

THE HARRISS FAMILY OF SWINESHEAD BRIDGE

Around two hundred years ago in 1716 at **St Mary's church Swineshead**, local girl Rebecca Hall married **William Harriss** and when the illiterate William signed the Parish register with an X it became the first record of this **Harriss** family in **Swineshead**.

William arrived in Swineshead from **Little Staughton** in **Huntingdonshire** where he was born in 1790. Whatever the reasons for his move, he did well for himself as a blacksmith and he is mentioned in the 1828 edition of Pigot's Directory. He and Rebecca lived in and around Swineshead Bridge and it was there that they raised their four children.

The Census tells us that by 1851 William was a blacksmith living in Browns Drove and employing one man. Daughter Sarah was living with him and was a grocer while youngest child John was a Boatman presumably working on the South Forty Foot Drain transporting agricultural produce to Boston. William's eldest two sons had followed him into the blacksmith's profession; first born Thomas Harriss was a master blacksmith living at Moulton Seas End with his wife and two children, second born William Pickles Harriss was newly married and living just over the turnpike at Gibbet Hills, Swineshead.

Things were looking good for the Harriss family in 1851, but that was about to change. Youngest son John died in June 1853 aged just 30. A headstone erected by the grieving parents marks his grave on the west side of St Mary's Church; the inscription says he was "an affectionate son and brother". The cause of death was certified as "Disease of (the) Heart". The fact that it was certified suggests that a doctor had attended. The death certificate shows a cross in the column reserved for the informant and it reads, "X.....The mark of Jane Pickersgill. In attendance. Swineshead". Usually the person present at the death was a relative; however there is no known family connection to Jane. So she could have been someone who made a living by sitting with the dying and laying them out after death, or a close friend or neighbour.

There was a widow named Jane Pickersgill living at Swineshead North End who was a washerwoman in the 1851 census; it is not unreasonable to assume that this was the person mentioned on the certificate.

John's death certificate gives his occupation as a "Boatman". Although there is little information specifically relating to John, we do know that Fen Barges (or Fen Lighters) were common in the area. These barges were long, narrow, flat bottomed vessels. Author Basil Greenhill tells us, "Fen barges were moved around in "gangs" of about five or six barges. Each barge had a wooden arm with a chain on its bow which extended over the stern of the barge in front to which the chain was fixed. The gangs were pulled by men for short distances but more often by three horses. The leading barge in a gang was called the 'fore barge' and loaded up to 30tons. In some cases they had a short mast to set a square sail for use when there was a fair wind." Of course the chosen name for the nearby public house was The Barge.

Six years after the death of John Harriss the Boston to Sleaford railway line opened. Running as it does alongside the South Forty Foot Drain, it consigned the Boatman and his barges to history. Having lost his youngest son, William was then widowed in 1860 when his wife Rebecca died. Following her death he retired and went to live near his daughter Sarah who had moved to Boston.

Retirement was unusual for working people but it enabled William Pickles Harriss to move into the forge previous worked by his father.

There was more grieving to be done when Thomas Harriss at Moulton Seas End was left a widower. This seems to be the beginning of a downward spiral for Thomas who returned to Swineshead and worked for a while in the family forge before ending his days in Boston Union Workhouse.

Sarah never married and moved to Nottingham where she worked as a domestic nurse until she died aged 63. When Sarah left Boston, William, the first of the Harriss family at Swineshead Bridge, moved back to the village where he died in 1870 aged 80.

If it wasn't for William Pickles Harriss, then the connection between Swineshead and the Harriss family would have been a brief one as Thomas's children didn't return to the village, Sarah never married and John died young.

William Pickles Harriss married the girl next door.....well almost. Eliza Boys was born in Sleaford and moved to Swineshead Bridge with her parents and siblings in the 1840s. Father John ran a beer house beside the Forty Foot drain which later became known as The Plough. William and Eliza married in 1851 at St Marys Church and lived at Gibbet Hills. They had eight children two of who did not survive childhood. Like his father before him William Pickles was a blacksmith, but in the 1871 census he was also a shopkeeper, although the likelihood is that Eliza was running the shop while he worked at the forge. The two buildings are attached and are still standing today next to the railway crossing on the A17.

Ten years later and we find that William Pickles Harriss is also a coal merchant. Four of the children remain at home, but eldest daughter Sarah Eliza has married local man Joseph Burden and after a brief spell in Sheffield is now living in Swineshead Low Grounds while second eldest daughter Hannah Rebecca is a servant at The Manor House at Wrangle 10 miles the other side of Boston.

In 1887 three days after Christmas William Pickles Harriss died aged 69. He was buried in St Mary's churchyard on New Year's Eve. His estate was valued at a £468 and the beneficiary was the eldest son George William Harriss. The paperwork relating to the estate has survived and provides a wonderful link to the past. In very shaky handwriting the widow signs herself Elizabeth Harris on a "Statutory Declaration" which confirms that the copy of her marriage certificate, eight copies of her children's birth certificates and the two copies of her deceased sons' burial certificates to be true. The copies of the certificates have survived alongside the declaration.

We can see from her marriage certificate that Eliza signed the register with an X and her uncertain signature on the Statutory Declaration she made thirty seven years later suggests that her literacy skills were limited. However after losing her husband she went on to run the shop next to the Swineshead Bridge signal box until she died in 1913. Her numeracy skills don't seem to have been in doubt.

George William Harriss was just 21 when he inherited the family business. He was the seventh born child, but the early death of his elder brothers and the system of primogeniture meant that in law the family estate came his way.

In 1890 he married local girl Emily Middlebrook and by the time of the 1891 census he was described as a Coal Merchant. He also had a baby daughter. Younger brother John Henry Harriss lived next door and in the same census he gave his occupation as a blacksmith.

But what of William Pickles and Eliza's daughters?

As already stated, Sarah Eliza had married Joseph Burden; she gave birth to seven children but by the time she died at the early age of 39 three of them had pre-deceased her. Hannah Rebecca married Isaac Eaton a County Court Bailiff and moved to Boston where she had two sons. However after Isaac died she ended her days as a farmer at Frampton Fen. She was 56 when she died.

Elizabeth Ann married local man John Robert Thorpe and lived at North End where they had ten children. She lived to be 90.

Georgiana Pickles Harriss was the youngest daughter and she was living with her mother and helping in the shop when she died in 1892 at the age of 26.

Brothers George William and John Henry were the third generation of the Harriss family at Swineshead Bridge and it fell to them to keep the business running and to keep the name alive. It would seem from the census returns that the brothers did just that. In 1901 George William is a blacksmith and coal merchant and he and Emily have six children. John Henry had married Rosetta Butler the daughter of William Butler the landlord of The Barge Inn. Less than a year into the marriage, John Henry's father in law died which meant that by the time of the 1901 census John Henry could call himself a publican and farmer.

There is an old photograph of Swineshead Bridge elsewhere on this site. The image is undated, but it shows The Barge Inn, the forge and the shop. In the early part of the last century a Harriss was the proprietor of all three ventures plus the coal merchants business that operated out of the station yard at the rear.

Over the next quarter century the fortunes of the Harriss family were to change. If family lore is anything to go by, an element of misfortune accounted for their changed circumstances, but it is also said that some of the damage was self inflicted.

Either way, the facts are these:-

In 1910 John Henry's wife Rosetta died aged just 33. She left behind seven young children (5 boys and 2 girls). In the next year's census John Henry has left the pub and is no longer a farmer, his occupation is given as an agricultural labourer.

In 1911 Eliza is still running the shop at the grand age of 82, but within two years she dies and is buried at St Marys.

The 1911 census shows George William to be a carter which suggests that the Coal business is no more but that he still has the horse and cart. For whatever reason, some official has amended "Carter" to "Higgler". Being the eldest son, he is heir to Eliza's estate of £154 and the probate records refer to him as a "General Dealer".

On Christmas Day in 1918 George William died aged 52. Emily his widow was well provided for as she was left £1430.

He also left behind six children and the records tell us something about their lives:-

Annie Elizabeth Harriss was the eldest and while her father was still alive she had married Ernest William Nundy, a Swineshead lad.

Edith Harriss went to live in Lancashire where she married Richard Collinge.

Amy Harriss moved even further away when her and her husband William Motley sailed to Canada. She ended her days there in 1977 aged 83.

George Henry Harriss lived at Tarry Hill with his wife Hilda Irene Gaunt until 1945 when he died aged 50.

Arthur Harriss lived locally and died aged 79. His headstone can be found in St Mary's churchyard. Elsie Rebecca Harriss married George Dawson and lived at North End. Elsie died aged 65. The Harriss genes may have spread far and wide but as yet there is no evidence that the Harriss name was passed down from this particular branch of the tree.

Six years after George William was buried, John Henry was laid to rest although his was a tragic end. On Christmas Eve 1924 he caught the train to Boston to do some shopping. He had told his daughter Rosetta that he would be back at 6.30 pm. He did not return and the matter was reported to the police. It wasn't until 8th January that his body was seen in the River Witham, held down by a chain which ran into the bed of the river.

A subsequent inquest heard that he had been in the Great Northern pub but "he was not drunk and was quite sensible, knowing what he was doing". Any such inquest today would want to know, 'did he fall, or was he pushed?', but the verdict reached here was a rather obvious "Found Drowned". John Henry left behind four sons and three daughters:-

John William Butler Harriss married Mary Alice Mabel Beck and lived at Beck Bridge. A tractor driver, he worked all his life on the same farm.

George Stephen Harriss married Alice E Cope and lived in Boston.

Rosetta Harriss married John Henry Jackson and died in 1945 aged 43.

Frank Henry Harriss married Mabel A Cope had three children and lived to be 75.

Ernest Benjamin Harriss married Josephine Carey and was 91 when he died in 1996.

Joseph Arthur Harriss married Mabel Annie Wilson and died in 1991.

Emily Elizabeth Harriss married Harry Ward and lived in the Lincolnshire Wolds. She died aged 83.

John Henry's children have kept the Harriss name alive and a new generation of the Harriss family can count him as their Great, Great, Grandfather and can count **Swineshead Bridge** as their spiritual home.

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Contact:

harryaharriss@yahoo.co.uk

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