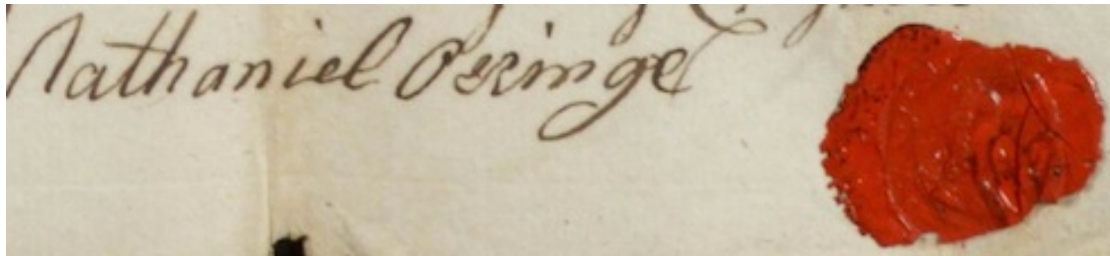


## Trading Stories, Working Lives

### **Graham Barker continues his occupational history series with Nathaniel Orringe – a Georgian miller and baker of Shepshed**

It's a Thursday afternoon in February 1791. Nathaniel Orringe perches beside a large desk at the Loughborough offices of John Blunt, solicitor. A fire crackles in the grate and a couple of candles add some much-needed light. Mr Blunt has just finished reading out the document neatly written on two large pages of parchment. Satisfied that his wishes have been accurately recorded, Nathaniel dips the quill into the inkpot and carefully writes his name at the bottom of each sheet. His business associate – flour dealer, John Barlow – acts as witness, along with Mr Blunt and his son. A couple of red wax seals are added and the deed is done; Nathaniel has finalised his last will and testament.



Over two centuries later, I discover this document signed by my ancestor, Nathaniel Orringe, a miller and baker of Shepshed. It's one of thousands of Leicestershire records recently scanned, indexed and uploaded to the Find My Past website ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)). One phrase in Nathaniel's will especially catches my interest: "All that Plot or Parcel of Ground with the Wind Mill and all other Buildings thereupon Erected... in the Lordship or Liberty of Sheepshead aforesaid and now in my own Possession." Inspired by this glimpse – and the prospect of finding a windmill – I decide to investigate.

The parish registers and an early poll book (1719) bear witness to the Orringes being an established Shepshed family. By the time Nathaniel is born in 1741, both his father's and mother's lines – the Alts – had lived in the village for several generations. As a child, Nathaniel – son of Edward and Ruth – plays with his younger brothers and Alt cousins down by the Black Brook and in the woodlands surrounding the village. "The air is very dry and sweet," wrote county historian John Nichols "and, owing to its vicinity to the [Charnwood] Forest, it is a very salubrious healthy place."

On Sundays he dutifully attends St Botolph's Church, perched at the highest point in the village, and indeed he's there when a great shudder passes through. As the vicar, Thomas Heath records in the parish registers: "Sept 30, 1750, this day (Sunday), while I was administering the Sacrament, between the hours of 12 and 1 o'clock, I and the congregation were very terrible of the shock of an earthquake."

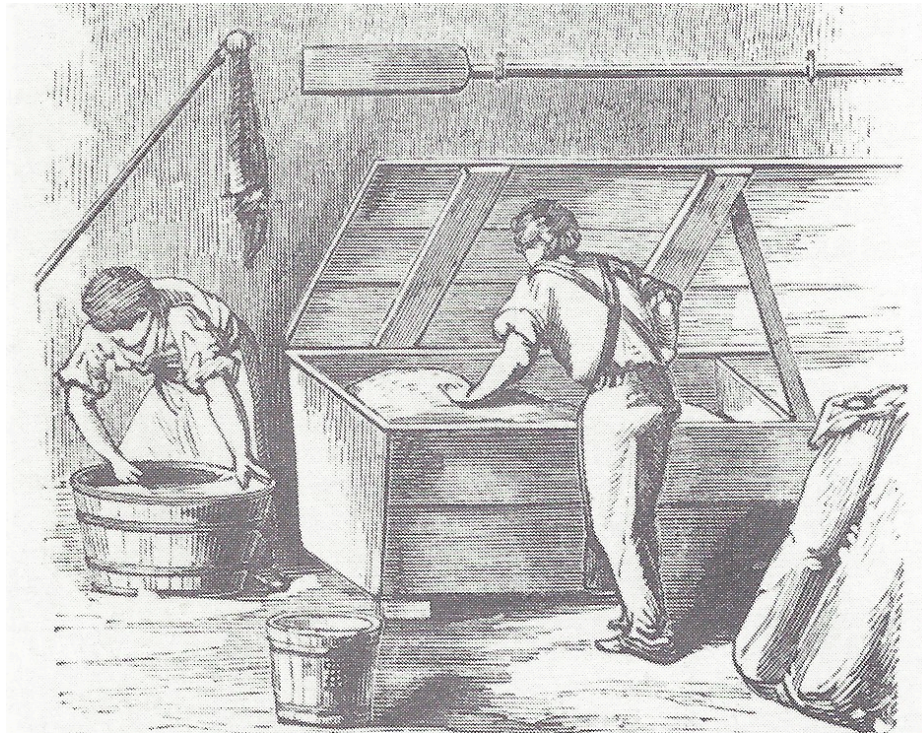


And Nathaniel's childhood is marked by another dramatic event. On 30 June 1753, 'The Great Fire of Shepshed' rampages through the village. "By what means it was occasioned was never with certainty known," wrote Rev Heath, but "Some little time after the fire had begun, a piece of building was set on fire 150 yards distant from the main place of it; and so unexpectedly did the accident happen, that several persons were busy assisting their unfortunate neighbours, when at the same time their own houses were consuming." Many of the villagers help douse the fire – Nathaniel runs frantically with buckets from the village pump – but it burns for twelve hours, destroying or damaging some 85 bays of buildings. It's not clear whether any Orringe or Alt properties perished, but the streetscape is undoubtedly altered and a flurry of rebuilding ensues.

When Nathaniel reaches the age of 14, he takes up an apprenticeship as a baker in the neighbouring village of Belton. His master – the perfectly named Robert Bakewell – is paid a premium of £11 to take him on, and in return he teaches Nathaniel the craft of bread making and baking. Bakewell is pleased to have another apprentice as the previous incumbent, Thomas Simples, has just completed his seven-year term.

"As late as 1800," writes HG Muller in *Baking and Bakeries*, "baking technology had hardly changed since Roman times. Mixing was done manually in wooden bins, and the beehive oven was inserted with a peel – a long-handled wooden shovel – once the ashes had been raked out. Probably cinders became stuck to the bottom of the loaf and the millstone grit inside the bread was said to be 'oftentimes troublesome unto the teeth'."





As an apprentice, Nathaniel spends hours ‘working the sponge’ in the wooden bin. In a series of steps, he combines around 5 gallons of mixed yeast and water, four hundredweight of flour, and seven pounds of salt – mixing and kneading it strenuously to achieve dough with uniform consistency. After leaving it to swell until it’s sufficiently spongy – a stage known as ‘proof’ – it’s fit for dividing, weighing and shaping into loaves. Young Nathaniel then feeds them into the oven using the peel.

It is back-breaking work, and as *The General Shop Book* (1753) notes: “[A baker’s apprentice] ought to be a good sturdy lad, as they carry out great quantities of bread, and are obliged to sit up [a] good part of the night to attend the oven.” But it has its perks – he’s never hungry and during the winter the oven’s glow radiates through the sleeping quarters to keep him warm. Upon completing his apprenticeship, Nathaniel returns to Shepshed and sets up as a baker on his own account and soon after – in December 1765 – he marries his sweetheart, Sarah Whittley of Beaumanor. It’s a marriage that lasts for over 45 years and bears ten children.





As his family grows, so does his business. Nathaniel's not the only baker in the village but there are plenty of mouths to feed and demand for bread grows steadily. Despite the early importance of agriculture – especially sheep farming, from which 'Sheepshead' first took its name – Shepshed has by now become an important centre for framework knitting. The large Leicester factories pass batches to out-workers in the village and during the late eighteenth century there are between 900 and 1,000 frames in operation at Shepshed. And after all, busy workers need bread: "Bread is nourishing enough, and good Food... Bread agrees at all times, with any Age and Kind of Constitution." (A Treatise of All Sorts of Foods, 1745).

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## C H A P. XLIII. Of B R E A D.

**B**Read differs according to the various Things it is made of, according to their respective Proportions, according as the Dough is prepar'd, and according to the Way of baking it. The best is that made of good Wheat Flower, wherein they leave a little Bran, which is well kneaded, and sufficiently fermental, and lastly, well bak'd, with a moderate Heat, so that it ought not to be neither too hard nor too soft. It ought no to be eaten too new, because it will clog the Stomach, but you ought rather to stay 'till it is a little stalish.

Bread is nourishing enough, and good Food; Bread-Crust toasted is binding, but the Crumb used in *Cataplasms*, softens, digests, sweetens, and dissolves.

Bread produces no ill Effects, unless eaten to Excess, or that it be ill made. For Example, when it is too much bak'd, or not enough, it is hard of Digestion, and heavy upon the Stomach.

In due course, Nathaniel's two eldest sons join him working in the bakehouse – William around 1776 and Nathaniel junior some six years later (until 1797, that is, when he signs up for the Coldstream Guards). And, with extra hands on board, Nathaniel is able to expand into milling flour by acquiring a windmill. But where was the mill, I wonder?

Search the Shepshed area these days and you'll soon discover a couple of mills: Shepshed watermill was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and is powered by a millpond fed from the Black Brook, and Fenney Spring windmill is a four-storey tower mill built around 1840 beside Charley Road, a mile or so to the south-west of Shepshed. The Fenney Spring windmill originally stood alone, surrounded by cornfields, but has since been redeveloped as a house. It has inspired photographers and artists alike.



But neither of these fits the bill; Nathaniel's will refers twice to it being a windmill – which precludes the watermill – and Fenney Spring windmill wasn't built until some fifty years after the will was written. In Nathaniel's day, windmills were not, of course, such a rarity. Loughborough once had four, but as JD Bennett wrote in the *Leicestershire Historian* (1971), "Windmills have almost disappeared from the Leicestershire landscape in the last hundred years, the victims of technological and economic changes. The coming of steam power, introduction of steel roller mills, and improvements in communications dealt the wind-operated local mills blows from which they never recovered... The figures speak for themselves. There are 88 windmills shown on Greenwood's Map of Leicestershire published in 1826... but by 1922 there were only 7."

As I continue my research, the land enclosures of Shepshed catch my attention. Under a grant of land in 1724, the vicar was gifted "1 rood land in

the Windmill field shooting down to Carr Lane.” Carr Lane runs between fields on the western fringes of Shepshed, sloping to the Black Brook. What’s more, a house called Mill View later stood in the vicinity. Maybe Nathaniel’s windmill was hereabouts? Another clue pops into view: Nathaniel’s uncle – John Alt – is one of only a handful of beneficiaries during the Shepshed enclosures of 1777 when approximately 2,000 acres are enclosed and cease being common land. Uncle John died shortly thereafter, so perhaps this gave Nathaniel the land or wherewithal to acquire the windmill?

Alas, for the time being, the exact location of the windmill has proved elusive. However, when I next visit Shepshed I shall be sure to pay my respects to Nathaniel Orringe – miller and baker – who rests with his wife Sarah beneath a Swithland slate headstone at St Botolph’s churchyard. Uncovering his will on Find My Past has sparked my interest in other family links with the Charnwood area. Further tales – of mayhem and murder – will follow in a later LRFHS journal.

### **Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories**

To read Graham’s previous ‘Trading Stories, Working Lives’ articles, visit [www.auntiemabel.org](http://www.auntiemabel.org); as well as stories about football referees, Loughborough boatmen, and postmen in Victorian Leicester, the site includes ideas for writing your own family history.