

Emma Beck
1835–1868

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Preface

Some time ago I took the decision to attempt exhaustive studies of the lives of each pair of my great great grandparents, concentrating on just the nuclear family of themselves and their offspring until they left home. This is the first of these studies, which by virtue of its subject matter is restricted almost entirely to the life of just one individual, the woman whose name we have inherited.

Introduction

In researching this booklet I have become quite fascinated—some might say almost obsessed—with the life of Emma Beck. It seems that we can know so little of her, and yet we owe so much to her. Whilst much of our inheritance is determined by chance factors, it seems that *choices* that Emma made have had consequences that resonate down the years: if she had not, as it appears, withheld the identity of her son’s father, we might bear a different surname today; if she had not left her son in the hands of the workhouse for much of his upbringing, he may never have found cause to enlist in the Marines, and so would never have moved to the Medway towns, where he met his wife, from which union we have all descended.

So in a way I feel I *owe* it to Emma to uncover as much as I can about her life, a life which seems in many ways to have verged on “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”, but one that is not now wholly forgotten.

Where Emma was baptised

The workhouse



Where Emma is buried

Emma's home in 1841

Part of the O.S. 1" map, showing all relevant locations (1961 edition)

Opening

Emma Beck was born in 1835 in Littlewick Green, in Berkshire. She was baptised, as Emma Dennis Beck, on the 27th September of that year, in Hurley parish church¹. As she had an aunt named Emma², one may surmise that she was named after her aunt; the baptismal name of “Dennis”, never subsequently used, was that of her paternal grandmother.³

Though her great-grandmother Anne Beck survived into Emma’s lifetime, she died in Emma’s second year⁴; it’s unlikely that Emma would have known any of her forebears earlier than her grandparents⁵. For this reason, I don’t propose to look any further back than them, into Emma’s ‘prehistory’.

Her paternal grandparents were John and Dennis (Russell) Beck; they had married in 1804 in Hurley, at which time John was described as a volunteer⁶. In Emma’s lifetime, he is first recorded (1841) as an agricultural labourer⁷. By 1851, however, he had evidently developed veterinary skills, and is described as a cow doctor⁸; he even achieved recognition as such in the 1854 Post Office Directory for the Home Counties. He owned his own small cottage in Littlewick, about which I will say more later.



The parish church of Hurley, where Emma was baptised

About her maternal grandparents I can unfortunately say very little. Her mother’s baptism isn’t to

¹

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Anne Beck, of Littlewick, was buried in Hurley on 15 Jan 1837, aged 86. [Berkshire RO D/P 72/1/11].

⁵ This can’t be said with certainty, as dates of death for her maternal grandparents are unknown; however, given that, if alive, they were probably in Wiltshire, it seems likely that Emma wouldn’t have known them.

⁶ Hurley parish register.

⁷ PRO HO 107/11/5 f. 6.

⁸ PRO HO 107/1694 f. 249.

be found in the local area¹. DNA evidence, however (albeit rather weak), suggests that she was the Ruth Tuck baptised at Preshute, Wiltshire, on the 20th April 1817, daughter of Joseph and Charlotte (Hale) Tuck. Joseph was a carpenter and wheelwright.²

Her parents were William and Ruth Beck, born Tuck. They had married in Hurley on the 19th October 1834, William being at that date a labourer, of Hurley³. Emma was to be Ruth's first and only child—she apparently died at some date between Emma's birth and June 1849, when William, described as a widower, remarried⁴. In the light of entries in the 1841 census, she may have died before 1841. Certainly it seems fair to say that Emma may not have known her natural mother for very long, and her memories of her in later life may not have been strong. She may also have felt the lack of the support her own mother could have given her⁵.

¹ Parishes searched: Bisham, Bray, Cookham, Hurley, White Waltham.

² Preshute parish registers. I myself have three matches, at 6–9 cM (centimorgans), with descendants of Amelia Tuck, a sister born to the same couple in 1814 (Ancestry ThruLines). It's suggestive, too, that the Berkshire Marriages Index shows Amelia Tuck marrying in White Waltham in 1834, suggesting that there is a local family link.

³ Hurley parish register.

⁴ I have failed to locate any entry for her death in the indexes of the General Register Office between 1837 and 1849; similarly, I have found no entry for her burial, between 1835 and 1849, in any of the parishes of: Burnham, Farnham Royal, Beaconsfield, Eton, Upton, Dorney, Taplow, Wooburn, White Waltham, Bisham, Cookham, Maidenhead St Luke, Hurley, Bray, Shottesbrooke, Waltham St Lawrence, Remenham, and Wargrave.

⁵ This, of course, is speculation, which has proved impossible to avoid—I hope I have always at least remembered to qualify with “may” or “might”.

1841

There are a few family events to note before I come to 1841: in 1839 the 16-year-old Maria Tuck, probably Emma's maternal aunt, served seven days' hard labour for leaving service, in Beaminster, Dorset, where she worked as a flax and tow spinner. At some point prior to February 1841 Maria lost the first and second fingers of her right hand, leaving her fingers and hand much deformed; from the middle of that month she served two months' hard labour for running away from the Beaminster Union with the (presumably workhouse) clothes.¹ Emma's aunt Amelia Tuck, who had married John Kidson the year before Emma was born (in either White Waltham or Waltham St Lawrence), had had three children by 1841: John, Amelia, and Sarah.² Her aunt Ann Tuck married George Plumbridge, a cordwainer, at Egham, Surrey, in October 1840.³

In 1841 the census records Emma Beck living with her grandparents John and Dennis Beck in a house in the northern (Hurley) part of Littlewick Green. At this point, we should take a look at Littlewick:

I visited Littlewick Green in the summer of 1987, finding it a charming village, miraculously unspoilt by its situation—it forms a narrow triangle, the shortest side of which is part of the present A4 (the old Bath Road). On this, its public side, the old Wheatsheaf public house and the neighbouring village post office have been combined into a roadside steakhouse irrelevantly called Sykes's, though the Wheatsheaf is still authentically antique, as to its interior. The passing motorist wouldn't be aware of the pretty, and surprisingly quiet, village behind it, which is still surrounded by many of its original cottages; at the south end, the village green is still in active use by Littlewick cricket team, with their own clubroom facing onto it, as does the other village pub, the Cricketers; at the southern edge of the green stands the old well. Now, of course, the village has the air of a well-heeled prosperity that surely dates from modern times.

Directories and county histories have little to say about Littlewick Green—it seems to have been quite an unexceptional village; perhaps also its identity has suffered from its position straddling the two parishes. It needs a close look at the census returns themselves, to find out what sort of place it was—and this itself is of course less easy, as Littlewick didn't form its own discrete enumeration district; what follows is a reconstruction of my own of what I take Littlewick to have been, based on a common sense interpretation of the area covered by the census enumerators, checked against maps⁴.

There were 65 houses in Littlewick Green, of which at the date of the census seven were unoccupied. In the 58 occupied houses lived a total of 282 individuals; there were four more females than males. Nearly half the population (133) were under the age of 20, a quarter (71) being children under ten years old; there were six individuals over 70, including two in their eighties.

Overwhelmingly, the largest single occupational category was that of agricultural labourer, of whom there were 31 so styled—only 92 individuals have any description at all, under this

¹ Dorchester prison admission and discharge registers.

² Berkshire marriage index; TNA: HO 107/60/6 f9 p13.

³ Egham parish register; TNA: RG 9/761 f35 p23

⁴ Subsequent figures derived by me from HO 107/11.

heading. The second largest category consists of female servants, of whom there were twelve; there were also four male servants. At the most prosperous end (I assume) of the social scale were seven individuals who described themselves as of independent means, and three farmers. There was a schoolmaster, a governess, and a clerk. There was a publican, a butcher, a blacksmith, one unspecified shopkeeper, and—rather unusually—one sieve maker. No less than six men worked as carpenters, and a further three as wheelwrights. Four worked as tailors, one of whom was also a draper. One man is listed as in the employ of the Great Western Railway, and three others are described as rail road labourers—this railway was still under construction, having only reached Reading in 1840¹. Four men worked as bricklayers or bricklayer’s labourers/assistants. That leaves only two surgeons and a gardener, and the list is complete².

The 1841 census doesn’t state place of birth, but only asks whether a person was born in the same county. From this information, one can see that in Littlewick at that date 54 people were not born in Berkshire—this suggests a degree of fluidity in the population, but it’s difficult to say more than that.

Of household types, the majority (31) were straightforwardly nuclear, at their core: man, wife, and (up to seven) children. The remainder constitute a very varied group, about which I don’t care to generalise. Eight households had servants, one having no less than ten—the extreme of affluence in Littlewick Green.

There is more to be learned from the 1841 census, but not before taking into account the fact that we now know that Emma was living in John Beck’s house at that date—and another source will help here.



The 1843 tithe map of

Littlewick Green.

The house on the right is on the site of Emma’s home in 1841.

¹ Ian Yarrow: *Berkshire* (London, 1974; 2nd edn).

² Three entries are illegible.

Hurley¹ shows John Beck's house, situated on a strip of land where also are separately housed Susan and Thomas Beck, his sister and brother. He is stated to be the owner, as well as occupier, of a cottage and garden of the area of 20 perches (506m²). The cottage is shown at the end of his garden, close to the other Beck cottages. Sadly, though the other cottages have survived to this day, John Beck's has not—on its site is a more modern house, with an immaculately kept garden. The surviving cottages may not be much guide to what John Beck's was like, as there is presumably a reason why his hasn't survived, which may relate to its inferior construction. What can be stated, on the basis of the tithe map², is that the cottage was certainly small—*very* roughly 5m x 3m—not too different in floor-area to my own front room. It was one of the smallest cottages, though not the smallest, in Littlewick Green. The garden, at least, was closer to the median in size.

It seems likely that the cottage was one of the poorer sort, built of mud, lath and plaster, and roofed with ill-repaired thatch, with only two rooms to the whole cottage³. G.M. Trevelyan quotes the economic historian John Clapham as saying, rather significantly, "The worst were generally the small freeholds, inhabited by the person who owned them"⁴. In this humble dwelling (avoiding the word 'hovel', to which I'm drawn) lived nine people, in this year 1841.

The question has to be asked—Where were Emma's parents? At the moment, a definitive answer eludes me. Certainly William Beck was still alive, though the same can't be said for Ruth with any certainty⁵. In the southern part of Littlewick the census does list a William Beck, whose age and occupation are correct, living in a cottage with a *Jane* Beck. I'm aware of no other William Beck in the area in the right age group. The "Jane" is suggestive, as well—to look ahead, Emma's father married a Jane Green in 1849. Jane Green, a spinster in 1849, had two children prior to her marriage, the younger of whom—Jane, aged two in the 1851 census—must have been born very close in time to the marriage⁶. Is it possible that Emma's mother had died some time earlier, and that her father had set up home with Jane by 1841, living together as man and wife, though not actually marrying until later? Against this theory is the fact that David and Jane Green retained that surname even after William and Jane's marriage. This is all very speculative—it can be averred, however, that if this is *not* Emma's father, then at the present time we haven't the slightest idea where her parents were in 1841. On the whole I think the identification is correct.

Assuming Emma lived with John Beck for a longer period than the time of the census itself, it's worth noting the neighbours she would have been familiar with in the immediate area, all of them families of agricultural labourers: William & Ann Cook, and their baby daughter Emily, and

¹ Berkshire RO DP72/27/A, B.

² Measurements will necessarily be very approximate, as 1) they are worked up from my own tracing, of the original map, rather than the original itself, and b) at the scale involved, even the thickness of a pencil line may give, an appreciable distortion.

³ G.E. Fussell : *The English Rural Labourer His Home, Furniture, Clothing & Food from Tudor to Victorian Times* [London, 1949]; G.M. Trevelyan : *English Social History* [London, 3rd edn 1946].

⁴ Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 540.

⁵ An extensive search in the 1841 census failed to disclose the whereabouts of any other William Beck of even approximately the right description, or of any Ruth Beck at all; the search covered the entire registration districts of Cookham, Easthampstead, Eton, Reading, Windsor, and Wokingham, in Berkshire; Wycombe, in Buckinghamshire; Staines, in Middlesex; and Wycombe, in Oxfordshire.

⁶ The birth certificate of the elder child, David, born in 1846, gives no indication of his father; the mother's surname is given as "Green".

Martha Leonard; Dinah & Susanah Beck, and the ten-year-old William Beck; Thomas & Joanah Beck, and Amelia & Elizabeth Beck; and Mary Couzens; most of her immediate neighbours, then, being relations of hers.

One can also point to the children with whom she may have played, some of whom may have been her close friends, by listing the children in Littlewick aged within a year of Emma: Eliza & Samuel Hewett, George, Emma & William Greenaway, James & Reuben Barnfield, Emily & George Starke, Elizabeth Brown, Emma, James, Ann, James & Charles Wells, Elizabeth Brown, James Street, Martha Pottinger, Isabella Mellet, James Wise, Sarah Stevens, William Bowles, James Low, Fitzroy Clayton, and Thomas Neighbour; girls of exactly Emma's age of six years, with whom she presumably had most in common, were : Emma Greenaway and Isabella Mellet; Emma Greenaway was the blacksmith's daughter, Isabella Mellet attending school, so perhaps socially out of Emma Beck's league.

City or Borough of _____
 Parish or Township of Hurley

Enumeration Schedule.

PLACE	HOUSES		NAMES of each Person who abode therein the preceding Night.	AGE and SEX		PROFESSION, TRADE, EMPLOYMENT, or of INDEPENDENT MEANS.	Where Born	
	Unfinished or Building	Inhabited		Male	Female		Whether Born in same County	Whether Born in Scotland, Ireland, or Foreign Part
Littlewick Green		1	John Birk	53		Ag Labr	Y	✓
			Teresa D		50		Y	
			Emma D		20		Y	
			Rebecca D	20			Y	
			Mary Ann T		15		Y	
			Caroline D		15		Y	
			David D	12	1		Y	
			Emma D		8		Y	
			Ann D		3		Y	
			Thomas Birk	50		Ag Labr	Y	✓
			Jeanet Birk		60		Y	
			Ann D		20		Y	
			Elizabeth		15		Y	
			Mary Longwell		60		Y	
		William Young		20	Ag Labr	Y	✓	
		Jane Gelling		40	Publican	Y	✓	
		Ann D		55		Y		
		Sarah T		15		Y		
		Oliver D		15		Y		
		Mary T		70		Y		
		John Birk		25		Y		
		James Morris		25	Ag Labr	Y	✓	
TOTAL in Page	5			8	14			

214 6 13 - R 4 6

Extract from the 1841 census for Littlewick Green

1851

Before I get to 1851, there are a number of family events to note: on the 13th September 1846 David Green was born in Littlewick¹—either Emma’s half-brother, or her step-brother to be. In 1848 or 1849 was born his sister Jane, Emma’s half/step-sister.

Emma’s aunt Emma Beck married James Morris, a labourer, at Cookham, Berkshire, in 1847, and the couple had two children—Caroline and Reuben—by 1851.²

In July 1843 her uncle Reuben, her father’s younger brother, was charged with GBH at the Berkshire midsummer assizes, after a quarrel at Littlewick during a game of skittles in which he had stabbed a man twice in the arm (the wounds two inches deep), and was sentenced to four months’ hard labour; Reuben died in 1849, and was buried in the graveyard of the recently-founded Knowl Hill parish church on the 20th May of that year³.

Her aunt Mary or Maryann Beck had given birth to a child, Charles, at Littlewick in 1849.⁴

Her aunt Carry (Caroline Rachel Beck)—already pregnant—married John Collins, an agricultural labourer, in 1849, in Cookham registration district; their eldest child, Georgina, was born the same year.⁵

In March 1842 her maternal aunt Amelia Kidson emigrated to Nelson, New Zealand, with her family. Four more children were born there during the 1840s: Mary Ann, Charles Benny, Catherine, and Charlotte Ann.⁶

Her aunt Ann Plumbridge had three children during this decade: George Henry, Charlotte, and Jane, all born at Eton, Buckinghamshire.⁷

On the 24th June 1849 Emma’s father, a widowed labourer, married Jane Green, in Hurley⁸.

There is no way of knowing how Emma felt about her new stepmother, nor how Jane felt about Emma. The subsequent lack of support that she got from her immediate family, however, suggests that the new marriage may have been a strain, and that from then onwards Emma may have felt increasingly isolated—but this may well be reading too much into the scanty evidence.

*

¹ Birth certificate.

² GRO index; TNA: HO 107/1694 f66 p19; TNA: RG 9/754 f161 p21; *Berkshire Chronicle*, 1869-05-29

³ *Reading Mercury*, 1843-06-10 and -07-15; Berkshire criminal register; letter to me from Peter Newton, cited above.

⁴ HO 107/1694 f249 p40.

⁵ GRO index; HO 107/1694 f58 p3.

⁶ Find a Grave; Florence Anne Morgan Family Tree, on Ancestry.co.uk.

⁷ GRO indexes; censuses.

⁸ Marriage certificate; parish register.

On the night of the 30th March 1851, when the census was taken, Emma was living in the northern part of Littlewick Green, in the household of her father and step-mother; other than these three, the household included Jane Beck's two children David and Jane Green, and a 39 year-old farm labourer named George Heusey, recorded as a lodger. Emma's occupation was described as "Work in the Fields"—I will come back to this in a moment, after taking a look at Littlewick in 1851:

In 1851 there were 63 houses in Littlewick Green, of which six were unoccupied¹. In the 57 occupied houses lived a total of 298 individuals, of whom at this date there were now 24 more males than females. Once again, nearly half the population was aged under 20 (138), of whom 94 were children less than ten years old—nearly a third of the population, and an increase since 1841; the increasing youthfulness of the population is confirmed at the other end of the age spectrum as well, for there were now only four individuals aged over 70, and only one octogenarian.

163 individuals have their occupation recorded—a higher proportion than in 1841; however the increase is partly accounted for by the enumerators this time listing 34 children as (day and/or Sunday) scholars. 40 of the remainder were agricultural labourers²; four more worked as hay cutters or hay binders. Their employers were three farmers, one of 181 acres, employing 10 labourers, one of 150 acres, employing 5 labourers and 3 boys³ and one of 200 acres; two women were described as farmer's wives, and there were two farmer's sons and a farmer's daughter. 10 men and women were in some form of domestic service; three more worked as gardeners or garden servants; another as a governess; two more as nurses. Eight men worked as bricklayers or bricklayer's labourers. There were five carpenters, two sawyers, and two wheelwrights, a wheelwright's wife, and a wheelwright's apprentice; one man worked as a coachmaker's labourer. Four men were employed in tailoring; five women as laundresses, three others as dressmakers; there were five shoemakers. There were two cattle dealers, two grocers, a fruiterer, a baker, a blacksmith & beershop keeper, a victualler & cordwainer, and a retired shopkeeper. There was a carter and his two carter's boys, a thatcher, and a cow doctor (John Beck). Three individuals were house proprietors, another two being annuitants; there was one schoolmaster; and there was the curate of White Waltham and Shottesbrooke. A railway labourer, an errand boy and an individual described as "Parish Relieved" complete the list. All in all the village gives the impression of a comfortable self-sufficiency, and a socially mixed community.

Since the 1851 census gives parish of birth, rather than merely whether or not born in Berkshire, we can now get a better idea of mobility in Littlewick: in all, 115 individuals present there in 1851 had not been born in Hurley, White Waltham, Littlewick Green or Knowl Hill—more than a third of Littlewick's population; of these, 72 had been born outside Berkshire—almost a quarter. Visibly a fluid community, then. Of the 58 households, 42 were straightforwardly nuclear at their core; only six households had servants, and of these three had but one apiece. In the light of what

¹ 1851 census information is derived by me from HO 107/1694. As I've had to use common sense definitions of what is and what is not within Littlewick Green, my interpretation may not be absolutely consistent between 1841 and 1851; the nearness of these figures as to number of houses, however, suggests that I am close enough as to make little difference.

² Descriptions by the enumerators are rather freer than in 1841, so the actual phrase "agricultural labourer" is not always used; however, the occupation is clearly identical.

³ I haven't been able to reconcile these figures with the numbers actually resident in Littlewick describing themselves as labourers; presumably, therefore, these included non-Littlewick residents.

is soon to happen in Emma's life, it's notable that there is apparently only one unmarried mother in Littlewick Green in 1851, the 36 year old laundress Faith Crockford, described as unmarried, but with three children aged 1 to 12, all surnamed Crockford.

I have unfortunately not been able to establish precisely where the house was in which Emma was living in 1851; the best that I can say is that it was probably somewhere in the vicinity of the present cricket pavilion¹. Obviously it's impossible to say anything about the house itself. However one can reasonably suppose her neighbours to have been: her grandfather John Beck, with his daughter Mary and grandson Charles; William & Amelia Young and their children Eliza and Frederick; and Samuel & Ann Freeman, their daughters Mary and Eliza Lucy, and their lodger Mary Ann Heale, with her baby son Benjamin Fred. William Young and Samuel Freeman were farm labourers.

Youngsters in Littlewick aged within a year of Emma, among whom may have been the friends of her teenage years, were: Richard Huse, an agricultural labourer, Lucy Wise, a scholar, James Street, a house servant, James Wells, a wheelwright's apprentice, George Wells, an agricultural labourer, Thomas Neighbour, an errand boy, William Austen, a hired farm servant, Charles Wells, a hired farm servant, George Fred Wallis, with no occupation given, Jane Underwood, a house servant, and James Wells, a carter's boy. Of these, the likeliest candidates for Emma's friendship were James Street, James Wells, Thomas Neighbour, Charles Wells, and James Wells, all of whom had been living in Littlewick for at least ten years. There were no young women of exactly Emma's age—16 years—in Littlewick Green *itself* at this date, but Emma Greenaway was still living on the Bath Road nearby, so may well by this date have been her oldest and closest friend².

¹ Comparing the apparent route taken by the enumerator with Berkshire RO DP72/27/A, B and the 1841 census returns.

² It's possible that the houses on the Bath Road, listed as such in the enumerator's returns should in any case be included in Littlewick Green; if so it wouldn't alter my statistics too substantially.

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Name of Street, Place, or Road, and Name or No. of House	Parish or Township of	Revival District of	City or Borough of	Part of	Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born	Whether Blind, Deaf, or Dumb	Age of		Condition	Relation to Head of Family	Name and Surname of each Person who abode in the house, on the Night of the 30th March, 1851
								Male	Female			
45 Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick		2			Head	Charles Brock
46 Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick	Littlewick		34		Mar	Head	William Young
								34		Mar	Wife	Emeline Young
								8			Daughter	Eliza
								5			Son	Frederick
								29		Mar	Head	William Brock
								37		Mar	Wife	Jane
								16			Daughter	Emma
								4			Son	Frederick
								2			Son	Jane
								34		Mar	Head	George Young
								36		Mar	Head	Admund Johnson
								30		Mar	Wife	Ann
								9			Daughter	Mary
								6			Daughter	Melba
								2			Daughter	Elizabeth
								14			Wife	Lavinia Johnson
								23		Mar	Wife	Mary Ann Johnson
								4			Daughter	Melba
1 House Littlewick								8			Head	John Littlewick
								11			Wife	Mary Littlewick
Total of Persons...								8				

Extract from the 1851 census for Littlewick Green

Work in the fields

Emma was said to be engaged in ‘Work in the Fields’. The first thing that needs to be said is that the particular census enumerator concerned invariably used that form of words, in preference to the ubiquitous ‘Ag. Lab.’, when referring to a woman; it seems, then, that he was making a point as to the difference between men’s and women’s work, but that, generically-speaking, what Emma was engaged in was farm labouring.

What was the reason for the employment of women in fieldwork at this period? The historian G.M. Trevelyan wrote:

During the Napoleonic wars women, deprived of their old means of livelihood by the decay of cottage industries, went into field work beside their men folk. The big capitalist farmers began to employ gangs of women in hoeing and weeding. Such employment had always been occasional among country women, and they had always turned out at haytime and harvest. But the big farmers in the age of Speenhamland employed females all the year round, because the newly enclosed lands required much weeding and preparation; because there was less charge on the poor-rate if the wife earned wages as well as the husband; and because if women were drawing pay it helped to keep down the wages of the men. It was a vicious circle: the fact that the husband’s wages were not at that time enough to support the whole family forced the wife and daughters into this competition with the men for farm service. It was only as the field labourer’s wages gradually rose in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, and as agricultural machinery enabled farmers to dispense with many kinds of hand work, that female employment in agriculture again became as restricted as it had been in earlier times.¹

An earlier authority, W. Hasbach, followed contemporary opinion in attributing the increase in employment of women and children in agriculture to the operation of the New Poor Law, from 1835². However, this would appear to place the start date improbably late, given that it’s now clear that this form of employment was actually decreasing from 1851 onwards—the number of female agricultural labourers and shepherds in England and Wales fell from 144,000 in 1851 to 58,000 in 1871; this absolute decline, while partly due to increased mechanisation, ‘was presumably due mainly to the farmers’ increasingly efficient use of their adult male labour force and, as the years wore on, to the lessening of the need for the womenfolk to earn money as the menfolk came to earn more.’³ Interestingly, Berkshire [with Bedfordshire] had in any case the lowest percentage of agricultural labourers who were female—just 0.2% in 1851.⁴

How much would Emma have earned through her work? Hasbach considered that the average wage of grown women in agriculture was about 3d a day, with girls over 16 earning about 6d; however, in 1867 a parliamentary commissioner reported that in Oxfordshire and Berkshire

¹ G.K. Trevelyan: *English Social History. A Survey of Six Centuries Chaucer to Queen Victoria*. London, 3rd edn, 1946, pp. 486-7.

² V. Hasbach: *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*. London, 1966 [first publ. 1894], p. 225.

³ Geoffrey Best: *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851–1875*. London, 1971, pp. 108, 109.

⁴ K.D.M. Snell: *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, Cambridge, 1985, p. 96.

women's wages were ordinarily about 8d a day.¹ Emma, then, probably earned about 5d or 6d a day, in 1851. She may well have received part of her wages in kind—perhaps fuel or produce, but more probably beer or cider, for consumption at work.²

Sometimes reasons were given for preferring to employ women—usually their dexterity, but sometimes their “superior industry and order”³; however, “it appears that there were few agricultural operations for which women and children were so specially fitted as to make their work indispensable.”⁴ The sort of work Emma was most likely engaged in was “weeding and hoeing, picking up stones, and topping and tailing turnips and mangel; or, in wet weather, mending sacks in a barn.”⁵ A form of seasonal gang work in which she may well have also participated was that of withy or osier peeling—work largely done by women and children, which involved cutting, stacking, and binding the willow rods, and then removing their bark, and which was practised along the banks of the Thames, wherever willows grew well⁶; however hurdle-making died out fast as the century progressed, imported withies coming in so cheap as to make the growing of osiers uneconomic.⁷ At harvest time in Berkshire women could earn well in reaping and tying the corn, in hoeing the turnips, and in making the hay. Large numbers of women would be kept busy during the acorn harvest; and women could also be seen in the autumn collecting leaves in bags for use in their gardens and as bedding for pigs.⁸

Women's work was increasingly seasonal: an examination of poor law settlement material for ten counties including Berkshire, for 1835–60, shows a peak of female unemployment of 12% in December, and a trough of 5% in April.⁹

Flora Thompson described the appearance in the 1880s of the few women still doing fieldwork—women of Emma's generation: “They worked in sunbonnets, hobnailed boots and men's coats, with coarse aprons of sacking enveloping the lower part of their bodies”, together with “the ends of old trouser legs worn as gaiters.” She saw them as “Strong, healthy, weather-beaten, hard as nails . . .”.¹⁰

Contemporary views of the character of women field workers were often less sympathetic: the field labouring girl was held to be spoiled alike for domestic service and for marriage, “coarsened” by her work—and by the mixed company she kept—to the point that womanliness was destroyed. Field work, the Agricultural Employment Commissioners were repeatedly told, encouraged “strong passions, rough language, and general “loudness” . . .”; it corrupted the girl's mind, perhaps irretrievably, and left her rough in manner.¹¹

¹ Hasbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 265–6, 407–8.

² Jennie Kitteringham : “Country work girls in nineteenth-century England”, in Raphael Samuel, ed.: *Village Life and Labour*, London 1975, p. 91.

³ Kitteringham, *loc. cit.*

⁴ Hasbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 265–6.

⁵ Flora Thompson: *Lark Rise to Candleford*, 1945, Penguin edn p. 58.

⁶ Kitteringham, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁷ G.E. Mingay: *Rural Life in Victorian England*, London, 1977, p. 112.

⁸ Mingay, *loc. cit.*

⁹ Snell, *op. cit.*, p.21.

¹⁰ Thompson, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ Kitteringham, *op. cit.*, p. 97.



Chalk Pits Farm, Littlewick Green – one of the farms Emma Beck may have worked on.

Motherhood

On the 7th May 1852 Emma's aunt Mary Ann Beck died in the Cookham Union workhouse, at the age of 30¹. She was buried in the graveyard of Knowl Hill parish church, the new neighbourhood church that had been founded in 1842².

On the 11th June 1852 Emma's stepmother Jane gave birth to Emma's half-brother William Beck, in Littlewick³.

Emma's aunt Maria died in 1853, her body being buried at Holy Trinity, Beaminster.⁴

Her aunt Amelia Kidson gave birth to another child, George Henry, in 1852; although there were to be two further children, I'll not mention them here, as it's unlikely there was any communication between the English and New Zealand families.⁵

Some time around February of 1854, at the latter end of winter, Emma Beck, now eighteen years old, herself fell pregnant. The pregnancy ran its course, and it will presently be my task to examine a few possibilities as to the identity of the other dancer in this particular tango, for remarkably he remains entirely unknown; however, I will come back to this after the birth itself.

On the 18th October 1854 Emma was admitted to the Cookham Union workhouse⁶, in an advanced state of pregnancy. She was not entirely without company, for her great-aunt Dinah Beck had been permanently resident there since at least September 1853; additionally, her grandfather, John Beck, had been admitted only two days beforehand, and remained in the workhouse for the first five days of Emma's stay⁷. On the day of Emma's admittance, the Board of Guardians for Cookham Union ordered the initiation of legal process against William Beck, her father, "for wilfully refusing or neglecting to maintain his daughter by reason of which refusal or neglect she has become chargeable" to the parish⁸.

At some stage prior to this date, as will be noted, William Beck had removed to Lent, near Burnham, in Buckinghamshire⁹.

One can speculate as to the reason why William Beck didn't maintain Emma—it may have been choice, or the ill-will of her step-mother, but one can't help feeling that the fact that his own wife Jane was herself heavily pregnant may have caused him to feel that the financial burden of two new babies was more than he could bear, and that his primary duty lay with Jane.

¹ Maidenhead Union Register of Deaths, Berkshire RO MF25 [G/M 5/1,2].

² Letter to Benjamin Beck, from Peter Newton, Vicar of Knowl Hill, 17 Sept 1987.

³ Birth certificate of William Beck.

⁴ Parish register.

⁵ Florence Anne Morgan Family Tree

⁶ Maidenhead Union, Indoor Relief, List for the Parish of Hurley Berkshire RO (G/M 3/2).

⁷ loc. cit.

⁸ Guardians Minute Book, Berkshire RO [G/M 1/6].

⁹ It's possible that this move may have been associated with a third marriage: the birth certificate of Emily Beck, born in the beginning of the following year, gives her mother's maiden name as Bristow.

On the 7th November 1854, Emma's great-aunt Dinah died in the workhouse, at the age of 70¹. She was buried in Knowl Hill churchyard, on the 12th November.² Her great-aunt Denny (Beck) Martin had died at Wooburn, Buckinghamshire, the previous year.³

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8th Nov. 1854

Ordered that the Overseers of the Poor of the Parish of Hurley do forthwith proceed against Emma Beck for wilfully refusing or neglecting to work by which refusal or neglect she has become chargeable to the said Parish

Charles Sawyer
Chairman

Extract from the minute book of the Cookham Union board of guardians

The day after Dinah's death, the Board of Guardians decided to take steps against Emma herself, on the grounds that, she had become a charge to the parish by "wilfully refusing or neglecting to

¹ GRO index; letter to me from the Vicar of Knowl Hill.

² Letter to me from the Vicar of Knowl Hill.

³ Davidson Family Tree, on Ancestry.

work”¹. This seems exceptionally unreasonable, given how close to term she was by this time, but it may be that this was normal procedure, rather than local vindictiveness.

Emma’s baby was born on the 25th November 1854, in the workhouse². According to the workhouse birth register, the baby was female, and was christened “Jane”, on the 3rd December. However, the entries on the page concerned have clearly been written in haste, with that immediately above the entry concerned having been struck out in mid-word; so it seems that this particular entry has been garbled.

Chapter Seven will look at Cookham Union Workhouse, as Emma experienced it. She left the workhouse five days before Christmas, having been an inmate for 67 days; her child had spent the first 29 days of its life in the workhouse, described in the Indoor Relief List rather offhandedly as “Beck Infant”³. Christmas and the New Year past, she went to register the birth of her baby on the 2nd January 1855; the *boy* child was given the name Reuben. The columns in the register headed “Name, and surname of father” and “Occupation of father” were left entirely blank. Emma marked her name with an X, as informant (in England in 1853–5 only 41% of women could sign their names)⁴.

Three months later, Reuben now nearly five months old, he was baptised with that name on April 15th 1855, in the parish church of Burnham, in Buckinghamshire. Emma was described as a single woman, of Lent⁵. The venue for the christening implies that Emma and Reuben had returned to the family fold, for the time being at least.

Single parents / illegitimate children

In Great Britain in 1851 there were 2,765,000 single women aged 15 and over; there were 72,500 so-called ‘surplus’ single women in this age group. These figures were growing, and gave rise to increasing concern among Victorians.⁶

Middle class commentators saw special risks in the perceived moral laxity that accompanied country hiring fairs: Arthur Young, for instance, thought that farm-servants “sleep where and with whom they please,” writing luridly:

There are certain inevitable evils arising from the indiscriminate mixture of several hundreds of young people in the same town, on the same day, for the same purpose, which no precaution can prevent, or even do much to mitigate. The

¹ Maidenhead Guardians records, Berkshire RO 9/4 & RO 3/2; Cookham Union records, Berkshire RO, minute book. Legal action would have been in the local petty sessions, records of which do not survive. Although comparable cases received coverage in local papers, Emma’s case never reached the attention of the *Berkshire Chronicle*, the *Reading Mercury*, or the *Windsor and Eton Express*—the only possibilities.

² Birth certificate of Reuben Beck; Maidenhead Union Register of Births, Berkshire RO MF25 [G/M 4/2].

³ Maidenhead Guardians records, Berkshire RO 9/4 & RO 3/2; Cookham Union records, Berkshire RO, minute book

⁴ Birth certificate of Reuben Beck; the original register held by the Superintendent Registrar, Berkshire Registration Service, Windsor & Maidenhead Registration Service, has no further details regarding the father nor any marginal note, according to a letter to me from the Superintendent Registrar, dated 17 July 1987. David Philips: *Crime and Authority in Victorian England*, London 1977, p. 159—as measured by women able to sign the marriage register.

⁵ Burnham baptismal register, Buckinghamshire RO PR31/1/10.

⁶ J. A. & Olive Banks: *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*, Liverpool 1964, p. 27.

grossness of the scene does not unveil itself till the shades of night have fallen.
Then the orgies begin.¹

But while it seems true that the rural poor were less fond of the institution of marriage than the better-off—premarital sex being sufficiently widespread that upwards of 45% of women were pregnant at the time of their marriage—they seem also to have had less inclination to stray from it, once entered upon.²

In the early nineteenth century “most illegitimate children were the result of casual sexual encounters by girls in their late teens and early twenties scarcely of an age to have formed a regular consensual union.”³

It’s notable that the union authorities apparently only sought to take action against Emma herself and her father, but not against *Reuben’s* father. At this period [1844-1868] the union had in fact no right in law to seek an affiliation order against the alleged father—though in theory Emma herself could have.⁴

¹ Snell, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

² *ibid.*, pp. 353-4.

³ N.L. Tranter: *Population and Society 1750-1940*, London 1985, p. 95.

⁴ Norman Longmate: *The Workhouse*, London 1974, p. 70.

Who was Reuben's father?

The first answer to this vital question is, and looks like remaining, we simply don't know. He isn't named in any contemporary record whatsoever, including all possible poor law, court, and church records, which are almost deafening in their muteness on the matter. One single, later, record gives a name for Reuben's father, namely Reuben's own marriage certificate, which gives his father's name as William Beck, and his father's occupation as porter. However, too much reliance shouldn't be placed on this, as it wasn't unusual, in cases where spouses wished to conceal their illegitimacy or ignorance of paternity, for them to disguise the fact by naming their grandfather; it seems likely that this is what happened in the present case; against this, however, is the occupation of porter, as there's no evidence that William Beck ever was one. Either, then, Reuben made this up out of the back of his head, or there was some substance of truth in the statement that his father was a porter.

How can the situation have arisen, that all relevant authorities remained ignorant of the identity of the baby's father? It seems that there are only two possible explanations: either it was deliberately concealed, or Emma herself didn't know. The second explanation is the less flattering, but that doesn't exclude it from consideration. The first raises the further problem of motive for concealment—though speculation here would be possible, it could only be on the basis of no hard fact whatsoever, so ultimately of little worth. Whether or not Emma knew who the father was, there is at least no doubt that the infant did have only one. Here one can enter a little more justifiably into speculation, as at least there are a number of possible candidates known. I must preface any further comment by saying that of course the father may have been someone completely different from any name I put forward. My speculation covers three general scenarios¹:

1. **George Hensey.** In the 1851 census return, the Beck family had a lodger, George Hensey, a 39-year-old farm labourer, from Wheldin in Hampshire. This man is not traced in any of the later censuses, though the GRO index and the National Probate Calendar both record the death of a George Hensey of Tottenham in 1888, said to have been 83. But it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that he was still with the Beck household in 1854, and that he had ample opportunity, should he so wish it, to press his attentions on the teenage daughter of the house.

2. **Seduction.** A contemporary authority, Dr William Acton, wrote in 1857:

It cannot be denied by anyone acquainted with rural life, that the seduction of girls is a sport and habit with vast numbers of men, married and single, placed above the ranks of labour . . . The "keeping company" of the labouring classes, accompanied by illicit intercourse, as often as not leads to marriage; but not so that of the farmer's son, farmer, first or second or third class squire. The union house is now often enough the home of the deserted mother and the infant bastard.²

¹ Other conceivable scenarios include rape and incest. Few rape cases involving girls older than 16 went to court, and those that did received veiled coverage, at best, in the press (David Philips (1977) *Crime and Authority in Victorian England*, London: p. 269); there is no evidence in existence that supports this scenario. There is no evidence, either, to support the incest scenario, where surely incest resulting in pregnancy could not have been kept out of the papers, at least.

² Quoted in Norman Longmate (1974) *The Workhouse*, London: pp. 160-1.

Apparently, too, *publicans* were “notoriously fathers of bastards”.¹

From the 1851 census no individual in Littlewick can readily be identified as even a third class squire. The three farmers were all in their 50s, perhaps old enough to allow for their exclusion from consideration (but perhaps not, if the 1888 George Hensey is in the frame). This would leave the following possible seducers, from the categories stated above²:

A. *Thomas Windsor*. A 27-year old single farmer’s son, at Feenes Farm. Thomas married in 1852, in Reading registration district, and by 1861 he was a farmer in Hurley in his own right, with three children. In 1871 he was farming at Chalkpit Farm, Hurley, his family makeup unchanged. He died at Knowl Hill in October 1878.

B. *William Windsor*. His 25-year old single brother. By 1861 William was still living with his now widowed mother, at Feenes Farm; still single, by 1871 he and a general servant were the only residents of ‘Feen’s’ Farm. By 1881 he had moved to Putney, where he was living with his ironmonger brother Henry; he was still living there with his brother in 1891, now just living on his own means. By 1901 he was living in Esher, a retired farmer, one of three boarders with a restaurant keeper in the High Street; in 1911 he was a boarder in Roehampton; his death was registered in Wandsworth RD later that month. He had never married.

C. *Revd Francis William Peel*. The 28-year old unmarried curate of White Waltham and Shottesbrook, an MA of Worcester College, Oxford, originally from Caenby, Lincolnshire, and great-nephew of the former prime minister Sir Robert Peel. Francis married in 1852, in Wycombe RD, and by 1861 he was living with his wife and four children, with four servants, as rector of Burghwallis, Yorkshire. He was still rector at Burghwallis in 1871, now with six children, six servants, and a governess; by 1881, still in the same post, the household had expanded to eleven children, seven servants, and a governess. In 1891 he was described as both rector and farmer at Burghwallis, four family members still at home. He died at Burghwallis in 1895.

D. *Charles Hibbert*. A 28-year old married man, blacksmith and beer shop keeper in Littlewick, originally from Ilsley, Berkshire; he had a one year old daughter, and a son was born later that year. He died young, his death being registered in Cookham RD in the last quarter of 1853. Given that Reuben was born in November 1854, Charles Hibbert can definitely be ruled out as his father.

E. *William Low(e)*. The married 34-year old victualler and cordwainer, of the Wheatsheaf public house, originally from Watlington, Oxfordshire; there were two small children in the family, and two lodgers, one of whom was 26. The Wheatsheaf was the next address visited by the enumerator after Emma’s great-uncle Thomas Beck. He was still the publican there in 1861, now with seven children, and one servant, together with six male lodgers, all labourers; William was recorded as “cordwinder, publican or victualler”. In 1871 he was still in Littlewick with his wife, five children, and a lodger; he was now apparently employed as a cordwinder only. By 1871 he was listed as a bootmaker in Hurley, living with his wife and two sons, both also bootmakers. By 1881 he was a self-employed

¹ K.D.M. Snell (1985) *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, Cambridge: p. 362

² TNA: HO 107/1694.

dairyman in Littlewick, living with his wife, a nephew, and a lodger. He died in Cookham RD towards the end of 1894.

F. *William Cozens*. William Cozens was a 26-year-old farm labourer, lodging at the Wheatsheaf in 1851. His subsequent history has proved elusive.

3. ***The eligible young men in Littlewick***. Once again, three years intervene between the census year and the year of Emma's pregnancy, in which many changes could have happened. But in 1851, the young men aged within two years either side of Emma, with whom she might have formed a liaison, were as follows¹:

A. *William Austen*. William was a hired farm servant at Chalk Pits Farm, from Ruscombe in Berkshire, the same age as Emma. He married at Ruscombe in 1861, by that time working as a footman there, in the same household where his wife worked as a housemaid. By 1871 he had become a railway porter, and was living in Reading with his wife and two children. The family, now with five children, was still in Reading in 1881, William's occupation given as a railway checker. His wife died in 1898, and he remarried in 1900. He and his wife were recorded in Reading in 1911, at which time he was recorded as pensioned (another hand has added "Army", which seems doubtful). He died in Reading RD in 1915.

B. *James Huse/Hughes*. James was an agricultural labourer, from Iver, Buckinghamshire, two years younger than Emma. He married in Cookham in 1858, and in 1861 was an ag. lab., living in Littlewick Green with his wife and one year old daughter. By 1871 the family had moved to Hackney, where James was still a labourer, living with his wife and daughter, but also a 25 year old step-son. In 1881 James and his wife were at a different address, but still in Hackney, a 9 year old nephew also present; James was working as a bricklayer's labourer; the household—including the nephew—was essentially unchanged in 1891. Still at the same address in 1901, James was still working as a bricklayer's labourer, but his wife had died, and his widowed daughter had moved in, with her own two children. This was essentially the household makeup in 1911, though by then James was working for the borough council as a night watchman. He died at home in October 1914.

C. *Richard Huse/Hughes*. Richard was James's elder brother, also an agricultural labourer, of the same age as Emma. By 1857, when he married, he had moved to Southall, where he was working as a labourer. In 1861 he and his wife were still in Southall, where James was working as a hay binder. In 1871, now with a family including four children, he was a farm labourer in Southall. The family had moved to Hanwell by 1881, now with nine children at home; James was still a farm labourer. By 1891—James once again described as a hay binder—only four of the children were still at home. Richard and his wife had moved back to Cookham by 1901, where they were living on their own in two rooms. Richard died of cancer, at Hanwell, on Christmas Day 1909.

D. *Thomas Neighbour*. Thomas was Littlewick's local errand boy, of Emma's own age. According to Ancestry trees, he had three children in the early 1860s, apparently out of wedlock, as no marriage has been found, and the children all took their mother's names. Neither can Thomas be located in the 1861 census, although the eldest child and her mother are living in Littlewick with the mother's parents. He died in Cookham in early 1866.

¹ HO 107/11 and HO 107/1694.

E. *James Street*. James was a house servant, a local lad of Emma's age. In 1861 he was living alone in Bray, working as a gardener; that year he got married in Sevenoaks, but in 1871 the couple were living in White Waltham, now with three children. By 1881 there were five children of the marriage, living in Bray. In 1891 the family was in Cookham, now only three children still at home. Widowed by 1901, he was living in Maidenhead with the family of one of his sons. He had remarried by 1911, when he was living with his wife in Maidenhead. Throughout his life he had worked as a gardener. He died in Maidenhead in the summer of 1921.

F. *George Fred Wallis*. George was a local lad of Emma's age, with no occupation stated. In 1861 he was still living in his parents' family in Hurley, now working as a joiner. His subsequent history has proved elusive.

G. *Charles Wells*. Charles was a local boy, working as a hired farm servant, at Chalk Pits Farm, of Emma's age. He was married in 1856, in Cookham RD. By 1861 he was working as a lime-burner, and living in Bisham, Berkshire, with his wife and a two year old son. His subsequent history is not clear, although it's possible he was the Charles Wells whose death was recorded in Reading RD in 1862; the 12 year old son was recorded as nephew, living with an aunt and uncle in Hurley, in 1871.

H. *George Wells*. George was a local agricultural labourer, a year older than Emma. He was married in 1856, in Cookham RD. By 1861 he was a journeyman blacksmith in Hambleton, Buckinghamshire, a visitor in the household of John Williams, blacksmith. In 1871 he was a carter in Hambleton, living with his wife and two children; and in 1881 an ag. lab. there, with his wife and two younger children. In 1891 he was an ag. lab. in Horton, Buckinghamshire, living in four rooms with his wife and a grown-up son. He died in Cookham RD in early 1893.

I. *James Wells*. James was a year younger than Emma, apprenticed to his wheelwright father. Having finished his apprenticeship by 1861, he was still living with his parents and working for his father. In 1871, though recorded as married, he was lodging on his own with a labourer's family in Littlewick Green, working as a wheelwright. In 1872 and 1878 the deaths were recorded in Cookham RD of two men named James Wells, each with a calculated birth year of 1836.

J. *James Wells*. Another local boy of the same name and age, working as a carter's boy at his employer's farm. By 1861, now apparently married (marriage registration not found), he was living in Clewer, Berkshire, with his wife and four year old daughter, and a boarder; he was working as a railway porter. In 1871, though still recorded as married, he was living on his own in Basingstoke, working as a baker. In 1872 and 1878 the deaths were recorded in Cookham RD of two men named James Wells, each with a calculated birth year of 1836; public member trees on Ancestry prefer this James for the 1872 death.

K. *John Wells*. Son of John and Elizabeth Wells. John was a tailor, two years older than Emma, a local boy. Conceivably, though perhaps improbably, he was the John Wells, recorded as a private soldier at St George's barracks, Charing Cross, in 1861; the birthplace is given as White Waltham, but the calculated birth year is 1837, which doesn't fit. A John Wells died in Cookham RD in the second quarter of 1864.

The stronger candidates among these twelve, on the grounds that she had probably known them a long time, were the Littlewick local lads, Thomas Neighbour, James Street, George Fred Wallis, Charles Wells, George Wells, James Wells, James Wells, and John Wells. Among these eight those engaged directly in farm labouring (or farm work more generally), like Emma herself, and thus perhaps with opportunity, were Charles Wells, George Wells, and the second James Wells. To these final two, I am inclined to add George Fred Wallis, who seems to have had time on his hands, and Thomas Neighbour, who could doubtless have found time. The 1861 occupation of the second James Wells—railway porter¹—could be significant given that Reuben’s birth certificate gives his father’s occupation as porter.

At this distance in time it may be futile to speculate further. But if, on the one hand, we take seriously the father’s occupation as stated on Reuben’s birth certificate (discounting the father’s name stated there) the only candidate that fits is the second James Wells; while on the other hand, given that in later life Reuben used an additional forename, Charles, this could have been a nod in the direction of his elusive father, in which case the only candidate would be Charles Wells (Charles Sawyer himself, Chairman of the Board of Guardians, and the local JP, would have been 67 in 1854², so is surely to be ruled out).

To summarise: in my highly subjective judgement the likeliest candidates from each scenario are:

- George Hensey
- William Low(e), and potentially William Cozens
- Charles Wells, James Wells, Thomas Neighbour, and potentially George Fred Wallis

DNA Evidence

My brother and I—direct male line descendants—have each had our Y-chromosomal DNA tested, at separate dates, and by two separate companies. The conclusions of these are as follows: Oxford Ancestors reported that the Y chromosome was “of probable Celtic Origin”, with the following markers:

DYS 19	DYS 388	DYS 390	DYS 391	DYS392	DYS 393	DYS 389i	DYS 389ii-i	DYS 425	DYS 426
14	12	24	10	13	13	10	16	12	12

EthnoAncestry determined that the haplotype group is R1b1b2, referred to in Oppenheimer’s terminology as Rox, described as “the main male gene cluster that moved into the British Isles after the last Ice Age over 15,000 years ago.”

DYS 19	DYS 383	DYS 388	DYS 390	DYS 391	DYS392
14	13	12	24	10	13

Both tests were taken some years ago, and clearly were in need of greater refinement, given how few markers were used.

In 2017 I took the Family Tree DNA Y-DNA67 test, upgraded in 2021 to the Y-DNA111 test,

¹ TNA: RG 9/761 f25 p3.

² *Maidenhead Advertiser*, 1876-06-07.

giving the following markers:

This represents haplogroup R-M269, formerly known as R1b1a1a2 (and previously known as R1b1b2). This is the most common European haplogroup, which arose near the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution, about 10,000 years ago. At the present time no matches have been found at any level higher than 25 markers.

In 2022 I upgraded the Family Tree DNA test to the Big Y700. This confirmed my haplogroup as

PANEL 1 (1-12)											
Marker	DYS392	DYS390	DYS19 **	DYS391	DYS385	DYS426	DYS388	DYS439	DYS389I	DYS392	DYS389II ***
Value	13	24	14	10	11-14	12	12	12	13	13	29

PANEL 2 (13-25)										
Marker	DYS458	DYS459	DYS455	DYS454	DYS447	DYS437	DYS448	DYS449	DYS464	
Value	17	9-10	11	11	25	15	17	29	15-15-16-16	

PANEL 3 (26-37)										
Marker	DYS460	Y-GATA-H4	YCAII	DYS456	DYS607	DYS576	DYS570	CDY	DYS442	DYS438
Value	11	11	19-23	16	14	18	16	26-37	12	12

PANEL 4 (38-47)									
Marker	DYS531	DYS578	DYF395S1	DYS590	DYS537	DYS641	DYS472	DYF406S1	DYS511
Value	11	9	15-16	8	10	10	8	11	10

PANEL 4 (48-60)												
Marker	DYS425	DYS413	DYS557	DYS594	DYS436	DYS490	DYS534	DYS450	DYS444	DYS481	DYS520	DYS446
Value	12	23-23	15	10	12	12	15	8	12	21	20	13

PANEL 4 (61-67)							
Marker	DYS617	DYS568	DYS487	DYS572	DYS640	DYS492	DYS565
Value	12	11	13	11	11	12	12

PANEL 5 (68-75)								
Marker	DYS710	DYS485	DYS632	DYS495	DYS540	DYS714	DYS716	DYS717
Value	25	15	9	15	12	26	26	19

PANEL 5 (76-85)										
Marker	DYS505	DYS556	DYS549	DYS589	DYS522	DYS494	DYS533	DYS636	DYS575	DYS638
Value	12	11	13	12	11	9	12	12	10	11

PANEL 5 (86-93)								
Marker	DYS462	DYS452	DYS445	Y-GATA-A10	DYS463	DYS441	Y-GGAAT-1B07	DYS525
Value	11	29	12	13	24	13	10	10

PANEL 5 (94-102)									
Marker	DYS712	DYS593	DYS650	DYS532	DYS715	DYS504	DYS513	DYS561	DYS552
Value	20	15	19	12	23	17	12	15	24

PANEL 5 (103-111)									
Marker	DYS726	DYS635	DYS587	DYS643	DYS497	DYS510	DYS434	DYS461	DYS435
Value	12	23	18	10	14	17	9	12	11

R-FT254717, which branched off from R-S1026, itself a branch of R-M269. So far I am the only person who has test-confirmed descent from this group, and I have no DNA matches.

The workhouse

For administration of the Poor Law, the parishes of Hurley and White Waltham (which included Littlewick Green) were united to the parishes of Cookham, Bray, Bisham, Shottesbrooke, Waltham St Lawrence and Maidenhead. The Union Poor House had been built on land which, although within the borough of Maidenhead, was a part of the parish of Cookham, which therefore gave its name to the Union. The workhouse that Emma Beck knew was in fact the second of the name, having been built during her infancy (in 1836)¹.



St Mark's hospital, Maidenhead—formerly the Cookham Union workhouse. Main entrance (behind the creeper), and the former women's wards.

Unsupported women had been refused out-relief since 1834, so this group soon formed the second largest, outnumbered only by the old, in nearly every workhouse. At the beginning of December 1854 there were 185 inmates in Cookham workhouse (it had a capacity of 225); 25 were able women, “of whom 12 have 15 Bastards”.²

In that month it was reported that Cookham workhouse had been afflicted with smallpox for four months continuously, and there were two inmates currently infected. On admission to the workhouse Emma's clothes would have been taken away to be fumigated and kept for the day of her release, while she was bathed and disinfected before donning the shapeless workhouse clothing. The uniform was a prime element of discipline, for if worn in the street it identified the pauper as readily as broad arrows the convict. Some unions forced unmarried mothers to wear yellow gowns, as a further indignity, but it's not known if this was the practice at Cookham in

¹ Stephen Darby: *Chapters in the History of Cookham, Berkshire*, privately printed, 1909.

² Longmate, *op. cit.*, p.156; TNA: MH 12/185.

1854.¹

Emma would have been consigned to a dormitory with others of her class. The women's dormitories at Cookham—occupied by night only—were 4591 and 4374 ft³ in volume, with a capacity of 23 and 13 women respectively. In equipping their workhouses, few Boards erred on the side of extravagance. The basic item of furniture was the cheap, wooden bed, with a flock-filled mattress made of sacking and two or three blankets. Pillows were generally regarded as unnecessary and sheets, if provided, were of the coarsest kind. Few people enjoyed the luxury of a single bed, and some beds, both single and double, were arranged in two tiers, as bunks. Beds were often so tightly packed together that the occupants could only get in or out by climbing over the end. “We have it determined”, wrote one critic, “that in the excruciating hour of labour, with all its inevitable and humiliating accompaniments, a crowd of poor women may be thrust into eight beds in a low narrow room sixteen feet long!”²

There were no lockers for personal possessions. Clothes had to be dumped on the bed, or under it. Inspectors at some workhouses complained that inmates hoarded pieces of food and other more personal objects, usually in or under the beds. Some smuggled in tobacco and other forbidden commodities.³

The dining rooms were furnished with only the roughest wooden tables and backless benches; in the whole establishment there might not be a single chair with a back or arms and certainly none that were upholstered. The only decorations on the walls were the lists of regulations, enjoining instant obedience to the master, and the official diet tables, the pauper having the right to see her rations weighed.⁴

Inmates who were not infirm were set to work. Though female inmates were normally assigned relatively more attractive domestic tasks—the routine work, and perhaps the sewing of the house—the Poor Law Board ruled in 1851 that unmarried mothers should be made to pick oakum—tearing all day at old and matted ropes, sometimes denied the use of nails or tools which would have made the work easier. The central Poor Law authority insisted throughout its history that its function was to relieve destitution, not to correct morals, but local administrators didn't always put this belief into practice. It should be noted that physical cruelty was neither the intention nor the usual practice of the workhouse system. Where cruelty did occur, it resulted from problems which were common to all residential institutions. Understaffing, ill-chosen attendants, and undue economy could be found in charitable as well as state institutions. It was not violence, but the unrelieved tedium of institutional life, which probably afflicted the inmates most.⁵

The workhouse rules laid down that the adult inmate should rise at 5 a.m. in the summer (and 7 a.m. in the winter), should be set to work from 7 a.m. [or 8 a.m. in winter] to 12 noon, and from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., and should go to bed at 8 p.m. The Master of the Workhouse was instructed to

¹ TNA: MH 12/185; M.A. Crowther: *The Workhouse System 1834-1929*, London 1981, p. 195.

² MH 12/106; Longmate, op. cit., pp. 90, 92.

³ Crowther, op. cit., p. 196.

⁴ Longmate, op. cit., p. 92.

⁵ Crowther, op. cit., pp. 196, 198, 270; Pat Thane: 'Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop Journal* Vol. 4, p. 32.

“enforce industry, order, punctuality and cleanliness on the inmates.”¹



The former workhouse—inside one of the workhouse yards.

The day began and ended with prayers. The workhouse registered Emma Beck’s religious persuasion as “Church”—i.e. Church of England. But this probably meant little: “If the Lark Rise people had been asked their religion, the answer of nine out of ten would have been “Church of England”, for practically all of them were christened, married, and buried as such, although, in adult life, few went to church between the baptisms of their offspring.”²

Diets in the workhouse were graded according to the age and sex of inmates, the able-bodied receiving the plainest fare. The Poor Law Commissioners decided that workhouse diets should be related to the local diet, and so paupers in southern counties fared worse than those in more affluent industrial areas—although in quantity the diet could actually include up to a third more than could be had by an agricultural labourer outside. Bread and cheese or bread and gruel were standard in the south and east, usually with some variety on regular days of the week. The only drink allowed was water. The Chairman of Cookham Union wrote to the Poor Law Board in January 1855 that “In consequence of a number of idle and dissolute persons applying for admission to the Union who are able but unwilling to work, particularly the youth of both sexes . . .” there was a need for a second, inferior, dietary. If Emma was perceived in this manner, as seems likely, she may well have experienced a dietary similar to this, even though officially it wasn’t introduced till the month after she left the workhouse. The inferior dietary for a woman in Cookham workhouse was as follows:

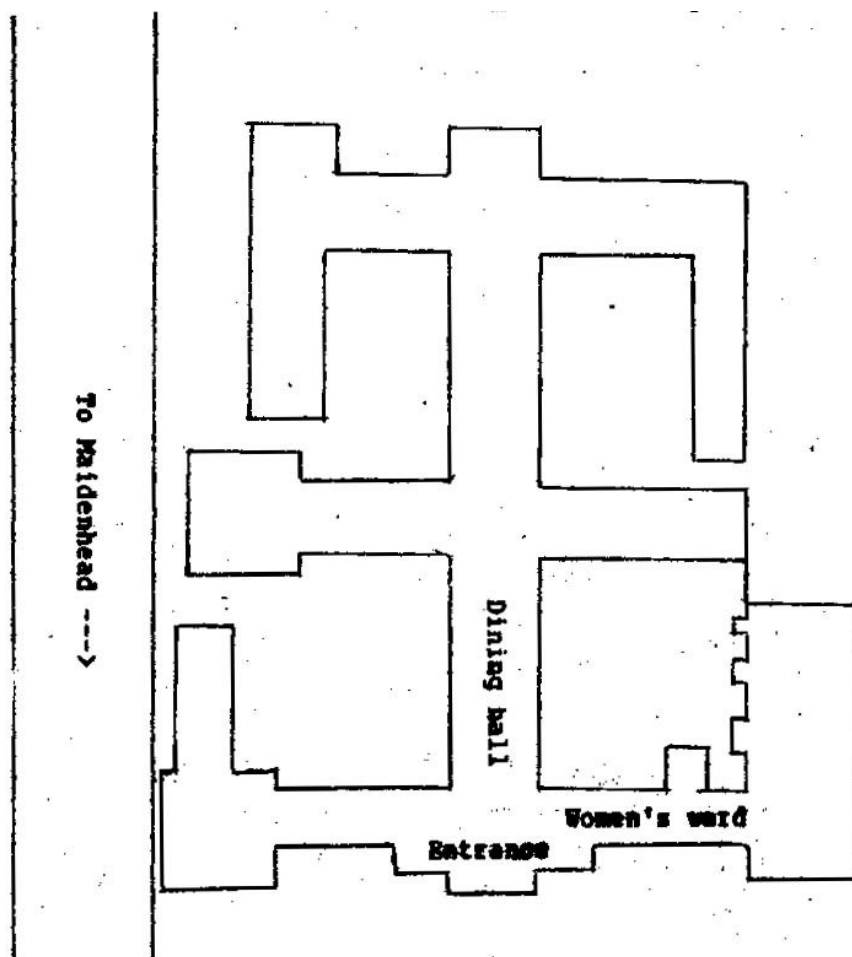
Breakfast : 6 oz bread, 1 pint gruel

¹ Anne Digby: *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, London 1985, p. 17; Longmate, op. cit., p. 92.

² Longmate, op. cit., p. 92; Thompson, op. cit., p. 209.

Dinner : 6 oz bread, 1 oz cheese—on Saturday 12 oz of suet pudding
Supper : 6 oz bread, 1 oz cheese

The gruel was made with 16 oz oatmeal to a gallon of water; the suet pudding with 10 oz flour to 1 oz suet.¹



Workhouse plan.

Reconstructed from O.S. map and plans of later building in TNA: MH 14/21

It's impossible to know how Emma was affected by her contact with the workhouse—so little is known of her subsequent career. Often the lying-in ward, the nursery and the able-bodied women's day room threw a basically decent, and perhaps tearfully repentant girl into the company of hardened older women, so that, as one speaker told a conference in 1857, they "laugh at her simplicity and too often shame her out of her repentance." A widely received view was reported by the *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society* in 1865: "The depraved women bring contamination with them; the unwed mothers, who come to lie-in, go out laughing, with a promise to come again." Though Emma never returned to Cookham workhouse in these circumstances, it's hard to imagine that she can have profited by the experience.²

¹ Longmate, op. cit., pp. 93f.; Crowther, op. cit., p. 214; TNA MH 12/186.

² Longmate, op. cit., pp. 156, 159.

1855–60

At the beginning of 1855 Emma's half-sister Emily was born at Lent, Burnham, Buckinghamshire, apparently¹. Her half-sister Mary Ann was born in 1857, and her half-brother Samuel in 1860, both in Burnham.²

In April 1855 her paternal aunt Carry Collins appeared before the county petty sessions, as reported in the *Reading Mercury*:³

Patience Boulton was charged with having assaulted Caroline Collins, at Littlewick. It appeared that they were neighbours, and on the morning of the assault, met and began quarrelling. A witness for the defence proved that Collins first pulled Bolton's nose; they then stripped off their bonnets and shawls, and had a regular fight, which lasted a considerable time; Collins having the worst of it, obtained a summons against Bolton. The Chairman severely lectured them on their behaviour, and stated that the Bench had determined to dismiss the case.

Emma's great-uncle Thomas Beck, who'd been a thatcher in Littlewick, died in 1859, being buried at Knowl Hill on the 16th August.⁴

Emma's grandfather John Beck spent two and a half months in Cookham workhouse over the winter of 1858/9. On the 27th February 1859 he died at Knowl Hill, Hurley, of old age; he was described as an agricultural labourer. His body was buried in Knowl Hill churchyard on the 6th March.⁵

About the beginning of February 1860 Emma admitted Reuben into the Cookham workhouse on his own. Reuben spent the whole of the next seven years there—the greater part of his childhood. Throughout this time he is described as a “labourer's child,” which probably refers to Emma's occupation rather than to that of his unknown father; however, in view of later entries, it may only refer to Emma's occupation at the time of Reuben's birth.⁶

¹ Birth certificate. There is a real problem here, which incorporates the possibility that there were actually two couples in Lent named William and Jane Beck, having a daughter Emily in this year. On the one hand there is an entry in the Burnham baptism register for the baptism on the 18th February 1855 of an Emily daughter of William and Jane Beck; William is said to be a labourer, of Lent; Emily is said to have been born on the 24th January; this is the only possible baptism for an Emily Beck. On the other hand the only possible *birth* registration for an Emily Beck shows her being born at Lent Green, Burnham, on the 1st February, to William and Jane Beck; William is described as an Agricultural Laborer; but most alarmingly, Jane's name is given as “Beck formerly *Bristow*”. Additionally, Emily's age as given in the 1861 census suggests a birth year of 1852 or 1853. Clearly there are two discrepancies: the birth-date, and the mother's name before marriage. Conceivably the latter could be accounted for by a bride's former marriage, but I know of no evidence for this; the GRO has no record of a William Beck marrying a Jane Bristow, so a groom's subsequent marriage is also ruled out. The 1861 census return for Burnham only shows a single family with these names. I'm reluctant to suggest simple error, to account for the discrepancy of birth-dates, but at the moment this seems the least unlikely explanation. I don't think this problem affects the narrative too much—it doesn't cast doubt on Emma's own ancestry, and forms only a small part of the picture.

² GRO index; TNA: RG 9/854, f21 p10.

³ *Reading Mercury*, 1855-04-28

⁴ TNA: HO 107/1694 f250 p41; GRO index; letter to me from Peter Newton, Vicar of Knowl Hill, 17 Sept 1987.

⁵ Berkshire RO G/M 3/3; death certificate; letter to me from Peter Newton, Vicar of Knowl Hill, 17 Sept 1987.

⁶ Berkshire RO G/M 3/6.

1861

Emma's presence in the 1861 census proved pretty elusive for many years, but I eventually found her. She was recorded as female "E.B.", a farm servant, an inmate of the Clifton Union workhouse, Stapleton, Gloucestershire (i.e. Bristol).¹ Regrettably it's not possible to say anything further about this Bristol workhouse, as virtually all records of this workhouse, and of the Clifton Union, were destroyed by bombing in the Second World War.

In my earlier version of this study I speculated that my failure to locate her in 1861 might have been because she had migrated out of the area—most probably to London. At that time of writing, of course, there was no national database of indexed and digitised census images, so that was as far as I could go. But although I was wrong about London, my instincts were right, except that she'd gone west instead of east.

After the creation of a national railway network in the 1840s and 1850s there was a huge efflux from rural areas to urban, industrial ones.² Emma herself may have taken advantage of this, as the Great Western Railway had a line in place from Maidenhead direct to Bristol. At the third class rate of a penny a mile a one-way ticket would have cost something like 6s. 8d., which represents around £20 at current prices. Not cheap, but if Emma had had paid work she might have been able to save this much. Of course, if she couldn't afford it she could probably have walked, especially if she took it in stages, stopping at perhaps Reading and Swindon.

The 1861 census showed, in Berkshire, 50-60 persons migrating per 1000 acres—the second highest category. The volume of migration was highest in south-east England, where it seems to have been a reaction to severe economic difficulties as well as to the attraction of London. The Census Notes leave no doubt that it was in large part unemployment and low wages, caused partly by the replacement of manual labour by machinery, that were driving people off the land. Although during this period English agriculture as a whole enjoyed a period of prosperity, this was not true of the corn-growing south and east. Grain prices remained low and prosperity failed to reach the agricultural labourer or the small farmer. In southern England the wages of agricultural labour failed to rise with prices in the 'fifties, and unemployment was far more common than in the north and the midlands. Agricultural wages in the 'fifties showed remarkably close parallels with the volume of migration from each county. In reference to the specific migration pattern that concerns us here, the 1861 census recorded a net movement from Berkshire to London, for example, of between 20 and 40,000.³

However it appears that, some time after her spell in the workhouse, she went into domestic service.⁴

¹ Ancestry.co.uk's online index to the 1861 census includes no other possible Emma Beck; given this entry's close match with birth year and occupation, and especially the reference to her place of birth as "Whitewalton", Berkshire—surely 'White Waltham', spelt as heard—the identification seems reasonable.

² Digby, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

³ C.T. Smith: "The Movement of Population in England and Wales in 1851 and 1861," *Geographical Journal* XCVII, 1951, pp. 204-6.

⁴ Berkshire RO G/M 3/6; death certificate.

NAME and SURNAME or Initials of Inmate	(1) RELATION to Head of Family—or (2) Position in the Institution	CONDITION	AGE		RACE, PROFESSION, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN	If Deaf-and-Dumb Blind	
			MALES	FEMALES				
Ann Straty	Wife	M	—	59	Housekeeper	St Pauls Bristol		
W. S.	"	M	—	72	"	St Philip's Bristol		
J. P.	"	U	—	22	Servant	(Cont to P) (St Philip's Bristol)		
S. M.	"	U	—	22	Press Maker	St Philip's Bristol		
M. P.	"	U	—	20	Servant	(Cont to P)		
M. P.	"	M	—	25	Fish Woman	St Philip, Bristol		
R. Walby	"	—	—	2				
R. R.	"	—	—	4				
J. W.	"	—	—	13	Scholar	(Murdy) (Sussex) Bristol		
E. Laga	"	—	—	3				
J. Wells	"	—	—	4				
E. Reed	"	—	—	7		St Pauls Bristol		
S. Cannon	"	M	—	27	Wife	Clifton Bristol		
E. Saffin	"	U	—	19	Embroider Sewant	Highbury, Gloucester		
E. G.	"	U	—	24	none	Clifton, Bristol		
E. B.	"	U	—	25	Woman Sewant	Whitehall Bristol		
S. G.	"	U	—	25	none	Warrington, Lanc		
J. H.	"	U	—	69	Sundress	Stambridge, Somerset		
E. H.	"	M	—	80	Clear Weaver	(Pottery?) Cannock, Staffs		
C. E.	"	M	—	69	Servant	St Philip Bristol		
J. R.	"	M	—	70	Clear Weaver	Hoborn, Bristol		
E. J.	"	U	—	80	do	Clifton, Bristol		
E. J.	"	U	—	57	Servant	Ireland		
M. L.	"	U	—	50	do	St Pauls Bristol		
S. J.	"	M	—	80	do	Weymouth, Dorset		
Total of males and Females...							1	24

Extract from the 1861 census for Stapleton workhouse, Gloucestershire

Domestic service

There is an argument that women entering service in the period 1851 to 1871 could be regarded as cheap labour from the countryside. However, although an influx of women from the countryside in this period may explain the relative stagnation of servant wages, in purely material terms this explanation may not suffice. There are some factors which suggest that rural, migrant servants were not simply employed because they were cheap, but because they would work in social conditions which were unacceptable to urban women. Even in 1851, when servants were relatively well paid, migrant girls from rural backgrounds were already favoured as servants. Although rural servants were an economic advantage to servant employers, they were also favoured because they could be more easily disciplined within the social hierarchy of the household. The crux of the matter was not simply that urban women wouldn't do the work for the wages asked, but that they wouldn't take upon themselves the social stigma of service at that price.¹

At this period the domestic service sector of the economy of England and Wales employed over 40% of all occupied women. Interestingly, the largest servant households were in fact found in the rural areas of Berkshire (Easthampstead, Bradfield, Cookham, Windsor and Wokingham). Even if Emma had initially been attracted to the possibility of employment in a household of this nature, she would probably not have stayed there long—servants remained in their positions for three years or less, on average.²

In the period 1858-1867, the average annual pay of a female general servant in England rose from £11.7 to £12.8—the general servant, or maid-of-all-work, was overwhelmingly predominant among domestic servants, and in view of the only indicators of Emma's work in this field describing her merely as "servant" or "domestic servant" it seems reasonable to assume she was a general servant.³

What was the work of a general servant like? Mrs Beeton wrote:

The general servant, or maid-of-all-work, is perhaps the only one of her class deserving commiseration: her life is a solitary one, and, in some places, her work is never done. She is also subject to rougher treatment than either the house or kitchen maid . . .⁴

Another contemporary gave the following description:

One little soldier single-handed against a house and its wants, and the dust and the smuts, and the food and the inmates, and the bells, and the beds, and the fire, and water to be served up in cans, and stoves and plates. Atlas could carry the world upon his shoulder, but what was his task compared with poor little Betty's?⁵

¹ Edward Higgs: *Domestic Servants and Households in Rochdale 1851-1871*, London 1986, pp. 82, 90.

² Higgs, op. cit., pp. 70, 166, 212.

³ *ibid.*, p. 349; references as note 88; Pamela Horn:, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, Dublin 1975, p. 18.

⁴ Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, London 1863, p. 1001, quoted in Higgs, op. cit., pp. 84-5.

⁵ Higgs, op. cit., p. 54, quoting 'Maids-of-all-work and Blue Books', *Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. XXX, p. 285.

The most vivid description is from the diary of Hannah Cullwick, who actually was a maid-of-all-work at this time. She described a typical day:

Opened the shutters and lighted the kitchen fire shook my sooty things in the dusthole & emptied the soot there, swept & dusted the rooms and the hail, laid the cloth and got breakfast up—clean'd 2 pairs of boots—made the beds and emptied the slops, clear'd & washed the breakfast things up—clean'd the plate—clean'd the knives and got dinner up—clear'd away, clean'd up the kitchen—unpack'd a hamper—took two chickens to Mrs Brewer's & brought the message back—made a tart & pick'd & gutted two ducks & roasted them—clean'd the steps & flags on my knees, blacklead'd the scrapper in front of the house—clean'd the street flags too on my knees—had tea—clear'd away—washed up in the scullery—clean'd the pantry on my knees & scoured the tables—scrubbed the flags round the house & clean'd the window-sills—got tea at 9 for the master and Mrs Warwick in my dirt but Ann carried it up—clean'd the privy & passage & scullery on my knees—wash'd the door & cleaned the skin down—put the supper ready for Ann to take up, for I was too dirty & tired to go upstairs.¹

*

On the 12th July 1863 Emma's father William Beck, described as a hay-binder, died of phthisis (i.e. tuberculosis) at Burnham. He was buried in Burnham churchyard on the 16th.²

¹ Higgs, op. cit., p. 50, quoting citation in Horn, op. cit., p. 50.

² Death certificate; Burnham parish register; the death certificate erroneously gives his age as 41, but the parish register confirms it as 51.

Reuben's early life

As Anne Crowther—an authority on the workhouse system—put it in a letter to me, “It sounds as though your great-grandfather had the hardest possible start in life!”¹

*

As a new-born baby, Reuben would have been allowed to stay with his mother—sleeping with her over night—notwithstanding the harsher rules on separation of families that customarily applied.²

In rural Berkshire, when a marriage didn't take place, it was usual for the child to be consigned to the care of the girl's mother, whilst she herself, when possible, went out in the capacity of a wet-nurse. Emma's mother, of course, was dead, so there is no knowing how closely Emma's experience conformed to custom.³

Assuming she initially went back to work in the fields, she would certainly have had to find some form of minder for Reuben. If this was a near relative, it could only have been her stepmother or possibly her maternal grandmother. It's possible that she paid a childminder, but it seems unlikely her earnings would have stretched to this. Whoever initially minded Reuben would have brought him to his mother in the fields, to be fed at intervals.⁴

Interestingly, unmarried mothers at this date had one advantage over the respectably married. They had common law rights over their children which the married mother lost entirely to her husband. This enabled them to retain permanent access to and responsibility for their children. The degree to which Emma Beck exercised these rights is, however, debatable.⁵

Around the beginning of February 1860, when Reuben was little more than five years old, Emma took him to Cookham workhouse, and left him there on his own, for his next six and half years.⁶ This seems a desperate action, and takes some explaining. Anne Crowther writes:

Although it was against the regulations of the Poor Law Board for guardians to keep the children in the workhouse and allow the ‘head’ of the family to work outside, I have found quite a number of cases where this happened. The guardians took the pragmatic view that it was cheaper to keep the child and let the parent (or parents) maintain themselves than to have the whole family at the cost of the union. In the case of an unsupported mother, like Emma Beck, it would have been difficult for her to find work as a domestic servant if she had a child, hence the guardians may have decided to allow her to leave. They should, by rights, have charged her towards his maintenance in the workhouse, but if her wages were too low for this, they may have decided not to bother. [. . .]

¹ Letter to me dated 8th March 1988.

² Digby, op. cit., p. 18

³ John R. Gillis: *For Better, For Worse. British Marriages 1600 to the Present*, Oxford 1985, p. 115.

⁴ Kitteringham, op. cit., p. 131.

⁵ Thane, op. cit., p. 32.

⁶ Berkshire R.O. G/M 3/3-6.

It is equally likely that Emma Beck abandoned her son (for which she could have been imprisoned, if caught), and that she worked in another union but was forced back to Cookham when she became ill. Or she may have been destitute—and I'm sure we should give her the benefit of the doubt of wanting to return to Reuben. [. . .]

The main point is that, although the Poor Law Board had all sorts of rules, guardians often bent them to suit their own interests, particularly financial interests.¹

What can Reuben's formative years have been like, in the workhouse? There would have been no games or toys for the children to play with. "The children, like their elders, fought, teased each other, threw stones or, most commonly, sat listlessly about, stupified with boredom and apathy."²

The diet of a child aged 5–9 in Cookham workhouse was as follows:

Breakfast every day consisted of 4½ oz bread and a pint of milk.

On Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, dinner was 4 oz beef and 8 oz rice, potatoes or cabbage; on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, it was a pint of soup and 2 oz bread; and on Saturday it was 8 oz suet pudding.

Supper every day consisted of 4½ oz bread and ½ oz butter or cheese.³

There was a degree of schooling for the workhouse children. An inspector visited Cookham in October 1860 and reported:

Visited the school, which considering the youth of the children and the number of changes during the year is in a satisfactory state—I noticed that the School room was very chilly & uncomfortable and the children seemed to suffer from the cold—an open fire wd be preferable to the hot water pipes which do not seem to act.⁴

The defect with the hot water pipes had been sorted out by January 1861. In April 1862 the inspector reported that "The Boys are now educated at the National School about ¼ of a mile distant at the entrance of the lane leading to the Workhouse."⁵

In November 1863 it was reported that there were a small number of boys receiving industrial training—just two, learning tailoring. The boys worked occasionally on two acres of land. The National School was about to be moved to Maidenhead, a mile away. The Chaplain reported that "Having had opportunity of observing the Boys during the late Vacation, I am afraid to report the excess of ill language and roughness of manner with each other which was too observable

¹ Source as note 97.

² Longmate, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

³ TNA: MH 12/187.

⁴ MH 12/188.

⁵ *loc. cit.*; records of the Maidenhead National School appear not to have survived.

amongst them.”¹

By May 1864 the workhouse had its own schoolmaster in post again, though he was reportedly a drunkard.²

In September 1865 there were 18 boys in the workhouse school. Seven children were receiving industrial training. According to the inspector, the children were “very intelligently taught, and do great credit to their respective teachers.” The subjects taught at Cookham were: Religious Knowledge, Reading, Spelling, Penmanship, Arithmetic, Geography, and an Industrial Skill.³

In that month, too, the inspector stated:

I recommend that a medical examination be made of the Boys and Girls in the School, as they seem to have been, and perhaps are now suffering from some cutaneous disorder. The state of their Beds would lead to the supposition that they abound in Fleas, if not in Insects which are more difficult to exterminate. The Boys have no Stockings during the Summer months.⁴

By December the skin disease had abated, and the children were apparently in fair health.⁵

¹ loc. cit.

² PRO MH 12/189.

³ PRO MH 12/189 and MH 12/190.

⁴ PRO MH 12/189.

⁵ loc. cit.

Final years

In October 1866 Emma Beck was readmitted to the Cookham workhouse; she is described as an able-bodied, unmarried woman, “Church”, a servant. The attribution “able-bodied” seems at best unrealistic, since it’s clear from what follows that she was now a sick woman, probably no longer able to support herself.¹

On March 27th 1867 Reuben left the workhouse. It was the Guardians who decided when children should leave the workhouse, subject to the factory acts and other legislation on child labour. Although the Poor Law Commissioners had believed that children should learn to support themselves, workhouse children often had a longer period of education than those of labourers outside. The point of maturity was also that when the child could be taken out of the school and placed in the adult wards: from 1842 this was 15 for boys.² Reuben therefore, at twelve, was leaving early—possibly the union felt he should now contribute to the support of his mother, or perhaps they were just reluctant to support both. At any rate, Reuben took up labouring for a couple of years, before finally enlisting—underage—in the Royal Marines, in October 1871.³

Emma Beck had actually contracted a disease known in the nineteenth century as ‘phthisis’, which would now be described as chronic bronchogenic tuberculosis.⁴ Although tuberculosis nationally was steadily diminishing from the early 1850s onwards, the decline came too late for Emma. Her impoverished life was evidently critical: in tuberculosis “a number of internal and external factors combine, amongst which economic and social conditions and especially nutritional deficiency seem to play a decisive part.”⁵

Described as a domestic servant, Emma Beck died in Cookham workhouse on the 1st April 1868.⁶

A pauper funeral was an ignominious affair. A report on one union described how ‘The dead are laid in shells, the boards unplanned inside, upon a sprinkling of sawdust, perfectly naked, with a strip of calico over the body only. The burial service was often conducted in indecent haste, and was inevitably an occasion of melancholy.’ Emma Beck was buried in an unmarked grave in the churchyard at Knowl Hill, Berkshire, on the 5th April 1868.⁷

¹ Berkshire R.O. G/M 3/6; death certificate.

² Crowther, op. cit., p. 207.

³ Reuben Beck’s service record, PRO.

⁴ John Francis: *Tuberculosis in Animals and Man*, London 1958, p. 296.

⁵ Best, op. cit., p.55; Folke Henschen: *The History of Diseases*, tr. by Joan Tate, London 1966, p. 101.

⁶ Death certificate.

⁷ Longmate, op. cit., p. 149; letter from Peter Newton, cited above.



The unmarked graves at Knowl Hill—Emma’s last resting place

Appendix—The Cranford Connection

In 1985 I received a letter from Dorothy Carr, one of Reuben Beck's grandchildren, which contained some puzzling information. She said he was born in *Cranford, Middlesex*, and continued:

I visited his people once when I was staying at Hounslow; seemed to be farm people, nice cottages, met two women one of whom must have been Grandad's (Reuben's) mother Emma; (I was only 18) Grandad gave me the address & told me to call as I was in the area, he didn't go very often himself, hardly ever spoke of his family bit of a mystery there somewhere I think.

Another grandchild, Sidney Beck, also remembers his own father, Reuben A. Beck, visiting someone in that area when he was administering Reuben's estate, in 1932.

Quite clearly Dorothy must have been mistaken in thinking she met Reuben's mother. Even if the Emma Beck who died in 1868 was another person of the same name—and demonstrably she wasn't¹—she would have had to be a nonagenarian at least, for Dorothy to have met her at age 18.

In fact there is a real connection, though. Apart from William Beck, who emigrated to New Zealand, all Emma's half-siblings—her father's children with Jane Green—settled in the area of Cranford, Heston, and Harlington (just east of what is now Heathrow Airport). Even William, prior to his emigration, was living in Heston by 1871. Emily Taylor's children were born in Cranford, Heston, or Dawley, then the family lived at Harlington, Hillingdon, and Yiewsley. Mary Ann Walters lived with her family in Heston, Cranford, and Harlington, and she in fact died in Cranford in 1936. And Samuel Beck was living in Heston by 1881, then Heston and Cranford, dying in Cranford in 1930. I have in fact corresponded with descendants of Mary Ann Walters, some of whose family still live in the area.

Dorothy was 18 in 1909. Emily Taylor had died in 1891, so it probably wasn't her family Dorothy visited. I think the likeliest thing was that she had visited Mary Ann Walters, who in 1909 lived at 3 Chester Cottages, Harlington—immediately next to Cranford. She may also have met Samuel, who was clearly close to his sister, as he had moved in with her family by 1921.

¹ For most of the time Reuben was in the workhouse he is entered on official forms under the category 'Orphans or other children relieved without their parents'; for the months at the turn of 1866/67 when Emma was also in the workhouse, he is reclassified merely as "illegitimate." [Berkshire RO G/M 3/1-8].

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