

Joe Liggins (1806-1872)

By Peter Lee

At the beginning of the 19th century the hamlet of Attleborough in the parish of Nuneaton stood remote from the town about a mile distance amongst the green and miry lanes of rural Warwickshire.

It was a small settlement without a church, the remains of a defunct chapel, and with a population of about 300 souls. It was a poor and uneducated district where people eked a modest living from a little agricultural husbandry, a few were silk ribbon weavers, a large stone quarry near the village offered a few jobs, and others were engaged in trades of various sorts. One particular trade, which seems to have been prevalent in the village was wooden rake making. Farmers, trailed behind horses to comb the soil after crops were gathered in, used these Rakes. The wooden rake makers, of which there were two or three in the area, also made up for the gaps in their business by woodturning and other wooden implement manufacture. As you can imagine they employed few hands, but one or two seemed to prosper.

Then there were several pubs and beer houses. The Bull Inn, being the principal hostelry with the Fox, the New Inn, and a few more beer shops dotted about. These beer shops sold nothing but beer and were often just a sideline to other trades, or the owner's principle occupation. One of the rake makers, for example, sold beer in his front parlour, and his beer shop was appropriately called the "Woodman". Another beer house was located in the house of the tollgate keeper who managed to earn a few more coppers by dispensing ale to thirsty travellers trudging along the turnpike road from Lutterworth into the village.

Against this background, a baker called William Liggins, who lived in a cottage in the road that led to Nuneaton, seemed to have done pretty well for his family from the meagre business he had selling bread to the local population, and scraped enough money for his only son, Joseph, who was a bright lad, to be sent to Cambridge University. It can hardly be imagined that anyone else in this poor district could have done the same. The population were largely coarse and illiterate, and a place as smart and upper class as Cambridge beyond their wildest imaginings. We do not know much about Joseph Liggins at Cambridge other than he rusticated, never finished his course, and somehow ended up working as newspaper reporter on the Isle of Man where he worked for a local paper called the "Manx Sun". It was said he got into debt and bad company, which is not surprising in view of his humble background. Just getting into Cambridge must have been a drain on his family's resources. The cost of day-to-day living in a place where excess was to be expected, something probably not anticipated when young Joseph set off to those hallowed cloisters, buoyed up with hope and ambition.

After working on the Isle of Man it seemed Joe decided to return to his native place-Attleborough in the year 1833, and I understand he acted as a tutor to several local families children. Commendable enough but hardly a living, so I suppose when his father died his underpinning means of support was gone.

One day in 1857 a copy of Blackwood's literary magazine arrived at a booksellers and stationers in Nuneaton town, a regular order of the manager of the town's principle flourmill. It contained within it the first published essay by an unknown author called "George Eliot". Of course, in 1857 no one knew who George Eliot was. It did not matter really, as authors frequently had pen names. As long as their stories were beautifully written and appreciated by the public no one enquired too deeply. As far as can be determined this copy of Blackwood's was the only one delivered in Nuneaton and was the sole copy in distribution. It must have slowly dawned on the Manager of Thomas Hollick's flourmill, that there were stories and scenes familiar to him, and it set him wondering how this could be. As the year 1857 progressed and further copies of Blackwell's turned up his interest alerted he must have thought it decidedly odd that here were events he had witnessed or known about taking place twenty or thirty years earlier, being described in print in this national literary magazine. Who was this George Eliot? Surely it must be someone living in the area today? A man coyly garnering stories and re-creating them for the readership of the country in such a refreshing style. It is not surprising that he started making enquiries. He showed the magazines to other Nuneaton residents and yes they could clearly remember those incidents, which were once the talk of the town in this neighbourly district. Surely it has to be a local person with such an intimate knowledge, and George Eliot was still here in the Nuneaton area. But who was he? No one even intimated that it could be Miss Mary Ann Evans, the daughter of a local land agent Robert Evans who had disappeared from the area in 1841 to live with her father in Coventry, and when he had died in 1849 she moved out of the area completely. Few people remembered her. Few, but her immediate family, would have known she was now moving in literary circles in London.

Therefore, Nuneaton was all-agog. Who was this mystery author, who could it possibly, be?

It was not long before suspicion fell on Joe Liggins. After all he was literate, known to have gone to university, and widely believed to be writing a book. There was no one else.

So one day, the local literati assembled and decided to go to Attleborough to confront Joe, and ask him point blank if it was indeed he. As they approached his cottage they found him alone washing out his slop bucket under the pump in the yard. The cottage he lived in was filthy. The paltry table festooned with papers. Yes he said, suspiciously, it might be him, brandishing papers, leave him alone!

They felt sorry for him living in such reduced circumstances, when his output was so readable, and so brilliantly written. Surely his publishers must pay him for the work? Why was he living so pitifully?

“Scenes of Clerical Life” the work then under review caused local people to enquire after the real characters who peopled the pages before them. It was as though they were gathering evidence to trace the relationship to the mystery author.

This flurry of activity might have died down, and Joe’s anonymity restored had it not been for the publication of George Eliot’s next story “Adam Bede”; it took the literary nation’s collective breath away. It even had the Queen reciting passages of it to Prince Albert, and Charles Dickens commenting favourably on it. This was sensational stuff. But there was poor old Joe still going about his modest business, among the rutted weedy streets of Attleborough, still living in relative poverty in a grimy cottage along the lane to Nuneaton town.

Why was he not benefiting from his new fame and fortune? He was pressed on the subject again. The modest interest shown at first had become a storm of enquiries. Poor old Joe, at last relented, under the pressure from people who would not take no for an answer, yes it was him! But why had his publishers not paid him a penny piece. He was invited everywhere. He could not cope with the attention received. It must have gone to his head. Letters were appearing in the papers. Even the Times. Why was Joe not being paid by his publisher it was a national disgrace! The vicar of Attleborough (By then Attleborough had a new church) – Reverend James Quirk, championed his cause.

Over the next few months Miss Evans, stung by all this bad publicity, relented on her anonymity. She had no choice. Hard things were being said of Blackwood’s. She was under enormous pressure to come clean, and she did.

Poor old Joe, abandoned by those who supported him, sunk back into oblivion. He died in Nuneaton workhouse.