

## **Martha ROBERTS (1764-1845) – an old wife's tale**

I have written before about some of the men who lived in High Littleton and Hallatrow in the past but one should not forget the women. This is the story of Martha ROBERTS (nee HARRIS).

Martha was born and baptised at High Littleton in 1764, the daughter of William HARRIS and his wife Martha TUCKER. Young Martha lived with her parents in High Littleton until she was 14 years old, when she went to live in service in Bath. For the next 30 odd years Martha lived and worked in service in various places until she eventually went to live with Mr Jacob MOGG at Alfred Street, Kingsdown, Bristol, being employed there as a maid of all work. Martha bargained with Mrs MOGG and was paid 8 guineas a year. After living there for fifteen months, Martha broke a blood vessel and had to give up work, returning to live in High Littleton with her father William HARRIS, who had been a widower since 1796. The MOGGs obviously thought highly of Martha and they looked after her for the rest of her life.

Martha was 40 years old, when she was wooed by Thomas ROBERTS, a seaman and they married at High Littleton in June 1805. Martha knew little of Thomas' past but heard he was an Irishman and he told her he was in the Irish Rebellion. Unlike Martha, Thomas was illiterate. At the time they married, Thomas was one of the ship's company on board the Tender in King's Road, Bristol. He continued in that service for about a year and fortunately for him was at home on leave with Martha, when the Tender was captured by the French enemy, while making a routine voyage to Plymouth with impressed seaman on board and was carried into France.

Having lost his ship, Thomas got a job working on board the canal boats in Wiltshire and Berkshire. After some time on the canal boats he went to sea again, going from Bristol to America as a seaman on a merchant vessel. Following a six months voyage Thomas returned once more to High Littleton and went back to working on the canal boats.

Martha and Thomas lived with her father in High Littleton for the first nine months of their married life until Thomas rented a house and garden in Combesham (Scumbrum) Lane from Mrs STAPLE for £7 a year. There they lived for 4 years. Martha and her father then went to live in a house at Farrington Gurney, which Jacob MOGG rented for her from William COLLINS and they lived there for the next 4 years with Thomas coming and going.

Thomas' job kept him apart from Martha for long periods and after nine years of marriage she was used to his absences. Following a typical voyage from London to Berkshire as a boatman, Thomas returned to Martha in Farrington, stayed 3 days until 6<sup>th</sup> May 1815, when he told her he was going to Bristol to get a job. And that was the last she ever saw or heard of him!

Martha and her father then went to live in another house in Farrington, which Jacob MOGG rented for them from Aaron HAM at £5 a year and they stayed there for 2 years. This was followed by 2 years in another house in Farrington, which again Jacob MOGG rented for Martha at £7 a year. Whilst living in Farrington, William HARRIS received a regular 2/- a week poor relief from High Littleton parish. He eventually died at Farrington and was buried at High Littleton in December 1819, aged 80.

When Jacob MOGG's first wife Rebecca died in August 1819, Martha went to live with him at High Littleton for 13 months as his servant, while he was looking for another servant. At the end of her employment Martha was paid 2 guineas and given some clothes. Maintaining his generosity, Jacob MOGG allowed Martha to live rent free in a cottage and garden, that he owned in High Littleton, on the west side of the High Street opposite Timsbury Road. After Jacob MOGG's death in 1824, his executors allowed Martha to continue living there for the rest of her life. During the last few years of her life Martha received 2/6d a week poor relief. However, at Christmas 1842 the High Littleton Vestry discovered that she was paying no rent for her cottage and rather meanly reduced her relief to 1/6 per week. Martha died in March 1845 and was buried in High Littleton churchyard.

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