



Helpston in 1831 by the Reverend W.C.H. Seal, M. Div

Recently, while examining some documents my predecessors had deposited in the Records Office at Delapre Abbey, Northampton, it came to light that a copy of the 1831 Census Returns for Helpston had been preserved by the Helpston Churchwardens. Herewith follows some interesting facts about Helpston in those days.

In 1831, Helpston Parish had 103 inhabited houses, 104 families, and 485 inhabitants. There were 260 males and 225 females. One house was not inhabited in 1831, so ideally there should have been one house for each family in the village.

The disparity between males and females should not be considered unusual since men working in agriculture got the most and best food [because their labour fed the family], followed by the children. As a result, the adult female population of most English and, indeed, of American villages at that time were relatively poorly nourished. As a result, the female death rate would be expected to be higher. Add to that the roughly one third of all women who died in childbirth at that time, and it is easy to understand why Helpston had more males than females in 1831.

Sixty-nine heads of families were employed in agriculture, 20 were employed in trade and handicraft, and fifteen were classified under that ubiquitous term in government studies, 'other'. The population of Helpston, therefore, was largely engaged in agriculture.

Because of the fact that in 1831 men were generally the only people employed in agriculture and business, the rest of the census is concerned with them. Of the 260 males then living in Helpston Parish, 119 were over 20 years of age, and 141 were under twenty. Again, this relative disparity is not unusual. In the year 1821 only in London were more than 50% of males over 20 years old, which says much about early 19th century London. Due to accident (even today roughly twice as many males under 21 die by accident as do females) and infant mortality one would expect fewer males over 20 years than under 20.

Helpston had 6 farmers who employed labourers, 6 who had no employees (but probably had family members helping), and 70 agricultural labourers. It would be

interesting to know how many labourers worked for each farmer, but that information is not available.

Twenty-four men worked in retail trade and handicraft, and only four men were classified as 'Wholesale and Capitalists', Clergy, Office Clerks, Professional, and other Educated Men.' Helpston had no non-agricultural labourers, and 9 'other males of 20 years.' In the Parish was one male servant, and he was under 20 years of age, and 9 female servants. At least one or two servants probably worked for the parson.

If one examines the parish rate book kept by the Churchwardens from 1781 to 1838, it is possible to discover much about our parish. At the top of the list was, of course, the Earl Fitzwilliam. Indeed, the Fitzwilliams had at one time in the 16th century briefly lived in Helpston, though the location is not known (perhaps Helpston House).

The next largest landowner was Benjamin Bull, who paid the most rates, £4, 5 shillings, 1 1/2 pence. After that came John Clark at £3-17-6. John Clark is erroneously identified in village legend as a drinker and gambler, whose infant child the parson refused to bury in the churchyard, which is the most used explanation for the origin of the Ghost of Woodhall Farm, which was where the Clark family lived. On the contrary, John Clark was a long serving Churchwarden whose monument was erected in the Parish Church nearest the altar.

A woman, Elizabeth Wright, owned a great deal of land in the Parish, and many pieces of property in the village itself. On the 1820 Enclosure Award Map she is shown as owning, among others, the land now occupied by the home of Mrs George Crowson at the corner of Church Lane and Maxey Road.

The shopkeeper in the village, John Nottingham, who regularly supplied ale to the Church, was as a youth named as the father of a child by Jane Clare in an 1807 Bastardy Bond for which his father, John Nottingham senior, stood surety. Although it was not at all unusual in Helpston at that time for a child to be born soon after a marriage, it seems that these two decided not to make their relationship permanent. Jane Clare subsequently married Thomas Gedney in our Parish Church on 8 August 1814.

As one can discern, Helpston was not so 'droning dull' as John Clare wrote, but neither was it a rural paradise filled with fat and happy peasants.

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