

Court Depositions of South West England, 1500-1700

Case 13: Theft of Wool in Chewton Mendip

Case type: Theft

Summary: When 50 sheep lose their wool overnight in a Somerset enclosure, Joane Stephens is accused of stealing it.

Source: Somerset Heritage Centre, QSR82

Original Spelling Transcription

Som[er]sett

Deposition 1

The Informac[i]on of James Rowden of Chewton taken on this twentieth Day of Novemb[er] 1650 before John Buckland Esq[uir]e²² one of the Justices of ye Peace² of this County.

This Informant sayth, that about ye nineteenth of June Last his Mother had above fifty sheepe pulld in ye Fold³ in Chewton in one night and then lost neare twoe Waight of Wooll, whereupon searching with the Tythingman⁴ of Eastharpry in the Howse of George Stephens they there found in a Malt seeive⁵ about ye quantity of one Pound of Wooll p[ar]te of it white and p[ar]te black which (as Joane Stephens ye Wife²⁴ of ye sayd George Stephens then affirmed) was all ye Wooll yt was then in ye Howse This Informant farther sayth yt about ye seaventh of November last the sayd Joane Stephens did sell unto Mr Newton of Chewton about thirteene pounds of Wooll which as hee doth veryly beleive was most p[ar]te of it fell Wooll⁷, and haveinge shewen it to some yt have skill therein they affirme the same: And Whereas ye sayd Joane Stephens and Mr Newton doe acknowledge that it was sold after ye Rate of about twelve pence halfe penny the Pound hee doth beleive yt it would yeild sixteene pence or seaventeene pence ye pound at ye Price Wooll is now at in ye Marketts⁸ Hee sayth yt hee beleive there was three or fowre Pound of it black Wooll /

This Informant lately with ye Tythingman⁴ by speciall Warrant from A Justice of Peace² searchinge againe ye sayd Stephens his Howse did there finde in ye possession of ye sayd Joane Stephens about thirty knotts of Silke and some new Buttons of sev[er]all Colours And hee was allso shewne by George Burges of Chewton a peece of mixt coloured silke Ribbin of about eight yeards which the sayd Burge affirmed hee lately had of ye sayd Joane Stephens in Exchange for Ware allowing her for it about twoe pence halfe penny a yard.⁹ The sayd Joane Stephens at ye time of ye sayd search throwinge a great Stone at this Informant and callinge for a Pike¹⁰ as hee beleive to doe him some mischeife / chargeinge him (after hee had beene in ye Howse & searcht) yt hee had stolen twenty Shillinges thence. Hee farther sayth yt hee hath beene credibly informed that the sayd Joane Stephens

James Rowden¹¹

Jo. Buckland²⁰

Deposition 2

Som[er]sett

The Informat[i]on of William Lockier of WestharpryTayler¹ taken on Oath this five and twentieth Day of November 1650 before John Buckland Esq[ui]er²²

Whoe sayth, That about Mich[aelm]as last¹⁵ neare halfe a yeare since, beinge at Worke at George Stephens Howse¹² of East harpry Joane Stephens his Wife then offered him to buy some Silke of her, w[hi]ch hee refused, shee then shewinge him about three Quarters of A Pound of soweinge and stitching Silke of severall Coloures which shee told him (demandeing how shee came by it) that her husband had bought it of a travaylinge man as hee was at Worke at Mendip at ye Quarre¹³. The sayd Joane Stephens at ye same time likewise shewed this Deponent neare tenne Bundells of mixt silke Buttons of sev[er]all Colours, some of three dozen and some of fowre dozen in A Bundle which shee allso offered to sell to him, or to put off for her to any other./

This Informant farther sayth, That about three Quart[er]s of a Yeare since at A Shooemakers²² Standinge in Wells Markett next above Mr Case brookes, the sayd Joane Stephens did carry away a Paire of Childrens Shooes¹⁴, which the Shooemaker²² (whose name he remembreth not) runneinge after her, required her to deliver backe againe, Shee then affirmeinge that shee had payd for them, which ye Shooemaker²² denyed, therupon takeinge away ye Shooes from her./

Will. Lockier¹¹

Jo. Bucklan²⁰

Deposition 3

The Information of Richard Harse of Westharpry afore sayd taken this tenth Daye of Decemb[er] 1650 ut supra

This Informant sayth yt about a yeare since or more, beinge accidentally at ye Howse of George Stephens of Eastharpry, Joane ye Wife²⁴ of ye sayd George did then shewe him a p[ar]cell of Silke in Knotts, to ye Quantity of neare about One Quarter and halfe, all of A kinde of Muske Colour, and stitchinge Silke, which shee then offered to him to sell⁹, tellinge him hee should have a good Bargaine in it, but hee refused it; and beinge asked how shee came by it, shee replyed, what if shee had it of A Trooper?

Richard Harse¹¹

Jo. Buckland²⁰

Deposition 4

Som[er]sett

The Examination of Joane Stephens the Wife⁶ of George Stephens of Eastharpryhusbandman²³ taken the one and twentieth Day of November 1650 before John Buckland Esq[ui]er²² one of ye Justices² &c.

This Examinant sayth that shortly upon sheare time was twelvemonth she bought of Luce James⁹Widd[ow]²⁴ of Eastharpry, twoe & thirty Pound of Locks Lambe toe and Fleece Wooll whereof onely three Pound & halfe was Fleece Wooll and blacke giveinge sixe pence ye Pound for ye white & tenne pence ye Pound for the blacke Woole. And sayth yt this three Pounds & halfe of blacke Wooll was in ye Howse about Midsom[er] Last¹⁵, when ye Tythingman⁴ togeth[er] w[i]th James Rowden of Chewton came to search ye Howse for Wooll beinge then in A Malt seeive⁵ togeth[er] with a Small p[ar]cell of white Wooll This Examinant doth acknowledge that on this Day fortnight shee did sell to Mr Newton⁹ at Chewton the aforesayd three Pounds and halfe of black Wooll togeth[er] with nine Pound & A quart[er] of white Wooll at 13s²¹ & 6d but sayth yt ye white Wooll was all fleece Wooll of her husbands Sheepe shorne this yeare beinge sixe Fleece, exceptinge onely about

twoe Pound of Fell Wooll which came of A Yew of her husbands, that died in ye baneinge yeare about a Yeare or more since and shee sayth that hee had pickt and p[re]pared all this Wooll as well ye blacke as ye white to bee Spunne up to make Cloath¹⁶ and that there was noe more fell Wooll⁷ amongst it then what shee hath allready exprest. An ye lourgest of this Wooll beinge about fifteene Pound shee hath spunne into yarne to make Cloathes¹⁷ for her Selfe and her Children, Shee denyeth not but yt shee did tell Mr Newton that ye black Wooll cost her fifteene pence a Pound, yt soe shee might gett ye more for it The reason why shee sold this Wooll at soe lowe a Rate was out of necesity to pay a Debt oweinge¹⁸ to Thomas Currell of Westharpry.

This Examin[an]t confeseth that shee hath in her howse about thirty sceanes of Silke and yt shee had about eight Yards of coloured Silke Ribbon which shee hath sold to George Burge of Chewton at twoe pence halfe penny ye yard all which shee bought for ye worth of twelve Pence in Mony and Victualls about tenne Weekes⁹ since of A Travayler yt past by her howse who comeinge in to light a Pipe of Tobacco¹⁹ offered it to her. And shee sayth yt about A fortnight after shee had bought it shee did offer it to sale to William Lockier⁹ a Tayler.²² But shee sayth it is noe matter where shee had it, for shee is sure it is none of James Rowdens, nor her Wooll neither, Hee cannot sweare they are his goods./

Joane Stephens¹¹

Jo. Buckland²⁰

Modernized Spelling Transcription

Somerset

Deposition 1

The information of James Rowden of Chewton taken on this twentieth day of November 1650 before John Buckland esquire²², one of the Justices of the Peace² of this county.

This informant says that about the nineteenth of June last, his mother had above fifty sheep pulled in the fold³ in Chewton in one night and then lost near two weight of wool. Whereupon searching with the tithingman⁴ of East Harptree in the house of George Stephens, they there found in a malt sieve⁵ about the quantity of one pound of wool part of it white and part black which (as Joanne Stephens the wife²⁴ of the

said George Stephens then affirmed) was all the wool that was then in the house. This informant further says that about the seventh of November last, the said Joanne Stephens did sell unto Mr Newton of Chewton about thirteen pounds of wool, which as he verily believes, was most part of it fell wool.⁷ And having shown it to some that have skill therein, they affirm the same. And whereas the said Joanne Stephens and Mr Newton acknowledge that it was sold after the rate of about twelve pence half penny the pound, he believes that it would yield sixteen pence or seventeen pence the pound at the price wool is now at in the markets.⁸ He says that he believes there was three or four pounds of it black wool.

This informant lately with the tithingman⁴ by special warrant from a Justice of Peace² searching again the said Stephens' his house did there find in the possession of the said Joanne Stephens about thirty knots of silk and some new buttons of several colours. And he was also shown by George Burges of Chewton a piece of mixed coloured silk ribbon of about eight yards which the said Burge affirmed he lately had of the said Joanne Stephens in exchange for ware, allowing her for it about two pence half penny a yard.⁹ The said Joanne Stephens at the time of the said search throwing a great stone at this informant and calling for a pike¹⁰ as he believes to do him some mischief, charging him (after he had been in the house and searched) that he had stolen twenty shillings thence. He further says that he has been credibly informed that the said Joanne Stephens

James Rowden¹¹

Jo. Buckland²⁰

Deposition 2

Somerset

The information of William Lockier of West Harptree, tailor¹, taken on oath this five and twentieth day of November 1650 before John Buckland, esquire.²²

Who says that about Michaelmas last¹⁵, near half a year since, being at work at George Stephens' house¹² of East Harptree, Joanne Stephens, his wife, then offered him to buy some silk off her, which he refused, she then showing him about three quarters of a pound of sewing and stitching silk of several colours, which she told him (demanding how she came by it) that her husband had bought it of a travelling man as he was at work at Mendip at the quarry.¹³ The said Joanne Stephens at the same time likewise showed this deponent near ten bundles of mixed

silk buttons of several colours, some of three dozen and some of four dozen in a bundle, which she also offered to sell to him, or to put off for her to any other.

This informant further says that about three quarters of a year since at a shoemaker's²² standing in Wells market next above Mr Case Brookes, the said Joanne Stephens did carry away a pair of children's shoes¹⁴, which the shoemaker²² (whose name he remembers not) running after her, required her to deliver back again, she then affirming that she had paid for them, which the shoemaker²² denied, thereupon taking away the shoes from her.

Will. Lockier¹¹

Jo. Bucklan²⁰

Deposition 3

The information of Richard Harse of West Harptree aforesaid taken this tenth day of December 1650 as above.

This informant says that about a year since or more, being accidentally at the house of George Stephens of East Harptree, Joanne the wife²⁴ of the said George did then show him a parcel of silk in knots, to the quantity of near about one quarter and half, all of a kind of musk colour, and stitching silk, which she then offered to him to sell⁹, telling him he should have a good bargain in it, but he refused it. And being asked how she came by it, she replied, 'what if she had it of a trooper?'

Richard Harse¹¹

Jo. Buckland²⁰

Deposition 4

Somerset

The examination of Joanne Stephens, the wife⁶ of George Stephens of East Harptree, husbandman²³, taken the one and twentieth day of November 1650 before John Buckland esquire²², one of the Justices² etc.

This examinant says that shortly upon shear time was twelve months she bought of Luce James⁹, widow²⁴ of East Harptree: two and thirty pounds of locks lamb toe, and fleece wool whereof only three pounds and a half were fleece wool, and

black giving six pence the pound for the white and ten pence the Pound for the black wool. And says that this three pounds and half of black wool was in the house about Midsummer last¹⁵, when the tithingman⁴ together with James Rowden of Chewton came to search the house for wool, being then in a malt sieve⁵ together with a small parcel of white wool. This examinant acknowledges that on this day fortnight she did sell to Mr Newton⁹ at Chewton the aforesaid three pounds and half of black wool together with nine pounds and a quarter of white wool at 13s and 6d²¹ but says that the white wool was all fleece wool of her husband's sheep shorn this year, being six fleeces, excepting only about two pounds of fell wool which came off a ewe of her husband's that died in the baning year about a year or more since. And she says that he had picked and prepared all this wool as well the black as the white to be spun up to make clothes¹⁶ and that there was no more fell wool⁷ amongst it than what she has already expressed. And the largest of this wool being about fifteen pounds, she has spun into yarn to make clothes¹⁷ for herself and her children, she denies not but that she did tell Mr Newton that the black wool cost her fifteen pence a pound, that so she might get the more for it. The reason why she sold this wool at so low a rate was out of necessity to pay a debt owing¹⁸ to Thomas Currell of West Harptree.

This examinant confesses that she has in her house about thirty skeins of silk and that she had about eight yards of coloured silk ribbon which she has sold to George Burge of Chewton at two pence half penny the yard all which she bought for the worth of twelve pence in money and victuals about ten weeks⁹ since off a traveller that passed by her house, who coming in to light a pipe of tobacco¹⁹ offered it to her. And she says that about a fortnight after she had bought it she did offer it to say to William Lockier⁹, a tailor.²² But she says it is no matter where she had it, for she is sure it is none of James Rowden's, nor her wool neither. He cannot swear they are his goods.

Joane Stephens¹¹

Jo. Buckland²⁰

Notes

¹ (technicalities of the court) Male depositions: occupational or social status descriptors (e.g. baker, joiner, yeoman) were typically recorded in the brief biographical statement at the beginning of the deposition.

² (gloss) A Justice of the Peace was a high-status man appointed to preside over the county courts.

- ³ (interpretation) Having sheep 'pulled in the fold' meant that the wool had been stripped from them while they were in their enclosure overnight.
- ⁴ (gloss) A tithingman was an officer responsible for law and order within the parish.
- ⁵ (gloss) A malt sieve was used for malting (brewing) but was also a useful storage vessel.
- ⁶ (technicalities of the court) Female depositions: marital status descriptors (e.g. singlewoman, widow, wife) were typically recorded in the brief biographical statement at the beginning of the deposition.
- ⁷ (gloss) Fell wool was a course type of wool.
- ⁸ (interpretation) Prices and fluctuations in the market are recorded here, demonstrating knowledge of the local economy.
- ⁹ (interpretation) Both men and women were engaged in commerce (buying and selling). Prices as well as the origins of the product are mentioned, demonstrating awareness of the market.
- ¹⁰ (interpretation) Although this is not unusual, female violence is less commonly recorded in courts records than male violence.
- ¹¹ (technicalities of the court) Witnesses were asked to sign their depositions: signatures range from full names to simply initials or marks (sometimes images linked with trades).
- ¹² (interpretation) William Lockier did not work for himself; he was a tailor at work in another person's house.
- ¹³ (interpretation) Quarrying: evidence of men's work. This was labour intensive work, in which lime and building stone was extracted from the quarry.
- ¹⁴ (interpretation) Within this case in which Joan Stephens is examined for theft of wool, witnesses also incidentally mention that she attempted to steal a pair of shoes.
- ¹⁵ (interpretation) In describing when a particular event had taken place, witnesses often reported the time in relation to the liturgical calendar (e.g. referring to church seasons and feast days).
- ¹⁶ (interpretation) Preparing wool to be spun: evidence of men's work, demonstrating their engagement in preparing products from the animals they had reared.
- ¹⁷ (interpretation) Spinning wool into yarn to make clothing: evidence of women's work.
- ¹⁸ (interpretation) Incidental evidence of debt and credit networks. Borrowing and lending were fundamental to the early modern economy and the ability to pay debts was inextricably linked to one's reputation.
- ¹⁹ (interpretation) Incidental evidence of tobacco being smoked in this rural parish.
- ²⁰ (technicalities of the court) Signature of the Justice of the Peace.

²¹ (gloss) 's' and 'p' used after numbers refer to shillings and pence (e.g. 40 shillings, 3 pence).

²² (technicalities of the court) Occupational or social status descriptors (e.g. baker, joiner, yeoman) were recorded for men.

²³ (gloss) A husbandman is an agricultural worker. Male depositions: occupational or social status descriptors (e.g. baker, joiner, yeoman) were typically recorded in the brief biographical statement at the beginning of the deposition.

²⁴ (technicalities of the court) Marital status descriptors (e.g. singlewoman, widow, wife) were typically recorded for women.

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