

Buying a Wife

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After reading the article by Mr J.R. Millman (Aug. 1996), I discovered that the story of wife-sales originated in a book by Rev. Baring-Gould entitled "Devonshire Characters and Strange Events". He recalls that when he was a boy living in Lewtrenchard there was a tall thin man called Henry Frise who had bought his wife, Ann, from Okehampton Market for half-a-crown (12 1/2p.). He had led her home, a distance of twelve miles, by the halter, he holding it in his hand and she with the loop around her neck. He did not remove it until she was inside his house and the door had been closed behind them.

The Rev. Baring-Gould's grandfather, the Squire, and his uncle, the Rector of the parish, attempted to convince Henry that this was not a legal marriage in the eyes of the Church or State, but without success. As he lived in a cottage that was on 'lives', the Squire was unable to bring any more pressure to bear on him.

In the 1841 Census, for Lew Down, the family appear as Henry Frise (40), Ann Frise (35) Elizabeth (3) and Henry (6 weeks). There is a record in Thrushelton Parish Register of the baptism of young Henry on 20th March 1841, the son of Henry and Ann Frieze of Lew Trenchard (phonetic spelling by Clerk)

By 1851 the family are living at Frises Cottage, Lew Down. By this time Henry is 50 and a widower, his son Henry is 19 years old and there is also a daughter Ann, aged 7. Sadly Ann, the wife and mother, died in the summer of 1846. The Rector of the parish of Lewtrenchard refused to enter her as Ann Frise in the burial register for, in his opinion, that was not her legal name. Henry was so angry that he carried her remains off to another parish for burial, where the circumstances of their cohabitation were unknown.

Henry Frise died in Lew Down in August 1860 aged 60 years. Baptised on the 28th September 1800 in Thrushelton, he was the eleventh child of William Frise and his wife Elizabeth (nee Down).

He was also the village poet. Whenever a special event took place in the parish, he would compose some verses. The Rev. Baring-Gould recalled that on the marriage of the Squire's daughter Henry went down to the manor house with one of his compositions and was given his dinner and a crown (25p). It says something of the scale of values that a poem was worth twice the price of a wife! Unfortunately he is remembered more for buying a wife than his literary achievement.

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