

been turning to which areas of the county we should tackle next.

In the period before 2010 when research and writing for the Victoria County History was wholly funded by the County Council and the University of Gloucestershire, it was normal to tackle one area at a time, and a volume was usually produced about every five years. Now that the funding of the project has to be raised by the Trust from charitable donations, we have found that it assists our fundraising activity to work on several areas simultaneously, even though this means a less regular output of new volumes. Since about half of the volumes that remain to be researched and written relate to places in what is now South Gloucestershire, the trust decided last year that it would try to ensure that at least one of the volumes we work on in the future would always be in this area, while at the same time we work on completing the remaining Gloucestershire parishes.

At the Trust's meeting in July, we finally took the exciting decision about which areas we will work on

Welcome from the Editor

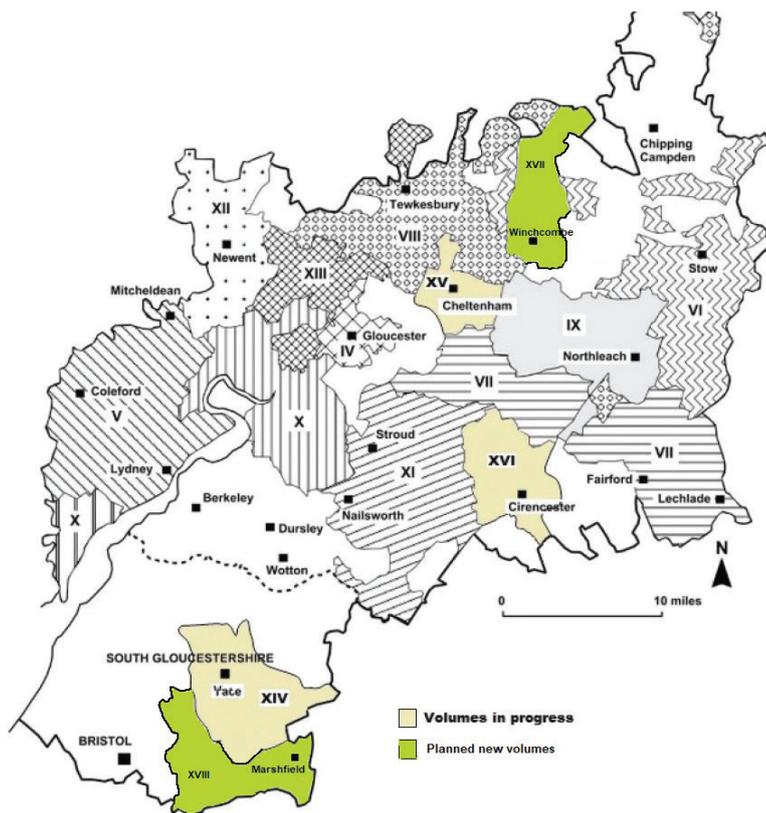
Welcome to the July 2023 newsletter of the Gloucestershire County History Trust bringing you the latest news of its work. Our chair Nicholas Kingsley outlines the new opportunities and challenges which are opening as we gradually reach the completion of our existing three volumes. Most of the rest of this edition contains those interesting stories and situations discovered by our historians which will never make their way into a Big Red Book.

As always, my thanks go to all those who have contributed to the creation and distribution of the newsletter with special thanks to John Chandler for another attractive production. We hope you enjoy reading it and, as usual, if you have any comments or further ideas, please let me know: dhaldred@btinternet.com.

David Aldred

Where next for the Gloucestershire VCH?

The Gloucestershire County History Trust has been working since 2012 on VCH accounts of three areas of the historic county, covering Chipping Sodbury and district (volume 14), Cheltenham (volume 15) and Cirencester and district (volume 16). As these projects slowly approach the finishing line, with the text of the Cirencester volume due to go to press at the beginning of 2024 and the other two volumes perhaps another two or three years away, our thoughts have



VCH Gloucestershire

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after the current volumes are completed. These will be the volumes covering Winchcombe and the parishes to its north, and Marshfield and the Boyd valley (volume XVIII). The areas concerned are marked on the accompanying map. The Winchcombe volume (volume XVII) will cover Winchcombe itself, Sudeley, Hailes, Didbrook, Toddington, Dumbleton, Wormington and two parishes which are now in Worcestershire but which were formerly in Gloucestershire and were not covered by the Worcestershire VCH: Aston Somerville and Childswickham. The Marshfield volume will cover Marshfield itself, Cold Ashton, Doynton, Wick & Abson, Pucklechurch, Westerleigh, Siston and Bitton .

Having made the decision about which areas we are going to tackle next, there is a lot to do before we can actually commission any of our researchers to work on the project. Rob White, chair of the Gloucester Street History Group in Winchcombe, whose powerful advocacy of the case for selecting the Winchcombe area was a factor in our decision, has already found a number of local volunteers to help with the project, and we will be looking for others to help with the task of cataloguing unlisted material relating to the new project areas and transcribing documents such as wills and census returns to assist future researchers. At the same time, we will be contacting local organisations and private individuals in the project areas to let them know about our plans and to seek their support and endorsement. Needless to say, finding new sources of funding to support our work around Winchcombe and Marshfield will be critical to the success of the project, and if any of our supporters feel they can help, either financially or through volunteering, we shall be very pleased to hear from them!

Nick Kingsley
Chair

Local History Research Workshops

Report from our County Editor

I reported in the previous newsletter on the success of our series of Tuesday morning workshops at the Heritage Hub, which was then nearing completion. The last session took place on 14 March, and numbers held up to the end. We were very gratified

by the comments we received on the feedback forms which we circulated to participants, and I was able to write a report summarising them, which circulated to UWE, VCH central office, the archivists at the Hub and of course to the lecturers. There were very many complimentary remarks, but also some suggestions for changes, additions and improvements, and I am trying to take these all on board, because.....

We are planning to repeat the series, on alternate Thursday mornings this time, and we have dates booked in the Dunrossil Centre at the Hub. The first will be on 19 October, then fortnightly to 14 December, and resuming on 11 January and running to the final session on 7 March. Over the next few weeks I shall be working out the syllabus, contacting all the lecturers and publicising the course as widely as possible. If you are interested in coming to all of them, or just to the ones you missed first time round, do please look out for further publicity and a syllabus once it is all worked out, or contact the Hub.

John Chandler

Updates from our Historians

From Alex Craven

Since the last newsletter work has continued on the history of Preston near Cirencester, and there are now drafts for all sections except Economic History, which I hope to complete this month. I wrote in the last newsletter that the completion of Preston would draw my work on the Cirencester parishes to a close. However, since then, our colleague Grace Owen has left the project to take up a position at Exeter University, and I have agreed to complete her unfinished work on the parish of Coates. Like Preston, Coates borders the parish of Cirencester, but unlike Preston, Coates has so far avoided any encroachment by modern developments as the town expands outwards. Coates is of course famous for being the location of the source of the River Thames, but it is also noteworthy for once having been divided between five separate manors, despite its small area. I am very grateful to Grace for having untangled the complexities of those estates before handing over her notes to me! I am looking forward to learning much more about the parish once I am able to turn my attention to it. The residents of Coates are lucky to already have an excellent history of the parish, written



Google

Fig2. Preston

by Philippa Moore and published only in 2018, but I hope nevertheless that we will be able to add some fresh insight and detail to their story. I am looking forward to visiting the parish for the first time soon.

Before I can focus on Coates, however, first I must complete the history of Preston. The proximity to Cirencester, and the lack of resident gentry for much of its history, has had a visible impact upon the social character of the village. Being so close to such a large town, there has rarely been much demand for the sort of amenities one might expect to find in a rural parish, and I have found no references to an inn or public house, shops, or friendly societies. A school was founded in 1858, in a small building put up for that purpose which was soon described as cramped and unfit but which continued in use until the closure of the school in 1904. Since then, the building has served as the village hall. There have never been any endowed charities within the parish, although the Chester-Master family supported the parish in less formal ways, and still do, letting land for allotments and a recreation ground to the parish council. But although the family lived nearby at Cirencester, they were rarely resident in the parish itself, whilst the smaller manor of Norcote was similarly owned by absentee proprietors for much of its history. In the absence of resident lords, a group of wealthier parishioners took a leading role in the parish.

Of these, the most prominent were perhaps the Hamlet family, who farmed the manor of Preston from the abbey of Cirencester from at least the early

16th century.¹ In the military survey of 1522 and the lay subsidy of 1523 John Hamlet was assessed as the wealthiest of parishioners, at £20 and £18 respectively.² This was more than the assessment of the abbot of Cirencester, lord of the manor, who was rated at £13 6s. 8d., the same amount as another of the leading tenants, Richard Stratford. A third, Thomas Blackwell, was also assessed in double figures, £12 in 1522 and £10 in 1523. There were several men on the next rung of Preston community, rated at between £2 and £8, including two members of the Harding family, and John Chester, who held the lease of Preston mill. These names – Blackwell, Chester, Hamlet, and Stratford – recur in the next generation as the leading men of the parish.³

It is always illuminating to compare these taxation records with the surviving probate material from a parish, which can give a valuable insight into the material culture of a community and the prosperity of its residents. Compared to other parishes in the area, there are frustratingly few probate inventories from Preston, and we are left to infer conclusions from the incomplete picture presented by wills. Nevertheless, there are a few indications during the 16th and early 17th centuries of the wealth of this group of leading parishioners, with few marks of prosperity or opulent

1 *L&P Hen. VIII*, XX (2), 328.

2 The following paragraph is drawn from *Glos. Lay Subsidy 1524-7*, 370-1; *Military Survey of Glos. 1522*, 107.

3 WAAS, BA2764: 802, fo. 302.

items amongst the possessions of testators, with wealth held in the form of land and livestock rather than valuables. Even amongst the leading parishioners, flock beds and pewter or wooden dishes were the norm, with perhaps some small items of plate. When Thomas Blackwell died in 1558, his legacies included six cows, 19 sheep, and three silver spoons, whilst five years later Richard Hamlet's legacies included eight cows, and eight sheep.⁴ The Blackwell, Hamlet and Harding families remained pre-eminent in Preston, and individual members began describing themselves as yeomen over the course of the 17th century. Their greater prosperity is also reflected in the increasing value of bequests left in the form of money. John Blackwell (d. 1606) left legacies worth £92, besides livestock and crops, whilst the vicar Robert Harding left £230 in 1619, and Robert Hamlet £141 in the following year. Hamlet's will also provides some of the first indications of increasing comfort within the homes of at least the wealthiest inhabitants of Preston, with his possessions including two feather beds and coloured rugs, although he still ate from pewter. Late in the century the Tawney family, who held the lease of Preston mill, also owned a feather bed with a tester bedstead, amongst possessions valued at £210 in John Tawney's inventories. Nevertheless, more than half of this sum still represented the value of the unexpired

term of his lease, and the remainder of his possessions consisted mainly of the usual array of pewter and wooden dishes, wooden furniture, and brassware.⁵ *(To be continued in the next newsletter)*

From Louise Ryland-Epton

SEXUAL TRANSGRESSIONS IN GEORGIAN CHELTENHAM

All sorts of sexual transgressions were possible at the busy resort of Cheltenham. It seems that the pretext of taking the waters of the spa liberated some from the usual conventions of the everyday. This had repercussions.

One of the most obvious was the large number of illegitimate births it precipitated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the mothers of these children were poor, while large numbers of the fathers were wealthy. Cheltenham's parochial authorities tried to regulate this sexual behaviour. The parish actively pursued the fathers of these children for money to ensure they supported their offspring. The money was payable to the parish itself. While this action was encouraged under legislation to morally police men's behaviour, given the enthusiasm with which it was enacted here, it was also about offsetting the cost of local welfare.

4 GA, GDR, Wills, 1558/465; 1563/101.

5 GA, GDR, Inventories, 1691/184; 1694/133.



Fig3 Cheltenham High Street in 1813

The men sought by Cheltenham parish to support their illegitimate offspring included ‘gentlemen’, army officers, attorneys, surgeons and lawyers. Payments received from them could be sizeable. If they resisted, they could face prosecution and detention at Northleach Bridewell. But this was more likely to happen the further down the class structure an itinerant father was or the more belligerent a character he proved to be. In 1827, an excited local newspaper reported James Roberts had been incarcerated for three months after the birth of his seventeenth child out of wedlock. At the other end of the class structure, in the same year, Major Kennedy and the Rev. Eccles quietly paid the parish large sums and were neither prosecuted nor subject to press intrusion. Irony abounds. ‘Gentleman’, Richard Pruen married in the same month his second illegitimate child was born. His wife-to-be was not the mother of these children but a wealthy heiress. A few years later, his obituary recorded he had ‘passed through life in the cordial esteem of rich and poor and in the fair possession of a name unsullied even by suspicion.’

By contrast, the mothers of illegitimate children were not considered ‘in the fair possession’ of a good name. They could face also incarceration, particularly if they did not comply with the administrative process or pushed societal norms too far. Sarah Davis was imprisoned for six months after having four illegitimate children and leaving them to the care of the parish. The children’s father, Thomas Smith, was also sentenced for not providing financial support. Predictably, Thomas’s sentence was half as long as Sarah’s. However, Cheltenham parish gave women access to medical care and support when there was no statutory requirement to do so. The level of demand locally was so high that the workhouse became, according to a government observer, ‘little more than a lying-in hospital for mothers of bastards and an asylum for their offspring.’ Unfortunately, it was not a benign welfare regime, as the derogatory term ‘bastard’ suggests. These women probably had no alternative.

Another outcome of Cheltenham being a ‘destination of desire’ was the local prevalence of brothels. The proprietors of these ‘disorderly houses’ were also liable to prosecution and imprisonment. Given the successful prosecution of six brothel keepers in one go in 1817, there was at least one establishment for every 1000 heads of the population. The majority of the legal cases were against women. These included Mary Wood described as a ‘great local celebrity’ incarcerated for three months in 1818. Here as elsewhere, there were double standards. Most of the women who were imprisoned were not detained

for keeping a brothel but because they had failed to pay their bail. On her third offence, and unable to pay bail, Mary Ann Light was jailed for 12 months. If you broke moral codes in Cheltenham and had access to money your behaviour was likely to be tolerated, but if you were poor, particularly if you were a woman, then you were likely to be dealt with harshly.

Notes: The overseers and bastardy records housed in the Heritage Hub are a rich source of information on how the local government dealt with illegitimate births. Local newspapers provide some wonderful insight into the seedy underbelly of Cheltenham life. These are available to view online through the *British News Paper Archive*. Amongst examples used are *Cheltenham Journal and Gloucestershire Fashionable Weekly*, 5 Feb 1827, 27 Aug 1827, 10 Sept 1827, 20 Feb 1832; *Cheltenham Chronicle* 14 Aug 1817, 26 Feb 1818, 27 Oct 1831 and for Mr Pruen’s obituary *Wiltshire & Gloucestershire Evening Standard*, 13 October 1838. The government observer I mention was Robert Weale, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner. His correspondence can be seen at the National Archives in Kew.

From Mark Forrest

PUBS IN CIRENCESTER IN THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURIES

Most of the inhabitants of Medieval and Tudor Cirencester liked a pint or two – and even those who didn’t like it drank anyway as something mildly alcoholic was probably much safer than drinking water and provided around a third of their daily intake of calories. The 15th century provides sparse evidence in a sample of 400 individuals, taking occupations from the court of common pleas. In 1415-1515 there were seven ostlers, who looked after travellers’ horses and five inn holders. There may have been a change in the terms used for different trades as the ostlers were all recorded before 1490 and the inn holders after 1484.

The earliest reference to a specific inn with a landlord is the Cocke for which the lease to John Nele by St Mary’s chapel in 1460 was noted in the chapel’s rental. Our first comprehensive assessment of the town’s inns comes in an account compiled in 1540 when there were at least nine inns in the town. Gosditch Street was the heart of the hospitality sector

and contained six: the Ramme, the Hartishead, the Bell, the Bere (i.e. Bear), the Swan and the Lyon situated beside the *Dakkor Gate*, perhaps a former name for the Almerly Gate. The Bere, Swan and Lyon were all owned by the widow Lady Elizabeth West. On Cricklade Street the Kateryne Whele was described as an inn and a house called the Angel probably also functioned as a tavern as no other houses were given names in the account. Dyer Street had just one inn called the Crowne.

From the middle of the 16th century the court leet for Cirencester gives more information about the inns and their holders. At the Michaelmas court held in 1550 there were two public houses (*communia hospicia*) in Dyer Street, which provided food and accommodation for horses and were probably operated as coaching inns, run by Robert Ingram and Joanna Spicer. There were also two public houses, again similar to coaching inns, in Cricklade Street and another five in Gosditch Street, all of which sold victuals. In the 1560 courts some of these public houses were noted as having signs for which an easement was charged in the manor court at Chippenham and perhaps the court at Cirencester did the same.

In Castle Street Thomas Sansome had what was described by the unusual word *taventrius*, which presumably denoted a kind of tavern that just sold beer (unlike the more normal *taberna*, which mostly sold wine), and there were another three in Gosditch Street and two in Dollar Street. In Castle Street Robert Wodd and Clement Clerke ran private houses selling victuals, which were probably guest houses. The court noted that three taverns in Gloucester Street sold cider, which was probably a slightly lower priced product, and consumed in one of the poorer areas of the town.

These mid-16th century courts give a snapshot of a constantly changing economic environment. The named inn holders and numbers of establishments are different from one court to the next. A few of the larger coaching inns remained on the same sites for centuries, while some of the boarding houses and taverns may have only lasted a few months.

From John Chandler

SWINDON AND . . . SWINDON

Ag. Lab., Ag. Lab., Ag. Lab., Farmer, Ag. Lab., Tight-Rope Dancer (retired) – hmmm, wasn't expecting that, in my Victorian village. But there's no mistake. John Oliver Richer was born in 1773, and by the age of nineteen was the star attraction at Sadler's Wells theatre in Islington, where 'Charming Richer' stunned audiences with his rope dancing and daring leaps from his tight-rope. As an observer wrote: '... his steps are more infinitely pleasing on the narrow diameter of a three-inch rope, than nine-tenths of our professed dancers on the stage. The wonderful leaps he takes, nearly his own height, terrifying those who see him for the first time. His correct manner of performing on the tambourine, when dancing, draws forth repeated plaudits.'

His performances led to royal patronage, entertaining at Queen Charlotte's very select fêtes in Frogmore gardens at Windsor; and female admiration, as 'one of the handsomest and best made men in England'. William Hazlitt, no less, the essayist, said he was, 'matchless in his art, and added to his extraordinary skill exquisite ease and unaffected natural grace.' Charles Boles Watson, Gloucestershire theatre owner and impresario, saw his potential and snapped him up to perform in Tewkesbury and elsewhere, eventually in 1800 enticing him away from

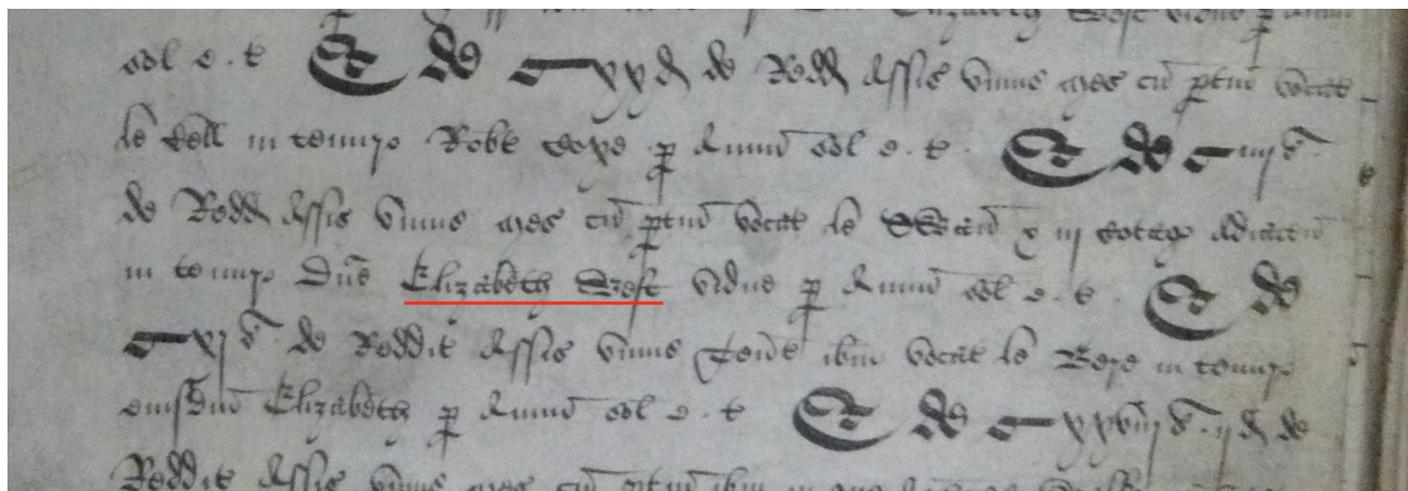


Fig4. Elizabeth West's name can just be made out in the 1540 account

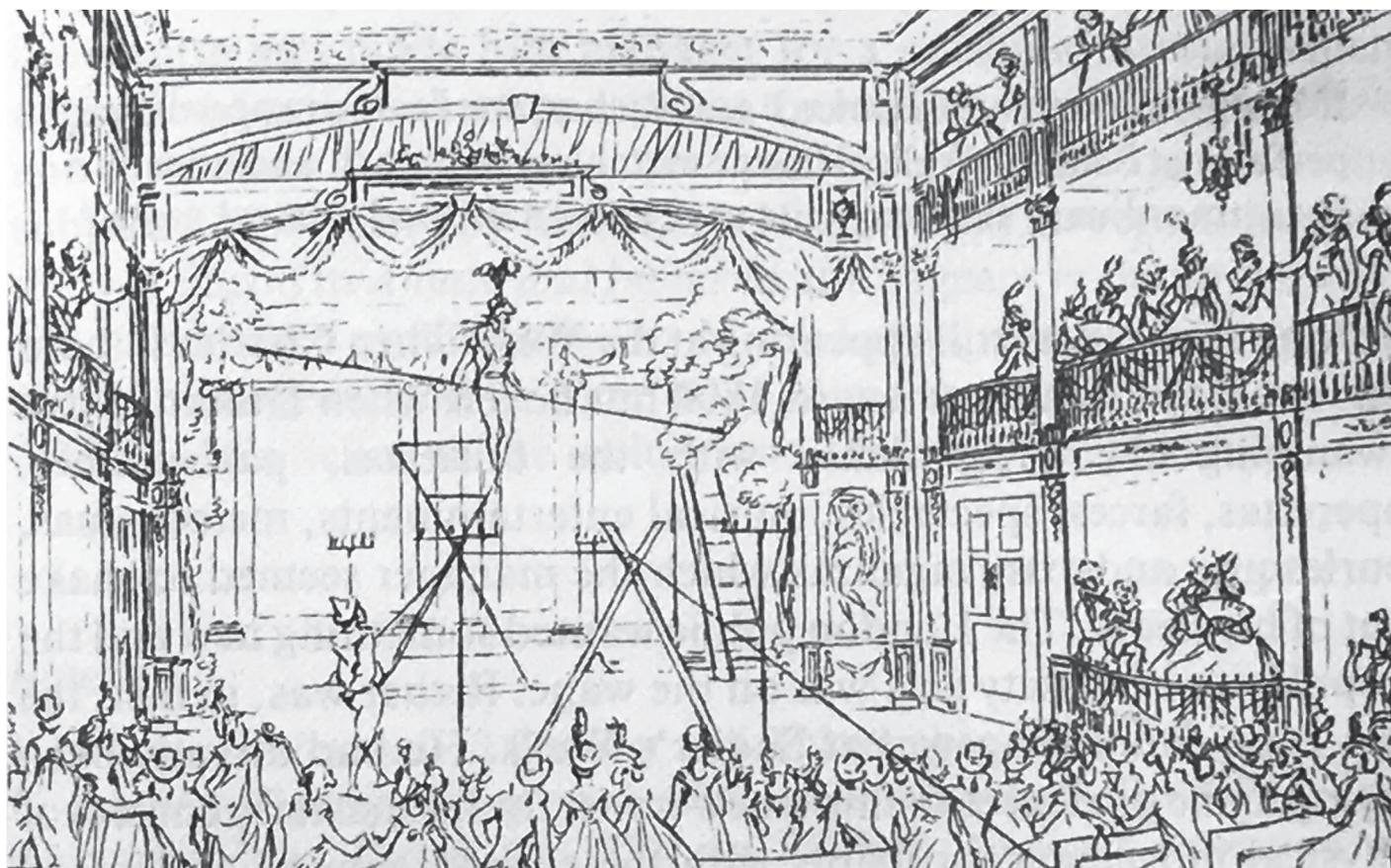


Fig5. John Richer leaping from the tightrope at Sadler's Wells, as sketched by Anthony van Assen in 1795 (from Denning, 1993)

London altogether for Cheltenham and Cirencester. Watson's daughter Louisa also saw his potential and snapped him up as her husband soon afterwards, and two years later, aged 29, he gave up his aerial pursuits for the safety of theatre management, acting and pantomime. Tragically Louisa died in 1804, and Richer returned to rope dancing, but eventually, in 1817, he remarried. Catherine Long was an heiress to property in Swindon and nearby, including the Cross Hands Inn on the Tewkesbury road; and so to a comfortable house in Swindon, 'Brookville', and elegant lifestyle the couple retired.

John Richer lived on until 1846 and died in Swindon. In April the *Cheltenham Chronicle* advertised the sale of his effects, including a collection of rare curiosities, 'among which the well-known celebrated violin of this unequalled performer on the tight rope on which he accompanied himself, to the never-to-be-forgotten delight of crowded houses which ever attended his elegant and inimitable performances thereon.'

I came across John Richer while researching the trades and occupations of Swindon's inhabitants for the economic history portion of the VCH chapter on the parish. I am relieved to be able to get back to work on Swindon, begun before lockdown, and I hope to finish the remaining topics this summer. The task has been made much easier by Sally Self's sterling and

extraordinarily thorough work (assisted by Eileen Allen) on the Kingsditch trading and industrial estate (much of which is in Swindon), and on the market gardens of the parish (both now published as articles, in *Local Historian* and *Cheltenham LHS Journal* respectively).

By a strange quirk I also find myself this summer putting the finishing touches to a third edition of a history I wrote many years ago about another Swindon, the rather bigger one thirty miles away. It occurs to me that this may be the first time ever that a local historian will have completed at the same time the histories of two places with the same name, which in this case are in different counties. Name apart, which does mean 'pig hill' in both cases (a derivation sometimes referred to by detractors) the two places have little in common. Or maybe they do. In 1987 'big' Swindon's local council set up a 17-foot high statue of the Great Blondinis, an acrobat couple who in the 1920s and 1930s performed around the town balancing, juggling and – yes – high-wire acrobatics.

Principal sources: GA, D3751, Grazebrook notes; A. Denning, *Theatre in the Cotswolds* (Soc. for Theatre Research, 1993), 50-4, 76, 122-3.

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