

GEORGE STRANGE AND THE STRANGE FAMILY OF HOOK

By Mark and Lorraine Child (published in the Friends of Lydiard Tregoze report No. 32, ISSN 0308-6232)

[Mr and Mrs Child have been researching the Strange family history for some years. George Strange was Lorraine's paternal great-grandfather. A shortened form of this article appeared in Lydiard's Magazine, May 1998.]

George Strange is also Janet Millar's (nee Williams) great-grandfather making Janet and Lorraine Child second cousins.

***(Note - I have been unable to locate Mark and Lorraine Child, the authors of this biographical sketch, for permission to reproduce the article or to verify any of the source material; on the basis of the already established internet availability, I have taken the responsibility to reproduce it here
– Stewart Millar)***

The Strange family settled at Lydiard Tregoze during the 1790s with the arrival from Wootton Bassett of John Strange (b.1765) and his wife Sarah (b.1664), and Edward Lansdown Strange (b. 1778) and his wife Elizabeth.

John and Sarah had eight children. Their third son James was born in 1793, and of this marriage the second born was William (b.1819) who married Elizabeth Embling (b.1820) in 1840. William was a hard man, most of whose children were to flee the family hovel as soon as possible as much from desire as necessity. One of his children was George - the most fascinating in a family of several interesting characters.

George Strange was born in 1843 at Prioryfield, in one of a group of tiny stone cottages isolated at ~ the end of a long track off Hook Street. He was the second in a family of seven children born to William and Elizabeth between 1841 and 1857. His parents were labourers and such education as he had took place at the Dame School in Hook; a single-cell, thatched cottage with bare lime washed walls and a flagstone floor. He was taught by George Swyer (1799-1890) who ran the school with his wife Jael (1797-1848).

Late in George Strange's teens, the family moved into rented cottages at Cobb Gutter off the narrow Flaxlands Lane between Hook and Braydon. Here was a double row of ten thatched cottages

served by a central well and clustered within an arrangement of ditches (gutters) which can still be seen in the field, adjacent to Bolingbroke land. George took one cottage and the rest of the family moved in next door. Landlord Cornelius Gleed charged a weekly rent of 1s. 6d from each of the properties.

George appears to have grown up emotionally in the likeness of his father, for William was described as a tyrannical bully. When he married Elizabeth Embling at St.Mary's in 1840 she was seven months pregnant with their first child, Mary Ann. Then came George, followed by Simeon (b.1845), Edwin (b.1848), William Richard (b.1852), John (b.1855), and Rhoda (b.1857) - all at Prioryfield.

Mary Ann left home before she was twenty, and had been living at Goatacre for some time before her marriage at Hilmarton church in 1864. William Richard was dead; the rest of the family were at Cobb Gutter and on the verge of breaking up.

Simeon, who in later life had the appearance of George's twin, was a mild-tempered man with deep religious beliefs and a strong moral sense of right and wrong. After a spell as a servant at Spittleborough Farm he married a sweet lady called Elizabeth Loveday. They were people of simple pleasures who often took in strangers who had fallen on hard times. In addition to their own children, they later

brought up the illegitimate daughter of their daughter Ruth, the illegitimate son of their daughter Letitia, and the youngest son of Ruth's subsequent marriage. Once they had moved away to a smallholding at Wroughton, they seem to have given up contact with the family remaining at Hook. Simeon was to die at Stratton workhouse in 1929; ignored for so long by his family, bankrupted by the excesses of his own son, made homeless by a devastating fire, and senility.

Edwin Strange also fled his father's bad temper and never returned. One day he set out on foot for Somerset where he learned basket-making. Armed with the trade he was to pursue the rest of his life (and so too his sons, in their turn), he walked first to Exeter, and later to Mevagissey in Cornwall. There he married Amanda Jago, the harbourmaster's daughter. Thirty years later they were to live in London. John completely disappeared after the age of 16; so too Rhoda, although her name lived on as a family favourite through several generations. Of the family, only George Strange remained at Hook, an angry man who was to look after an angry father until William died in 1899, the year after his wife.

The young George Strange was a pugilist, regularly fighting for beer and a purse in a field behind the Wheatsheaf (now Sally Pusseys) on the Wootton Bassett road. His reputation for picking a fight was legendary. It is said that when he walked into the pub, banged his fist on the bar and exclaimed "Here oi be!" the room emptied. Those who didn't want to be his next victim and those who wanted a good view of anything which might happen next, quickly moved out to the field at the back. Thickset, with a large moustache and a bullish appearance, George always shaved his head so that opponents could not grab him by the hair. Fights usually lasted until one man fell from exhaustion, although there were occasions when the proceedings were stopped for a beer break because neither protagonist could see through the blood in their eyes. George's bare-knuckle exploits would

have taken place with the knowledge of the Wheatsheaf's famed and formidable Sarah Purse nee Garlick (1815-1885) after whom the pub is now named.

In 1863 George married Jane Fowler of Wanborough. He was nineteen years old; she was twenty four and more than seven months pregnant. Over the next seventeen years she was to give him thirteen of his twenty-seven children. When she eventually died following childbirth it was, in the words of the Coroner " . . . of haemorrhage after confinement under a midwife, and from want of professional assistance at time of labour" In truth, George had resisted fetching the doctor throughout the confinement and its aftermath wholly against the midwife's advice. When he did so, he first asked the doctor what was his fee for attending a confinement. Wrangling ensued as George would only pay half a guinea (he admitted to earning 12s. a week as a wood dealer and there was money hidden in the house). Irritated by all this haggling, Dr Kirkman grabbed his bag saying that he wouldn't argue about the fee when a woman's life was in danger - but arrived too late. If George had listened to the midwife, said the Coroner, his wife's life could have been saved.

After Jane's death, George pressed their eldest daughter into service as housekeeper. His bare-knuckle fighting days over, he was now known as, Turk Strange', and it is interesting to speculate why. Turk' was a term given to a type of scythe, and we know that George hired out his services with a scythe at harvest time. But, Turk' is also an 18th- and 19th-century colloquialism for a male given to brutal sexual behaviour. The family at that time called him 'Great John George' although he did not have the name John, so this could have referred to the size of his girth or the size of his family, He was also described as a 'higgler' by occupation - someone who drives a hard bargain. With George, there were clearly no compromises.

Living close by at Cobb Gutter were Jacob Gough (b. Clyffe Pypard 1831) and his wife Eliza (nee Leighfield). At eighteen years of age he had been servant to the Horsells of Marsh Farm, then came to live at Hook and married in 1853. In 1869 the rent on their house and garden, owned by William Moulden, was 10d per week. They also had allotment no. 35 at Franklins, which was land at the back of the Bolingbroke Arms: George had allotment no. 37.

In 1881 George Strange married Sarah Ann, eldest of the Gough's five daughters, He was thirty-eight years old; she was just fifteen years, and four months pregnant. She was destined to give him fourteen children, either at Cobb Gutter or Purley Farm, Braydon, where George went in 1895 as a tenant farmer, taking his parents with him. Eventually worn out and undoubtedly thoroughly demoralised, she was to die at Wharf House, Kempsford, suffering from cirrhosis of the liver - quaintly termed 'gin drinker's liver' - and dropsy. The inquest heard that she had been an alcoholic for over twenty years and had virtually drunk herself to death. Losing her favourite son in the Great War had only hastened her demise.

Jacob Gough lived all of his life at Hook and Lydiard Tregoze, for much of the time next door to his own parents - William Gough and Finetta (nee Reeve) who were bringing up the illegitimate sons to whom his sister gave birth whilst in service at Lydiard Tregoze and Purton. Said to be, a bit of a wag' and fond of his drink, the landlady of the Bolingbroke Arms used to call time on Jacob by hooting in his ear. He eventually died in 1922 in the Purton workhouse; a sad, lonely, old man of ninety-one!

Meanwhile George continued to prove himself as mean, unsympathetic, and bad tempered. He thrashed his children for childish behaviour. And he beat them thoroughly when they refused to clear stinging nettles with their bare hands. His offspring were sent to school with nails in their boots, which had to be presented for inspection every evening, The owner of

any boot which did not have its full complement of nails was also soundly beaten. This favourite occupation nearly had tragic consequences when one of George's sons 'popped' a row of young cabbages. George responded with a horsewhip, punishing the son to 'within an inch of his life'.

George spent as little money as possible, making his family live on the most fatty, cheapest pieces of meat. On one occasion his wife took a huge piece of white fatty bacon and threw it into the canal. George saw it in the water when he came home, fished it out, and made the family eat it. The family's other staple food was cheese which, it is said, hung under the stairs and still had to be eaten even when it had gone green. He always insisted that the potatoes which were grown in the garden were left there as long as possible so that they would grow to their fullest. His daughter Sarah liked to cook small potatoes, so sometimes dug up the young haulms, stripped them of the vegetables, and replanted them.

It was George's policy to allow no lighting in the house after 6 o' clock in the evening during the winter months, which he ensured by dispatching the family to bed at that time. Later in life, when his married daughter and her husband lived with he still insisted on the curfew. His son-in-law, when he wished to go to the pub for a drink, had to smuggle himself noiselessly in and out of a window.

George Strange was a familiar sight on the Lydiard road between Hook and Swindon' sprawled drunkenly across his cart, drawn by the great horses 'Captain' and 'Noble'. Their owner being disposed to call at several hostelryes on his return journeys meant that these creatures frequently found their own way home, their owner fast asleep in his seat. It was said that Captain and Noble stood patiently outside each pub for about half an hour, at the end of which they started off Local boys who held them back and helped the drunken George aboard were rewarded with a penny.

On one occasion, the horses had to turn around and go all the way back to Swindon. As an alternative to a farthing's change, McIlroy's store in the town sometimes gave a packet of pins. Discovering this had been the case when he arrived home, an enraged George Strange turned his horses round and drove them all the way back from Kempsford (where he went to live in 1901) to Swindon to claim his farthing.

It would be nice to think that these snapshots malign George. That here was a kind-hearted man who took pity on two pregnant women whom he married to save from shame and the parish. But alas, the stories handed down through the family about this son of Hook deny all attempts at amelioration. Two years after the death of his second wife George married Mary Lawrence, nee Juggins, a widow of, Kempsford: she was fifty-nine and he was seventy-four. It is said that this marriage was not a happy "union" and, although unsubstantiated by her death certificate, she apparently went to her coffin "'black and blue' on account of her lack of interest in marital favours!

There is a final twist. George ended his days in 1925 in a house in Swindon. By the purest coincidence when I received this news, my husband was sitting in an office opposite a girl who turned out to be the then-owner of that very house. That evening, just as she was finishing telling her husband about George and of the coincidence of their ownership, a clock on the wall left its moorings and simply shot across the kitchen. Taking this as a sign that seven decades on the other side still hadn't quelled George's tetchy spirit, they left the clock off the wall and sold the house!

