

Thomas Corkett – a Soulbury farmer

In the eighteen sixties, seventies and eighties Thomas Corkett was a well-known figure in Soulbury. Being one of the twelve or so farmers in the parish he held a significant place in the local social order below the local gentry but above the traders and labourers. As a farmer he had 'clout' as an employer who could hire and fire labourers at will. He had influence as member of the parish Vestry and an occasional holder of parish offices. In 1867 and in 1868 he was appointed Overseer of the Poor of the parish. In 1881 he was appointed the position of Surveyor of the Highways in Soulbury. These were positions that required some skill and sense of fairness and propriety in undertaking them. They brought with them some power and influence as well as financial responsibility. He had prestige and buying power as a man who had good annual earnings and accumulated wealth. He also held some moral high ground as senior member of the Wesleyan Chapel and as a leading member of the temperance movement in Soulbury.

If Thomas Corkett had had the ability to trace his family back a couple of centuries he would have found that he was descended from a yeoman family, the Chandlers, of Hollingdon, back in the 1600's. This was a time when Hollingdon was a centre of religious dissidents in the parish of Soulbury.

As it was, he was the son of Michael Corkett, an agricultural labourer of Hollingdon and his wife, Sarah, formerly Kemp. Thomas was born in Little Hollingdon in 1828 probably in one of the cottages that today are incorporated into a house known as 'Holmside'.



'Holmside', Little Hollingdon c.1900

Thomas was baptised a few days after he was born into a dissenting religious group whose records were transcribed into an index in 1837. The transcription does not say to which group or denomination his parents belonged. Quite likely it was the Leighton Buzzard Wesleyan Methodists but his baptism is not recorded in their

registers, so he may have been baptised by a minister of a different Wesleyan circuit where his parents attended chapel. Alternatively he could have been born into a baptist or small independent sect long since forgotten whose records are no longer available.

On New Year's Day 1852 Thomas married Emma Gibbs. She was from nearby Little Horwood and had been living in Soulbury helping her aunt to run the village shop. On the first of September that year their first child, George, was born at Little Hollingdon. At least eight other children followed on a fairly regular basis over the following twenty-three years. The last child who survived into adulthood was, William born on the fourth of July 1875 at Little Hollingdon.

Thomas's and Emma's children were: -

George, born 1852 at Little Hollingdon

John Kinch, born 1853 at Little Hollingdon

Mary Ann, born 1856 at Little Hollingdon

Sarah, born 1858 at Little Hollingdon

Michael, born 1858 at Little Hollingdon

Elizabeth, born 1861 at Little Hollingdon

Abraham, born 1864 at Little Hollingdon

Thomas, born 1868 at Little Hollingdon

Unmamed, born 1871 at Little Hollingdon

William, born 1875 at Little Hollingdon

Thomas Corkett spent most of his life in Soulbury, and most of the time he lived in Little Hollingdon. He was very familiar with Hollingdon's hillsides and the 'great hollow' of Hollingdon, and the little stream that separates Little Hollingdon from Great Hollingdon. From his hilltop at Little Hollingdon he knew well the distant panorama to the north and the nearer view across the Ouzel valley to the Greensand Ridge at Brickhill and Woburn. Here the ridge pushes forwards like a snout, in a distinctive profile of a sandstone escarpment. He would have been very familiar with Hollingdon's rich clay soils, its gravel patches and the softer wet areas along the spring line.

By becoming a successful farmer he must have known which were the best fields for grazing sheep or growing barley or roots. He was also familiar with the land below Hollingdon in the Ouzel valley where water meadows and adjacent land provided rich pasture. He would have known where the wildlife found sanctuary and how the birds took from his crops. Above all he knew the rhythm of the farming year and how to read the changing weather and when to bring tasks forward and when to delay them. He could spot an illness or abnormality in a sheep or a cow by walking by the field. His success a farmer demonstrates that he knew his business.

Thomas had reached adulthood by the time his father had risen from being an agricultural labourer to become a tenant farmer at Thornborough, a few miles north of Soulbury. He could therefore describe himself in the 1851 Census as a 'farmer's son' – an expression of some note which combined his new found status with what he actually did. It placed Thomas in a respected social class above the vast numbers of labourers. Not many months later he called himself a butcher when completing the entry in the marriage registry at All Saints Church, Soulbury. Perhaps it was just before his marriage he had become a butcher like his elder brother Isaac in Heath and Reach. In subsequent Censuses he described himself as a farmer, at first being a tenant farmer and then becoming a landowning farmer. He had risen from being an agricultural labourers son, to being a tenant farmers son, to being a butcher, to being a tenant farmer and finally to being an independent farmer in his own right. In Victorian society this was a much-respected journey of self-improvement.

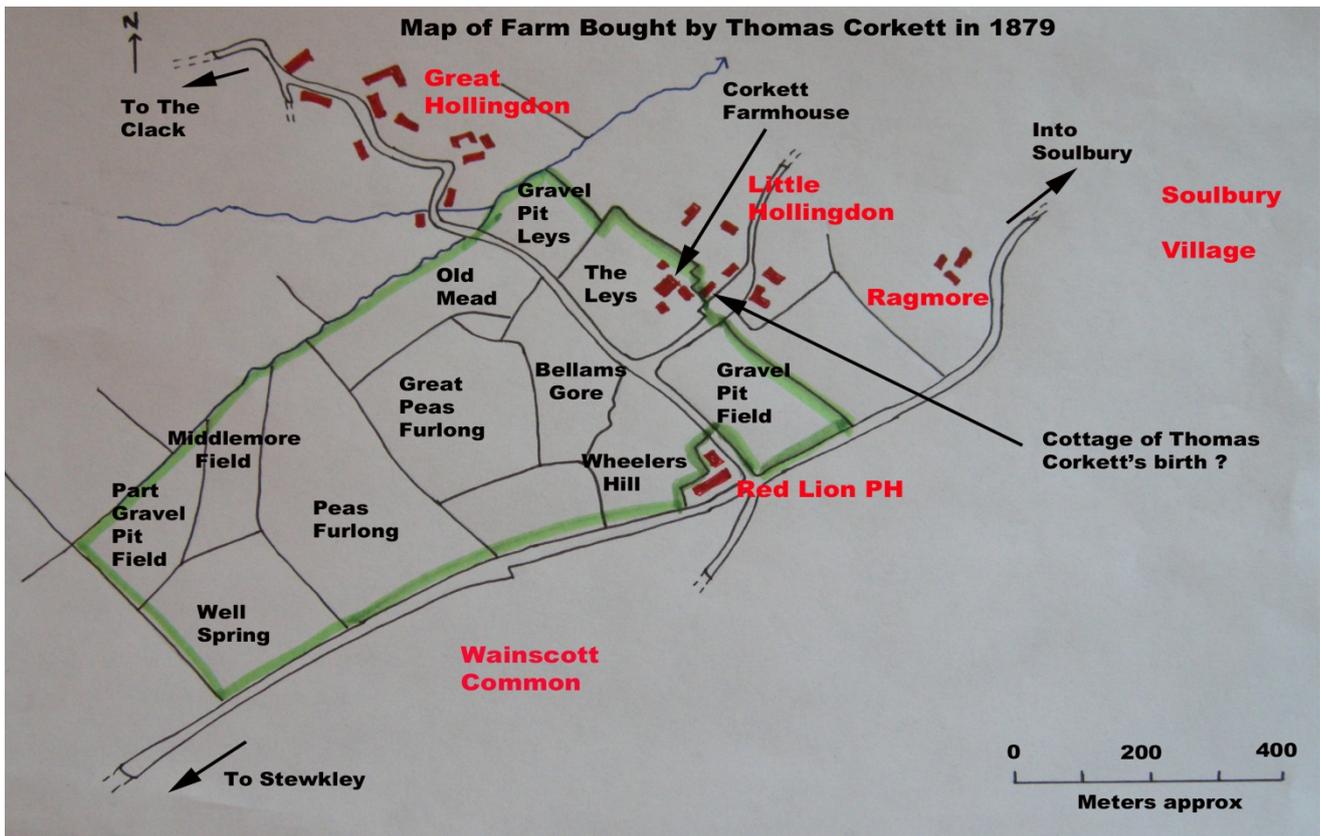
Thomas would have been proud of his standing amongst other farmers in the Annual Leighton Buzzard Wool Fair. In July 1868 he put up 500 fleeces for sale – good number by any standard. In June 1878 he did much better, putting up 850 fleeces, the second highest number for any farmer or estate.

Thomas buys a farm

About a half of the farmland in Soulbury parish was owned by the Liscombe Estate, which it let to about ten or so tenant farmers. For much of the nineteenth century the farms were profitable. The Estate took its rent and did a minimum to maintain the cottages and other buildings it let out. The eighteen seventies were a difficult time for such enterprises. Farming went through three successive very thin years of poor weather and poor harvests. Consequentially much pastureland was overgrazed which it was going to take many years to restore. Farming was a less than attractive proposition for potential tenants. New social and public health legislation were requiring Estates to improve the quality of their housing stock. If the Estates pushed rents up too much they would lose their tenants. If they didn't improve their cottages they would be fined. At the same time cheaper imports of food were coming in from Europe and the New World undermining the profitability of home agriculture.

Under these circumstances Estates like Liscombe sought to sell off their least profitable lands, farmsteads and most run down cottages. All together in 1879 Liscombe put up some seven hundred acres of its outlying farmland for sale. In Soulbury most of these were in the north of the parish in Hollingdon. In July 1879 the Estate put most of Hollingdon and a part of the Ouzel valley up for auction. It was a considerable gamble.

Thomas Corkett must have been a man of vision for he decided to try to 'buy in' at a time when the market was low. He stood out as being the only person who bought any of the farms that were up for sale. At the time of the sale he was a tenant of the Estate with over 100 acres of land mainly in the Ouzel valley in the area of the Three Locks.



The Auction was held, as usual, on a market day – Tuesday the 5th August 1879 in the Assembly Rooms of the Corn Exchange in Leighton Buzzard. The event was well attended by all sorts. Notably, local ‘heavyweight’ landowners from Soulbury and parishes around were there keeping their own counsel and keeping their hands in their deep pockets. The auctioneer, Mr Wigley, began at 3.00 pm with a splendid speech extolling the qualities of what was on offer and talking up the wonderful opportunities that were there for the taking. The crowd didn’t really believe him. They knew times were bad and many were there to have a bit of fun watching the auctioneer trying his very best. By three o’clock those who had made some money at market who had had a drink or two were in a good mood for some entertainment. They were not to be disappointed. They knew that fresh in the minds of local land owners who might be tempted to buy, was the disastrous storm of just a few days earlier which destroyed crops throughout the parish. The associated flooding in the Ouzel valley had drowned many beasts and partially destroyed Stapleford Mill. They also knew that the same landed interests had one eye firmly on the growing dissent amongst the farm labourers in neighbouring counties and the consequential outbreaks of strikes. They felt unrest was coming their way and they were being cautious about expanding their farming interests at a time of a marked decline in farming.

The auctioneer brought forward lot after lot, buying most in when they didn’t reach their reserve price. Wigley worked hard but didn’t get very far. The cynics and slightly inebriated in the crowd were enjoying what was happening.

Thomas Corkett had his eye on a farm in Little Hollingdon- almost certainly the one his father had worked when Thomas was a boy. That was the farm just behind the

cottage where he had been born. It was up for sale with 52 acres of land: 22 acres of rich pasture and 30 acres of arable. The bidding started at £2,000 and worked slowly up to £3,200 bid by Thomas. Wigley knocked it down to him. Thomas gained from the lack of interest of those with deeper pockets.

This wasn't enough for Thomas. He wanted more land. He was interested in a parcel of land of some 36 acres of arable land bordering the Soulbury to Stewkley road and contiguous with the land he had already bought with the farmstead. Bidding started at £1,200 and when it stuck at £1,400 it was bought in. The following day Thomas upped his offer to £1,450, which the Estate quickly accepted.

The whole venture had cost Thomas, the son of a former agricultural labourer, £3,600. In today's (2020) terms this was in the region of £450,000! He would take possession later in the year in December. It begs the question of how did Thomas raise that amount of money? So Thomas had his farm, which then had no particular name. It would become known as Corkett's Farm, then as Hill Farm and today as Hollingdon Grange.

The fields that belonged to the farm had long established names, known to all in the village. Close to the farmstead were – The Leys or Home Leys, Gravel Pit Field and Gravel Pit Leys. The other side of Hollingdon lane were Wheelers Hill, Bellams Gore, Great Peas Furlong, and Old Mead. Following these were Peas Furlong, Middlemore Ground, Well Spring and Part Gravel Pit Field. Thomas was now a man of property. He owned all the land enclosed in green on the above map and he would be ruthless in protecting his interests in it.

Thomas a flawed character

Thomas may have been a 'pillar of society' and a loving and fertile husband but he was not always pure in his behaviour.

One defect was what may be seen as a tendency to bully women in pursuit of his interests. Two cases illustrate this weakness.

The first event occurred in 1870 when a forty-four year old widow from Hollingdon called Martha Syrett who had known him since childhood, said that he had physically assaulted her on the 12th of November. No further details were reported. He was called to Linslade Magistrates' court to answer the charge. Neither he nor Mrs Syrett turned up, having sent messages to the court that they had patched up their differences. The Magistrates were not amused and demanded that the two parties present themselves. If the case came back to court it was not reported. Reading between the lines of a report of the magistrates proceedings there was a suggestion that Martha Syrett had been 'persuaded' to drop her allegations.

On a second occasion in 1878 a 61-year-old woman, Elizabeth Guess, wife of an agricultural labourer, accused Thomas Corkett of knocking her down and taking corn that she had gathered out of her hands. Corkett admitted that he had knocked her

over but claimed that the land on which the corn had been growing had become his, due to a change of tenancy. Therefore the corn was his. Mrs Guess who had set the corn had previously been granted use of the land by the previous tenant, before Corkett took over the tenancy. She therefore believed that the corn was hers. The Magistrates let themselves be diverted away from considering the violence that Corkett had committed to focus on the dispute over ownership of the corn. They then ruled that they were not expert in land tenancy law and referred the question of ownership onwards. Corkett's admitted violence to Mrs Guess was thus overlooked. It would appear that questions of ownership of property took precedence over questions of crimes against the person.

By today's standards Corkett would probably be regarded as a man capable of using physical force to assert himself with weaker women. In those days he was perhaps seen as headstrong in the pursuit of maintaining his property.

Thomas Corkett also was not shy of bending (and breaking) the law when it suited him to do so.

This is shown when he found himself again in court in August 1882 when he was accused of employing a thirteen-year-old boy, Charles Canning, on his farm who was of school age. The boy concerned was the son of a labourer who lived in Great Hollingdon, not far from Corkett's farm. The case came to court through reports of school attendance officers who were then vigorously pursuing parents who kept their children away from school. Typically parents actively connived with farmers who illegally employed their children because of the gains to family income that resulted. No mention was made in court of the role of the boy's father in this matter. Corkett's defence was that he believed that given the boy's level of achievement already attained at school he was no longer required to attend school, even though he was still of school age. He said that he knew of other cases where this principle applied. The Magistrates clearly thought that he knew the law on employing children of school age and was 'trying it on'. They were very firm in putting Corkett in his place and fining him heavily.

Tragedy struck the Corkett household on the 27th July 1880 when Thomas's sixteen-year-old son, Abraham, was accidentally killed by his own gun. He had been scaring birds off a field of corn when the gun accidentally went off whilst he leaning over it when was ramming home the powder. The ramrod pierced his chest causing death soon after. Abraham's damaged body was laid out in the Boot Inn at Soulbury for the Coroner's jury to inspect it before they pronounced their verdict of accidental death.

The Leighton Buzzard Observer mentions Corkett's name in connection with the temperance movement in the Soulbury in early 1880's. He was thanked for lending his field and barn for a gathering following a big demonstration in the village. He would not have done so if he didn't actively support the temperance movement. Moreover, as a local landowning farmer committed to this cause he would have taken a leading role locally in this movement.

Thomas Corkett saw out the eighteen eighties and died on the first day of 1890 at his farmhouse at Little Hollingdon. He was sixty one years old. His estate passed onto his wife Emma, who continued to farm it, initially with the help of their sons John and Thomas. His estate was valued at almost £2,000 (around £300,000 in 2020 terms). This was perhaps a fitting tribute in its own way to the man who made his way from being the son of a poor lowly agricultural labourer to being one of the pillars of local society.

Thomas Corkett was buried in the Church yard at Soulbury.



His stone is inscribed with a quotation from Kings 20:40 'As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone'. Its precise significance for him and his family is lost but perhaps it refers to his hard work and determination in his self-advancement in Victorian England.

Note: there were other Corketts who were from poor agricultural labourers families in Soulbury and Great Brickhill but their relationship with this Thomas is not known.