

In search of Dick Christian



Max Stewart
April 2017
Version 5

Acknowledgements

I am grateful in particular to the following descendants of Dick Christian and his collateral family:

Martin Slater (Dick's third great grandson) who kindly supplied details of Dick's two 'lost' children which take Dick's total known offspring from 19 to 21. Martin also supplied most of the appended pictures: the Christian family plaque; a table of Dick's forebears going back to 1470; the photo of Dick's son Thomas Christian and his family (Martin's great grandmother is the youngest child sitting at the back); and the engravings of 'Dick setting off from Melton' and 'Dick schooling a horse'

Graham Christian (who is descended from Dick's younger brother Lester Christian via his unmarried daughter Ann Christian who had two children Thomas Sivers Christian [Graham's forebear] and Charles Christian) who pointed out that 1859 edition of 'Silk and Scarlet' (but not later editions – Dick was dead by then) contained a solicitation for further subscriptions for 'Dick Christian's Fund' to alleviate his poverty and provided the copy which is appended. Graham has also rightly pointed out that there is an alternative and equally valid ancestral tree for Dick's father James. Whereas Martin's family tree (*idem*) shows James's parents being John Christian and Elizabeth Mapley, another James (also born in Cottesmore but seven years earlier and who had parents James Christian and Mary Sneath) could also be Dick's father.

John Slusar whose website (<http://www.greyhoundderby.com> – see the '1836' links on the 'History of the Aintree Grand National' page – contains some fascinating additional information and pictures, including the remarkable fact that Dick on *Polyanthus* came second by one length to Becher on *The Duke* in the first Grand National – then the 'Liverpool Grand Steeplechase' – of 1836. The favourite 'fell at locked gate'!

Sally Thornton (née Christian – a descendent of the Christians of Cottesmore and Exton but not of Dick himself) – who allowed me to publish her family tree. It was the local legend that Sally was indeed descended directly from Dick that was the genesis of this article.

Dick Christian

Ever since horses were invented, there have been individuals – some with skill, pluck and resolve, and some totally batty – who would ride any horse over any country. In the early nineteenth century, in the heyday of the Old Club at Melton Mowbray and of history captured in the paintings of Sir Francis Grant and John Ferneley Sr, there were a few – a very few – really outstanding cross-country riders: riders in a league of their own; riders of whom even the cream of Melton – the Earl of Wilton, Lord Gardner, Mr Little Gilmour, Lord Forester and the others depicted in Grant's 'Melton Breakfast' – were more than a little envious. One already has a full length biography: Thomas Assheton Smith (1776-1858; MFH Quorn, Burton and Tedworth)



who with his inheritance of the Dinorwic slate quarries in Snowdonia became very rich. Another – who wrote an autobiography (much of which still exists, with a very detailed commentary by its editor) was the rich 'Squire' George Osbaldeston (1786 – 1866; MFH Burton, Mr Musters' country, Atherstone, Quorn (twice), Pytchley, Hambleton, Thurlow and Holderness). Yet another we know little about: Thomas Heycock (1796-1862) of Owston, East Norton Hall and latterly Braunston Manor¹. But perhaps the best of the lot – and the crème de la crème of professional rough riders – was Dick Christian.

Shortly before he died in penury in 1862 at the age of 83, Dick was interviewed twice at length by Henry Hall Dixon, better known by his pen-name² of The Druid. The outcome of the first interview was included by Dixon as *Dick Christian's Lecture* in the third edition (1857) of *Post and Paddock*, the first of his hunting and racing books. Dick's reminiscences proved so popular that, eighteen months later, he and Dixon took a gig tour around the Quorn, Cottesmore and Belvoir countries. The result appeared as *Dick Christian Again* (better known as Dick Christian's Second Lecture) in Dixon's second equestrian book *Silk and Scarlet* (1859). The two 'Lectures' are the finest source of (apparently) first-hand

¹ where Joss Hanbury's great-grandfather Evan Hanbury¹, MFH Cottesmore 1900-07, subsequently lived

² Dixon wrote legal texts such as *The Law of the Farm* under his own name

information³ about the long-vanished Melton hunting world. Despite his advanced years, Dick's recollections are extensive and, as far as can be checked, surprisingly accurate. Dixon himself came from a different milieu: Rugby, Trinity College Cambridge and called to the Bar in 1853. But he had a sympathetic ear, was a deft writer and a master of voluminous facts, and he was the ideal person to coax Dick's tales into print. How many of Dick's stories were recorded verbatim and which were local legend cleverly interwoven by Dixon into Dick's narrative will never be known, and it is a measure of Dixon's skill as writer that the result is seamless. Dick springs out of the pages as a colourful and spirited character with a fund of lively reminiscences about the 'old days', extending in his case back to the previous century.

What is missing from the Lectures is information about Dick himself – his family, where he lived and other details of his personal life outside hunting and horses. Later authors have remedied this deficit. Guy Paget's *The Flying Parson and Dick Christian*⁴ (1934) has Dick's first wife (of whom Paget says 'I have been unable to learn anything') producing twenty of his twenty-one children before expiring, a second wife with whom he eloped producing one child, and a third wife – a Belgian tightrope dancer (!) from Sanger's Circus in London producing none and who, after Dick's death, was supported by his children in a cottage in Market Harborough. Jack Brownlow's *Melton Mowbray – Queen of the Shires* (1980), which is the most widely-read account of the development of Melton, also trots out a variant of this tale. The problem for later readers is that these accounts by Paget and Brownlow are largely fictitious...

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The real Dick Christian

On 6th March 1779 in St Nicholas' Parish Church, Cottesmore, James Christian and his wife Jane (née Lester, from Clipsham) had their new-born infant son – their fifth child – baptised⁵ by the Reverend William Brereton, Rector of Cottesmore. The child was christened Richard but was for ever afterwards called Dick⁶. He had at least seven brothers and five sisters.

There have been Christians in Cottesmore⁷ for over 500 years, and a related branch of the family in nearby Barrow had long owned and farmed land in Barrow, Market Overton and Cottesmore. Barrow House was built by John Christian in 1859, with barns on the south side of the house believed to have been the site of the original Christian's Lodge. Yet another branch of the family lived just over the A1 at

³ few first-hand accounts of life in rural England in Dick's era exist. There is only one of substance: the (slightly earlier) diaries of the Reverend James ('Parson') Woodforde (1740 – 1803)

⁴ with co-author Lionel Irvine. One of Major Paget's hunting outfits – minus only his garter straps – can be seen in Melton's Museum of Hunting

⁵ parish records – as opposed to the post-1837 civil registrations – rarely contain birth dates, but as infant mortality was high it was usual for a child to be baptised within a day or two after birth if it was sickly and within around three weeks otherwise. Baptism in church has been assumed where the register does not also contain a subsequent 'received into the church on <date>' entry. It was (and is) acceptable to both the C of E and Church of Rome for midwives to baptise newborn children who were *in extremis*. If this baptism took the correct form and the child survived, it was later 'received' into the church (as above)

⁶ except by William, 1st Earl of Lonsdale who, Dick says, always called him Richard

⁷ their resident 'squire' would at one time have been Thomas Fanshawe, Brian Fanshawe's seventh great-grandfather's great-nephew who lived at Cottesmore Hall! And there is a bell in St Nicholas' Church that, before it was recast in 1885, had the inscription "Tho: Christian ... cast me in 1699"

Pickworth at a second Christian's Lodge where the Cottesmore meet each year. One of Dick's great-grandmothers⁸ was from the Barrow branch. Intriguingly, a circle centred on Horn – the 'lost village' on the Exton estate – and drawn through Oakham, Market Overton, Ryhall, Stamford, Easton-on-the Hill and North Luffenham contains the preponderance of Christian families in Rutland and adjacent counties from the nineteenth century and earlier. It also contains the bulk of Littledyke families (q.v. later). Exton village itself, however, appears not to have had any Christians resident until a certain Robert Christian moved there in the late 18th C (q.v. later).

Dick went to school under parental duress but learned to write⁹. Dick says that "about twelve and a-half...I went to [2nd Bt] Sir Horace Mann's racing stables; they were at Barham Downs in Kent". This lasted "two or three years" until a smashed knee while riding twenty miles away at Margate (when a chaise crossed the course) led him to return to Cottesmore and to school. Either before or more probably immediately after his sojourn in Kent, he was apprenticed to Hubbard the butcher¹⁰ in Langham, but his obsession with horses prevailed and he went to Sir Gilbert Heathcote (4th Bt) of Normanton Park as a pad-groom to Lady Heathcote, then as a groom and, when Sir Gilbert was MFH Cottesmore (1802–6) as stud groom and whipper-in.

Dick married firstly Juliana Littledyke¹¹, originally of Easton-on-the-Hill, on 26th December 1798 at St Peter and St Paul Parish Church, Exton. He was 19, she was 20, and they married in haste¹² as Juliana was heavily pregnant with their first child, Julia, who was baptised on 17th February 1799 in Exton. They then moved to Edith Weston where sons Richard (baptised 7th September 1800) and James (baptised 29th November 1801) were born, and then to North Luffenham for the births of Charles (baptised 9th October 1803) and Alfred (baptised 2nd March 1806). His wife Juliana died on 1st March 1808 and was buried at St John the Baptist Parish Church, North Luffenham.

Sir Gilbert gave up the mastership of the Cottesmore in 1806, and Dick left Sir Gilbert's service in 1809¹³ to farm in North Luffenham.

With a young family to look after, Dick needed another wife: within seven months¹⁴ of his first wife's death, he married secondly on 20th September 1808 22-year-old Elizabeth, daughter of William and Mary Redmile of Empingham, at St Peter's Parish Church, Empingham.

⁸ his father's mother's mother Mary Christian (1696 – 1746)

⁹ he signed all three of his marriage register entries with his own name and not the illiterate's X

¹⁰ butchery ran in the Hubbard family: one James Hubbard who was born in Langham in 1684 went to London and became a master butcher, chairman of the Butchers' Guild and a Freeman of the City of London

¹¹ who had (at least) eleven brothers and six sisters

¹² until the Legitimacy Act of 1926, a child born before marriage remained legally a bastard after the marriage, so Dick had an incentive to marry before the birth

¹³ Dick told The Druid that he remained in Sir Gilbert's service until 1809, when Sir Gilbert "gave up hounds". Since Sir Gilbert quit the Cottesmore mastership in 1806, there is an as yet unresolved three year discrepancy. This makes sense, however, if Dick actually meant that Sir Gilbert "gave up hunting" in 1809, i.e. the latter carried on hunting for a further three years after 1806 with William, 1st Earl of Lonsdale who was his successor in the mastership. Other Christians worked for the Cottesmore: there are headstones on the right of the SW porch of St Nicholas' Church placed there by Lord Lonsdale for some of his hunt servants; one in particular is memorable: "William Christian 1841 '*Beneath this stone lies a dutiful son; What faults you have seen in him take care and shun*'! This William could conceivably have been Dick's younger brother.

¹⁴ this quick remarriage, which today would be thought callous, was then accepted and not unusual

The first of Dick and Elizabeth's nine children, Eliza¹⁵, was baptised on 8th July 1809 (buried¹⁶ 9th January 1810) and the remainder followed closely: Ann (baptised 12th August 1810), a second Eliza (baptised 29th September 1811; buried 29th November 1811), Emma (baptised 8th November 1812; buried 12th November 1812), son Redmile (baptised 13th February 1814), Mary (born 17th April and baptised 26th April 1815; buried 30th March 1816), William (born 8th October and baptised 22nd October 1816; buried 19th March 1817), Ellen (born 16th February and baptised 2nd March 1817) and Caroline (baptised 30th September 1819; buried 4th November 1819).

Dick later impressed on The Druid his pride at having such a large family, but there was a more poignant side. When Dick and Elizabeth married, curate John Ellicott instructed them – in the uncompromisingly direct language of the Book of Common Prayer¹⁷ – that marriage “is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but ... duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained. First, It was ordained for the procreation of children Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication...”. With the fearfully high infant mortality then extant and with Elizabeth worn down by all-too-frequent child-bearing, the North Luffenham burial register tells its own pathetic story: 9th January 1810 – Eliza, aged 6 months; 30th March 1816 – Mary aged 11 months; 19th March 1817 – William aged 5 months. Then on 4th October 1819 Elizabeth herself and finally on 4th November 1819 – Caroline aged 5 weeks. With eight children in ten years, Elizabeth had kept her vows and had died in childbirth.

With his burgeoning family, Dick urgently needed yet another wife, and on 10th December 1820 at the age of twenty-eight married Catherine, also twenty-eight, daughter of John and Ann Cooke of Goadby Marwood in St Mary's Parish Church, Melton, and brought her back to North Luffenham where their first child Gideon was born on 14th March 1822 (died September 1908).

Dick and his wife then moved to Melton, although at some time between 1820 and 1822 Dick also worked, with board and lodging included, for Mat Milton, a somewhat shady horse-dealer, the sites of whose yard and of Dick's lodging have yet to be identified, although they were in or on the outskirts of Melton.

Further children followed: Thomas (baptised 10th March 1825; died before 1911), John (baptised 9th April 1826; died March 1866 in Leicester), Horatio¹⁸ (baptised 30th May 1828; died December 1850 in Melton Mowbray), Fredrick (baptised 14th May 1830; died December 1864 in Melton Mowbray), Sarah Maria (baptised 18th November 1832) and Alfred (baptised 14th May 1836; died 5th April 1840).

¹⁵ it is often unclear from the manuscript baptismal registers whether 'Eliza' or an abbreviation for 'Elizabeth' is intended. The abbreviated version of 'Elizabeth' is conventionally shown as 'Eliza:' (i.e. with a colon appended) but this is not always perceptible in the now-faded registers

¹⁶ unless indicated otherwise, burial dates were recorded until 1837. Then, with the statutory registering of deaths, the date of death was recorded instead. See footnote 26

¹⁷ this 1662 marriage service is still canonically approved. The 'BCP', written largely by Thomas Cranmer with psalter by Miles Coverdale, is a work of matchless felicity and memorable turn of phrase, unlike the present watered-down demotic 'alternatives'

¹⁸ the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 – England's greatest naval victory in the Napoleonic Wars – resulted in the death of Admiral Lord (*Horatio*) Nelson

In the early 1840s, Dick and family lived in New City¹⁹, a row of (at least) ten²⁰ cottages on the scrub land to the east of the current Working Men's Club on what is now Norman Way where it crosses the present Charlotte Street.

At some point during the next ten years he moved round the corner to Chapel Street, but during 1841-1856, Dick lived away at Rufford Abbey for each hunting season as groom and horse-breaker to Lord Scarborough.

Dick died of "natural decay" on 5th June 1862 at the age of 83 in his house at Chapel Street, Melton. Catherine later moved to Leicester Street but ended up in the indignity of Thorpe Road Union Workhouse (now St Mary's hospital) where she died of "paralysis and exhaustion" on 23rd January 1879 aged 86.

Melton Times merely reported Dick's death as "on 5th Inst. at Melton Mowbray Mr Richard Christian aged 82": scant valediction for someone who had consistently out-riden the finest steeplechase and foxhunting riders of his day.

Whereas the deaths of Dick and Catherine are well documented, their burial places are currently uncertain. Brownlow (q.v. above) says that Dick was "...buried in the Congregational²¹ Burial Ground opposite the house [in Chapel Street] in which he had lived for so long". The only problem with this is that the burial ground of the Congregational chapel along with those of St Mary's Parish Church and the Wesleyan chapel were full and had been closed for most new burials some years previously. But a new burial ground – St Mary's Close – had been established on what is now Norman Way (behind Mill Lane Asset Management Ltd²⁰ opposite the dead-end of Charlotte street) in 1842 to cater for both the C of E and Dissenters. It almost backs on to the Congregational chapel burial ground, and the two areas were divided by scrub land behind the present Norman Way Day Centre.

Neither Dick nor his last wife was, apparently, ever formally 'received' into the Congregational Chapel²². So unless the couple were buried in parishes other than St Mary's²³ – which seems unlikely since they were married there, had all but one of their children baptised there and both died within that parish – the logical place for them both to be buried was in St Mary's Close²⁴, either as members of the Established

¹⁹ 'London' was in vogue: New City was previously called Little London; at the Scalford Road end of what is now Norman Way on the car park immediately behind the current B&H Midland Services there was Soho Street; and on the site of the current local authority housing off Norman way there was Pall Mall. The hamlet of Welby was even ambitiously nicknamed Great City...

²⁰ there were 22 families living in New City in 1841, so perhaps 'New City' also included the houses on the opposite side of what is now Norman Way which are now occupied by Mill Lane Asset Management Ltd who say that they were built c. 1800 so could conceivably be the original houses

²¹ this Dissenters Chapel was originally called the Independent Chapel, then the Congregational Chapel (the names are synonymous) and latterly – when the English Presbyterians and most but not all Congregationalists merged – the United Reformed Church

²² neither the Chapel Street Independent Chapel Meeting Minutes book nor the St Mary's register of burials makes any mention of either of them. If Dick and Catherine were baptised into the C of E, they would have needed to undergo 'reception' into the chapel as a prerequisite for being buried there. But the Minutes make no mention of this

²³ neither is there a record of their burials in Sysonby (which was used as an overflow from St Mary's), Cottesmore, North Luffenham or Goadby Marwood

²⁴ the Melton Borough cemetery on Thorpe Road was not opened until 1892, although when St Mary's Close burial ground was flattened to make the present green space now known as St Mary's Memorial Park, a number of bodies were exhumed and transferred to Thorpe Road. Melton is littered with small undocumented graveyards: exhumations were needed when the present Morrison's Superstore (formerly Safeway) was built, when the railway station yard was developed and so on.

Church or as Dissenters. But there are no St Mary's parish or Congregational chapel burial records for them extant. They could, of course, have joined the Primitive Methodists in Goodricke²⁵ Street, the Wesleyans in Sage Cross Street or even the Roman Catholics in Sherrard Street – all within a short walk of their house in Chapel Street. And this would not have been unlikely as a surprising number of Melton's population – and 40% of parents – were Dissenters. Unfortunately, the grave plans²⁶ for the Congregational chapel and for St Mary's Close have long gone. The grave headstones in St Mary's Close have, however, been recorded but there is no mention of Dick or his wife: hardly unexpected as the poor couldn't afford an inscribed headstone and, in Catherine's case, the Workhouse Guardians almost certainly wouldn't pay.

But perhaps the lack of headstone doesn't matter: Dick *has* a permanent memorial – his 'Lectures'.

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Epilogue

So what? All this looks more suitable for *Amateur Genealogist*. There is, however, a little bit more...

Note firstly that Dick was born in 1779 and his elder brothers James and William in 1775 and 1777 – all in Cottesmore, and that Cottesmore and Exton are just over two miles apart by footpath.

Then, in the dry jargon of genealogists:

Robert Christian (b. c. 1776; d. 3rd December 1836 in Exton) who on 14th May 1800 at St Peter and Paul Parish Church, Exton m. Jane (b. 12th April 1772 in Exton), da. of Edward and Elisabeth Preston of Exton and had issue among others:

Horace Christian (b. 28th December 1805 in Exton; d. 15th April 1846 of cardiac inflammation) a farm labourer who in the 1830s worked for George Rudkin of Exton and who on 14th February 1832 at St Peter and St Paul Parish Church, Exton m. Eleanor (b. 29th January 1809 in Exton) da. of Richard and Ann Young, and had issue among others:

William Christian (b. 17th May 1840 in Exton, d. 1879) a servant and later farm labourer who on 22nd August 1861 at St Peter's Parish Church, Barrowden m. Mary Ann (b. 25th August 1839 in Barrowden) da. of Thomas and Jane Sharman and had issue among others:

²⁵ which for some unfathomable reason Melton Borough Council insist on calling Goodricke Street. In Dick's time it was called Bradley's Row

²⁶ from 1837 there were potentially three sources of death registration: the 'births, marriages and deaths' one required by law and held for England and Wales at the General Register Office at Southport, a possible 'burial' entry in the church register, and the position of the grave on the grave yard or cemetery grave plan. Until Rose's Act of 1812, there was little standardisation of C of E register entries, although Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 regularised the recording of marriages

George Amos Christian (b. 26th May 1873 in Ryhall; d. 1956) a job-master's groom, later warehouseman and finally domestic coachman, who in 1898 in Loughborough m. 25 year old Annie Jones of Loughborough and had issue among others:

Alan Christian (b. 12th July 1914 at 3, Southfield Road, Loughborough; d. May 1985) a hosiery machinist and later farmer, who on 23rd March 1940 at Holy Trinity Parish Church, Loughborough m. 26 year old Mollie Webster of Loughborough and had issue among others:

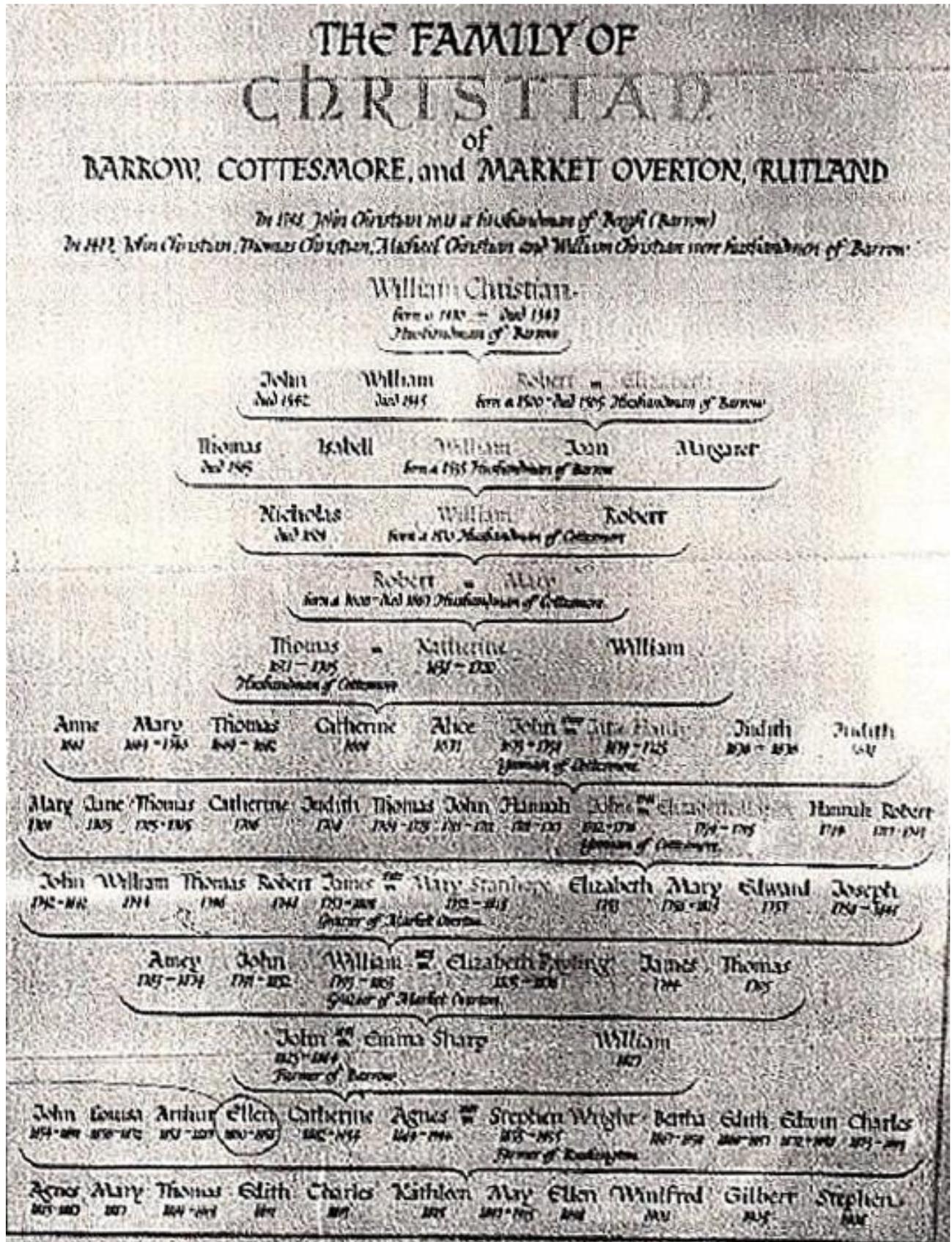
Sally-Ann Christian (b. 5th March 1953 at Leicester General Hospital) who on 22nd June 1974 at St Mary's Parish Church, Walton-le-Wolds m. Martin Kenneth Thornton who was then in hunt service at the Quorn Kennels, Barrow-on-Soar and subsequently huntsman of the Duke of Rutland's hounds (the Belvoir Hunt) 1992 – 2006. Sally Thornton is thus not a lineal descendent of Dick Christian but *is* descended from the same extended Christian family which has farmed in and around Lord Gainsborough's Exton estate since the Reformation.

+ + +

DICK'S FOREBEARS

William Christian ('Husbandman of Barrow') b. 1470; d. 1547
|
Robert Christian ('Husbandman of Barrow') b. 1500; d. 1565 (m. Elizabeth)
|
William Christian ('Husbandman of Barrow') b.c. 1535 (m. Joan)
|
William Christian ('Husbandman of Cottesmore') b.c. 1570
|
Robert Christian ('Husbandman of Cottesmore') b. 1600; d. 1st March 1667 (m. Mary)
|
Thomas Christian ('Husbandman of Cottesmore') b.1631; d. April 1705 (m.
Katherine)
|
John Christian ('Yeoman of Cottesmore') b. 16th March 1674; d. 19th Feb.1738 (m.
Jane Hardy)
|
John Christian ('Yeoman of Cottesmore') b. 13th July 1712; d. 7th Nov. 1776 (m.15th
Feb. 1741 Elizabeth Mapley, Cottesmore)
|
James Christian (of Cottesmore) b. 26th Dec. 1751; d. 1805 (m. 30th June 1771 at
Clipsham, Rutland Jane Lester)
|
Richard (Dick) Christian (1779-1862)

(kindly provided by Martin Slater)

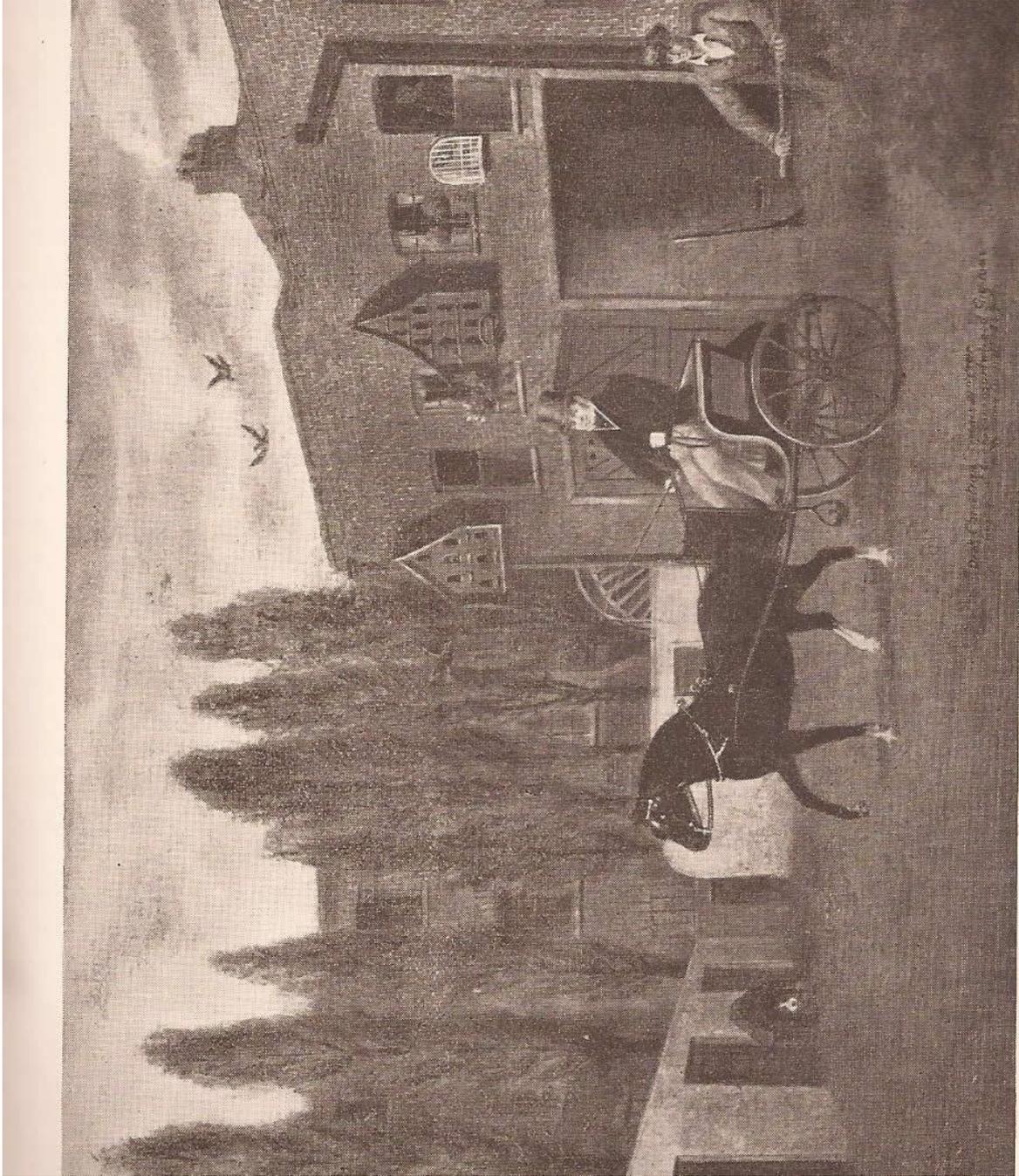


Thomas Christian, Mary and family





*Dick Christian Schooling the Hon. Berkeley Craven's Horse
From the original painting by John Ferneley in the possession of Messrs. Knoedlers*



Dick sets off from Melton
From the original painting by G. P. Nightingale in the possession of Major Guy Paget

[See the Acknowledgements for details of this notice]

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ADVERTISEMENTS.

DICK CHRISTIANS' FUND. -

As it seemed very hard that a man of Dick Christian's sporting fame should, after having undergone all the toils and dangers of a rough-rider's life, and bringing up nineteen children on very precarious earnings, be dependent, in his eighty-first year, entirely on casual charity, it was proposed by some of his friends, last March, to endeavour to raise a small Fund for him. Since then the following subscriptions have been kindly forwarded or promised for that purpose; but nearly the whole amount has been exhausted by the weekly allowance which it was absolutely necessary to make him out of it. It is hoped that the proposed Fund will not be allowed to fall to the ground, for lack of support; and subscriptions will be received by Mr. George Marriott, High-street, Melton Mowbray, who has kindly undertaken the charge of it.

LIST OF SUBSCRIBERS;

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