SUTTON POYNTZ MAKES THE NEWS

INTRODUCTION:

This is a talk I gave to the village in April 2024, resulting from research I had done finding newspaper references to Sutton Poyntz (or Sutton Pointz as it was always spelled until the mid-19th Century). I have also now completed an Annex containing some topics that I did not have time for in my talk.

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SEWAGE

I'm going to start with something rather unexpected - sewage - but a story that gives us a picture of a very different village in the past. We start in 1896, and the protagonists in the story are the County Council, Preston Parish Council, and the newly formed Weymouth Rural District Council. Preston Parish wrote a letter to the Rural District Council, concerning the unhealthy state of the Jordan River and the water supply in Preston and Sutton Poyntz. Here are some quotes. "**We regret to have to move a vote of censure on the Weymouth district, they having treated with indifference the several resolutions and petitions that have been submitted to the above authority. Now, please note that after this vote of censure has been passed on you by the parish council of Preston in the most condemnatory language that can be used by one public body against another for your dilatoriness, now we do hereby threaten you that unless immediate steps are taken we shall petition higher authorities to see to the abovenamed matters and to censure you on your dilatoriness in the carrying out of the abovenamed matters which have been submitted to you time after time, and of which very little proceedings have been taken. Should you still persist in their dilatoriness respecting the cleansing of the stream and the flow of sewage matters into the stream, we shall petition the Local Government Board to send an inspector down, and then the Weymouth Rural District Council will have their duties dictated to them if they do not already know them. Now, we, the parish council of Preston, do move this resolution much against our wish, but we do intend to have this state of things altered, and if you do not do it then your masters or higher authorities will have to be petitioned to do it**". This letter caused great hilarity, with the District Council Chairman saying "And this is the 19th Century!".

This all seems to have been reported to the County Council; a sub-committee reported, saying the stream that inhabitants got their water from was "**no better than an open sewer**", and that steps were urgently needed to prevent its pollution. One local representative disagreed and referred to a much more favourable report done for the Rural District, with much increased use of dry earth closets to prevent water contamination. Harsh words were used by both sides, each accusing the other side of vested interest. At a second County Council meeting, it was suggested that a number of villages have acute problems but Preston was the worst in the county. However it was recognised that insisting on sewerage works would give the villages very great financial difficulty. On a vote it was agreed to suspend any action for 2 months to give the villages a chance to fix the worst problems. A newspaper Editorial commented that local government was guilty of its usual inactivity, and said the Parish Council ought now to appeal over the heads of the County Council to the Local Government Board.

A Rural District Council meeting then received a report by its Medical Officer, saying that: "**The cottages are principally very old, many of them having been built on waste land nearly 100 years ago. About three years ago they were claimed by the Weld estate, which has granted the occupiers leases for 50 years. From the great age of many of these buildings, they have got into a dilapidated condition, and nothing short of complete renovation will fit them for habitation. There is no sewer, and the suds are thrown into the brook; however the closets are supplied with pails that are emptied into the gardens. The water supply is not what it should be, but the Weymouth Water Company are about to erect seven hydrants for the supply of the inhabitants.**" He then noted that in fact disease rates were actually quite low in Preston and Sutton Poyntz. There was some discussion of condemning the worst houses - it was observed that the worst of all belonged to a member of the Parish Council - but they were reluctant to take steps that would leave people homeless. They decided to identify cases of overcrowding, and serve notices.

Apart from the installation of water stand pipes, nothing was done at this time to improve the drains - we can imagine the villages would have smelled appalling to our sensitive noses. We now move on about 40 years to 1932, when Weymouth Rural District Council was abolished, with parts going into Weymouth and Melcombe Regis Borough and parts into Dorchester Rural District. The original very sensible proposal was to align the boundary with the watershed, apart from Bincombe. What actually happened, for reasons I don't understand, caused the strange split half way up Plaisters Lane, with the top end becoming part of Bincombe. The driver for this reorganisation was sewage. As areas such as Preston developed, proper sewage plants were beyond the resources of the Rural District Council, and only affordable for an enlarged Weymouth. A report said "At Preston there were some attractive development sites on shoulders of land looking out to sea. Weymouth had undertaken, should the boundary changes be agreed, to carry out drainage works".

Plans were drawn up for a sewerage system. At which Preston Parish got up in arms again but in a way that completely opposed what they'd done before. An open meeting was held, and complained bitterly at the idea of a sewage works in the Jordan valley, which they said would be "**contrary to the health and prosperity of this popular end of the Borough**". It was estimated that building the sewage works would cause the loss of 800 houses that could otherwise be built in the Jordan valley. And it was suggested that the villagers were entirely happy carrying on in the traditional way, using their waste to the benefit of their gardens.

In fact, nothing happened until after the war. The last reference I have found was a planning application in 1945, for an extension, with bathroom, at Blue Shutters. This was turned down because there was nowhere for the waste water to go. The medical officer noted that this house had an earth closet, like most others in the area, but that nevertheless the stream was, in his words "already highly polluted". A different world!

SUTTON MILL

Let me move to a topic that recurs in the early newspaper archives - Sutton Mill. The first reference was in December 1818, announcing the sale by auction of "**that fine new built and substantial Corn and Grist Mill, belonging to the late Mr George Hyde, deceased". The mill has a regular, never-failing supply of water, which can drive two pairs of stones plus dressing machines. The mill is to be sold with a half-acre meadow, a garden, and a stable**. At that time the mill house had not been built. It seems the mill failed to sell, as we then find several advertisements, offering it for sale by private contract, at a price of £1500, which compares poorly with later information that it had cost £4000 to build.

The next record is 8 years later, when in 1826 the mill is again advertised for sale by auction, as one of a number of lots being sold by the assignees of three bankrupts, Sir William Elford, Baronet, John Tingcombe, and John Clarke. This advertisement gives us a good description of the Mill. This is the first mention of a dwelling house, and there is also a stable, outhouses, garden, and field, and a full set of milling gear. The Mill is described as **brick fronted and four stories high. It was built on "the most approved principles, with materials of the very best quality**".

From the internet Sir William Elford and his colleagues were Plymouth bankers. Sir William was MP for Plymouth, and a friend of William Pitt the younger. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, researching alternatives to yeast. Finally he was a significant artist, exhibited on various occasions at the Royal Academy. Sadly, the bank failed in 1825, and the three partners were declared bankrupt. Part of the fallout from that was the sale of Sutton Mill, plus six houses in Weymouth.

After this time, a quick succession of millers came and went, with at least one who went bust. But at some time in the 1840's, ownership of the Mill seems to have passed to a Dorchester baker, Job Shorto, and the Shorto's had a rather longer relationship with Sutton Mill than most of their predecessors. Initially, Job Shorto had tenants, first a George Hill (another who became bankrupt), then a Thomas Hopkins, but then in about 1859, Job's son Charles settled at Sutton Mill as the miller. He stayed there about 14 years, after which he moved to Stratton Mill, where sadly he also went bust - something of an occupational hazard, it seems, for millers.

After Charles Shorto left, there was again a succession of millers. An advertisement in this period gives a really good description of the mill and also of the mill house, which "c**ontains 3 bedrooms, 2 sitting-rooms, large kitchen with enclosed range, back kitchen, pantry, cellars, garden and yard. There is stabling for 5 horses, coachhouse, waggon and cart shed, piggeries, and large yard.**" In 1882, the Mill was taken over by Barnard Henry Meech, who, with his son, ran a successful milling business until the late 1940's. They also ran Upwey Mill, which became their business headquarters, but Barnard Meech lived in Sutton Poyntz for 50 years, until his death in 1932. I'll return to Barnard later.

SUTTON FARM

Let me now turn to the farms in the village. The first reference I have found to a distinct farm on the west side of the village was a lease document in 1781, letting what was then called West Farm, an area of 886 acres, to Thomas Willis. Thomas seems to have been a ship owner and operator as well as a farmer. and miller. A number of London newspapers report the launch in 1807 of a 400 ton vessel belonging to him, at Weymouth, attended by the Queen and others of the Royal Party. Later newspaper entries advertise passage on the ship Royal Yeoman for Quebec, for which passage can be booked via him at Sutton Poyntz. Thomas Willis moved to Bincombe in 1829, and his move was reported as follows: "**Mr Thomas Willis, who has occupied Sutton farm nearly 30 years past, left it on Monday last; and his departure excited a deep feeling of regret among his parishioners. To those moving in a similar sphere of life with himself, he was always found a good and friendly neighbour, and by the poor he has ever been looked up to as a constant and never-failing benefactor; and to mark their sense of estimation and regard, the bell of the parish church was tolled on his quitting the village. The inhabitants of Bincombe, to which place he removed, to welcome so worthy a character, met him some distance from the village, placed him in a chair, and bore him to and through the village, accompanied by a band of music and the ringing of bells. The merriment was kept up until eleven o'clock, with music, dancing, and singing, and with plenty of strong beer.**"

Returning to Sutton farm, there was an advertisement in 1827 for the Letting of a large farm holding, consisting of Southdown Farm in Preston and what was now called Sutton Home Farm - a total now of 1200 acres, and it seems this is when the Scutt brothers, Robert and Thomas, started farming in Sutton Poyntz. They stayed there until 1848, when an auction of their household goods was advertised. The Scutt family stayed farming in the area for a long time after that, in Preston rather than Sutton Poyntz - the Scutt Memorial Hall was built in memory of Charles Scutt. I found some rather scary reports concerning Charles Scutt's death. He was a JP and Chairman of the Dorset County Council Executive Committee, and the reports say he left home one day and did not return. He was eventually found, drowned in a 2-foot-deep pond quite close to his home. It appears that his mind was going, and although he was in truth one of the richest men in Weymouth, he had convinced himself that all his wealth was gone. He had torn up his Will and started destroying Securities, saying they were worthless.

His widow then funded the Scutt Memorial Hall. I read a newspaper report of the opening ceremony, and am very glad not to have been there - the opening speech by a local clergyman was reported very fully by the Newspapers, and looks like quite the dullest speeches it has every been my misfortune to read.

Back to Sutton farm, which was next taken over, with even more land, by John Allen Pope, three of whose sons were later joint owners of the Dorchester brewery, Eldridge Pope. John Pope built a strong reputation particularly for his flock of Dorset Down and Dorset Horn sheep, which were frequently featured in newspaper advertisements for agricultural auction sales. Many of these auctions were run by Henry Duke and Son, then a fairly new company. John Allen Pope passed the Sutton Farm lease on to his second son Henry in around 1870. Henry maintained the high reputation of the farm, with a greater emphasis on cattle, until he died in 1908. In his obituary, he was called "**an experienced and successful farmer and breeder of cattle and well known throughout Dorset and adjoining counties. In matters public the deceased gentleman took no active interest**". A man after my own heart.

Sutton Farm went to a second cousin, Bernard Pope, but he only stayed for 10 years before retiring. Stories are told locally of Bernard Pope leaving as it were by a moonlight flit, but the newspapers make it look more orderly, with advertisements of the auction of his household and farming goods, which was then quite normal. In the auction advertisement, Henry Duke & Son expressed their regret at the end of what they called "a**n unbroken family tenancy of no less than a century". They wrote of Sutton Farm's "reputation for growth and constitution, [which has] given all classes of Stock bred there a foremost position even in this district of high farming**". At this point Sutton Farm was taken over by Henry Diment; he bought the farm outright in 1925 and his family stayed until the farm closed in about 1984.

In 1893 there was a report of a court case where Edward, son of Henry Pope of Sutton Farm, was accused of assaulting Benjamin Goldring at Puddledock Dairy. The dairy had been leased by the Popes to the Goldrings for over 40 years. The accusation was that there was a discussion, possibly quite heated, between Henry Pope and Benjamin Goldring about the quality of some hay, during which Edward Pope came up and threw Benjamin Goldring down and punched him. Edward Pope claimed that his father had been accused by Mr Goldring of being a liar, at which he lost his temper. The Bench concluded that there had been provocation, but not sufficient to justify the assault; they therefore fined Edward Pope £1, plus nearly £3 in costs. The next we hear of Benjamin Goldring is him quitting a few months later, so perhaps accusing your landlord's son of assault, although entirely justified, was not entirely wise.

NORTHDOWN FARM

The other main farm in the village was Northdown Farm. Richard Lillington was the farmer there from about 1789 to his death in 1818 when newspapers advertised the auction of his farm equipment and stock. The next record was in 1853, when another auction shows Josiah Wallis retiring. The advertisement talks about a f**lock of 627 south down sheep, plus a few cows and calves, a bull, 6 pigs, 9 horses, 2 donkeys, a number of waggons and carts of various purposes, ploughs and harrows of all sorts, and, last but certainly not least, a cider mill and press**.

Next came William Keynes. He is also referred to in numerous agricultural auction advertisements, also by Henry Duke and Son. Auction advertisements in 1890 and 1891 show him quitting the farm. Lots of farm animals and equipment for sale, including a galvanised iron shepherd's hut, but no cider press this time! There is a separate auction for household effects including a **7 ft mahogany sideboard, a massive mahogany dining table extending to 15 ft 6 in., a rosewood cottage piano, an American organ with six stops and automatic swell, a mahogany bagatelle table, and a 3ft 6 in high safe.**

William Macey was the next farmer. There is a little newspaper report in 1901, saying that his son Charles had been arrested for the theft of an umbrella. It seems Charles was at the Park Hotel in Weymouth, drinking with two other young people. When he left, in his pony and trap, he took an umbrella which was not his. The theft was reported later, and the police visited Northdown Farmhouse, where Charles Macey gave them the umbrella. In court, Charles Macey said he had been a "bit fuddled" and had taken the umbrella in case it might rain but it was "too rough" to keep up so he did not use it. He drove to the Ship Inn in Preston and sent a boy to his home with the umbrella. The newspaper says that "the Bench showed their view of the defendant's conduct by fining him £5 and costs".

William Macey died in 1901; again Henry Duke and Son ran the auction sale of **160 ewes and 100 lambs, along with 42 cows and heifers and one bull, 7 cart horses, the usual farm equipment, a portable forge, household furniture, and (hooray!) a cider mill and press**. William Macey was succeeded for a time by his other son Arthur. I have not found a record of when Arthur left, but by 1907, the farmer at Northdown Farm was Leonard Saunders. Leonard died in about 1915, when the farm was run first by his wife and then by his son Ernest; they bought the farm, and Ernest ran it, along with his twin sons and daughter, until his death in 1992.

THE SPRINGHEAD

Going back to the middle of the 19th Century, there were two pubs or ale houses in the village, the Spring Bottom (in one of the cottages by the pond) and the Butcher's Arms (on Sutton Road south of the fork).

Then in 1896 there were a number of newspaper articles on the proposal for a new hotel at Sutton Poyntz. One party to the application was John Groves and Sons, the brewers, and part of the bargaining involved them agreeing to terminate the licenses held for the two existing pubs. The site was described as an admirable one, and it was proposed that the hotel would cater "not just for the inhabitants of the parish but for visitors who drove out from Weymouth. The spot was one of the most attractive in the neighbourhood and visitors were attracted by the famous White Horse and Spring Head. Between £1200 and £1500 would be expended in erecting the hotel, which would include tea and luncheon rooms". The only objection to this was from the publican at the Ship Inn in Preston, who seemed to take exception to the idea that the brewery's might be hoping to make money from the scheme. The magistrates on the licensing committee agreed to grant the new licence, on the proviso that the two old ones were given up.

From other sources the Springhead opened in April 1898, with the pavilion added next year. The first landlord was a Mr Charles Clay, who had apparently been a vet. A few months after opening, he was summoned for serving alcohol out of hours on a Sunday afternoon. The police said they had seen **12 carriages, bringing a total of 74 adults, plus children, to the Springhead** - business was brisk. The case hung on the definition of a bona fide traveller - apparently a landlord was not allowed to serve anyone other than a genuine traveller. The magistrates concluded that that these people could not possibly qualify, but accepted that there could have been real uncertainty and chose not to convict Mr Clay on this occasion. The Springhead advertised **prawn teas at 1/6d, and lobster teas at 2 shillings, with tennis, croquet, quoits and clay pigeon shooting**. There were swings and something called an Aunt Sally which was said by the advertisements to be "most amusing". Travel by char-a-banc was available from King's Statue at 2.30.

The newspapers reported many outings to the Springhead. The earliest report was the Wheeler's Cycling Club of Dorchester in April 1906. After tea in the pavilion, "**dancing and games were indulged in on the lawn, and later in the evening the members adjourned to the hotel, when several songs were rendered**". Fun! Other outings were the Gleaners' Union, who were treated to an "earnest address" on missionary activity in Africa, the staff of Messrs Genge and Co of Dorchester on their annual outing who enjoyed a strawberry tea followed by sports, but my favourite was the 1926 visit of the Bath Master Builders' Association. This party of 54 people travelled from Bath in three motor coaches, arriving at the Springhead at 12.30, on which they tucked in to a **lunch consisting of salmon and cucumber, roast lamb, roast beef, boiled beef, steak and kidney pie, potatoes and salad, gooseberry tart and cream, fruit salad and cream, trifle, and biscuits and cheese**. There were then various speeches. After lunch, the party dispersed to Weymouth, but returned to the Springhead at 5, for a tea consisting of **lobster with salad, dressed crab, prawns, strawberries and cream, bread and butter, and fancy cakes**. The party returned to Bath, getting home late. The report doesn't suggest anyone expired from starvation on the long journey home.

VILLAGE FETES

A series of Preston and Sutton Poyntz Annual Fetes were held between about 1900 and soon before the 2nd World War. These seem to have been mainly organised by a group called the Preston Reading-Room Slate Club, and were held in July in the grounds of the Springhead and the adjacent field. There was a brass band and amusements such as roundabouts, swings and shows. A report of the 1913 fete lists the races and events, including a **boys' boot race, a girls' skipping race, a ladies' blindfold race, a 3-mile marathon race won by one of the Harrison boys, something called "decapitating the bird" won by Mrs Squibb, something called a cigarette race competed for by couples, a slow bicycle race, a wheelbarrow race, a tug-of-war competition, and a sack race**. There was also a baby show, but that year there was only one entrant so baby Puckett won. Later fetes also included **throwing the cricket ball, a potato race, a mixed couple needle-threading race, and a ladies' ankle competition**. The joys we are missing in our busy lives!

The 1923 fete was run by the local W.I. Among events was a fancy dress competition. The adult section was won by a **Miss Trott as Good Luck, with Miss Saunders as Sunrise coming second**. In the children's section **Eric Guppy won as a red indian, followed by William Goulden who was apparently dressed as "Football Results" and Rene Smith dressed as "Virol"** (which was apparently a bit like Marmite). There is quite a well-known photo of the children in their fancy dress for the 1922 fete, but sadly no one there dressed as Virol.

SUTTON POYNTZ'S HOLY THORN

A very long article was published in the Dorset County Chronicle in January 1884, under the title "Under the Holy Thorn at Sutton", written by an anonymous writer who referred to himself as "A Sceptic".

The story concerns a thorn tree in Sutton Poyntz, which evidently was propagated from a Glastonbury thorn, which is a variety of hawthorn that flowers twice a year, including in the winter. The writer says "**it was only last week my attention was called to what is regarded as a mysterious occurrence, the blossoming of a so-called Holy Thorn at Sutton Poyntz, which, I was assured, came into leaf and blossomed exactly at midnight on Old Christmas Eve". "My informant told me it was a holy thorn, a piece taken from THE holy thorn at Glastonbury.**" The author was told a large number of people were going to see the thorn, and decided to go himself. He and a friend left home at about 10, and called in on the way at The Ship Inn, where the landlady said that the tree was about 100 years old, and not in good condition, but that what there was of it blossomed beautifully on Old Christmas Eve. The writer walked on to Sutton, to the orchard belonging to a Joseph Keynes. There was a charge of 2d to go in to the orchard, but as the orchard was in a hollow with a footpath above, those who did not pay still had a good view. Inside the orchard some wire netting had been put up to protect the tree, but it was immediately obvious this was insufficient. Some lighting had been put up, and the tree had a fair show of foliage, and some good sprays of buds.

There were about 250 people in the orchard, including the Weld family from Lulworth. Someone spoke about the legend of Joseph of Arimathea having come to Britain, and having struck his staff in the ground at Glastonbury, where it budded and blossomed. It was explained that a piece of the Glastonbury thorn had been brought to Sutton Poyntz about 70 years previously by one Nathaniel Brett, and planted in the orchard.

By the light of the lanterns hung from the tree, and other hand lanterns, it could be seen that the tree was now breaking into blossom, albeit not exactly at midnight as had been suggested. Despite the netting and guards, people broke through in order to tear off pieces of the blossom. The whole scene quickly turned into something of a riot, with more people from above coming down into the orchard, and the tree being sadly damaged.

The writer returned the next day, and spoke to Joseph Keynes, the owner, who said that in the past knowledge of the tree had been kept to just his wife's grandfather Nathaniel Brett and Stephen Galpin, the parish clerk. The two of them used to come and sit by the tree when it blossomed. Then a few years ago Joseph Keynes himself came out one night and took a piece of the tree in to the Butcher's Arms. As a result, knowledge of the thorn had become more widespread leading to the events of the previous day.

This report has been referred to many times in national newspapers. One of the most interesting references was in an edition of the London Daily News from 1938, which tells of the discovery of a scrap of paper with the following announcement "**In consequence of the riotous conduct which took place on the last occasion of the Blossoming of the Holy Thorn, the Owner of the Tree gives this Public Notice that any person found Trespassing on the Premises will be Prosecuted.**".

By putting the report together with other information from Censuses and the Tithe map, we can be reasonably certain that this orchard, with the Holy Thorn, was beside what is now called Sutton Road, just before the steep slope up south of where the Osmington Bridge goes under the road. Fredy Litschi in his book claimed that it was in the Camelot garden, and this cottage is right in the middle of where the orchard would have been, just south of where the Butchers Arms pub stood. Fredy could be right.

GREAT FIRE OF SUTTON POYNTZ

I'm sure many of you are aware of this, from photographs of the fire engine and of the burnt buildings. It happened over Easter weekend, 1908. The fire seems to have been started by some children playing on the Saturday afternoon, and accidentally lighting some loose material in the roadside barn at Northdown Farm - possibly in what is now the garden of the Court House. The fire spread rapidly, and a cow stall was enveloped but luckily the usual occupants were at pasture. As most of the nearby buildings were thatched, and there had been a strong drying wind for a time before, the fire spread rapidly along the line of buildings, to a maximum of about 400 yards of blazing buildings.

The Weymouth Fire Brigade was contacted by telephone from the Springhead, and the fire officer, **Captain Courtenay**, gathered as strong a body of men as he could, and came out to the village with their steam fire engine. Most of these men and equipment stayed in Sutton Poyntz the whole day and following night. The stream provided water, and Weymouth Waterworks stopped pumping water from the spring, to maximise the amount of water available. Without this the consequences could have been far worse.

When the Fire Brigade arrived, several thatched houses were already ablaze, including the Old Court House, where Mrs Macey, the widow of the recently deceased Northdown farmer, had moved. She unfortunately had left much of her furniture in the barn where the fire started, and the old insurance policy on it had lapsed, so particular efforts were taken to rescue as much of it as possible. Several buildings in Mr Guppy's Court Farm were caught in the fire, and all the outbuildings of the Mr Saunders' Northdown Farm. Northdown Farmhouse itself, with a slate roof, was not affected.

Rather than trying to save buildings that were already well alight, the firemen devoted most of their efforts to ensuring that the fire did not cross to the thatched cottages on the other side of the pond, where it would have spread in the opposite direction extremely quickly. As evening came, the wind died down, reducing the risk. The firemen continued to work during the night, and it was not until seven o'clock in the morning that it was thought safe to stand down most of the men. The last firemen did not leave until five o'clock on the Sunday afternoon. It was reported that fresh flames started among the charred timbers of the Old Court House, but although the fire brigade was called out this outbreak was dealt with quickly.

That Sunday, many people came out from Weymouth to view the scene, and the newspaper hinted that the Springhead Hotel did a roaring trade that day. More came on Monday, it being Easter holidays. "**It's an ill wind turns none to good**" was the newspaper's slightly unfeeling comment. But the newspaper further commented, with good justification, what a blessing it was that the firemen's efforts to keep the fire away from the west side of the pond had been successful, and how much greater a disaster it could have been if they had failed.

DEATHS AT THE MILL

I promised you some deaths, and Sutton Poyntz had a good share, some tragic, and some horrific. Let me start with the tragic.

I spoke earlier of Barnard Meech, the miller, and there was a very sad report of an inquest, held in 1900 at the Mill House, into the death of his wife, Elizabeth. Evidence was given by Barnard and by his two sons. From this it is clear the family went to bed in a cheerful state between half past ten and eleven on the Friday evening. On the Saturday morning, Elizabeth Meech got up at quarter past six, and went down to breakfast. The husband slept on, but he heard her at about 8 o'clock come up to call the two sons. A little later he heard the post-girl come in, and his wife then came up to tell son George that there was a parcel for him. Mr Meech got up and went down for breakfast about half past 8. Son George also came down, and tried to find his mother; Mr Meech suggested she might have called on Mrs Macey, across the road at Northdown Farmhouse. George left the mill house, but quickly came rushing back to say he had looked in at the mill, and had seen his mother, hanging from the mill hoist chain, with the chain around her neck. They ran to the mill, struck the hoisting gear, and lowered her down to the floor. They sent for the local constable and for the doctor, and Mr Meech went for John Puckett at Northdown Dairy. When the constable came, they moved the body, which he was quite sure was dead. They said there was a sack waiting to be hoisted, and they believed Mrs Meech might have intended to hoist it and somehow got caught in the chain. She quite often did work in the mill, despite their frequent pleading with her not to. The post-mistress confirmed she had delivered a parcel at about 8, and Mrs Meech seemed completely normal. Mr Puckett said that his daughter had seen Mrs Meech beating mats on the Saturday morning, and she had seemed her usual cheerful self. After hearing the evidence, the coroner and jury went in to the mill, and inspected the hoisting gear. Several of the jurymen expressed their doubts about the plausibility of the lady having got entangled accidentally with the chain round her neck, in the way that had been suggested by Mr Meech. However in the end they returned an open verdict "**that death was caused by having been hung by the mill chain getting round her neck, from which she died instantly, but that there was no evidence that show how this happened**".

An employee at the Mill who made the news a couple of times in 1866 was one William Kaynes. The first concerned a bonfire that had been lit near the Mill Pond on the 6th of November. The village policeman reported that "**between six and seven o'clock on the evening in question, as I was going towards Sutton, I beheld a bonfire in a field belonging to Mr Pope, and as I was approaching it, I saw several boys round it with lighted sticks and throwing them about**". He caught a couple of the boys and told them to put the fire out, but then William Kaynes and another man appeared and told the boys not to do anything of the sort. The policeman in his evidence said he told the men to mind their own business, at which William Kaynes punched him, and the two fought and fell down. William Kaynes's story was completely different, and had the policeman as the aggressor. In addition Mr Kaynes said the whole thing had been seen by several occupants of the cottages by the pond who were willing to give evidence. At this, the magistrates hastily said that the policeman had given his evidence in a very straightforward manner, but as he had no independent witnesses they would dismiss both his summons and the counter-summons that had been brought by William Kaynes.

Much sadder was the inquest into a fatal accident at the Mill. Two employees were hauling sacks of wheat up to the fourth floor. William Kaynes was at the bottom floor, putting chains around the sacks for them to be hauled up. They had hauled about six sacks up when one of them slipped and fell, killing William's six-year-old younger brother, Herbert. Mills were always dangerous places.

TWO CHILD DEATHS

There were two rather more significant trials related to child deaths. In 1877, a man was tried for killing his son by neglect. His wife had died, leaving him to bring up their six children on his own. The children all caught measles, and the youngest got ill and died. At the inquest the doctor said the cause of death was exhaustion due to diarrhoea or dysentery, and implied that serious neglect had contributed to the death. The two doctors who carried out the post mortem differed in their opinion of whether the child had measles but agreed that proper medical care at an appropriate time could have saved it. They said the child was well nourished but had not had solid food for a time before his death. The father was therefore charged with manslaughter. The newspapers reported that local opinion was quite hostile to the man. At the trial, the jury agreed that there was neglect, but concluded it fell short of being criminal neglect. Happily the man later remarried and successfully brought up his other five children and other children born to his second wife.

More tragic by far was a case in 1858, which actually happened at Herringston but involved the 18 year-old daughter of the farm bailiff to Mr Pope of Sutton Poyntz. The bailiff's daughter, unmarried, was pregnant. The family had made arrangements for proper care to be given at the birth, but before the due date they found the girl in bed one morning with a dead baby under the sheets next to her. We are well used nowadays, from programmes like Silent Witness, to seeing the work of pathologists examining dead bodies, but nevertheless I found myself distinctly upset by the detailed report of the careful work carried out by the two surgeons examining the baby's body, proving first that the baby had clearly been born alive and healthy, and second that death had been caused by injuries caused to the baby after its birth, and particularly by having something, probably fingers, thrust forcibly down its throat. Quite astonishingly, given the strength of the evidence at the inquest, when it came to a full trial no evidence was offered, and the girl was acquitted. The newspapers offer absolutely no explanation, but subsequent Census returns show her life going on as though nothing had happened.

THE SUTTON POYNTZ MURDER

And finally, by far the most significant case was the Great Sutton Poyntz Murder in July 1862, which led to long reports in newspapers across the country, first reporting the inquest, then the preliminary magistrates' hearing, and finally the full trial. Some of the details differed in the many reports, and this is my best attempt to understand exactly what happened. The murder itself happened on the **8th July, the inquest was on the 9th, the magistrates' hearing on the 14th, and the trial on the 26th** - justice was delivered quickly in those days.

First, let me try to set the scene for you. Fortunately there is just enough detail scattered through the newspaper reports , o be able to work out exactly where the murder took place. I want you to imagine yourself at the fork, facing southwards towards Preston. Just behind you, you have the village smithy, where John Crisp's garage now stands. To your left is a cluster of buildings, some dwellings and some agricultural, with the Cart Shed to the left ahead of you. Immediately to your right, there is a ford where the stream crosses the start of Plaisters Lane, and then a cluster of agricultural buildings making up the farm-yard of Sutton Farm, with beyond them the fairly new Farmhouse, built about 15 years before for John Allen Pope. Now start walking slowly towards Preston. Just before you reach the junction with what we now call Puddledock Lane, which had been re-routed about 15 years before, you will see on your right a white gate with one of the driveways leading to the Pope's house. In front of you is a bridge over the Osmington Brook, but to its left is another bridge, a footbridge leading to a path along the south bank of the stream. Now cross over the main bridge, and stop again. Up the road on the right, there is a smallholding with a single cottage standing where John and Suzy Legg's Linden Lea now stands. On your left, you will see the Butcher's Arms, which with a bit of work you will recognise as the house now known as 64 Sutton Road, although it still has a Butcher's Arms sign by its driveway. There are a couple of cottages beyond the pub, and two tiny cottages joined on to the pub's left-hand end. Half hidden behind these two cottages is a third, even smaller. Beyond these cottages, beside the river, there is an orchard, leading to the fields up the valley. The three cottages on your left have garden at the front and side, no doubt filled at this time of year with peas, beans, carrots, onions, early potatoes, currants and raspberries. The garden had a surrounding wall, with two gates (or "hatches" as one witness called them) - one out to the road and the other leading to the footpath alongside the stream.

Focus on the smallest cottage, set back from the others. From the newspaper reports, we know it is single storey, with just two rooms. It had a door and one window on the north side, facing the stream, leading to a living room; then up a single step, there was the one bedroom, also with a single window. Contemporary surveys show it was about 17-foot square; we can be fairly sure it would have been thatched, and it would probably have had stone walls, although wattle and daub can't be ruled out.

This tiny cottage was the home of the Cox family - parents Richard and Mary aged 69 and 66 respectively, with sons John, Isaac and Jacob aged 38, 28 and 27 - on the day in question the two younger sons were away trying to find work. Another son, George had married and lived in Preston with his wife and two children (with five more coming later). In the 1861 Census, the parents are described as paupers, meaning they received parish handouts, and the three sons are described as labourers, although John Cox had a reputation as a poacher. Isaac had also had one charge of poaching, and Jacob a charge of indecent exposure. John's most recent spell in prison was the previous October, when he had been sentenced to two months in prison. Evidence came out during the trial that he had displayed signs of mental health problems while in prison, as a result of which he was put in the infirmary and was kept in a few extra days to recover.

As a result, when back at home, John Cox was visited on various occasions by Adam Puckett, who was the apothecary and surgeon employed by the Weymouth Poor Laws Union to care for poor patients in a large area of north Weymouth. He lived at Broadwey and in the nature of his job, which opinion at the time agreed was shockingly poorly paid, had large numbers of patients to care for. In the few months after his release from prison, John Cox's state of mental health deteriorated, to the stage where Mr Puckett concluded that it would be best to confine him in the Workhouse, where he would get better and more constant care. It was the murder of Adam Puckett by John Cox that had the whole country's attention, for reasons that'll become clear. The following account is based mainly on evidence given at the trial itself, but rearranged to give a clearer narrative.

When the trial started, John Cox was brought up before the judges, and asked whether he pleaded guilty or not guilty, to which, after some time standing in silence, he answered Guilty. The judges stressed to him that this would lead to a death sentence and asked if he understood the charge, to which he gave no answer. The judges questioned the prison doctor, who said that he believed the prisoner was currently capable of understanding the charge. The prisoner was then asked again to enter a plea, to which he said that he did not recollect anything about it. On that basis, a plea of Not Guilty was entered. The Court provided John Cox with a Counsel, and the case was adjourned to the next day.

The next day, when John Cox was brought up to the bar for trial, he held his hands out in supplication to the judge, and stood stationary for a time. The judges allowed him, I think unusually, a chair. In the previous hearings he had not displayed much emotion, but this time he showed much more, especially when his old mother gave evidence.

The barrister for the prosecution then gave a summary of the case, in particular noting the several occasions when John Cox had voluntarily admitted having killed Mr Puckett. He said that this was a case where there would be no difference of opinion between prosecution and defence about the facts of the case; the only matter that the jury would need to consider was the question of whether John Cox had been of unsound mind at the time he committed the act, enough to satisfy them that he could not distinguish right from wrong.

The first evidence was given by Zachariah White, a Thomas Hardy name if ever |I heard one. He was an officer of the Weymouth Poor Laws Union. He described discussions he and Mr Puckett had had about John Cox, and Mr Puckett's conclusion that some time at the local Workhouse would be beneficial for John Cox's mental health. On the day of the murder he said he had heard that John Cox's state had deteriorated, so he visited Mr Puckett at Broadwey, and they concluded that they should take him in immediately. So the two of them travelled to Sutton Poyntz. He said that they met Richard Cox, the father, by the white gates to the Pope house. Richard Cox said in his evidence that he warned them that there could be trouble, but Mr Puckett felt he would be able to calm John Cox. He said he would go in alone, as more people might excite John. Zachariah White asked if there were any weapons in the cottage, but was told anything dangerous had been hidden. Mr Puckett then went on to the cottage; Mr White asked Mr Cox senior to go to the Ship Inn for a cart in which to take John Cox, but then seeing Mr Cox's crippled state decided to go himself.

Richard Cox, in his evidence, said that he followed Mr Puckett into the cottage, and sat on the step up to the bedroom. He could see his son's anger building, looking, he said, like a wild man, and feared the worst, so left to try to find help. He failed to find anyone other than what he called "**a parcel of women folk who were frightened**"; he returned to the cottage where he was threatened by his son and went off to find and warn Mr White.

The narrative is now taken up by three neighbours of the Cox's, **Mary Hanham, who lived in the cottage next to the Cox's, Jane Galpin who lived in the next cottage, and Hannah Croft, aged 16 at the time who lived with her parents a couple of doors further up**. Mary Hanham evidently knew that John Cox was to be taken to the workhouse, so when Mr Puckett arrived she went to the back of her house close to the Cox's bedroom window. She heard some of the conversation: "**Come, John, put on your shirt and come with me for some fresh air**". "**Don't bide there chaffing me, or I will beat your brains out**". "**Oh John, if you strike me then I must strike you again**". John Cox then said "**I should like to have a round or two with thee**" after which there was a terrible noise and Mrs Hanham heard John Cox jump out of bed. At this, Mrs Hanham out of fear ran round to the front of her cottage, where she saw the other women, Mrs Galpin and Miss Croft, and they all went to the corner of Mrs Hanham's cottage, from where they could see the front door of the Cox's cottage. They saw Mr Puckett holding tight to the Cox's front door latch to keep it shut, with a pair of tongs in the other hand, crying for help. Mrs Hanham went for help but could not find anyone.

Jane Galpin then took up the story. She saw the Cox's window smashed from inside by a piece of timber which was waved around from inside. From later evidence this window had metal bars so John Cox would have not been able to get out that way, but evidently Mr Puckett did not realise this, as Mrs Galpin says that Mr Puckett let go of the door latch and ran down the garden path, quickly followed by John Cox, wearing nothing but a flannel shirt, holding a stick which she thought looked like a bedpost. With this he felled Mr Puckett (another witness, watching this from a bit further away suggested he threw the bedpost in order to fell Mr Puckett). Both these ladies then said that they saw Mr Puckett on the ground in the Cox's front garden, with John Cox pummelling him with two pieces of timber. Mrs Hanham said she never saw Mr Puckett move after that. She said that John Cox then went up the road to Mrs Croft's cottage and demanded brandy. Hannah Croft confirmed this; she had gone home before John Cox smashed the window, but then saw John Cox at her home, asking for a drop of brandy. He said that he had killed one, had two more to kill, and would do the same to her if she did not give him brandy. She gave him a small cup through the window, and water when he asked for that; he then went away. Mary Hanham then took up the story again, and what she related next was what made this whole story particularly horrific and newsworthy. She said that John Cox went back into his cottage, and came out wearing a clean shirt, and carrying a saw. With this he sawed off Mr Puckett's head, then a foot, then a hand. At this point, the women left the cottage to try to find help.

No one witnessed what John Cox did with the head, foot and hand, but we have one of several confessions that he later made, in this case to Superintendent George Underwood later that night, at Dorset Police Station. Superintendent Underwood warned him that he ought not to say anything at that stage, but says John Cox made a completely voluntary confession, quoting his words "I **should not have murdered the old bastard if he had not pulled my hand quite so tight. I tried to get out of the window but could not because of the bars. I smashed the bedstead through the window, and Mr Puckett ran away. I ran after him and knocked him down. I looked for my gun but could not find it, but found the saw and cut off the hand, foot and head, and threw them out into the road. The head" he said "sounded like a damned old pumpkin**". This completes the evidence from the three neighbours who witnessed the murder.

Another witness, **Harriet Willis**, probably from a cottage just beyond the Cart Shed, said she saw John Cox go back into his cottage, come out carrying a bag, and leave across a field called Cowleaze towards Osmington - there were several Cowleaze fields but this one is probably the field that straddles the Osmington Brook just east of the village, across

which the present footpath from Sutton Road to Osmington goes. This entirely fits what John Cox later said about ditching the saw in the field near its boundary with an orchard. The story is then taken up by **James Downton**, who was in his garden in Osmington when he heard his name called, and saw John Cox, wearing a velveteen jacket, pair of boots, cap, but no trousers. He had two pieces of bedpost, one in his hand and the other in a white bag. John Cox stated that he had killed him and cut his head off, but did not say who. He asked Mr Downton to look after him and make sure no one hurt him. Mr Downton took him to the stable at the Plough Inn and helped him to get dressed properly. The Plough was on the main road through Osmington, at the western end of the village. The policeman came afterwards, and took him into custody. Mr Downton observed that there was blood on the stick that John Cox was holding.

P.C. Richard Bartlett, the policeman at Osmington, told the trial he had received information about the murder and had gone to the Plough Inn where he found John Cox, with, he said, a book in his hand. He arrested him and charged him with the murder, which John Cox freely admitted, adding that he had cut the head, hand and foot off. He told P.C. Bartlett where he had thrown the saw away, and it was later found.

Other evidence was heard from Zachariah White, and also from John Ford, an engineman at the Waterworks, who found the foot in the middle of the road and the head in the ditch opposite. They placed the body parts in the garden with the body, from where they were later taken to the Ship Inn for the Inquest.

The rest of the trial concerned the state of John Cox's mind. Various witnesses, including the Vicar, said they had heard John Cox talking incessantly at times, sometimes making sense but often not. The Vicar had advised Mr and Mrs Cox to hide the knives, guns and razors in the house. Two members of the medical staff at the County Gaol gave evidence. John Good, the prison surgeon, read extracts from his notebook "**found in a state of insensibility, having, I believe, had a fit of epilepsy" "Removed to the infirmary where he continued for several days very delirious and excited" "left very weak and it was necessary to detain him some days after his prison term had finished**". He had wondered whether John Cox was feigning, but had decided that he was not. He had concluded that it was catalepsy rather than epilepsy, which was uncommon, he said, in males but can lead to mania. Asked for his opinion, he said it was plausible to conclude that in a catalepsy-induced mania he might have been unable to distinguish right from wrong.

The judge then summed up, reminding the jury confirming that the only available defence was that the accused, at the time of the murder, was of such unsound mind that he could not distinguish right from wrong. The jury, according to the newspaper reports, only took a few minutes to reach their verdict - Not Guilty on Grounds of Insanity. Out of all the newspaper reports on the trial, just one, the Wells Journal, noted that the jury foreman actually delivered a verdict of Guilty on Grounds of Insanity. This, it said, caused some astonishment. The judge said surely you mean "Not guilty on grounds of insanity" and the jury foreman said "Yes". So that was nice and clear.

John Cox, according to a further report, was taken quite soon after to a Fisherton Asylum at Salisbury. From there he was taken at some time to Broadmoor, quite possibly as one of its first inmates when it opened fully in 1866. There is no further word of him until 1918, when the Birmingham Daily Gazette records his death, aged 94, having been in confinement for over 56 years. This makes his the longest incarceration in British legal history, about a year longer than the two cases usually cited as the longest in such lists.

As for the Pucketts, it was reported that a subscription fund had collected about £1,200, worth in modern terms about £150,000 for the benefit of the wife and family. And outrage about the very poor pay and work conditions for Union surgeons lad to some rapid changes.