

Ellen Bowskill – a Farm Servant of Eastby.

A story from the Embsay Vestry Minute Book, 1827-1870

In 1828 Ellen Bowskill was 67 years old, and after a lifetime as a farm servant she found herself out of work, with nowhere to live, and in need of poor relief. She came before the Embsay-with-Eastby Select Vestry and Overseers of the Poor to consider her case. As Ellen was not born there and had only lived part of her life in Eastby, the Overseers applied to Skipton Magistrates to have her removed. This is the story of her life.

Ellen was born in 1761 at Halton Gill in upper Littondale where her father William Bowskill was a tailor. He and his wife Ellen Tayler married at Arncliffe in 1750 and had four children of which Ellen was the youngest. Her elder sisters Frances and Agnes were born in 1752 and 1754, and her only brother John died in infancy in 1759.

The family later moved down the dale to Arncliffe and Ellen, like her sister, would have found work from an early age as a servant both at home and on nearby farms. In 1778 when Ellen was 17 her sister Agnes became pregnant and subsequently married Christopher Hill of Arncliffe. Her sister Frances later married William Metcalfe of Arncliffe in 1783 and they left the village two years later.

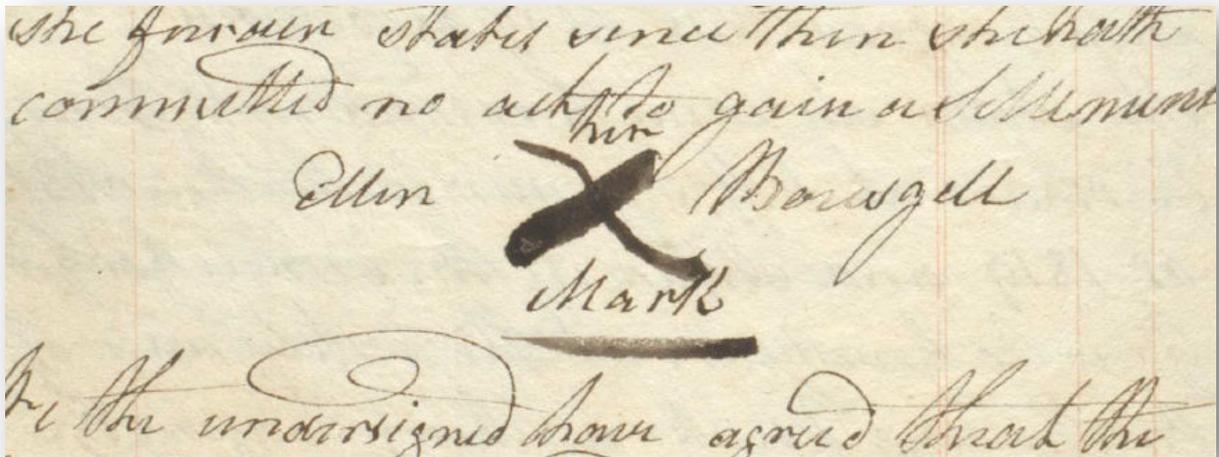
When she was 26, Ellen herself became pregnant but no husband was forthcoming and she gave birth to an illegitimate son on early 1788. She named him Airey Bowskill, no doubt named after the father, as there were Airey families living in Littondale at that time. The Arncliffe parish registers record his baptism as "Airey ye base begotten son of Ellen Bowskill a poor Girl Feb ye 12th." Poor, and with an illegitimate child, Ellen never married. After the death of her parents, she continued to live with her son in Arncliffe until 1803 when young Airey died at the age of 15. Ellen was now 42 and would have attended hiring fairs in the district looking for live-in work as a dairy maid, or general farm worker, which would have involved changing her place of employment every few years.

The only certainty about her middle years comes in 1818 when, aged 57, she came to Eastby to work as a farm servant for Henry Kershaw, a tenant farmer at The Heugh, whose wife was ill and subsequently died. Ellen received a weekly wage of one shilling, plus "meat, washing, lodging, etc." However, Henry Kershaw was regularly in arrears with his farm rent and in 1824 his tenancy at The Heugh came to an end. We learn from Ellen's later testimony that "after three or four weeks" she was hired on the farm of Mr John Nicholas Coulthurst, a Justice of the Peace who lived at Gargrave. She was paid "Six Guineas per year", more than double the amount she was paid by Henry Kershaw. This new position lasted just under two years and in 1826 she went to live at the farm of George Butler where she worked as a dairy servant at two shillings per week. This position came to an end in 1828 after 16 months, probably in March, the end of the hiring year.

Ellen, now 67 years old, and less employable, sought parish relief from the Gargrave Overseers of the Poor. They were clearly not happy to provide for her and successfully applied for a Removal Order at Skipton Petty Sessions on 1st July 1828 to remove her to the township of Embsay with Eastby where she had previously lived and worked. The two Justices of the Peace who approved the Removal order were Matthew Wilson of Eshton Hall, and her former employer, John Nicholas Coulthurst of Gargrave House, the two most prominent men in Gargrave, and most certainly contributors to the Gargrave Poor Rate.

Eleven members of the Select Vestry met in Embsay on 2nd July 1828. These comprised of: John Simpson, John Burnett, Isaac Walsh, Joseph Northrop, Richard Chippendale, William Chippendale, William Pollard, Thomas Biker, Johnathan Mason, and Thomas Parker, with William Oldridge as

Chairman – all prominent and relatively prosperous figures in the township. Before them was the solitary Ellen Bowskill. She was 67, without work and without a home, knowing that the people of Gargrave weren't prepared to support her, nor apparently were the people of Embsay-with-Eastby. She was asked to give an account of where she had lived and worked in recent years and summed up by saying that she had lived in "Gargrave and other places but had gained no place of Settlement." Her account was written in the Vestry Minute Book, to which, as she was illiterate, she was asked to add her mark.



she further states since then she hath
committed no act to gain a Settlement
Ellen ~~Bowskill~~
Mark
By the undersigned have agreed that the

A decision was made by the members of the Vestry to appeal against the Removal Order, and they agreed to instruct Mr John Carr, a solicitor of Skipton, to act on their behalf. At that time Vestry meetings were always held in one of the public houses of Embsay or Eastby. Expenses for ale for the members that day was the usual 5 shillings per meeting, paid out of the poor rate.

Two weeks later on 15th July 1828 the case was brought before the West Riding Quarter Sessions at Skipton where it was deferred to the next Quarter Sessions to be held at Knaresborough in October. In the meantime Ellen stayed in Embsay at the expense of the overseers.

Three days before the appeal was due to be heard at Knaresborough, a special meeting to the Embsay-with-Eastby Select Vestry was held on 11th October specifically to discuss Ellen Bowskill's case and to consider what action to take if their appeal was lost. Present were Isaac Walsh (Chairman and churchwarden), Joseph Northrop, William Chippendale, John Simpson, William Oldridge, and Jonathan Mason. They would have considered whether to instruct the solicitor, John Carr, to make a case for her to be removed to Arncliffe instead of to Embsay-with-Eastby. However, the Select Vestry agreed that if the Court found against them on 14th October they would not incur any further legal expenses and would accept the settlement of Ellen Bowskill at Embsay. In view of her age, this meant that the parish would have to support her through her final years. Expenses of 2s 6d for ale was allowed for the six members of the meeting.

Despite the deliberations of the Vestry, when the appeal was subsequently heard at Knaresborough Quarter Sessions on 14th October 1828 the Removal Order was discharged, and Ellen was returned to Gargrave.

She lived a further 10 years during which she became a servant at the poor house in Gargrave. She died there on 15th April 1838 at the age of 77 when her death was reported by 80 year old fellow inmate William Metcalfe, who may have been the widowed husband of her sister Frances. Her cause of death was given as the "course of Nature". Ellen had lived a long but difficult life, a life that

illustrates the lot of a single woman living in a largely agricultural area in that period. She was buried at St Andrew's Church, Gargrave on 18th April 1838 in an unmarked grave.

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