

George Holyer (1810-c1890)

It is said that to have a healthy and wealthy life, you should choose your parents with care! Perhaps George Holyer was unfortunate in that respect, as the decisions taken by his ancestors affected his chances in life.

Anyone visiting the beautiful and charming village of Woodchurch today would have difficulty imagining the difficult lives led by our rural ancestors in past centuries. The 19th century was a time of boom and bust and rarely was rural life easy. Many will have heard of the impact on the poorest of the Enclosures, the 'Swing riots' and the protests against the Corn Laws. Difficult economic times also fuelled political discontent, such as expressed through the Chartist movement.

To understand why George Holyer might have decided to emigrate to the USA in 1854, it is necessary to consider his particular circumstances. George was the 4th generation of a family of butchers in Woodchurch. In the days before metalled roads and modern communications, Woodchurch was a more isolated community than it is today and much of its day-to-day needs were provided by local suppliers. In particular, without refrigeration, fresh meat would be bought only as required, while traditional curing processes might extend the life of some meat products.

In those days, rural butchers had to handle the whole process from rearing animals to retail sales. A butcher was therefore a grazier, slaughterer, butcher and salesman, rather different from the way that meat gets to our supermarkets today. Woodchurch, however, is fortunate to have Mark Carley as our present day local butcher, who is proud to sell meat he has reared himself, albeit that today it is not permitted to have one's own slaughterhouse.

As far as we can tell, at any given time in history, Woodchurch was home to two or even three butchers which meant a rather limited market for their products and no doubt a good deal of local competition. Some people described as butchers might of course have been employed by the main grazier-butchers, as trained butchers, apprentices or 'butcher's assistants', who might look after the shop and deliver to local houses.

The Holyer ancestry

The Holyer story at Woodchurch starts in 1737. Before that time, there is evidence that the Holyer family may have been at Appledore and various unconnected records can be found across Kent and Sussex, including one as far back as 1399 at New Romney. Whatever may have happened elsewhere, it is the Woodchurch family that became the progenitors of all the Holyers (and many Hollyers) alive today.

In 1737, John Holyer (c1714-1772) married Elizabeth Gregory (c1711-1773) of Faversham in Canterbury Cathedral. He may have been the John Hollier who was baptised aged 8 at Egerton in 1822, which suggests he may have been an orphan, as no parents are mentioned in the baptism record. It seems most likely that the Gregory family 'set him up' with grazing land. His first two children were baptised in Woodchurch, although in 1738 John was described as 'of Faversham' and in 1739 'of Frittenden' but by 1741 and their third child's baptism, he and Elizabeth had settled in Woodchurch. However, in those days one needed permission to settle in another place so as not to

become a burden on the parish. Thus the Woodchurch Parish Chest contains a Settlement Certificate dated 1st June 1739 for John Hollier (sic) and his family stating that he was legally settled in Frittenden. Holyers would remain in Woodchurch for over 180 years, until 1922.

John held land at Highlands, to the east of the village where the Rare Breeds Centre and Farm now lies. He also held freehold land in the village as Poor Relief records show other villagers as being his tenants.

John and Elizabeth had 7 children in all, of whom 3 died in early life – not an untypical situation for that time and indeed right through the following century. The three surviving boys all trained under their father in the butcher's trade, but once grown up, it became clear that there would not be enough work in the village to support them all. Consequently, the eldest son John Holyer (b1739) moved to Charing, and later Egerton, to be the butcher there. Some of his descendants later became butchers at Maidstone.

In 1772, just a few days before he died, John made his will. He asks his Executors to sell off the majority of his land of 41 acres, comprising Highlands and a wood adjacent to Wightwick Wood, to repay the mortgage on these lands and distribute the money remaining to his children: John (of Egerton), William (1741-1810) and Elizabeth (1748-1782). His remaining land of around 8 acres passed to his son Abraham (1745-1815). His house was divided between Abraham and Elizabeth, the former part being the property rented by Peter Illenden and his mother. Elizabeth also got 2 acres of woodland adjacent to Highlands.

So from John being a butcher with some 50 acres of land, Abraham now only had 8 acres. We don't know the circumstances of why the land at Highlands was subject of a mortgage. It could always have been subject to a mortgage since John took it over, but it is also quite possible that he subsequently raised a mortgage on the land to tide himself over hard times. It seems that John intended his younger son Abraham to take over the business, but at some stage it appears that Abraham gave up his interest and William continued as the principal butcher. Perhaps this was because William had two sons who trained as butchers, while Abraham's only surviving son took no interest in it.

William married Sarah Batchelor (1742-1808) in 1763 and they had 9 children, although only 4 lived to adulthood. In 1776/7 William was a Churchwarden, while in 1779, he is shown as one of the landowners at Woodchurch nominating the Overseers for the Poor. As in the previous generation, it appeared that Woodchurch would not support two sons as the local butchers, so John Holyer (1766-1824) moved to High Halden to become a butcher there, while the second son William Gregory Holyer (1773-1845) continued to assist his father. William built his own cottage and butcher's shop adjacent to his father's cottage.

William's will of 1810 indicates that at that time, William held over 14 acres, more than had been left by his father. Despite his son's continuing interest as the local butcher, William directed the sale of most of his land. The son William Gregory was allowed to keep the cottage and shop he had built, plus a small plot of land extending back one Rod (5 metres) from the property. But the 14 acres was sold to fund generous legacies to his children and grandchildren of £750 in total, plus a provision of £100 to pay off a debt incurred by his two sons.

Since he now had no grazing land of his own, William would be reliant on other farmers using him as their route to market. Other butchers in the village still had their own grazing land and this would perhaps have made William uncompetitive. And indeed that is what seems to have happened, as William Gregory Holyer was declared bankrupt in 1826. In those days it wasn't easy to become discharged from bankruptcy and with 10 children to support it must have been extremely hard. It's not known how the business managed to survive. No doubt William Gregory had hoped to pass on the business to his eldest son William (1798-1854), but the latter eloped (it is said) in 1830 and married Mary Ann Weston (1809-1845) at Ulcombe. He later moved to Ramsgate and set up as a butcher there. The second son John (1800-1865) moved to Tunbridge Wells sometime in the 1830s and by 1841 had set up as a butcher on the famous Pantiles, a business that stayed in the hands of the family well into the 20th century. The third son Richard (1805-1842) moved to Brenzett and became the miller there. So it fell to the fourth son George (1810-c1890), the subject of this article, to continue the butchers business in Woodchurch.

By the 1841 census, George is shown as the butcher and his widowed father, at 69, was living with George and his family. This comprised his wife Mary (nee Bishopp)(b c1805) whom he had married in 1838 and their daughters Agnes (b 1835) and Grace (b 1839).

In 1845, William Gregory Holyer, George's father, died. His will shows a dramatically different situation than in the previous generation, only managing to provide legacies of £60 to his many children and a son-in-law (£5 each); and of that, £15 was earmarked to pay off a debt to the same son-in-law. He provided nothing to the children of his daughter Jane Wicken (1802-1833), who had pre-deceased him, though one of her children, James Wicken (b 1833), was employed as a butcher's assistant in his cousin John's shop in Tunbridge Wells.

Ten years on in 1851, George is still at their home in Upper Green and shown as a butcher. His family had expanded to include his two sons Thomas Bishopp (1843-c1900) and Richard George (1848-1861). A third son John Illenden (1841-1849) had died in the intervening 10 years. George had taken on his Nephew Nicholas Collis Holyer (1835-1912) as an Apprentice.

Emigration

Around this time, the hardship in Woodchurch and the surrounding villages was causing several families to emigrate. Woodchurch Ancestry Group member Lois Squire reported that:-

"There were a number of families from Woodchurch, Great Chart, Smarden, and Little Chart areas who moved to western New York State about the same time in mid-1800's and they seem to have gravitated to areas where friends and neighbours had already settled.

These include Woodgate, Harnden, Wood, Ottaway, Buss, Miles, Brown and Bourne. I know the above families settled in Chautauqua and Chemung counties (close to Olean) and also Monroe, Orleans and Wayne Counties (near Rochester NY) and Onondaga County near Syracuse."

So it is entirely possible that George got the idea of emigrating, and in particular to settle in New York State, USA, because of other families from the area that had reported back favourably. A move to the USA offered the chance of getting away from the challenging economic conditions of the time and of acquiring his own land to raise cattle.

And so it was that in 1854, George and his family of five set sail from London on the 'Quickstep' to arrive at New York on 16th October.

George Holyer	44	male	English
Mary	49	female	
Grace	18		
Thomas	14	male	
Richard	5		

The entry for the Holyer family on the passenger list of the Quickstep. Note the spelling as Hollyer.

Before describing their subsequent history, it is worth reflecting on George's reasons for emigration. Almost certainly, his immediate aim was to start a new life with better opportunities and the hope of better economic conditions than in rural Kent. Part of that would be the hope of acquiring his own land, which he was not able to do in Woodchurch. As stated at the beginning, the previous generations of Yeoman farmers had not served him well. For many centuries, the English landed classes would have no time for the egalitarian idea of leaving equal legacies for their children. The first born son would be assured the ownership of any title, the land and property, while younger sons, if not needed on the estate, might be encouraged into the military or even the church if they showed no particular business aptitude. In the Holyer family, however, we see that by dividing the land or selling it off to fund legacies, the family had squandered the very strength it had when John first moved to the village. No doubt a contributory factor was that the economic conditions were such that in neither generation was business good enough to accrue any real capital. Indeed, the Holyers always seemed to be in debt.

George Holyer's later life and his descendants

The 1860 US census shows that the family had settled in Augusta, in Oneida County, New York State. At least that is where George, wife Mary and son Richard George were. They were shown as having a personal estate worth \$1200, while their land was worth a modest \$75. Their 17 year old son Thomas Bishopp Holyer was helping at another farm in Madison, Madison County, NY. This was run by another English farmer George Adams (b 1835) and his wife Grace. From Grace's age of 20, it's a fair bet that she was Thomas's sister. Similarly, the daughter Agnes seems to be Agnes Franks, married to another Englishman William Franks (b 1834), also living in Madison.

In 1870, George and Mary Holyer were farming at Riga in Monroe County, NY. The census shows them incorrectly as Holden, but we know this is George Holyer from the associated farm census that was taken at the same time. The entry above George 'Holden' is none other than William and 'Angie' Franks. From the regular census we learn that the land owned by George was now worth \$9000, while his personal estate was worth \$2000. From the farm census we learn that George had 91 acres with 8 horses, 8 milking cows, 8 other cattle, 2 sheep and 3 pigs, so nothing dramatic in numbers compared to our image of enormous American ranches, but clearly the American dream had come true for George. Meanwhile, son Thomas had married Jennie (b 1841) and had 3 children of his own. He was at Chili in Monroe County but appears to be a tenant farmer, worth \$2000. His sister Grace appears to be doing even better. George and Grace Adams had also moved to Riga, Monroe and their land was now worth \$10100, with personal estate of \$3000. Nearby were two other English

Adams families, suggesting that close families stayed together. Sadly, records show that George's son Richard George had in the last year died by drowning, aged just 21.

Time marches on and by 1880, Thomas had given up the rural life to become a city butcher in Rochester, Monroe County. By now, Thomas and Jennie had 7 children and their father George, now widowed, was living with them. But at 70, George still describes himself as a butcher.

Unfortunately, the 1890 US census does not survive which creates many difficulties in tracing US families. However, the Rochester City Directory records the presence of George until 1889 and Thomas until 1899, so it looks as though George died aged about 80 and Thomas aged about 56.

In the 1900 census, we find Thomas's widow Jennie living at Tremont Street, Rochester with 5 of her daughters. Her two sons John (b 1868) and Alfred (b 1879) had both become photographers and were living at Trenton, Mercer County, New Jersey, and John had recently married to Catherine (b c1869).

In the 1910 census, we find the Tremont St premises occupied by three of Jennie's grown-up daughters: Nettie M (b 1865), Jennie P (b 1872) and Frankie (b 1876); it seems that their mother Jennie had passed on. John and his wife Catherine had moved to Omaha City, Nebraska, where John worked as a Stenographer – they had no family. Alfred was living at Gay Street, Rochester where he continued to work as a photographer and had his own studio. He was now married to Minnie B (b c1880) and had children Esther (b 1906) and Richard T (1910-1946).

By 1920, we lose track of John and Catherine, but the sisters Nettie and Jennie had moved in with their brother Alfred and family at their house in Penhurst Street, Rochester.

The 1930 census is the most recent available in the USA and shows us that Nettie and Jennie were still living in Penhurst Street, while Alfred's family were at 58 Winbourne Road.

A 1944 directory for Rochester does show Alfred's son Richard in Kingston Street. Army records show that he enlisted on 11th September 1943, was discharged on 23rd January 1945 from the Rhoads General Hospital, but sadly died on 3rd November 1946, aged 36, and is buried in the Riverside Cemetery. There the story of this branch of the Holyer family seems to end.



RICHARD T. HOLYER "DICK"
58 Winbourne Road
Lit in the fog.
Hi-Y 2, 3, 4; Executive Council 3; H. R. Baseball 2, 3, 4; Pres. Hi-Y 4; Reserve Soccer 3; Reserve Basketball 3; H. R. Basketball 2, 3; H. R. Soccer 2, 4.
M.J.H.S. CENTER

Last of the line: Richard T Holyer's entry in the 1928 Yearbook for West High School, Rochester, NY.

Postscript

When I started my Holyer research, I came into contact with a 5th cousin, once removed, Harry Holyer. When he died in 1997, I formally took over from him the One-Name Study of the Hollyer, Holyer and Hollier surnames within the Guild of One-Name Studies. Harry's widow passed to me much of Harry's research into the family. In his early correspondence with me, he made a statement about the Holyer's business in Woodchurch which at the time I assumed had been the subject of proper research. He said:-

"The family were the butcher/graziers at Woodchurch from 1737 until late in the 19th century. The business was then taken over by the Fullagars who married one of the daughters of George Holyer. The original shop was in existence up to 20 years ago still with the Fullagar family."

This statement now seems very suspect. We know of the Fullagar's butcher's shop and it still exists (but no longer as a butcher's shop) at 25 Front Road with the characteristic slaughterhouse behind. Thomas Walter Fullagar (1865-1952) appears in the 1891 census as a butcher, but his ancestors do not appear to have been in the trade – yet despite this, the Fullagar shop sign preserved in the Woodchurch Museum describes the business as "Established 1809". As can be seen from the description above, the Holyers ceased being butchers at Woodchurch in 1854 and the two daughters of George did not marry into the Fullagar family, but emigrated with their father and married in New York State. It is just possible that the Fullagar premises are on the same spot as the former Holyer business, as the buildings would have had the right facilities for this line of trade.



The old slaughterhouse in Front Road, formerly used by the Fullagars. Could this have been where the Holyers' butchery was?

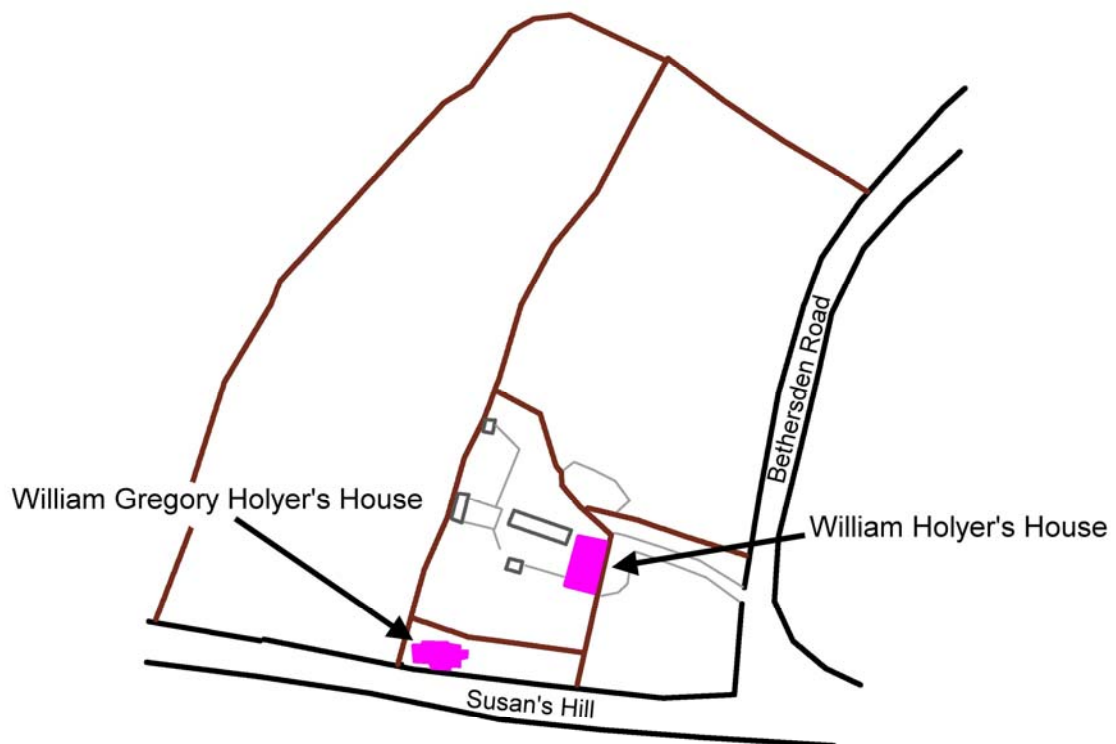
The only hint we have of the location of the Holyer premises comes from the will of William Holyer in 1810, where he bequeaths the house and shop built by his son William Gregory Holyer and describes it thus:-

"I give and devise unto my son William Holyer all that piece or parcel of Land or Ground adjoining my own Dwelling House in Woodchurch aforesaid upon which he my said son William at his own costs and charges did some years ago with my privity and consent erect and build a Messuage or Tenement with the Appurtenances and in which he my said Son now dwells And also all that the said Messuage or Tenement with the Appurtenances so erected and built by him my said Son on the said piece or parcel of Land or Ground adjoining my own House as aforesaid together with all that piece of Garden Ground with the Appurtenances in

the Occupation of my said Son lying between the said Messuage or Tenement so built by my said Son William as aforesaid and the shop there wherein I lately carried on my Business of a Butcher in the said Parish of Woodchurch and also all that other piece of Ground containing one Rod in width at the back of the said Messuage or Tenement so built by my said son as aforesaid commencing in a line with the wall which separates the said two Tenements of me and my said Son and continuing the Distance of one Rod beyond the end of the said Messuage or Tenement built by my said son as aforesaid and forming a right angle at the South West Corner of the said last mentioned Tenement and leading from the said Angle in a Parallel Line with the end of the said Tenement at the distance of one Rod from it to the High Road leading to Woodchurch Green in Woodchurch aforesaid “.

The 'legalese' is most impressive!

Some important evidence as to the locations described has come to light through the researches of Woodchurch Ancestry group member Josie Mackie. She found a Churchwarden's record of February 1774 which recorded that William Holyer was the landlord and tenant of a property which a later annotation on the record had described as being occupied by John Bird c1850. John Bird is known to have lived in the house at the corner leading down to Susan's Hill, variously known through the years as Bird's Corner, The Firs, and Clappers Mead. The Tithe map of c1840 shows this property having had a plot of land carved out at some time and another property erected. This is now known as Rose Cottage and fronts onto Susan's Hill. This allows us to conclude that the two properties were as shown below.



This seems to prove that the Holyers traded from Susan's Hill and not Front Road. It is possible that William Gregory Holyer was forced to sell this property when he became bankrupt in 1826 and that is why George Holyer, his son, was living in Upper Green.

Below are two photographs of the properties as they are today.



Peter Walker

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