

The “Extraordinary Termination” of Bland Mill in Howgill

Judith Robinson

On Sunday 2nd October 1870, a police constable from Kendal arrested the manager of Bland Mill in his bed at Mill House, Howgill, and took him back to Kendal to stand trial for larceny. It was not the first time that Henry Lawton had appeared in court but it was to be the end of his tenure of the Mill.

Henry Lawton

Henry Lawton was born about 1835 near Huddersfield, the third child of a shoemaker and, after his father's early death, was brought up by his mother, a milliner. By the age of 15, he had left Yorkshire and was apprenticed in a woollen mill at Meal Bank, near Kendal. After his apprenticeship, he stayed on at the mill as a spinner and in 1856 married a local girl, Mary Ann Long, who bore him two children¹ and then died aged 27 in 1862. When Bland Mill was offered for sale or to let in May 1866, Henry purchased the property, including the Mill House and two cottages, from the retiring owner, William Greenwood Best. Henry remarried the same year and lived in the Mill House with his two children, his second wife, Jane Blythe, and subsequently his third child, Margaret Jane, baptised in Sedbergh in 1868.

The Blythe family

The Westmorland Gazette recorded Henry Lawton's second marriage: 'at St George's church in this town, by the Rev. E. Gabriel, Mr Henry Lawton of Bland Mill, Howgill, Yorks, to Miss Jane Blythe, eldest daughter of Mr John Blythe, grocer of this town'² and the year before, the death of Jane's mother, 'at No 2 Far Cross Bank, suddenly, Margaret, wife of Mr John Blythe, grocer of this town, aged 52 years - much and deservedly respected.'³ There were eleven children in the family, of whom Jane was the eldest. It all sounds very respectable - but all was not as it seemed in the Blythe family. John Blythe's father Alexander (1769-1840), came from Wensleydale, where his family had for some generations owned and run woollen mills and dye works, in Askrigg and later in Hawes. Shortly before 1800, Alexander, a dyer, moved to Sedbergh, where his four children Richard, George, John and Elizabeth, were born in the early years of the nineteenth century. He returned to Hawes, with Richard and Elizabeth but the other two sons moved to Kendal. In 1830, his son George Blythe, a weaver, married Margaret Crawford, who had been baptised in Sedbergh in 1813, as 'Margaret, natural daughter of Esther Crawford, Pauper of Workhouse'. George died two years after his marriage and their only child, Mary born in 1831, went to live with her Aunt Elizabeth in Hawes. But in the 1841 census, Margaret is shown living in Far Cross Bank, Kendal, a 'labourer' with two children, Jane aged 7 and John aged 4. John's baptismal record gives the mother as 'Margaret Blythe, spinster', although in fact she was a widow, as had been shown on the record of Jane's baptism, when Margaret was living in Captain French Lane. And then, later in 1841, she married her brother-in-law John Blythe, who at census date had been living in Finkle Street, Kendal. He now moved to Far Cross Bank where he and Margaret had a further nine children, several of whom feature later in this article. So whether Miss Jane Blythe was really the 'eldest daughter of Mr John Blythe', or in fact his step-daughter, is unknown.⁴

¹ John Bedford Lawton born 1858 and Mary Ann Lawton born 1861. The name Bedford was the maiden name of Henry's mother, Harriet.

² The Westmorland Gazette, 1st September 1866

³ The Kendal Mercury 3 June 1865

⁴ Jane was born about 2 years after the death of George Blythe; John 3 years later; a further 3 1/2 years elapsed before Margaret's remarriage, which was followed by the birth of her next child after exactly nine

Bland Mill

Bland Mill or Blands Mill are alternative names for Howgill Mill. The Mill depended on the water from Bland's Gill, a tributary of the River Lune. The power was used to spin wool bought from the local farmers. "As at many other local mills, spun yarn was sent out to local knitters to be made into hose, bonnets etc. and then the finished garments were returned to the mill to be washed, fulled and finished."⁵ Whether there was actually any weaving done at Bland Mill is not clear but it seems to have been a small enterprise employing only a few men or boys at any one time. William Greenwood Best occupied the Mill for over 40 years, bringing up his family in Howgill. Although born near Halifax, he was married to a local woman and his middle name Greenwood suggests a possible connection with the local family of that name.⁶ Originally he combined farming with running the mill and only later acquired the freehold of the Mill and the various properties around it. In 1866 he retired and the following advertisement appeared in the Westmorland Gazette:

WOLLEN (sic) MILL Etc. FOR SALE

To be Let or Sold by Private Treaty

ALL THAT WOOLLEN MILL called Bland Mill, situate in Howgill, in the West Riding of the County of York, with the Warehouses, Two-stall Stable, Hayloft and Outbuildings thereto belonging.

Also, ALL THAT DWELLINGHOUSE, situate near the above Mill, and comprising a Parlour, Front and Back Kitchen, Four Bed Rooms, a spacious Attic and Two Cellars, together with a Garden thereto belonging.

Also, TWO COTTAGES, adjoining the Dwellinghouse, and a Parcel of Peat Moss called Blear Moss, situate in Theckstone Moor.

And, also, an Unlimited Right of Common on Howgill Fells.

The Mill has a never-failing supply of excellent soft water, particularly adapted for scouring and milling purposes. There is a considerable fall, which might be increased at a slight expense. The whole of the buildings are in good repair.

Mr William Greenwood Best, the Owner and occupier (who is retiring from Business on account of ill health), will shew the Premises, and any further particulars or information may be had on application to Messrs. Moser, Son and Arnold, Solicitors, Kendal.

Kendal, 25th May 1866."⁷

In 1871, after Henry Lawton's enforced retirement, the Mill was again advertised for sale: "The valuable FREEHOLD WOOLLEN MILL, called BLAND MILL, with the fixed Machinery, good DWELLINGHOUSE and WAREHOUSE, TWO COTTAGES and STABLE, small garden and Outhouse attached, as the same was lately in the occupation of Mr Henry Lawton, situate in Howgill, in the West Riding of the County of York, three miles distant from Lowgill Railway Station of the London and North Western Railway, and about the same distance from the Market Town and Railway Station of Sedbergh.

The Mill, which comprises Ground Floor and Two Lofts, 45ft by 26ft., is driven by water power, of which it commands a never-failing supply, and is eligibly situate in an extensive Wool-growing district. The Warehouse, of Ground Floor and One Loft, is 31ft by 25ft. The dwellinghouse comprises Back and Front Kitchen, Parlour, Four Bed Rooms, and a good cellar.

A Dale of Peat Moss on Thexton Moor, in Firbank, belongs to and will be sold with the property."⁸

months. These dates suggest that it is unlikely that John Blythe was the father of Jane and John. There is said to be a tradition in the family that some of his children were adopted.

⁵ "The Woollen Industry in Sedbergh" by C. G. Hollett, in Sedbergh & District History Society Newsletter No 6, Feb. 1983

⁶ The Greenwoods had connections to Gawthrop Mill in Dent and to Burnt Mill

⁷ The Westmorland Gazette 26 May 1866

⁸ The Westmorland Gazette 1 & 8 April 1871

The Extraordinary "Bee-hive case"

The first bizarre case against Henry Lawson was brought in the Autumn of 1866, not long after he moved into Howgill and married Jane Blythe. It was reported in both the local papers as "The Bee-Hive Case" and the resumed hearing as "The Bee-Hive Case - Extraordinary Termination". What was extraordinary was not so much the incident that gave rise to the court case but the case itself, the fact that it was brought against the defendants and, even more extraordinary, the attitude of the magistrates and the outcome of the case.

The bee hive, with one or more others, was situated in the small garden in front of the Mill House and was still the property of Mr William Greenwood Best. It is difficult to move a functioning hive in the summer, so it is not surprising that the Greenwoods had left their hives in situ, intending to come back and collect the honey in the autumn.

There was nothing extraordinary in the fact that on Sunday 23rd September the newly weds, Henry and Jane Lawton, received a visit from two of Jane's younger half-brothers, Alexander and Joseph Blythe. Alexander was 24, single and worked as a clerk, while Joseph was only 16. Henry showed them round his premises. The three young men were seen walking there - others were present too. A certain Matthew Stophard, an employee at the Mill, was walking in a nearby wood, as was William Lockwood. At the time of the court case in October 1866, Lockwood was described as having been recently employed as a spinner at the Mill and so he may have had a grudge against Henry Lawton. Another man, John Hall, who was a weaver at Farfield Mill (a large woollen mill on the far side of Sedbergh) visited the Mill that afternoon, for no clear reason, after being involved in a brawl at a dance in Sedbergh.

Two days later, someone informed the Best family that one of their hives had been damaged. Miss Sarah Best went to Howgill and, accompanied by William Burton, found that the hive appeared to have been hit with stones and knocked over. At this stage Lockwood was supposed to have told a Mrs Looker that he knew nothing about the damage to the hive until he was told about it by Mr Burton. But later, he changed his story to say that, watching from within the wood a distance of 25 to 30 yards, he saw the hive being damaged by none other than his former employer, Henry Lawton, together with the Blythe brothers.

This was the claim which led to a criminal case against Henry Lawson and Alexander Blythe, which was opened at Sedbergh Petty Sessions on 24th October 1866. A separate charge⁹ had been laid against the young Joseph Blythe, which enabled him to give evidence in defence of his brother and brother-in-law, since defendants were not then allowed to give evidence in their own defence. Appearing for the prosecution was Mr. William Bramley, solicitor's clerk and a familiar figure at Sedbergh Petty Sessions. Henry Lawton and Alexander Blythe had instructed Robert Thompson, a young solicitor who had recently set up practice in Kendal.

Among the evidence given, Matthew Stophard swore that he had been in the wood at the same time as Lockwood, though at some distance from him, and had seen nothing happen. Joseph Blythe also swore that the defendants had not meddled with the hive. When John Hall of Farfield swore that he had seen two children doing the damage, Bramley attempted to devalue his evidence by cross-examining him about the irrelevant brawl in Sedbergh. In fact there was nothing to corroborate Lockwood's story and the

⁹ This seems never to have come to court.

magistrates adjourned the case for a fortnight, requiring the defendants to produce the two children, “a course which appeared to be anything but satisfactory to them”¹⁰. When the case was resumed, two boys¹¹, whose age was not stated, came forward and said that they knocked over the bee hive at the Mill, although one admitted that he had told another boy that he did not know who had done it. Two more witnesses (John Stainton and William Shepherd) swore that they had seen the boys do it.

The Magistrates hearing this case were the Rev. George Platt, vicar of Sedbergh, Thomas Wearing, who had a cotton mill in Sedbergh, and Mr. J. Dover, owner of Farfield Mill. Their attitude to this new and apparently incontrovertible evidence was very strange. After retiring to consider it, they returned to say that they could not agree and that therefore the ‘information must fall to the ground’. They could not find the accused guilty but refused to acquit them - a verdict equivalent to the Scots verdict of not proven, unknown in English law. They insisted moreover that that, as the mischief had been done by Mr Lawton’s men, (implying that the two boys were mill-workers) and Mr Lawton had not told Mr Best, he ought to make amends. Mr Thompson protested: ‘What, at the expense of his own character!’ and claimed for his clients, upon the law and facts, an acquittal. The Magistrates said they could not give reasons but, as they could not agree, the defendants were not fined.

One would like to know the details of the disagreement among the Magistrates. Were the rival mill owners antagonistic to Lawton? Or did they suspect that the young mill workers had been bribed or coerced into giving evidence on behalf of their employer? It is difficult to imagine a motive behind the vandalising of the bee-hive, whoever did it. To throw stones at an occupied hive in summer would be to invite an eruption of angry bees, from which anyone would make a hasty retreat. A boy or young man might do such a thing to provoke the bees as a show of bravado, damage to the hive being an unintended consequence - a scenario which could fit either the mill lads or the Blythe brothers. Henry Lawson, aged 30, would hardly wish to provoke the bees so close to his house and children. Nor, however, could he have failed to be aware of the damage. As he was not allowed to give evidence, there is no explanation of his failure to inform Mr Best.

The names of the boys who appeared in this case cannot be found with any certainty in the census returns, so it seems that they were not locals but employed at the mill for a short term, perhaps as apprentices. Two years later, Henry Lawton again appeared before Sedbergh Magistrates, (this time, the Rev. G. Platt and Thomas Wearing) charged under the Factory Act with employing a child under 13, before 12 and after 1 o’clock of the same day and without having obtained a certificate of school attendance. The magistrates said that they would not “press for heavy penalties but, as a caution against any further infringement of the law”, Lawton was fined one pound, plus costs of £1.16s, which he immediately paid.¹² The magistrates, including Thomas Wearing, who had retired from running his small mill business, seem to have been more favourably inclined towards Lawton, Mr Dover not being involved.

Another two years passed, during which Mrs Jane Blythe gave birth to a daughter, Margaret Jane, and we must assume that the business of the Mill went on. There seem to be no records of exactly what the Mill was producing. Henry was trained as a spinner and is described variously as a woollen spinner or manufacturer. Considering his background, it is difficult to see how he had managed to find the capital to purchase Howgill Mill; he

¹⁰ The Westmorland Gazette 27 October 1866

¹¹ James Shepherd and Joseph Pooley

¹² Kendal Mercury 1 February 1868

must have borrowed heavily on mortgage. The cash-flow needed to pay the local farmers for their wool, to pay the wages of his small workforce and the out-workers, while waiting for the proceeds of sale to come in at the end of the process, may have caused problems. Howgill Mill was always a small concern; William Greenwood Best seems to have made it pay and supported a family but in the early days he combined the mill with farming and he acquired the freehold only gradually. In the two advertisements it sounds like an excellent proposition but there is no record of anyone operating the Mill after Henry Lawton left. The Lawtons may have been struggling financially for some time.

Meanwhile, in Kendal, Jane's father died and her brother John became the head of household at Far Cross Bank. He and his wife ran the grocery business, having no children, while his half-sister Esther acted as housekeeper and the two youngest half-sisters, still at school, lived with them. Alexander and his brother Matthew moved to a house in nearby Ann Street, with their sister Sarah as housekeeper, while Joseph left the area to become a teacher.

Nemesis

And then came another legal case, at Westmorland Michaelmas Quarter Sessions, not so bizarre from a legal point of view but provoking many questions as to what was behind the events which led to it. On Friday 30th September 1870, Henry and Jane were visiting Kendal and staying at the house of her brother, John Blythe. Henry and Jane went to Castle Mills, Kendal, a woollen mill belonging to the Wilson family. With a salesman, Joseph Robinson, they went into the rug-room and examined some rugs.¹³ Henry asked to see some rugs at the far end, saying it was a queer thing that "so often as they had been there, he (Robinson) had never shown them those rugs". While Lawson and Robinson were at one end of the room, Jane stooped down behind a pile of rugs and placed an expensive 'railway rug' in her basket. They then bought two other rugs, for which Jane said she had not the silver to pay but would go to the linsey¹⁴ room to buy some more things and would pay for them all together. However, she went into the yard instead, slipped out of the Mill for a few minutes, then returned to the mill office with her basket empty and paid for the two rugs. She had hidden the stolen rug in the yard of Webster's marble works whence she later recovered it and took it to the house in Far Cross Bank.

The next day, leaving the stolen rug over a chair in the bedroom she and Henry had slept in, Jane Lawton, went shopping in Kendal, accompanied by her half-sister, Esther Blythe, aged 24 (ten years younger than Jane). They called at a draper's, Parker and Head, and while the shop was full and busy, removed three yards of flannel. Pursued down the yard by Mr Head, Jane handed the parcel of flannel to Esther who went on ahead, put the parcel on the ground and brought her empty basket back to show to Mr Head. He, however, recovered the parcel and also found in Jane's basket six yards of calico, which he had marked the week before. Esther hurried off, saying she had to get the dinner ready, while Jane protested that the flannel was part of a larger quantity she had bought the previous week and that she had bought the calico a fortnight before. She seems to have been a regular customer there and to have already excited the suspicion of Mr Head. (Six yards of calico and three yards of flannel seem bulky articles to try to shop-lift.) In the subsequent court case she was also charged, alone, with having stolen a child's cotton robe and two flannel undercoats from another draper's shop, Rhodes.

Jane was arrested but Esther returned home to Far Cross Bank where she received a visit from the police, wishing to search the house. She told them that the house belonged to her

¹³ These seem to have been travel rugs, i.e. thick woven blankets, rather than small floor-coverings.

¹⁴ cloth made of linen and wool.

brother and that he was out. At this point Henry Lawton came downstairs and offered to go and fetch his brother-in-law. Although John returned shortly afterwards, Henry did not - leaving his wife in custody, he returned to Howgill and went to bed. The police search revealed the stolen railway rug and other stolen items. When Henry was arrested at Howgill the next day and was told that he was charged with larceny, he made no comment.

Before the Kendal magistrates, Jane and Esther pleaded guilty but Henry defended the charge. The legal argument turned on whether his wife could be considered to have been under his control when she stole the rug and whether they went together with the intention of committing the offence. The main evidence against him was the suggestion that he had led Joseph Robinson to the end of the rug-room to distract him from what his wife was doing. Since Robinson claimed he could see the rug in Jane's basket as she left the room, it is difficult to see how Henry could have failed to be aware of what was going on. He seems to have carefully avoided saying anything at that point and again when arrested. His solicitor, Mr M'Oubrey claimed that "the woman stole the rug in circumstances which did not at all implicate" Henry. He was acquitted.

Jane was sent to the House of Correction for a year (four months on each of the three counts), while the unfortunate Esther, "as having been led astray by" her elder sister, got one month with hard labour. While her mother was in prison, two year old Margaret Jane stayed with her uncle John in Kendal, while Henry's two elder children went to stay with his sister, Ellen Lee, in Lockwood, near Bradford.

Through John Bolton¹⁵, solicitor of Kendal, Henry transferred all his assets to trustees and Bolton advertised for creditors - that is Henry effectively went bankrupt - and the trustees then put up for sale the mill, the house and the rest of the property. It was still vacant at Census day in 1871, except for tenants in the cottages, while Henry himself was working as a porter in Liverpool. Clearly, Henry Lawton had been deeply in debt.

One of the puzzling things about this case is the statement Henry was said to have made in the rug-room - that it was a queer thing that "so often as they had been there, he (Robinson) had never shown them those rugs". Why had they often been to Castle Mills looking at rugs? Why indeed did they, as owners of a woollen mill, need to buy two rugs (and steal a third)? Did their own mill not produce rugs? Were they buying them to sell on to satisfy demand their failing business could not meet? Or to provide patterns for their out-workers to copy from? Or just for their own use? And why was Jane stealing flannel and calico? There was a reference at the end of the case to returning to their owners a quantity of other stolen goods, so it appears that she had been shoplifting for some time. She may have been suffering from some mental illness but there may have been financial problems too.

Afterwards

The 1871 census suggests that Howgill Mill was lying idle with the main house unoccupied and no millworkers in the surrounding district. By 1881, the Mill House was occupied by the Rev. Edward Powell, incumbent of Howgill, and his wife. Again there is no record of any mill workers around and the position in 1891 was the same. The Rev. Powell had succeeded the Rev. Isaac Green, who was a master at Sedbergh School and did not live in Howgill. The Rev. Green died in 1875 and the new incumbent would have needed a

¹⁵ Jane's half-brother, Matthew Blythe, was a clerk employed by Mr Bolton.

house in Howgill from that date. Mill House, probably still unoccupied, provided the solution. It seems likely that no-one was found to take on the business.

When Jane Lawton was released from prison, the five members of the Lawton family were reunited and left for Ireland to start a new life. Jane died in Dublin in 1892, having survived her incarceration by twenty years. Henry married again and in 1901 was described as a laundryman. In 1911 aged 75 and living with his third wife and youngest daughter, he was a 'proprietor of land', so that it seems his financial situation had recovered.

Henry's son, John Bedford Lawton (born near Kendal, 1858) married in Dublin in 1884 and the first of his three children was born in Ireland before he returned to England. In 1891 he was a 'hosiery manager' in Chilwell in Nottinghamshire. Then the family moved to Barrow-on-Soar, near Loughborough, where in both 1901 and in 1911 he was an overlooker in a hosiery factory. By 1911, all three of his children were also working in the hosiery industry there. But when John died in 1924, he was again resident in Dublin.

The later life of the second child, Mary Ann Lawton, has not been traced with any certainty. The youngest, Jane's daughter, Margaret Jane, born in Howgill, married Alfred Henry Davies in Ireland in 1896 but in 1911 was living with her father and stepmother without her husband. Continued communication with the Blythe family of Kendal is suggested by the probable marriage in Dublin of Jane's younger half-sister, Margaret Blythe, to an Irishman, John Gallagher.¹⁶

As for Esther Blythe, after serving her one month's hard labour, she left Kendal and took a position as a domestic servant in Keighley. The following year, she married James Robinson, who worked in the woollen industry as a 'stuff singer'¹⁷ in Bramley. They had six children, of whom five survived, but James became 'feeble minded' and ended his life in the workhouse, leaving Esther as head of household until her death in 1916. She was no doubt given the name Esther after her maternal Grandmother, once a pauper in Sedbergh workhouse, and seems to have been similarly unfortunate in life.

Joseph and Alexander Blythe, whose reputations might have suffered from their involvement in the bee-hive case and the refusal of the magistrates to acquit them, both did well for themselves. Alexander was a cashier and bookkeeper at the gunpowder works at Sedgwick and secretary of the Westmeria's Provident Sons Benefit Society. Along with his brothers he was active in the Third Westmorland Rifle Volunteers. After his wife died in 1886 he moved to Macclesfield and kept a hotel. Joseph became a schoolmaster in Walthamstow, where he founded a dynasty of teachers.

Conclusion

It would be possible to interpret all these events as unfortunate occurrences none of which was Henry Lawton's fault - that is, if it really was the boys who damaged the hive and he had perhaps intended to try to repair it before Mr Best found out; if he had really nothing to do with his wife's thefts; if the collapse of the business was caused by his undeserved loss of reputation.

¹⁶ In 1911, Esther's daughter Annie Cooper was living in Armley, Leeds. Visiting the family was one Maggie Gallagher, born in Kendal and the right age to be Annie's aunt Margaret. Margaret is absent from intervening English censuses and no English marriage has been found. It seems possible that she and the two other sisters, who are also absent from the censuses, moved to Ireland to join the Lawtons.

¹⁷ a type of weaver, stuff being coarse cloth.

But then again, how could he not have known what was going on? The stolen rug was over the back of a chair in his bedroom at Far Cross Bank. The defendants' reluctance to produce the boys as witnesses in the bee-hive case is suspicious. Was he covering for his impetuous brothers-in-law, by 'arranging' the contrary evidence from his employee Stophard and the boys? And as suggested above, the business may have been short of capital and Jane's shoplifting in part a response to financial difficulties.

Did Henry Lawton cause the demise of Bland Mill or did Bland Mill ruin Henry Lawton?

Sources

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