

HIGH LITTLETON HANDS

The surname Hand is rare in High Littleton and apart from our late vicar only one other family of that name lived in the parish and that was over 200 years ago. Amongst this early family was one George Hand who could, rather unkindly, be described as a bit of swinger. But let's begin with his grandfather, who emigrated from Marksbury in 1730.

Benjamin Hand married Jane Cook at Marksbury in 1723, had 3 children and then moved to High Littleton, where they had 4 more. Only the two youngest children seem to have been baptised, which was probably due to the fact that High Littleton church was in a dilapidated state and the parish had been without a vicar since 1685. It was not until 1737, two years after the church had been rebuilt, that a new vicar and parish clerk were appointed and normal service resumed.

Benjamin and family patronised the parish church and indeed, without going outside the parish, there was very little choice. However, in 1757 the Quaker Meeting was revived in Hallatrow and two years later a new meeting house was erected on the edge of the old burying ground. Benjamin became a quaker, as did some of his children, and he was soon able to obtain some practical benefits. Quaker minute books show that Benjamin was a regular recipient of relief from 1759 until his death in 1766. In March 1765, the year after Jane died, it was reported that "he is very bare as to necessarys for his ware". In August 1766 Joseph Clark, who was the leading light of Hallatrow Meeting at the time, was reimbursed £3.16. 9 for the support of Benjamin Hand while living and for his funeral expenses. Two of Benjamin's daughters were later buried at Hallatrow burying ground; Elizabeth, wife of local quaker William Naish, in 1788 and Jane, who never married, in 1805.

Benjamin and Jane had a son Benjamin, born and baptised at High Littleton in 1738, who also became a quaker. In 1764 Benjamin junior committed a cardinal sin when he married Clutton girl Artulus Parfitt at High Littleton parish church. Joseph Clark reported to the quarterly quaker meeting at Claverham that "Benjamin Hand the younger of High Littleton has lately been married by the priest to a young woman not in profession with us." The usual testimony was given forth against him, which was read out in Hallatrow Meeting and he was duly drummed out.

Benjamin and Jane's youngest child Joseph was baptised at Clutton in 1741. Although brought up for some time at least in a quaker household Joseph apparently had no other involvement with the quakers. In 1765 he married Sarah Carter at High Littleton church and subsequently had 9 children baptised there. Joseph's youngest child was George, born in 1785. Little is known of George's early life but he was probably employed as a farm labourer. A hundred years after his grandparents left Marksbury for High Littleton George was back in Marksbury, working as a labourer, when he did something which he should have known would reduce his life expectancy. On 27th September 1833 George Hand was committed to Shepton Mallet Gaol on the warrant of two local magistrates, Rev. Phillott and Rev. Seymour, for "feloniously setting fire to two mows (ricks) of hay belonging to Charles Keedwell."

What possessed George to do this I have not discovered. Had the act occurred 2 or 3 years previously one would have suspected that it had something to do with the Labourers' Revolt, when farmers received threats in the name of "Captain Swing" and gangs of farm labourers went round burning hay ricks and smashing up farm machinery. However, such events were more prevalent in the counties to the east and south of Somerset, which resulted in scores of poor labourers being hanged and many hundreds more being transported to Van Diemen's Land. In any event the revolt was effectively over by the autumn of 1831.

George remained in Shepton Gaol until he was sent for trial at the Lent Assizes at Taunton on 2nd April 1834. There he was convicted of arson and sentenced to death. George was transferred to Ilchester Gaol to await execution, where he is recorded in the description register on 10th April as "aged 53 years (he was actually 49), height 5ft. 4½ in., stout build, dark complexion, oval visage, grey hair, grey eyes, cut on top of lip, born High Littleton, labourer, last abode Marksbury, single, can read." It was common at that time for capital sentences to be commuted to transportation for life but there was no such reprieve for George and he was hanged on the front lodge of Ilchester Gaol on 30th April 1834. His body was buried in Ilchester Churchyard the following day.

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