

# Local History Cafe

# NEWSLETTER

*tis the  
the season*

Number 66

## A Christmas Gift ...



In the frostbitten dawn of December 24, 1921, William Hames tightened the final spoke on the oak-wheeled cart, his breath visible in the icy air of his Newton Regis workshop. The war had taken his son, Thomas, three years prior, leaving William's world quieter, his hands steadier in their craft but his heart adrift. This cart, ordered by Mrs. Eleanor Hartley of Appleby Magna, was more than a job—it was a promise. Her husband, a farmer, had died in Flanders; now, alone with two children, she needed the cart to fetch winter supplies before Christmas.

"You'll have it by this evening," William had vowed, though the sky threatened snow.

His mare, Bess, snorted impatiently as he hitched her to the cart. The eight-mile journey wound through skeletal hedgerows and fields glazed with frost. By noon, flurries began, dusting the lanes like powdered sugar. William tugged his woollen scarf higher, the rhythm of Bess's hooves a somber counterpoint to memories of Thomas—teaching him to carve spokes, the boy's laughter echoing in the workshop.

Near No Man's Heath, the wind howled. The cart lurched, a rear wheel catching in a frozen rut. William leapt down, fingers numb as he chiseled ice from the groove. Bess whinnied, her coat frosted. "Steady, girl," he murmured, though doubt gnawed. What if he failed? Another widow left wanting, another ghost to haunt him.

He pressed on.

Twilight bled into dusk as Appleby Magna's church spire emerged through the blizzard. Mrs. Hartley's farmhouse glowed like a lantern in the gloom. She rushed out, old coat clutched tight, her children peering from the doorway.

"Mr. Hames! We'd given up hope—"

"A Hames never misses Christmas Eve," he said, hoisting the cart's shafts with stiff arms.

Inside, she offered him tea and mince pies, her gratitude warm as the hearth. Her son, wide-eyed, touched the cart's polished edge. "It's absolutely brilliant, sir. Like Father's old one."

William's throat tightened. For a moment, he saw Thomas in the boy's wonder.



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The return journey was slower, Bess plodding through deepening snow. Yet William felt lighter, the weight of the year's loneliness momentarily lifted. Stars pierced the clouds above, their brilliance sharp in the winter sky. He thought of Mrs. Hartley's smile, her children's laughter—a fragile thread of hope spun from the dark.

By midnight, he reached home. The church bells of St Mary's rang, distant and sweet. In his workshop, he lit a candle beside Thomas's photograph. "We did it, lad," he whispered.

Outside, snow blanketed the world, pure and silent. Christmas morning had begun.

# The Appleby Huskissons

Sonia Liff has made a study of one of the more famous attendees at Sir John Moore School and his family ties ... In part three of a four part series we look at the life of Jane Rotten

Jane Rotten (1707-1797) was born Jane Gem, probably in the Bromsgrove area. Again, a brother is important to her story. In this case she had a younger brother, Richard, who became physician. He lived much of his life in Paris as a doctor to the British Embassy but retained contact with his Midlands family and had property nearby.

In around 1735 she married John Rotten. They lived somewhere in the Oxley area, and they had many children, some of whom died in childhood. One of the youngest was Elizabeth, born around 1745. John Rotten died about this time. His will made Jane one of two trustees and responsible for maintenance and education of their young children. The will makes generous financial provision for all his children up to the age of 21 or to the date of their marriage (whichever earlier). But ultimately the residue of the estate was left to Samuel, his eldest living son.

It isn't clear from the will how Jane was to be provided for but in 1755, about ten years after the death of John Rotten and six years after the death of Dorothy, she became William Huskisson's second wife. Fifteen years later, Jane's daughter Elizabeth married her stepfather's son (from his marriage to Dorothy Grundy), also called William. Elizabeth only lived a further five years but during this time she had four sons, the eldest of whom was to become William Huskisson the statesman.

The eldest children, William and Richard, were sent to boarding schools very young. Jane's brother Richard Gem was close to her and to her daughter Elizabeth. After Elizabeth's death he became concerned about her children and arranged to take William and Richard (then boarders at the SJM school in Appleby) to Paris to be educated under his care as young teenagers. Richard followed his great-uncle into medicine. William benefitted from his great-uncle's political and cultural links. He learnt French and became an assistant to the new Ambassador in 1790. When the embassy closed in 1792 (due to the French Revolution) he returned to England and was well placed to pursue a political career.

Richard Gem continued to have a close relationship with William and following the early death of his brother (as a naval surgeon and physician in the Caribbean) made him his sole heir.

## The Victorian roots of the Christmas Tree ...

The Christmas tree, now a global symbol of holiday cheer, became a cherished tradition in England during the Victorian era, thanks to the influence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. While evergreen decorations had long been part of winter festivals in Northern Europe, the custom of adorning a tree indoors gained prominence in 19th-century Germany. Prince Albert, who grew up in the German duchy of Saxe-Coburg, introduced the practice to the British royal family after his marriage to Victoria in 1840.



In 1848, an enchanting illustration of the royal family gathered around a lavishly decorated tree was published in the *Illustrated London News*. This image, showcasing candles, handcrafted ornaments, and gilded nuts, captivated the public and spurred a nationwide trend. Middle-class Victorians, eager to emulate the monarchy, embraced the tree as a centre-piece of festive celebrations.

The tradition also aligned with the era's emphasis on domesticity and sentimental family values, popularised by writers like Charles Dickens. Combined with growing industrialisation, which made ornaments and sweets more accessible, the Christmas tree became a staple in homes across Britain. By the late 1800s, it symbolised both warmth and modernity, blending Germanic heritage with Victorian innovation.

Today, the Christmas tree remains a testament to the Victorians' knack for blending tradition with cultural exchange—a legacy that continues to spark joy worldwide.





The farm house of Lower Rectory Farm, as many other farm houses and residences built in the 1700's, and 1800's in Appleby Magna, had many chimneys. Sometime in the 17th. Century wood for household fires became less available and coal became more commonly used in the domestic setting. Smoke from these coal fires was toxic, and so coal fires required ventilation and that was in the form of a chimney. At this time chimneys appeared on the roof of houses, growing like small trees out of the roof tops. In most houses, as in our farm house, each room had an open fireplace, even in the bedrooms. The kitchen often had a large, black range where all the family meals were cooked. Around this range were clothes horses where damp clothes and bed linens were dried on wet days. Sometimes in our farm house, beside the kitchen range a motherless lamb would be kept warm and fed from a bottle.

Most of these old chimneys were large with bricks or rocks placed inside and jutting out from the inside wall of the chimney. These brick ledges, or steps, formed a rudimentary ladder on the inside walls of the chimney. As a little girl I was full of questions about these bricks which could be seen as I looked up the chimney in my bedroom, I could easily see the sky above. Another chimney which interested me was in our lounge. This chimney was back to back with the chimney in the room next to it, they shared the same wall. Somewhere above the fireplaces these two chimneys joined and because of the slight bend in the brickwork it was difficult to view the sky as I looked up. This type of multi-flue chimney became widespread in the 1800's. This was a way to reduce taxes which were based on the number of chimneys in a house. Similar to the window tax which took place a little earlier.

These chimneys needed cleaning on a regular basis. We all have the image in our mind of the 'Mary Poppins' movie, made and enjoyed in the early 1960's. The chimney sweep was dressed in black and his brushes and scrappers carried in a bag. But in the 1700's and 1800's this was not the case. Here we had a 'dark age' of chimney cleaning when small children were used as chimney sweeps. Their diminutive size enabled them to fit into the very narrow, enclosed space of a chimney. This small size was required to clean a chimney from, yes, the inside. With some children as young as six years old, and others being used at the age of four and five years, this was work for little children. These ages were considered appropriate to enter the chimney sweep profession. These climbing boys, and sometimes girls, were reliant on the so-called master sweep for employment, clothing and food. These young children were referred to as a kind of apprentice, learning the craft as it were whilst the adult sweep had complete control over their lives. Very often these children had

been sold by their parents. Often parents would have signed papers securing the master sweep's status as their legal guardians. And so it was that these young children were tied to their master and their profession until adulthood with no way to escape.

The dangerous work of child chimney sweeps was well known. If their tiny feet slipped on a brick step inside the chimney they often fell into the fireplace or got stuck in the walls of the chimney. Inside the chimney was not just dusty, but coated with black soot, oily tar and ash. If chimneys were not cleaned often enough then they would have a creosote



buildup and that was difficult to clean and it could cause chimney fires. So cleaning your chimney was an important job, and oh so dirty and dangerous for those children.

Chimney sweeps usually worked in the predawn hours, after flues had cooled and before the morning fires were lit. Using their hands, knees and feet the children were forced to shimmy up the dark, narrow flue.

They clambered up chimneys with brushes and scraping tools to knock the soot and creosote from the chimney lining. After reaching the top, the children slid back down and collected the soot, which then the master sold to farmers as fertiliser. If the boys were reluctant to climb or were too slow at their work, their masters would sometimes hold a lighted torch under their feet; this is where the phrase 'light a fire under someone' originated.

It was difficult work for these children and, as bathing was rare for these children they were covered in soot. They were left with soot staying on their skin for ages, even years. Because of this, an occupational disease would arise for these children



which caused untold suffering, and it took the wisdom of the brilliant Percival Pott to recognise what was taking place. Through the 17th. to 18th. Centuries, chimney sweeps had lesions grow on their scrotum, this was scrotal skin cancer. Soot accumulated in the folds of the scrotum and so these lesions began, they progressed to destructive cancer tumours that engulfed the testicles and spread throughout the body. This form of cancer in child chimney sweeps became known as 'Pott's Disease'. Despite what the childhood film, "Mary Poppins" suggests, the life of a chimney sweep was not one of glamour, song and dance routines. It most often ended in death for the child chimney sweep.

George Brewster, an 11 year old Victorian chimney sweep, was England's youngest recipient of an official blue plaque on a building. As the last 'climbing boy' to die in England, his death was discussed in Parliament and was the catalyst for change in child labour laws. This law saved thousands of young lives. In February 1875, his master, William Wyer, sent him to clean the many Fulbourn Hospital chimneys. Here in a chimney he got stuck. A wall was pulled down in an attempt to rescue him. But he died a short time after being



rescued.

In September 1875, a bill was pushed through Parliament which put an end to the practice of using children as chimney sweeps. Joseph Glass, an engineer from Bristol, U.K. invented the new brushes and rods used to clean chimneys from that time forward, and that design is still being used today.



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## The Advent Calendar

A German Tradition Rooted in British Yuletide

The Advent calendar, a beloved fixture of UK Christmas traditions, traces its origins to 19th-century Germany. Rooted in Christian practices, Advent—from the Latin *adventus* (coming)—marks the four-week spiritual preparation for Christmas. Early observances included lighting candles or marking doors with chalk. By the 1800s, German Lutherans innovated physical countdowns, such as daily Bible verses or chalk lines on walls.



The first printed Advent calendar emerged in 1908, crafted by Gerhard Lang, a German printer inspired by his mother's homemade version of 24 festive treats sewn onto cardboard. These early designs featured religious imagery, with doors revealing angels or nativity scenes. The concept spread across Europe, reaching Britain through cultural exchange and royal influence—Queen Victoria's German-born mother, Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg, may have introduced similar customs earlier.

World War II interrupted production due to paper shortages, but post-war Britain embraced the calendar as a symbol of renewal. By the 1950s, British manufacturers secularised the designs, replacing scriptures with winter scenes or chocolates. The 1970s saw Cadbury launching chocolate-filled versions, cementing their commercial appeal.

Today, Advent calendars blend nostalgia with creativity, from luxury beauty products to DIY crafts. Yet their core remains a testament to cross-cultural heritage, bridging German ingenuity and British festive spirit—a countdown to joy, one door at a time.

THE  
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Andrew Moore

