

THE MURDEROUS VICAR OF BROUGHTON HACKETT

On the whole vicars of the Church of England do sterling work and most of them assiduously avoid breaking any of the Ten Commandments. Unfortunately, Revd James Lee, the vicar of St Leonards in Broughton Hackett during the time of Queen Anne, broke most of them – including the really important ones.

He started out in a small way, with some light blaspheming and not being particularly careful of how he spent his time between services on a Sunday. But, as all too many of us know, such small acorns of peccadilloes have an unfortunate likelihood of growing into whopping great oaks.

One Sunday he was seated outside the local hostelry, having partaken of a meal that would have kept a pauper in good fettle for several months, and enough beer to baptise an infant. His somewhat unfocused gaze drifted to a horse being ridden past and from it to its rider, whom he saw was a young woman of surprising beauty. He watched her bobbing down the road with interest.



'Who was that?' he asked, casually.

'Oh, that was old Sam Taylor's wife. Him that keeps Chequers Farm,' replied his drinking companion. He digested the information, along with another pint of beer.

It struck him that night, as he lay awake in his bed, that the vicarage was a damnably lonely place. It also struck him that he had not been as careful as he should have been in his pastoral visits to outlying farms and resolved to correct the matter the following morning. With that he fell asleep, blissfully unthinking of the tenth commandment, the one about coveting.

For once in his life he kept to his good intention, and rode off the next morning to pay a call at Chequers Farm. The farmer's wife proved as good-looking close up as he had thought her from a distance and seemed genuinely pleased to see him. The farmer, not unexpectedly, was absent on farm business, so the vicar was able to spend a long hour discoursing with the young woman. He, who knew his Chaucer, deduced that this

was a typical May and Januarie marriage, in which the wife felt unfulfilled in several departments.

Over the next few months he continued paying court to Mrs Taylor under the guise of parish visits. He was a clever one and increased his visits to many of his other parishioners as well. They were quite astounded in the change in the man. Being university educated and something of a charmer in his youth, and she a simple farmer's daughter unused to the ways of the world, it was not too long before Revd James Lee's stratagems paid off and the two were breaking the seventh commandment on a reasonably regular basis.

Now, it is often the fault of the young to underestimate the thought processes of their elders. Even to a busy and much put-upon farmer it gradually became obvious that his wife had changed in some mysterious way. She no longer seemed as grateful as she had once been that he had taken her in, put a roof over her head and provided her with what fancies and fairings as a man in his position could be expected to provide. Where once there had been softness, there now was scratching and grating. Since he thought himself the good fellow he had always been, he came to the conclusion that any man would and took to keeping a closer but surreptitious watch on his wife. Thus he discovered how assiduous the parson was being in his pastoral visits and his wrath, as it says in the Bible, was greatly kindled.

One Sunday the reverend rushed through Matins in order to visit his paramour, but when he reached the farm, he found not his lady but her husband waiting for him at the farmhouse door, arms on hips, watching him come up the path. Disappointed but sensing a little tension in the air, the parson resolved to be as civil as he could.

'Good day sir. Your sheep are looking well. They will make you a fair price at market I imagine.'

'Don't try any of your soft-soap with me, you blackguard. If you are looking for the baggage, you won't find her. I've sent her back to her mother's. As for you, I'm off to see the bishop. See what he makes of a vicar whose morals would disgrace a polecat.'

Reverend Lee's face went white. His stomach lurched and pictures of ruin and penury flashed through his mind. All he could think of was how to avert this tragedy. His eyes fell on a mattock by the door, which the farmer had been using to do some weeding while he waited for the vicar to put in an appearance. Lee seized it and swung it with desperate force at his tormentor. The blade hit Sam Taylor on the side of the head and he fell, poleaxed. He twitched a bit and then lay still.

Lee watched with horror as the blood oozed onto the path, soaking into the earth. For what seemed like an age he just stood there, unable to move. Then a new wave of desperation flowed down his back like cold water. He knew he must get rid of the body, but how? He turned right, he turned left, he turned back down the path by which he had arrived, as if his feet wanted to be away from this terrible place. Then his eyes caught sight of the bakehouse, a separate small brick structure by the side of the farmhouse, and his thoughts turned to the large oven in there.

He started to drag the body towards it but this left a great smear of blood along the path, so he went inside the farmhouse and fetched the sheet off the bed, wrapped the farmer in it and then proceeded, with several stops to regain his strength, towards the bakehouse. It took him all that afternoon to complete his task, getting the fire lit and bringing it up to a sufficient temperature for his purpose. While the body was being con-

sumed in the flames he cleaned the path as best he could. Then he removed the ashes, crushing the skull and the larger bones that had remained intact, and then disposing of them down the cesspit. It was the hardest day's work he had ever done, and by the time he returned to the vicarage, he was exhausted and in a fever. He sent word to the church warden that he was too ill to take evensong that night.

He slept remarkably well, and then spent the week swinging from elation that he had got away with it to horror at the enormity of his crime. No news came from the farm, so he assumed that nothing untoward had been discovered. As Sunday approached Lee found that he had a fear of entering the dark sanctity of St Leonard's, but knew that he dare not avoid taking the service for fear of arousing suspicion. On entering the building he almost expected to be struck down, but when nothing happened, he carried on with preparations for the service, appearing as if nothing was wrong but inwardly gripped by a feeling of unease.

Unbeknownst to the vicar, the farmer had a twin brother. He lived in Warwickshire, so the two had not seen each other for some time. The previous Sunday he had been enjoying his dinner when a terrible pain struck him in the head. As this subsided he was seized by the certainty that something terrible had happened to his brother. He was in business, so could not drop everything immediately, but by the Saturday, had got his affairs in sufficient order that he could make the journey to Broughton Hackett.

It was the middle of the Sunday morning by the time he reached his brother's farm. His worries were not abated by finding the place completely deserted. He was wondering what to do when he heard the bells of St Leonard's ringing out across

the countryside. Relieved and thinking that his brother and wife must be there, he set off in that direction.

Revd James Lee was in the pulpit, composing himself for his sermon. There was silence in the church as his parishioners waited. Suddenly the latch of the south door cracked in the quiet church like a musket bullet and the wooden door creaked open.

Some turned to look at the intruder, but those polite people who remained looking at the vicar saw his face freeze with horror. For what Revd Lee saw coming through the doorway was the ghost of the man he had murdered. As the spectre walked down the aisle towards him he let out a terrified scream and collapsed on the pulpit floor.

The congregation erupted into chaos. Some of them laid hands on the brother and demanded what he had done to their vicar while others tried to stop them, saying it was only old Sam Taylor; still others ran and dragged the unfortunate vicar down the pulpit steps and started slapping his face as a method of bringing him back to his senses. This was eventually successful, but as Lee regained consciousness, he found he could not bear to keep his secret any longer. He babbled out his crime to the shock of his parishioners and the distress of the man from Warwickshire.

The people of Broughton Hackett are a proud people. They did not look forward to the scandal that must shortly engulf them. The squire, the curate and a few of the larger farmers, as well as the aggrieved brother, met in secret session. A bold and daring plan was agreed upon. The squire wrote to the bishop, explaining that Lee had tragically died and that he favoured the appointment of the curate as replacement. As for the man himself, it was left to the brother to decide what to do with him. Unfortunately for Lee, he was a vindictive man.



The parson was shut in an iron cage and suspended from a large oak tree near Churchill Mill. Next to him was suspended another cage with a good quantity of food and drink, just out of reach. There he was left, until he starved to death.

The curate, or rather the new vicar, was an honest man. He wrote the details of the affair down in the parish register and, over the years, new incumbents were told but also warned never to breathe a word of it. In the course of time, the powers that be decided that all the parish registers must be centralised and brought together in one place. Now, if you doubt the truth of my story, go and ask to see the parish register of Broughton Hackett. You will find the pages for this period of Queen Anne's reign mysteriously torn out.