

The Story of Old Benny

On p.70 of Seth Evans' *Bradwell Ancient and Modern* (BAM) we read:

Strange Character's Money Buys Church Clock

Benjamin Giles known throughout the peak as 'Old Benny' for the greater part of his lifetime travelled the country as a hawker of small articles which he dragged about up hill and down dale on a handcart. The old gentleman's life was a mystery, but it was said that he was a London merchant, and lost every penny by misfortune, and the rest of his life was spent in the manner indicated. His home – if home it could be called – was a small chamber behind some lead smelting works on Bradwell Hills, where the Overdale Houses now stand, and when on his round he never lodged at houses, but was allowed to sleep at outhouses at lead smelting works belonging to Mr E M Wass, a wealthy mine owner near Matlock. He lived (Benny) to be more than eighty years of age and when he died in 1883 he left a large sum of money - £150 to £200 (in fact nearly £350 see below) – to Mr Wass, who returned it to Bradwell in the shape of a public clock, which he placed in the church tower at a cost of £150, and erected a monument over the grave of this strange character, which is noticed elsewhere.

On p.73 of BAM Seth Evans adds:

*On a headstone near the entrance to the vestry:
'In memory of Benjamin Giles, a native of South Wales (in fact he came from Gloucestershire, see below)) but for 40 years a hawker of this district, and resident at Bradwell, who died February 16th, 1883, and was buried beneath this stone February 19th, 1883, aged 81 years. Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also.*

What now can we add to the story of Old Benny?

In the 1871 census a 70 year-old Benjamin Giles was shown as a resident in Water Lane (now Church Street) as the head of a household, but with no other residents listed. Benjamin is recorded as a widower and a hawker and is said to have been born in Tetbury, Gloucestershire. It seems therefore that by 1871 Benny's itinerant days were over. Benny was still resident in Water Lane in the 1881 census that shows him aged 80 living as a lodger in a house that was probably next door to his 1871 residence. The head of this household was Aaron G Howe, lead miner. His wife was Harriet and there was another boarder whose name was Thomas Andrew. Benjamin seems again to be described as a widower (but difficult to read) and his profession as that of hawker. Benjamin is now said to have been born in Badminton, Gloucestershire (Tetbury is very close to Badminton).

It is possible that the census takers of 1851 and 1861 found Benny difficult to locate because no individual called Benjamin Giles of the correct age and origins can be found for those years. Perhaps they didn't look in '*a small chamber behind some lead smelting works*'.

When looking in the 1841 census the most likely Benjamin Giles mentioned was 40 years old and living in the hundred of Bisley in Painswick, Gloucestershire. (The 1841 census tells us that Benjamin was 'born in the same county' but not where in Gloucestershire this was.) He was married to Elizabeth (née Pierce) aged 43 and they had three children: twins James and Sarah aged 15 and Mary a 10 year old girl. A second girl Dorcas Giles was baptised at the same time and place as Mary (a twin?) but is not listed in the 1841 census. Elizabeth seems to have died in 1870 in Northleach, Gloucestershire making Benjamin a widower as shown in

1871 census. Two points about Benny's early history merit comment. His marriage to Elizabeth Pierce appears to have taken place in 1816 at Stonehouse in Gloucester when he was barely 16 (she was about 20). Secondly, if Seth's account is accurate, he seems to have abandoned his wife and children in 1843. But why?

As far as Benjamin's finances go the probate record for 1883 shows:

10 December.

The will of Benjamin Giles late of Bradwell in the County of Derby Pedlar who died 16 February 1883 at Bradwell was proved at Derby by Edward Miller Wass of Lea near Matlock in the said county Esquire the sole executor. Personal estate £350.

The main body of Benjamin Giles' will adds a little more to this. It reads:

This is the last will and testament of one Benjamin Giles residing in the parish of Bradwell, Derbyshire. I give devise and bequeath all my real and personal estate whatsoever and wheresoever situate (after payments of any just debts) unto Edward Miller Wass – Esquire of Lea near Matlock in the same County. And I hereby appoint him sole Executor of this my will. Dated this first day of January in the year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred and eighty three.

Benjamin Giles his X mark.

Signed with his mark by the said testator (he being unable to read or write) in the joint presence of us, present at the same time, who at his request, in his presence of each other have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses the alteration. First day of January One thousand eight hundred and eighty three.

Henry Thornton Dudley MA, Vicar of Bradwell

Charles Middleton, Butcher, Bradwell.

(Note that all of this is written in the same hand including the signatures of the vicar and the butcher. The fact that Benny appears to have been illiterate seems at variance with the appearance of a signature for (by?) Benjamin Giles appearing on his 1816 wedding certificate, whereas Elizabeth Pierce simply made her mark.)

When the will was proved it was recorded that the Gross value of the Personal Estate was £350. The Net value of the Personal Estate was £344 17s 10d. 'Extracted by F and H Taylor, Solicitors, Bakewell'.

Edward Miller Wass died three years later and the 1886 probate record shows:

2 June

The will of Edward Miller Wass formerly of Lea but late of Matlock Bath in the County of Derby Esquire who died 9 March 1886 at 56 Grosvenor-street in the County of Middlesex was proved at Derby by Thomas Buzzard 56 Grosvenor-street Esquire MD and Thomas William Denman Retford in the County of Nottingham Gentle men the executors. Personal estate £22733 3s 11d. Resworn October 1887 £26723 7s 0d ... and again in Dec 1888 as £266(or 9, it has been changed) 98 13s 7d ... finally Feb 1893 as £29439 18s 11d.

The 1881 census shows 54 year old Edward Miller Wass living at the house of his mother Anne Wass in Lea Green. Anne's occupation is stated to be 'Principal of the Firm of Wass & Sons Lead Smelters and Lime (illegible)' as is that of Edward Miller, who is also stated to be a Justice of the Peace for Derbyshire. Anne was born in Nottingham and Edward Miller at Crich Parish, Holloway. The same situation applied in 1871 but at that time Anne's daughter

Isabel Buzzard was at the house. Isabel was a physician. Isabel's 8 month old daughter Louisa was also present. Louisa had been born at St George's Hospital, Hyde Park Corner, London. The household also consisted of a housemaid Phebe Waterfall and parlourmaid Elizabeth Waterfall. In 1878 Anne Wass bought land from Florence Nightingale (among others) in Lea.

Sadly Edward Wass' will does no more to clear up exactly what were Benjamin Giles' intentions when he left his money to him. All of Wass' money was left to his brother and sisters and their children with no specific directions as to how it should be spent.

A recently-discovered copy of the front page of the Bradwell (Church) Parish Magazine for June 1888 helps clarify the question. It reads:

THE CHURCH CLOCK

We are glad to say that the executors of the late Mr Wass have through their Solicitors have accepted the estimate which the vicar submitted to them from Messrs John Smith and Sons, the well-known Clockmakers of Derby. This provides a 31/2 cwt bell upon which to strike and which will eventually, we trust become the treble Bell of a Peal, an apparatus to play Cambridge quarter Chimes and an additional dial plate for the service of the Villagers who live on the Hills side. This dial will be seen too, the moment the traveller emerges from the Dale, bent on catching his train at Brough Lane head station (*never built*) or Hope.. And as the clock is guaranteed 'to maintain true time with less variation than 15 seconds a month,' he will be able to either at once make his mind easy as to whether he will catch that train, or else philosophically reconcile himself to his fate, and 'bide a wee' at Bradda en route! The estimated cost is £145.

The UK Genealogy archives tells us a little more when it states of St. Barnabas: 'erected in 1868, is a small building of stone, in the Perpendicular style, consisting of chancel, nave, vestry, organ chamber, a small turret, at the junction of chancel and nave, containing one bell, and an embattled tower, in the Decorated style, at the south-west angle of the church, erected in 1889, at a cost of £1,004, and containing one bell and a clock, placed by the executors of the late E. M. Wass esq.: in 1895 the church was re-seated throughout, and now affords 220 sittings.'