
FEATURE ARTICLE

By Sue Burnay

What links an Essex girl, the slave trade, a famous brand of gin, a Somerset schoolteacher and an Oxford academic to East Ilsley?



The answer lies in the occupants of the Rectory in the late 19th century. I was taking part in another mini-project for FACHRS (Family and Community History Research Society) on parlourmaids and was allocated Sarah Winright who was working for the Rev. Hansell at the Rectory in the 1881 census. In researching who Sarah was, I came across some fascinating information about her life and the people she worked for and was associated with.

East Ilsley Rectory today

Sarah was baptised on 24 Dec 1837 (born 27 Nov) in Great Ilford, Essex, the daughter of Samuel Winwright (an agricultural labourer) and his wife Catherine. There do not appear to have been any other children of this marriage and Catherine died age 31, when Sarah was just 10 years old. Samuel remarried 2 years later, so by the time of the 1851 census she was living with Samuel and her stepmother Ellen in Leyton, West Ham – then a relatively rural part of Essex. As with so many girls from such a background, Sarah went into service and by 1861, age 23, she was living in Bedfordshire in the household of the Rev. Hugh Blagg Smyth in the village of Houghton Regis, working as nurse to his 6 children aged from 2 to 11. Hugh Smyth was the vicar of Houghton Regis and a county magistrate, and originally from Macclesfield in Cheshire.

Rev. Hugh Blagg Smyth came from a wealthy Cheshire family. His father Edward Smyth was mayor of Macclesfield and a well-known banker, and owned extensive land in the area. Hugh was also related to Dame Ethel Smyth, the composer and suffragette, and to the Pickford family (of Pickford's Removals). His grandfather Thomas Smyth made his fortune on slavery, owning several ships in Liverpool, and actively campaigned against the abolition of slavery and succeeded in getting compensation from the British government for loss of business when slavery was abolished!

In the 1871 census, Sarah appears in the household of the Rev. Edward Hansell in East Ilsley, Berks but she probably had already worked for him when he lived in Oxford and had moved with the family to East Ilsley in 1865, after the death of Hansell's wife. At the Rectory, Sarah (now age 33) was one of 3 servants and was still a nurse. The household consisted of the Rev. Hansell, his daughter Mary, age 12, three of his four sons, Reginald 9, Arthur 8 and Herbert 5, plus Rosa Maria Austin,

33, visiting professor of French and music, Martha Hibbert 18, housemaid, and Ellen Stanmore Ralph 14, nursemaid – the latter 2 were local girls, born in East Ilsley. Rosa Austin was from Bedfordshire and had formerly been a governess in the substantial household (with 12 servants) of Charles Tanqueray not very far from Houghton Regis – had she or her employer recommended Sarah to Rev. Hansell? Charles Tanqueray was the creator of the well-known gin brand but he came from a long line of clergymen in Bedfordshire and may well have known Rev. Hugh Blagg Smyth, Sarah's former employer.

Rev. Edward Halifax Hansell came from a quite different type of family. His father, Rev. Peter Hansell, was a minor canon and preceptor of Norwich Cathedral and minister of St John de Sepulchre in Norwich. Edward was born in Norwich in 1814 and initially studied at Balliol College in Oxford but then received a demy scholarship to Magdalen College (equivalent to half a fellow – originally for poor scholars of good moral standing). He became a tutor and mathematics lecturer at Magdalen and was a well-respected scholar. He left Magdalen College to become minister at St Peter's in the East in Oxford when he finally married (at the age of 38). He continued to act as lecturer and wrote several scholarly books, but his wife died in 1865 and he left Oxford to become rector of East Ilsley, where he devoted his life to parish duties. He is remembered as a quiet modest man, devoted to his books and his parish.



Edward H. Hansell during his time as a

demy scholar 1838-47

By 1881, Sarah, now 43 and single, was still in East Ilsley at the rectory with Rev. Hansell but was now listed as parlour maid. At this time, only Hansell's daughter Mary Beatrice was still living at home, all of the sons had gone. Rosa Maria Austin was also still part of the household, together with 2 other servants, a cook and a housemaid, both Berks born but not from the village. In the next 3 census records, for 1891, 1901 and 1911, Sarah Winright was living in Templecombe, Abbas Combe, Somerset as companion to Elizabeth Pask, schoolmistress. But Sarah is shown as living on private means – how did the daughter of an agricultural labourer, who was a servant first as a nurse and then a parlour maid, come to have sufficient funds to live on private means? This had to be a bequest of some kind and so it proved to be. The Rev. Edward Hansell died in 1884 leaving a gross estate of £38,315. The bulk of the estate went to his surviving children but there were several interesting bequests in his will. He left the income from £1000 to Sarah Winwright, with the specific instruction that she should be paid interest of 4% on the sum until such time as the



first interest on the investment could come through. He also left the income on £2000 to Rosa Maria Austin with the same instructions and a lump sum of £50 to his gardener Henry Talbot (who was the subject of my previous mini-project!!). The bequest gave Sarah a modest income that enabled her to live out the rest of her life without having to continue working as a servant.

Edward H. Hansell as a full fellow of
Magdalen College Oxford 1847-52

Sarah continued to live at Templecombe with her friend Elizabeth Pask until her death in 1928 at the age of 90, but she must have kept some links with East Ilsley and the Hansell family. Sarah's will also makes interesting reading, with two of Rev. Hansell's children acting as her executors. She leaves all her clothes to the Mother Superior of the convent in Woodstock Road, Oxford, for the benefit of the poor. This convent lay only a short walk away from the former residence of Rev. Hansell's family when he lived in Oxford, indicating that Sarah was probably in service there before they moved to East Ilsley. Out of a gross estate of £505, she leaves bequests of £60 to Elizabeth Pask; £40 each to Mary Beatrice Graham (the widowed daughter of Rev. Hansell) and Mary's four brothers; £20 to Miss Ariel Austin of Melbourne, Australia; £10 each to her godchildren – William John Field of East Ilsley, Alfred Stimpson of Steventon, Berks, and Lucy Mary Fortescue of Cowley Road, Oxford. The residue of her estate is split equally between the Rectors of East Ilsley and Templecombe to be used however they think fit for the benefit of the church. So at least part of Rev. Hansell's generous gift to Sarah comes full circle back to East Ilsley.

We are indebted to the Magdalen College Archives for the photographs of Edward Hansell.