

THE SHIPWAY PEDIGREE FRAUD or REGINA v DAVIES 1897

by Robert J. Haines

Recently, whilst engaged in research relating to the Shipway family of Beverston, Gloucestershire, the disturbing story of the "Great Shipway Pedigree Fraud", which created quite a stir on a local and national scale in the last decade of the 19th century, was uncovered.

One line of my ancestry went back to Thomas Shipway, who was buried at Beverston Church on 11 June, 1693. He appears to have been of yeoman status and was engaged in farming in the locality. His cousin, John Shipway, who was buried at Beverston on 25 November, 1690, was also a yeoman farmer, but on a much more substantial scale. John resided at the farmhouse attached to Beverston Castle - he was the tenant of the Hickes family who had long held the Lordship of the Manor after the demise of the Berkeley family of Beverston Castle. After John Shipway's death, an inventory¹ of his possessions was taken (December 1690) and the sum-total showed a value of £2,776, indicative of a very successful farming career.

In November 1895, Lt. Col. Robert Shipway, of Grove House, Chiswick, who knew of some "ancestral connections" within Gloucestershire, engaged one Dr. Herbert Davies B.A., M.D., who made claim to being a "principal genealogical specialist", to carry out research relating to the Shipway pedigree. Unknown to Col. Shipway was the fact that Dr. Davies was a 22 year old former assistant schoolteacher who had assumed the B.A. (Oxon) degree of one Herbert Davies, who had graduated in 1879, and was then actually practising as a barrister in Australia. Furthermore, the M.D. degree diploma from the University of Heidelberg was a complete forgery.

During the next year Davies pursued the Shipway pedigree and traced the line back to John Shipway (c. 1615-1690) of Beverston Castle. Throughout this period he was receiving a daily fee of six shillings (30p) plus expenses from Col. Shipway. Finding his research held up by the lack of Shipway entries in the Beverston parish register prior to 1639, Davies then commenced a remarkable series of fraudulent activities in order to establish a more ancient and far more important pedigree for the Shipways.

He visited Mangotsfield church, impressed the local incumbent with his academic status, and was given free access to the registers. Within these he created, then "discovered", ancestors of the Beverston Shipways - John Shipway, of Beverston Castle, was the son of John Shipway buried at Mangotsfield in 1628, that John Shipway, senior, was buried in 1625, that this latter was married in 1591 to Margaret Sandows, and that their son John was born in 1593. The vicar, the Rev. George Alford, very obligingly, supplied legal certificates of all these entries. The entries made frequent reference to Beverston but no-one seemed to wonder why the Shipways should choose to journey from Beverston to Mangotsfield to have their children christened. The Stonehouse parish registers, too, yielded relevant entries, with one even containing a reference to Lord Shipway who was supposed to have attended a service in the church.

SOME GRAVE ERRORS

With all these details, Col. Shipway was obviously delighted, as he was also with the discovery by Davies of the existence of an 18th century watch with a relevant ancestral inscription. More money changed hands. The inscription, in fact, had been made by a Bristol engraver at Davies' request! Further amazing discoveries were made at Mangotsfield. A carving of John Shipway's initials appeared on the hinge of

*The old parish chest.
Courtesy of the
Gloucestershire
Collection*



the old parish chest. Davies was able to persuade the vicar and church wardens to give this chest to Col. Shipway. Another inscription, dated 1541, was found carved on a wooden beam in the church. Davies, meanwhile, had obtained "some form of permission" to inspect the contents of graves at Mangotsfield. Consequently, he disturbed several graves in the churchyard (one belonging to Samuel Hicks, esq.). This coffin he had removed to the church, having casually dismissed the loose rusty metal inscription plate as being from a former interment. He had the coffin opened, and was able to report to Col. Shipway the details of the contents, noting that this ancestor "must have been a very fine man - at least 6ft 2in in height". The workmen were then instructed to leave for a while whilst Davies "cleaned" the lid of the lead coffin. On being called back they, along with the parish clerk John Preddy, saw a new inscription "John Shipway 1628" etched on the lid along with a coat-of-arms.. This tallied with details recorded in the register. John Preddy later testified to having noticed the pungent aroma of acid in the church.

Davies was still not satisfied. He had the organ moved so that he could examine two effigies which were partially buried within the church. County historians in the past had suggested they belonged to the Blount family. Davies, however, "found" an "ancient" inscription in the plasterwork which showed them to belong to the Shipway family. He also removed an heraldic shield from what was thought to be the tomb of the Andrews family. After cleaning, lo and behold, the name John Shipway appeared.

During the course of the excavations in the graveyard, a labourer named Webster had his foot crushed by a falling stone, the injuries and shock received leading to his death within days. Dr. E.M. Grace, coroner, a brother to the famous cricketer, Dr. W.G. Grace, enquired as to Davies' permission to tamper with graves. Once again, Davies made reference to his Home Office Authority. Col. Shipway, much distressed by this event, gave Davies £10 to give to Webster's widow. Davies gave her £4 and kept the other £6 for himself. The newly-discovered "Shipway" effigies were restored and set up in Mangotsfield church along with an elegant new brass engraving - all at a cost of £20 to Col. Shipway.

SHIPWAY WILLS

The existence of Shipway wills was also investigated. Without fail, several wills at Gloucester Probate Registry were found. One, dated 1547, referred to John Shipway of Beverston. In this will was recited the family's grant of arms by William de Longchamp, chancellor in A.D. 1192. Davies' knowledge of history, however, failed him, as Longchamp had been dismissed from office prior to 1192. At this point in the story the eminent genealogist W.P.W. Phillimore enters on the scene. Col. Shipway had shown him the Shipway will of 1547, along with some earlier wills discovered at Hereford

Probate Registry (James Shipway, 1524) and at Worcester Probate Registry (John James Shipway, 1490; Grace Shipway, 1537). The contents were suspicious to the eyes of this genealogist who, a few years before, had been involved with the indexing of the Gloucester wills. Phillimore discovered that Davies had tampered with the 1547 will of one John Nelme of Cam, and had re-copied portions of the document so as to make it appear to belong to John Shipway. The wills at Hereford and Worcester proved to be forgeries, but, once again, Davies had destroyed portions of original wills in order to obtain the aged paper for his own use.

Col. Shipway had by then paid Davies some £683 in fees and expenses. Mr. Phillimore, eventually, decided to place the facts before Sir Francis Jeune, President of the Probate Division. A prosecution ensued, lasting from September to November 1897, which was followed avidly by the local and national press. Davies, eventually, pleaded guilty at the Central Criminal Court, and was sentenced to three years

penal servitude.

To return, to John Shipway (c. 1615-1690) of Beverston. His father was, in fact, Nicholas Shipway of Beverston, whose will was proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, London, on the 22 July, 1641, Nicholas having been buried at Beverston on the previous 27 August, 1640. The family would appear to have originated at Sopworth or Luckington, just over the county border into Wiltshire. Anyone wishing to read the full story of this remarkable genealogical episode should consult *The Principal Genealogical Specialist*, or *Regina v. Davies*, by W.P.W. Phillimore, 1899, a copy of which is held in the Gloucestershire Collection at Gloucester City Library.² My thanks are due to Mr. Brian Frith who kindly showed me the relevant reference to this fascinating booklet.

REFERENCES

1. *Inventory, 1690, Gloucester R.O. (will proved 19 Jan 1690/91).*
 2. *Ref. 9460; R1981.*
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