

Court Depositions of South West England, 1500-1700

Case 15: The Drowning of Henry Abbott

Case type: Suspicious Death

Summary: One September morning, as men are reaping near the river and Joan Symonds and her son make their way home from market, Henry Abbott drowns in the river.

Source: Somerset Heritage Centre, QSR82

Original Spelling Transcription

Deposition 1

The Informac[i]on of Richard Weekes of Bridgewater in the County of Som[er]s[e]t husbandman¹ taken before George Bawdon mayor³ & Edward Sealy one of the Aldermen⁷ the Sixth day of September Anno diu[m] 1650 /

Who enformeth and saith upon oath that on wednesday last the fowerth of this instant September this enformant saith that he this enformant & one Robinson, the said Robinson and his two sonns and one henry Abbott went forth to ripe in the morninge about fyve of the Clocke² att w[hi]ch tyme itt rayned, whereupon they returned backe againe into the Towne of Bridgewater unto the house of one William Wookey in Bridgewater aforesaid where they druncke fifteene pence in beere but afterwards the weather seemeing to be faire this enform[an]te the said Thomas Robinson and William Robinson went forth to ripe againe² and after the said Abbott came forth into the feild where the p[ar]tyes abovesaid were att Breakefast during w[hi]ch tyme the said Abbott came forth unto them and metting w[i]th one Richard Glov[er] the said Abbott and the said glov[er] had some discourse. whereupon this enform[an]te asked the said Abbott what the discourse was, who answered that the said glover willed them to cutt the Corne lower and farther⁵ the said Abbott told them that since there departure he had druncke a Cann of beere and p[ar]te of another⁶ and there upon seing a woeman comeing towards, the said Abbott sayd that he would goe and kis her, and went from them w[i]th that resoluc[i]on as he supposed

and afterwards heard the said Abbott saye unto the said woeman that he would kis for he had made a vow soe to doe unto whom the saide woeman replied he should not, and afterwards he heard a certayne boy say that the man was in the River, w[hi]ch was seconded by the same woeman whereupon this depon[en]te and the rest that were w[i]th him lookeing about saw the said Abbott sweming in the River¹¹ whereupon this depon[en]te and the rest cryed unto him and willed the said Abbott to make unto the showre but as they conceived he still was carryed farther in the middest of the said River where they p[er]ceaved him to hold up his hands and afterwards saw him to sincke and farther saith that he nev[er] made noe Answere unto them And more he enformeth not:/

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Edw Sealy Aldr.⁹

Deposition 2

Eode[em] die Coram eisd[em]

The Informac[i]on of Thomas Robinson of Bridgewater aforesaid husbandman:/¹

Who enformeth and saith upon oath that on wednesday last the 4th day of this instant September this enform[an]te being att repe² in the ground of one Richard Glover⁴ att w[hi]ch tyme came came [sic] one henry Abbott into the feild likewise to reape² and haveing putt off his doublett⁸ w[i]th an intenc[i]on as this enform[an]te conceiveth to goe to worke, seing a woeman Comeing into the feild the said Abbott sayd that he would goe and kis her, and this enform[an]te saw the said Abbott stop upon the bancke att w[hi]ch tyme heard him saye unto the said woeman that he must kis her for he had made a vow soe to doe to whome the said woeman replied he should not but this enform[an]te tending his worke did not see him kis her, but heard the woeman say that he should paye dearely for his kis and ymediately thereupon heard a little boy w[hi]ch was w[i]th the sayd woeman to cry out the man was in the ryver and thereupon p[re]sently heard the sayd woeman to say the same whereupon this enform[an]te casting downe his hoocke¹⁰ run upon the bancke of the ryver and seing the said Abbott in the ryver endeavoured to have him by warding into the said ryver but could not because he was three tymes his length out in the ryver from him¹¹ att w[hi]ch tyme this exam[inan]te cryed unto him brother, make neere unto me but the more he cryed unto him the farther he seemed to goe from him, and shortly thereupon he saw him to sincke and afterwards to rise againe and ymediately to hold upp his hands¹¹, he suncke againe and nev[er] saw him more. And more he enformeth not:/

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Edw Sealy Alder⁹

Deposition 3

Eode[em] die Coram eisd[em]

The exam[ini]c[i]on of Joane Symondes the wife¹² of John Symonds of dunwre husbandman:/¹

Who confesseth and sayth that one wednesday last she being att Bridgewater to buy graines att that tyme brought thence 3ee peckes upon her head in payell and her son a pecke¹³ and in r^eturning homewards there came a man unto her haveing a knife in his hand¹⁴ and told her that he must kis her for he had made a vow soe to doe unto whom this exam[in]te replyed yo[u] shall not kis me wherefore doe yo[u] trouble me and farther sayth if yo[u] kis me you were better to lett me alone for I will make yo[u] paye for itt, whereunto he replyed , whereunto he replyed [sic] good woeman I intend yo[u] noe harme and w[i]thall threw away the hisknife¹⁴ out of his hand and then did kis her and thereupon he sayd good woeman now tis ended, and soe went away laughing and haveing not gon above three of he lengths heard her son to cry out, "Mother the man is in the river whereupon she called unto the workemen that were neere unto her to have the man, and takeing a stake out of the stile deliv[er]ed itt unto one of the said workemen and w[i]th all desired them to have him if they could and shortly thereafter saw him sincke in the ryver And more she confesseth not:/

George Bawdon Mayor:/⁹

Edw Sealy Aldr⁹

Deposition 4

Eode[em] die Coram eisd[em]

The exam[ini]c[i]on of John Symonds the son of¹⁵ John Symonds of dunwre aforesaid: husbandman:/¹

Who being exam[in]ed saith that on wednesday last being the fowerth of this instant September this exam[in]te & his mother haveing ben att Bridgewater aforesaid to buy graines & returning homewards his mother havein[g] three pecks of graines

upon her head in a payle¹³ And this exam[inan]te haveing likewise a pecke and halfe upon his head¹³ sawe a man Comeing towards his mother who then sayd unto her, that he must kis her, for he had made a vow soe to doe unto whome his mother replied goe about yo[ur] busines why doe yo[u] trouble me whereupon struggling w[i]th her di[...] kis her the graines being still upon her head and after h[^]e[^] had kised her sayd unto her good woeman now itt is ended and afterwards going backwards fell upon the sand neere the ryver and lyeing there upon the sand laughing and afterwards endeavouring to rise fell into the river, whereupon this exa[m]in[a]te seing the man in the ryver sayd "Lord mother the man is in the ryver and p[re]sently after his mother cryed out and sayd "Helpe the man for he is in the ryver And more he enformeth not:/"

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Modernized Spelling Transcription

Deposition 1

The information of Richard Weekes of Bridgewater in the county of Somerset, husbandman¹, taken before George Bawdon, mayor³, and Edward Sealy, one of the aldermen⁷, on the sixth day of September 1650.

Who informs and says upon oath that on Wednesday last, the fourth of this instant September, this informant says that he this informant and one Robinson, the said Robinson and his two sons and one Henry Abbott went forth to reap in the morning about five of the clock.² At which time it rained, whereupon they returned back again into the town of Bridgewater unto the house of one William Wookey in Bridgewater aforesaid, where they drunk fifteen pence in beer. But afterwards, the weather seeming to be fair, this informant, the said Thomas Robinson and William Robinson went forth to reap again.² And after, the said Abbott came forth into the field where the parties abovesaid were at breakfast, during which time the said Abbott came forth unto them and meeting with one Richard Glover, the said Abbott and the said Glover had some discourse. Whereupon this informant asked the said Abbott what the discourse was, who answered that the said Glover willed them to cut the corn lower and further.⁵ The said Abbott told them that since their departure, he had drunk a can of beer and part of another⁶ and thereupon seeing a woman coming towards, the said Abbott said that he would go and kiss her. And went from them with that resolution, as he supposed. And afterwards heard the said Abbott say unto the said woman that he would kiss, for he had made a vow so to do, unto whom the said woman replied he should not. And afterwards he heard a certain boy say that the man was in the river, which was seconded by the same woman. Whereupon

this deponent and the rest that were with him, looking about saw the said Abbott swimming in the river¹¹ whereupon this deponent and the rest cried unto him and willed the said Abbott to make unto the shore. But as they conceived, he still was carried further in the middle of the said river, where they perceived him to hold up his hands and afterwards saw him to sink and further says that he never made no answer unto them. And more he informs not.

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Edw Sealy Aldr.⁹

Deposition 2

On the same day before the same.

The information of Thomas Robinson of Bridgewater aforesaid, husbandman.¹

Who informs and says upon oath that on Wednesday last, the 4th day of this instant September, this informant being at reaping² in the ground of one Richard Glover⁴ at which time came came [sic] one Henry Abbott into the field likewise to reap.² And having put off his doublet⁸ with an intention, as this informant conceived, to go to work, seeing a woman coming into the field, the said Abbott said that he would go and kiss her. And this informant saw the said Abbott stop upon the bank, at which time heard him say unto the said woman that he must kiss her for he had made a vow so to do. To whom the said woman replied he should not, but this informant tending his work did not see him kiss her, but heard the woman say that he should pay dearly for his kiss. And immediately thereupon heard a little boy which was with the said woman to cry out the man was in the river, and thereupon presently heard the said woman to say the same whereupon this informant casting down his hook¹⁰ ran upon the bank of the river and seeing the said Abbott in the river endeavoured to have him by wading into the said river. But could not because he was three times his length out in the river from him¹¹, at which time this examinant cried unto him 'brother, make near unto me' but the more he cried unto him the further he seemed to go from him, and shortly thereupon he saw him to sink and afterwards to rise again and immediately to hold up his hands¹¹, he sunk again and never saw him more. And more he informs not.

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Edw Sealy Alder⁹

Deposition 3

On the same day before the same.

The examination of Joanne Symonds, the wife¹² of John Symonds of Dunwear, husbandman.¹

Who confesses and says that on Wednesday last, she being at Bridgewater to buy grain at that time brought there three pecks upon her head in a pail and her son a peck¹³ and in returning homewards, there came a man unto her having a knife in his hand.¹⁴ And told her that he must kiss her for he had made a vow so to do, unto whom this examinant replied 'you shall not kiss me, Wherefore do you trouble me?' and further said 'if you kiss me, you were better to let me alone for I will make you pay for it'. Whereunto he replied whereunto he replied [sic] 'good woman, I intend you no harm' and withall threw away the hisknife¹⁴ out of his hand and then did kiss her. And thereupon he said 'good woman, now it is ended'. And so went away laughing and having not gone above three of he lengths heard her son to cry out, 'Mother the man is in the river'. Whereupon she called unto the workmen that were near unto her to have the man, and taking a stake out of the stile delivered it unto one of the said workmen and with all desired them to have him if they could. And shortly thereafter saw him sink in the river. And more she confesses not.

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Edw Sealy Aldr.⁹

Deposition 4

On the same day before the same.

The examination of John Symonds, the son of¹⁵ John Symonds of Dunwear aforesaid, husbandman.¹

Who being examined says that on Wednesday last, being the fourth of this instant September, this examinant and his mother having been at Bridgewater aforesaid to buy grain and returning homewards, his mother having three pecks of grain upon her head in a pail¹³ and this examinant having likewise a peck and a half upon his head¹³, saw a man coming towards his mother. Who then said unto her that he must kiss her, for he had made a vow so to do. Unto whom, his mother replied 'go about your business, why do you trouble me?' Whereupon struggling with her di[...] kiss her, the grain being still upon her head. And after h^e^ had kissed her said unto her, 'good woman now it is ended' and afterwards going backwards, fell upon the sand

near the river and, lying there upon the sand laughing and afterwards endeavouring to rise, fell into the river. Whereupon this examinant seeing the man in the river said 'Lord mother, the man is in the river' and presently after, his mother cried out and said 'Help the man, for he is in the river'. And more he informs not.

George Bawdon Mayor⁹

Notes

¹ (gloss) A husbandman is an agricultural worker. Male depositions: occupational or social status descriptors (e.g. yeoman, baker, joiner) were typically recorded in the brief biographical statement at the beginning of the deposition.

² (interpretation) Reaping (agricultural labour): evidence of men's work that took place early in the morning. Reaping was an agricultural activity in which crops were harvested (cut and gathered) from a piece of land.

³ (technicalities of the court) Occupational or social status descriptors (e.g. yeoman, baker, joiner) were typically recorded for men.

⁴ (interpretation) Richard Glover's field is the site of work for these men. During harvest, both men and women were hired to reap in the fields of farmers.

⁵ (interpretation) Witnesses note that they were given specific instructions for how to reap the corn, indicating their relationship as workers for employers.

⁶ (interpretation) Henry Abbott had been drinking alcohol on the morning, suggesting his death may have been accidental, his fall into the river caused by inebriation.

⁷ (gloss) An alderman is an elected official of a ward or borough. Occupational or social status descriptors (e.g. yeoman, baker, joiner) were typically recorded for men.

⁸ (gloss) A doublet is a man's jacket.

⁹ (technicalities of the court) Signature of the Justice of the Peace. Mayors and aldermen often acted as JPs.

¹⁰ (gloss) A reaping hook is a tool used for cutting crops. It has a curved blade and a short handle (also known as a sickle).

¹¹ (interpretation) Not being able to swim was common in early modern England.

¹² (technicalities of the court) Female depositions: marital status descriptors (e.g. wife, singlewoman, widow) were typically recorded in the brief biographical statement at the beginning of the deposition.

¹³ (interpretation) Women and children were engaged in commerce (buying grain from market) as well as transporting it home. For information on early modern people carrying things on their heads, see

earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com/2016/02/23/why-do-women-carry-things-on-their-heads/.

¹⁴ (interpretation) Knives were often carried by men, used not necessarily as a weapon but as a tool. The knife is not mentioned in the depositions of the witnesses. It is mentioned only in Joane Symonds' examination, in which she suggests she was threatened.

¹⁵ (interpretation) John Symonds' status as 'the son of' John Symonds (senior) indicates his dependency on his father. He was young and still living at home.

Prepared as part of the Womens Work in Rural England project.