

Emigration

Emigration has taken place from a few parishes; the largest number went about six years ago from the parish of Hook Norton; it consisted of about 175 persons, reckoning the men and women and children: it answered well. About five returned, the rest remain, and write word that they are contented.

This report to Parliament in 1832 by D.O.P. Okeden, Esq., told of just one of many emigrations from Hook Norton around this time. In that very year “several families were sent to America by the parish”, and were attended to Liverpool by Mr Stephen Haynes. The journey was far from easy. According to Margaret Dickins, there was a saying in the village, “to go the footway to America”: the emigrants walked to Banbury and went from there to Liverpool by canal boat, “the passage on which included a good deal of walking on the towing path”.¹ The voyage that followed could be far more hazardous. Okeden reported that about 50 emigrants to North America from Deddington in 1826 were less fortunate than those from Hook Norton: “their fate was melancholy, and damped the spirit of emigration in the district.” Cholera had broken out aboard ship, and 81 people died.²

So why did so many people decide to emigrate in the nineteenth century?

There were many compelling reasons: poverty, dissent, the hope of gaining wealth or land, missionary zeal, adventure, freedom. Hook Norton illustrates all these. It is a prime example of an open village where the largest landholders in the 18th century were the Lord of the Manor and the Bishop of Oxford, which meant that no single landowner controlled the village (unlike Great Tew, for example). Open villages were places where dissenters flourished; where there was no unifying building plan and where (subject to the Poor Laws) there was more movement of labour. The Open and Common Fields of Hook Norton were enclosed in 1774 and while the beneficiaries of the Act acquired workable farms, and in the case of the

¹ Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928), p 156.

² *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws, Appendix A, from A Selection of Reports and Papers of the House of Commons*, vol. 41, 1836.

Church compensation for tithes, the poor who had relied on subsistence farming and their Common rights found themselves worse off, facing the bill for compulsory quick set hedges and a contribution to the costs of Enclosure. Some of them had to sell the little land they had to meet those costs and became dependent on working for others. The following years saw a rapid increase in poor relief payments and the redundant workhouse was reinstated.³

The nineteenth century brought the Napoleonic Wars, agricultural depression and labour unrest, so it is not surprising that both national and local organisations and individuals looked to radical ways to combat poverty.

As the century progressed, agents for overseas territories became active in recruiting new settlers with promises of great opportunities in countries as disparate as Brazil and New Zealand. Skilled workers were in great demand – and so were marriageable women. Thousands of people with no real knowledge of the world beyond their villages and towns launched themselves into the unknown.

Here are some of the stories of those who left Hook Norton for new lives in new worlds: the Baptist minister and his family; the Hook Norton born wife of a Methodist minister; the impoverished agricultural labourers; younger sons seeking their fortune who returned to Europe to die in the First World War.

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³ Poor relief rose 87% from £165 in 1769 to £309 in 1775. Levies on rate payers also rose: from 14 pence per pound in 1769 to 27 pence in 1774. In 1795-6 the figures were £580 and 34 pence. Pauline Ashbridge, *Children of Dissent* (London, 2008) pp 111, 118