

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1414

**The Blackest sheep
in my family's flock
was ...**

**Great Uncle Alex
(Richard Nettlefield)**

The Blackest sheep in my family's flock was possibly Great Uncle Alex, who mysteriously deserted his wife and three young children, resulting in him being ostracised forever from the family. Or perhaps it was Great Uncle William, who some say gambled the family fortune away. However I think there is little doubt it was Richard Nettlefield, my maternal Great Great Grandfather who suffered the ignominy of being hanged on the roof of Horsemonger Lane Gaol.¹

Richard was born about 1772 in Godalming, Surrey, England and baptised there on March 6 of the same year.² He was the second son of Richard (or John) Nettlefield and Ann Page who had married at Godalming on February 10 1768.³ Because the first English census listing people by name didn't eventuate until 1841, we now have to track his movements by other records.

The late 1700's and early 1800's saw England in the throes of the industrial revolution and there was a vast influx of people to the towns and cities. Richard followed the crowd and he then appears at St James Westminster, marrying Elizabeth Gibbons in 1793.⁴ London then boasted a population of nearly 1 million people, with about 80% coming from the working class. The living conditions were appalling, with overcrowding, little sanitation and unpaved streets piled high with rotting rubbish which was seldom cleared. Houses were built "back to back" with craftsmen and labourers living in just 2 or 3 rooms. There was no gaslight until 1807⁵ and Watchmen, who performed the duties of the police, carrying lanterns, patrolled the dangerous streets at night.

By 1794 Richard and Elizabeth were living in Putney Surrey, and their first child, Richard, was born there on January 10.⁶ Putney was an ancient parish on the river Thames that was easily linked with Greater London after the construction of a wooden bridge in 1729. By the late 1700's the fishing industry there was being replaced by market gardens.⁷ Perhaps it was in those gardens that Richard worked as an under gardener, which is how later records describe his occupation.⁸

We do know that for the next 12 years Richard and Elizabeth raised 7 children in Putney and appeared to have lived a hardworking settled life.

So what was it then that led Richard to commit the crime that would see him strung up from the gallows one cold morning in March 1807?⁹ A labourers lot was not easy. Putting the staple bread, butter, potatoes and bacon on the table to feed an ever-growing family was difficult. The spectre of the workhouse loomed if the breadwinner became ill or lost his job. And so it was that on October 11 1806, Richard and his accomplice gardener Duncan, were caught by John Stacey, the zealous Watchman, stealing "ninety pounds weight of pork to the value of fifty shillings, one piece of linen...1 shilling, and one piece of sacking...2 pence, of the goods and chattels of John Yates".

In reality, the men stole the equivalent of a fully-grown pig, a serious offence which could have sent them both off as convicts to the colonies. However Richard fought off John Stacy, the arresting Watchman, and "with a certain sharp instrument...he did make an assault...and

unlawfully did Strike, Stab and Cut the said John Stacy upon the head...with intent...to obstruct, resist and prevent the lawful apprehension and detainer of him".¹⁰ In one mad moment Richard Nettlefield had become a felon under Lord Ellenborough's Act 1803, which declared that a person who stabbed or cut another would suffer the penalty of death.¹¹

How strange it was then, that the very same John Stacy who Richard had attacked, would go on to sign a petition begging for Richard's clemency.

At home Elizabeth was very pregnant with her 7th child Emmanuel. Sadly they had lost John 5yrs, and William 3yrs within the space of three weeks in June of 1802.¹² What a shock it must have been to have her husband carted off to prison. It was not until 5 months later, in March 1807, that Richard faced the Court of Assizes held during Lent in Kingston.¹³ The Assizes heard cases for serious offences such as murder, or robbery with violence, and was a significant event in the town. After the Judge had been escorted to the court with all his dignitaries, a grand jury sat to decide if there was a case to answer for and a "true bill" of indictment would be declared. The Petty Jury, made up of members of the public, was then sworn in and the trial began. In those days trials were frighteningly quick and usually over in a matter of minutes.¹⁴ It's unlikely Richard would have had the means to have a defence lawyer and one can only imagine the chill he felt when hearing the judge proclaim "...and that you be hanged by the neck until you are dead..."

With no time to spare there was put up a Humble Petition to the Kings Most Excellent Majesty, George the third, which was illuminating as to the esteem in which his captors held Richard. It was signed or marked by no less than the committing magistrate, various churchwardens, overseers, the Minister, and "the man maimed" John Stacy. The petition called for Richard to be transported for life, as he was an active man of 35 years with a wife and five children, and the neighbourhood in which he lived is "in the greatest distress on account of the poor man's unfortunate condition". There was also an individual petition presented by Joseph Alcock who had employed Richard as an under gardener.

Archibald Macdonald, possibly the esteemed judge, wrote a report on the petition, but for some inexplicable reason no recommendation was given.¹⁵ There was to be no escape from the gallows.

By this stage Richard would have been shackled and languishing in solitary confinement in the Surrey County Gaol. It was commonly known as Horsemonger Lane Goal, named after it's location in Southwark. Criminals and debtors were housed in three wings enclosing a gloomy central courtyard and from the period of 1800 to 1877, 133 people were hanged, with four of those being women. Hangings were then conducted on the roof over the main entrance to the gaol, and were often a drawcard for large crowds who jeered and behaved badly. It would have been the scuffed shoes of executioner William Brunskill¹⁶ that Richard may have glimpsed under his rough hood. Were any of Richard's family or friends waiting anxiously below to see him go to his maker?

There are several accounts of Richard's execution on March 30 1807 in various magazines and newspapers, but the most touching is that printed in *The New Annual Register...1807*. It reads: "Monday morning, Richard Nettlefield was, after a short time spent in prayer with

the chaplain, launched into eternity from a platform erected on top of the lodge of the Surrey county gaol, in Horsemonger Lane. He died very penitent, and has left a wife and five children, who must of course become dependant on the parish of Putney for support; the youngest is only six weeks old. He was in the chapel on Sunday to hear the condemned sermon, and was accompanied by Duncan (the gardener) and their behaviour was pious, devout and resigned to their fate. The execution of the latter was respited, and he was pardoned on condition of transportation for life".¹⁷ Why not Richard too one wonders.

Richard's body was taken back to Putney, and on April 1 he was buried in the grounds of St Mary's church next to the river Thames.¹⁸ Twelve years later his long-suffering wife, Elizabeth, remarried William Chant,¹⁹ and bore three more children.²⁰ Emmanuel, Richard's youngest son went on to come before the courts himself,²¹ which is not surprising as survival would have been difficult with no father presence.

Richard Nettlefield would have slid into obscurity as a simple labourer working hard to support his family in the rapidly changing city of London during the early 19th century. Instead he has leapt through time and earned the dubious honour of being the blackest sheep in my family's flock.



NOTES:

1. <http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/contents.html> Criminal Records UK website, 1800-1827 Public Executions. List taken from newspaper accounts and handwritten court records.
 2. *Surrey, England, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials 1538-1812* GOD/1/4, Salt Lake City, Utah, FamilySearch 2013.
 3. *England Select Marriages 1538-1973* Salt Lake City, Utah, FamilySearch 2103.
 4. *Pallots Marriage Index for England 1780-1837* The Institute of Heraldic and
- 1414 – *The Blackest Sheep in my Family's Flock was ... Great Uncle Alex (Richard Nettlefield)*

- Genealogical Studies, Canterbury, England.
5. <http://www.localhistories.org/19thcent.html>. A World History Encyclopaedia by Tim Lambert. This website gives an excellent view of life in England (and other countries) through the ages.
 6. *England, Births and Christenings 1538-1975* Salt Lake City, Utah, FamilySearch 2014.
 7. <http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/g/r/a/Cameron-Gracey/FILE/0027text.txt?Welcome=1047919297> History of Putney.
 8. *Ancestry.com England & Wales Criminal Registers 1791-1892* National Archives, UK, Kew.
 9. <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/814815/person/-714573094> Conviction Image. This public family tree is called are-we-related.co.uk and owned by TMA74. It is well researched with many sources given which have mostly been accurate.
 10. *Ancestry.com are-we-related.co.uk family tree Conviction Image.*
 11. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lord_Ellenborough's_Act_1803
 12. *London, England, Baptisms, marriages and Burials, 1538-1812* Ancestry.com. /Church of England Parish Registers 1538-1812 London England: London Metropolitan Archives.
 13. *Report of Archibald Macdonald on 1 individual petition (Joseph Alcock, employer of the prisoner)* National Archives, UK, Kew H47/39/12.
 14. <http://vcp.e2bn.org/justice/page11548-court-procedures-assizes.html> Victorian Crime and Punishment website which gives a wealth of information on the court processes as well as on criminals, gaols etc.
 15. *Report of Archibald Macdonald on 1 individual petition (Joseph Alcock, employer of the prisoner)* National Archives, UK, Kew H47/39/12.
 16. <http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/horsemon.html> Detailed information on Horsemonger Lane Gaol.
 17. *The New Annual register or general Repository of History, Politics and Literature for the Year 1807.* London, printed for John Stockdale 1808. Google eBooks.
 18. *London, England, Marriages & Banns 1754-1921* Ancestry.com. London Metropolitan Archives, London.
 19. *London, England, Baptisms, Marriages & Burials 1538-1812* Ancestry.com
 20. *London, England, Birth & Baptisms 1813-1906* Ancestry.com 2010 London Metropolitan Archives.
 21. *England & Wales, Criminal Registers 1791-1892* Ancestry.com 2009, National Archives of UK, Kew.