

A pauper's life

Michelle Dennis was helped in her search for a poor ancestor by the information in settlement examination and removal papers

By Michelle Dennis



Michelle is a web designer and family historian living in Melbourne, Australia. She has been researching her own family history for the past 30 years.

I've often wondered how large families survived before the introduction of social welfare. My ancestor James Ruff, an agricultural labourer from Stilton, Huntingdonshire, who was baptised there in 1809, fathered 13 children by his first wife Susanna Brockwell (who he married in 1830), and four by his second wife Sabina Brown (married in 1856).

By 1826 James was a farm labourer at Belsize Farm in Castor, Northamptonshire, just eight miles from his birthplace. How do I know this without census records or trade directories to help me? I was fortunate to be able to find his Settlement Examination and Removal papers in the Huntingdonshire Archives (<http://tinyurl.com/j54f6vw>) – two extremely useful documents.

The examination by the parish officials occurred in 1829, just five years before the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act which introduced Poor Law Unions and the



Mary Ann Ruff, daughter of James Ruff and Susannah Brockwell, in 1875

Workhouse system. The new Poor Law was supposed to ensure that the poor would be housed, clothed and fed in workhouses.

Settlement examinations may be handwritten or partially pre-printed. Information may include names, parish of residence, examination date, working history, working parish, wages information, wife/children's names, chargeable parish, other settlement claims, and be sworn before two Justices of the Peace, including the name/mark of examinee.

James Ruff was unmarried, and no other family details (such as his father's place of settlement) are mentioned in either document. I concluded he was of lower class, could not write, was a farm labourer for hire, and had probably triggered this settlement examination by asking for relief from the parish of Stilton.

The settlement examination also told me that three years previously, at Michaelmas time, James had been hired to Mr John Bark of Belsize Lodge, Castor, for one year to serve him in husbandry – for a wage of £5. The subsequent removal order, dated 12 December 1829, stated that James was to be removed from Stilton to Castor, as he had not been able to produce a certificate of settlement for elsewhere. Although James may have been born in Stilton, it was Castor where he had last been employed for over a year, so the legal criteria that a settlement could be gained by



birthplace was superseded by this fact.

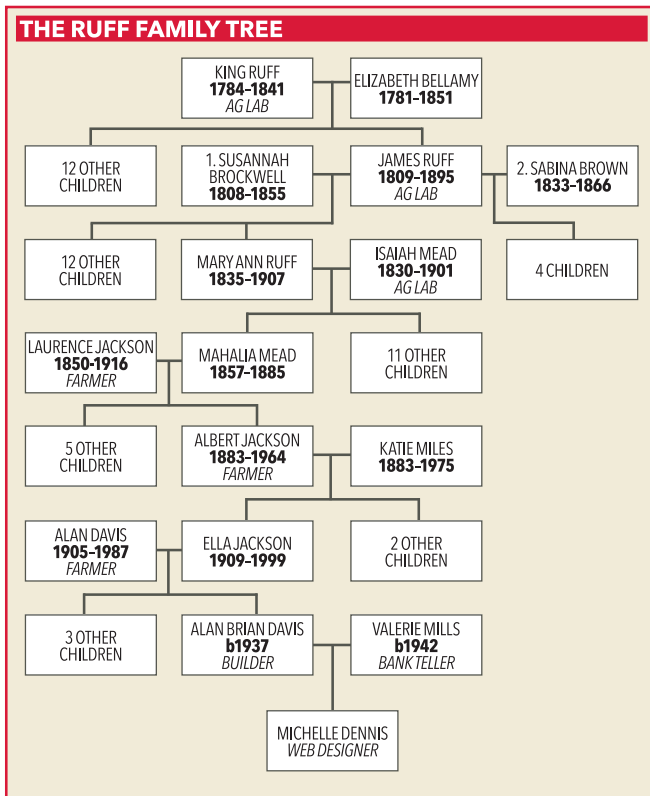
The Poor Law Commissioners report, available on Google Books (<https://books.google.co.uk>) states that the population of Castor in 1831 was 669, and that of Stilton, 793. Money expended on the poor of Castor between 1833 and 1835 for Castor was £430 and Stilton £303. The practice of poor law relief could be like a 'postcode lottery', concerning the amount and type of relief each parish offered. Some of the more affluent parishes may have been in more of a position to help their poor than others.

When the previous system of outdoor relief

was discontinued in 1834, able-bodied people claiming relief would be placed in workhouses. New central workhouses were being built in the larger towns, generally covering an area of around 10 miles. Many people, though,



James was to be removed from Stilton to Castor, as he had not been able to produce a certificate of settlement for elsewhere



resented paying poor rates, feeling that poverty was deserved and was the fault of the individuals themselves. The thought of workhouses filled the poor with dread, as they were deliberately austere and harsh to deter people from seeing them as an easy option.

MECHANISATION'S IMPACT

James Ruff was from, and worked in, parishes with fairly small populations. Castor's population has been recorded on a census since 1381, when it had a population of 115 people, and every ten years from 1801, when it was around the 400 mark. There was then an average rise of around 30 people every ten years, until 1861 when the numbers started to slowly decline (see www.nthgenuki.org.uk/). But why would James, an employed farm labourer, need to be applying for parish relief?

The mechanisation of farming equipment by the 1820s had a huge impact on the rural landscape. Tasks such as reaping and threshing (previously manual labour), were now being done by

machinery. In the 1830s, farm labourers in the south of England protested against what they saw as a threat to their jobs by burning haystacks and smashing new machinery. The declining need for manual labour also led to many labourers migrating to the larger towns and cities to

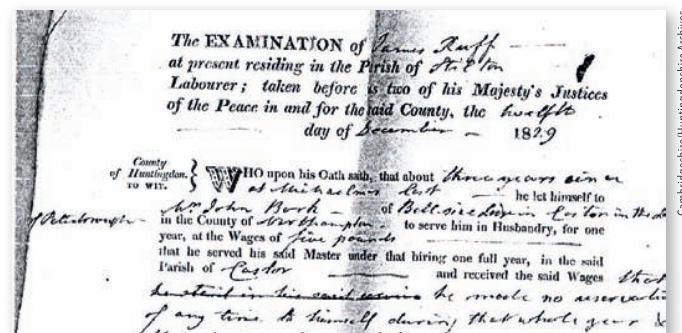
find work. Others turned to crime or poaching to survive. Prosecutions of those involved in the Swing Riots occurred in Sawtry, just five miles from Stilton, as records from the Huntingdonshire Assizes show.

The years between 1828 and 1830 also produced the worst harvest seen for many years. Marjorie Bloy, on the History Home website (www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/ruralife/swing.htm), states that during the Swing Riots of 1830, workers protested against the threshing machine that was destroying their winter income; and 1829 was the particular year that James Ruff was seeking relief from the parish. Poverty and pauperism became a particular problem in the so-called 'Swing' counties, which included Northamptonshire,

Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire.

The land in this area was farmed in common, under a system known as open field farming. Land tended to be owned by the Lord of the Manor and many workers, such as James, would have been taken on to serve in various husbandry tasks, as needed.

James ended his days in the Grantham Workhouse in Lincolnshire, dying in 1895, aged 85 years. He and his family may have been paupers, trapped in a cycle of poverty, through inheritance or circumstances – but I am encouraged to find that there are a wide variety of Poor Law documents surviving today that give me a much greater knowledge of not only his life, but the social and local history of his time. ■



Above: Settlement examination and removal papers: James Ruff to be removed from Stilton to Castor 1829'

Poor Law records

These records can be a treasure trove of information about those ancestors who had little treasure, or money, of their own

Poor Law records were created to ascertain which parish would be responsible for poor relief for the examinee. The record was usually created when a pauper first applied for poor relief, but in some historical research there appears to also be a question over whether money was the key issue, or whether some parish officials were actually using the system to regulate migration in their parishes.

Before the Poor Law Act of 1834, parishes would have been responsible for looking after not only their ecclesiastical duties, but also administering relief to their own poor. The Parish Overseers would be appointed annually from two local ratepayers (confirmed by Justices of the Peace at Quarter Sessions), and would have inherited either a debit or surplus from their previous incumbent. They would then have had to make account for every amount they spent providing for the poor in their parish. Churchwardens were also authorised to act as Overseers.

County archives contain Overseers of the Poor account books, which may also make mention of monetary relief, clothing distribution, food, coal, pauper funerals and work given to parishioners in receipt of relief, such as vermin catching and road repairs. Other documents worth checking are Creed Registers or Books – which recorded workhouse inmates' religious affiliation – and Rate Books.