

## **“Smallpox, Triplets and Double Murder”**

**Wendy Shepherd**

Following our Annual General Meeting we were joined by Wendy Shepherd for her intriguingly titled talk “Smallpox, Triplets and Double Murder”. Wendy’s talk highlighted the role of clergymen in recording social and family history by looking at the entries in the Parish Registers of her home village of Fordham in Essex.

Wendy explained that although Fordham only had a variable population of between 500 – 800 people the Parish Registers gave examples of interesting records where the curate had recorded accidents, diseases, plague, earthquake, farming incidents and double murder. When linked to the newspaper reports which provided more detail this gave a wealth of information for the social or family historian.

In 1666 Fordham like other areas had been impacted by the plague and victims were recorded in the burial registers. Also diseases such as measles which in the 19th century was a major killer of children had occurred in Fordham with two brothers aged 3 and 1 having died and been recorded as having been buried in the same grave as their father who had died the year before from an agricultural accident. Typhoid had also caused the death of one of the local head teachers in 1880 who had contracted the disease following a visit to London. Wendy told us of a smallpox victim who had been buried after dark at 9 o’clock at night presumably so that this was kept reasonably quiet.

Wendy noted that the vicars and curates were often themselves interesting, well educated and talented characters and used the information that could be gained by study of the registers. In 1796 the vicar of Ardleigh had undertaken a census of the residents in his parish as he was concerned about the Napoleonic wars and that men who might have to leave the village to fight would need evidence on their return of their property and resident status in the parish.

Wendy told us about some interesting items found in the registers including a 46 year old mother who had died and whose 15 children had died before her. Looking at the newspaper reports had shown that the mother had received the Queens Bounty as she had had triplets. The death of William Strutt in 1688 at the age of 103 was also recorded and the story reported in the local newspaper. Accidents from drowning, agricultural work, the railroad and coach and wagon accidents, similar to road traffic accidents today, were also recorded in burial records and reported in newspapers which gave more detailed information. One case of double murder was widely reported, Solomon and Susanna Johnson having been killed in 1875 by their son Thomas. The inquest was held at The Three Horse Shoes pub in Fordham and Thomas was found guilty and sent to Broadmoor.

Wendy advised that weather had always been a popular topic of conversation and there were often comments of the effect of weather conditions on the harvest and the impact of particularly harsh frosts and deep snow fall. The registers of Peldon having a gap in entries in 1884 as the church was damaged by an earthquake which had stopped services until rebuilding had taken place.

Wendy concluded her fascinating talk by encouraging us to look wider than our immediate relations when looking at Parish Registers and consider the vicars and curates as historians and recorders of the local parish history and the lives of their

parishioners, which when linked to the contemporary newspaper reports could provide a wealth of information.

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