

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his occupational history series with Samuel Taylor, the Beadle of Loughborough

Mention a 'parish beadle' and it conjures up images of Mr Bumble in *Oliver Twist*. Portly and bumptious, Bumble stands in the workhouse canteen overseeing the serving of slops of gruel to a seemingly endless queue of starving boys. "More?" he bellows, when little Oliver has the temerity to request a second helping.



So I felt a slight sense of unease on discovering that my relative Samuel Taylor had served as a parish beadle in Loughborough. The *Leicestershire Mercury* (2 Oct 1847) and *Nottinghamshire Guardian* (30 Sept 1847) reported his death respectively:

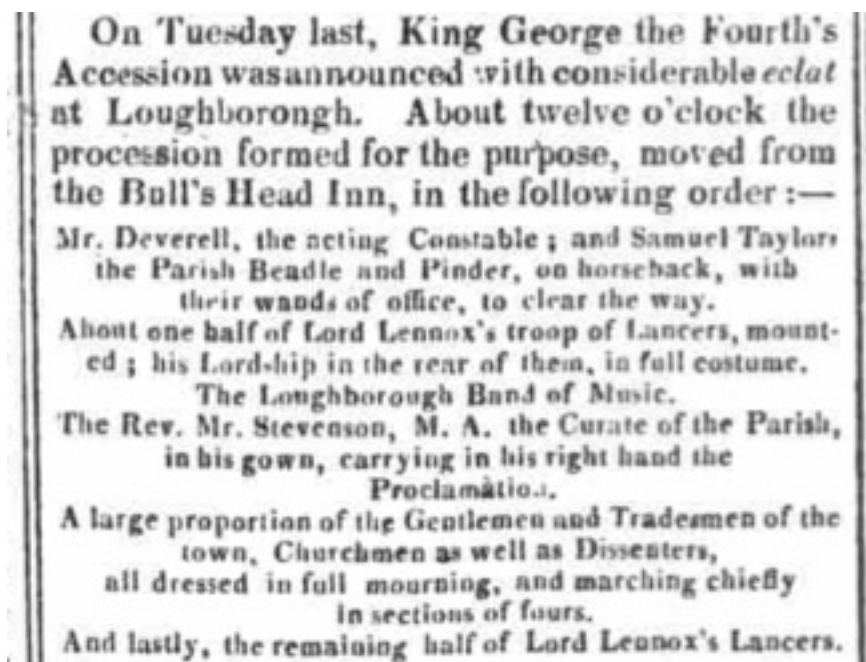
“On the 28th ult. [September] at Loughborough, after a short illness, aged 78, Mr Samuel Taylor, for many years beadle of the parish.”

“At Loughborough, on Tuesday, Mr Samuel Taylor, for many years beadle of that parish, and crier of the Court of Petty Sessions.”

Let's hope Samuel was a just and popular beadle, unlike the obsequious Mr Bumble. I decide to investigate. At the outset, I needed to get a sense of a beadle's duties. The *Handy Book of Parish Law* by WA Holdsworth (1859) helps to set the scene: “The beadle of a parish is chosen by the vestry. It is his duty to attend the vestry, and to inform the parishioners when and where it

is to be held, to act as its messenger or servant, to assist the constable in taking up beggars and passing vagrants. Unless he is regularly sworn in as a constable he cannot take or receive into his custody a person charged with any offence. The beadle is only appointed during the pleasure of the parishioners, and may at any time be dismissed by the vestry for misconduct.”

Beadles were perhaps most visible whilst carrying out their ceremonial duties. Samuel Taylor would have cut a distinctive figure in the Loughborough streets – decked out in a dark blue coat trimmed with gold braid over a red waistcoat, sporting a bicorn hat worn ‘athwarts’ (side-to-side) and carrying his staff or mace. A search through the British Newspaper Archive online (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) pinpoints Samuel fulfilling his official duties; in February 1820, the accession of George IV was heralded by a remarkable procession through the town, led by “Mr Deverall, the acting Constable; and Samuel Taylor, the Parish Beadle and Pinder, on horseback, with their wands of office, to clear the way.”



On Tuesday last, King George the Fourth's Accession was announced with considerable *eclat* at Loughborough. About twelve o'clock the procession formed for the purpose, moved from the Bull's Head Inn, in the following order:—

Mr. Deverell, the acting Constable; and Samuel Taylor, the Parish Beadle and Pinder, on horseback, with their wands of office, to clear the way.

About one half of Lord Lennox's troop of Lancers, mounted; his Lordship in the rear of them, in full costume.

The Loughborough Band of Music.

The Rev. Mr. Stevenson, M. A. the Curate of the Parish, in his gown, carrying in his right hand the Proclamation.

A large proportion of the Gentlemen and Tradesmen of the town, Churchmen as well as Dissenters, all dressed in full mourning, and marching chiefly in sections of fours.

And lastly, the remaining half of Lord Lennox's Lancers.

The procession – complete with a band and troop of Lord Lennox's Lancers – wove its way through the streets, and stopped six times for the Proclamation to be read aloud. As the report finishes, “The ringing of the bells, and buzzings of the procession, together with the distribution of a thousand buns amongst the children at the close of it, added not a little to the interesting scene.” And ten years later, in July 1830, a similar procession marks the accession of William IV and features “the beadle of Loughborough, mounted on a beautiful grey charger, clothed in crimson cloth, led by town servants.”

These reports illustrate the beadle's ceremonial role. But what was involved on a day-to-day basis? One of Samuel's duties – as parish ‘pinder’ – was to be responsible for impounding stray beasts, such as dogs or cattle. It's rather fitting given that he lived on Pinfold Gate where the pinfold – or pound – would once have been used to hold stray animals and the occasional inebriate.

More often, the beadle dealt with beggars and vagrants. This illustration (1820-3) by Sir David Wilkie depicts a parish beadle “in full blow of costume and official authority... seizing a female vagrant, who, without fear of the law before her, had presumed to entertain the lieges by playing on the hurdy-gurdy and exhibiting a monkey.” (Allan Cunningham’s biography of Wilkie, 1843)



The ne'er-do-wells that Samuel Taylor dealt with included William Scott and William Taylor (“a most impudent boy”) taken into custody in 1822, having been caught with about ten yards of stolen calico in their possession. And in 1821 he removed a beggar, Elizabeth Blick from Loughborough to the County Bridewell in Leicester; alas, she died of ague shortly thereafter and he felt compelled to defend himself in the Leicester Chronicle – who had reported her travelling “in an open cart, on an extremely wet day, at a time when she was very unwell” – by explaining that he had provided her with a sufficient supper and breakfast and that “by my direction, my son, a lad about 16 years of age, walked by the side of the said cart all the way from Loughborough to Leicester, where she got out and walked with him very well to the House of Correction.”

As crier of the Court of Petty Sessions, Samuel would be responsible for court announcements, messages and overseeing the welfare of those attending. Developed at the beginning of the 18th century, Petty Sessions were the lowest tier in the court system and dealt with matters such as minor theft and larceny, assault, drunkenness, and bastardy examinations.

In carrying out his duties, Samuel might have relied upon *The Complete Parish Officer* – “A Perfect Guide to Churchwardens, Overseers, Constables, Headboroughs, Tithingmen, Sidesmen, Beadles, and other Parish-officers, of every denomination” – or perhaps John Steer’s book, *Parish Law* (1832),

which sets out the parish responsibilities for the relief of the poor. Having the right of settlement in a parish was critical – a right acquired by being born there, married there, or serving an apprenticeship there – and providing documentary proof to the overseers and beadle was all important.

As Dickens wrote in *Sketches by Boz* (1839):

“The parish beadle is one of the most, perhaps THE most, important member of the local administration. He is not so well off as the churchwardens, certainly, nor is he so learned as the vestry-clerk, nor does he order things quite so much his own way as either of them. But his power is very great, notwithstanding; and the dignity of his office is never impaired by the absence of efforts on his part to maintain it. The beadle of our parish is a splendid fellow. It is quite delightful to hear him, as he explains the state of the existing poor laws to the deaf old women in the board-room passage on business nights.”



As the website www.workhouses.org.uk explains, Dickens' depiction of Mr Bumble in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) was somewhat anachronistic: “With the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the old parish-based workhouse system was being replaced by a new regime based on the Poor Law Union – typically twenty or thirty parishes centred around a market town. ... The workhouse portrayed by Dickens comes at the exact transition between the two eras presents a rather muddled mixture of the two. The Beadle, for example, was a parish official or constable who had no role in the union workhouse system.” Nevertheless, Samuel Taylor would have been well acquainted with the Loughborough workhouses; the old one, accommodating 70 inmates, was replaced in 1838 by a spacious new union workhouse off the

Derby Road, designed by George Gilbert Scott and William Moffatt with room for 375 inmates.

It's difficult to know exactly how effective Samuel Taylor was a beadle, though the fact he served for such a long period – between 1820 and 1846, at least – seems to suggest that he was well respected within the parish. Being beadle was not a full-time job, but it did attract the payment of a modest fee by the vestry. In other records he appears in his day job as a chair maker. As he entered his 60s, and with the change in Poor Law administration, it's likely that it became essentially a ceremonial role, with law enforcement devolved to parish constables. Indeed, Samuel's son – Benjamin Taylor – served as a Loughborough constable from the 1820s, and was one of the first five police officers in Loughborough engaged at the time the Leicestershire Constabulary was established in 1839. But that, as they say, is another story.