

Branches of the Tree

a Family History

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Chapter One

DANIEL OSBORN

of Siston, Gloucestershire

In the first year of the reign of King George II, Daniel Osborn's first child was born and named Anne after his wife. She was baptised on Thursday 18th May 1727 in the church of St Anne in the Parish of Siston¹, South Gloucestershire. This daughter was followed three years later by her sister, Mary, who was born just before Christmas of 1730² - the year Sir Robert Walpole became England's first Prime Minister. A (possible) brother, Richard, was born about 1728, married Rebekah Jarret of Bitton in 1748 and had a son, Richard, in 1750. Daniel and Anne's next son, John, was baptised on 3rd December 1732 - not at Siston but in Abson, the neighbouring parish.

On the 25th March, Lady Day, the New Year of 1735 began and a day or two later Daniel and Anne's next son was born. As was often the case, he was named Daniel after his father. Due to the extreme infant mortality rate of the times, especially in winter, the infant Daniel was baptised as soon as Anne could attend church. On the following Sunday, the 30th March, he was baptised in the old lead font of St Anne's church at Siston. A sister, Joan, was baptised at St Anne's on Wednesday 25th May 1737 followed by George, baptised on Thursday 21st June 1739. This George was to eventually father nine children - seven of whom died in infancy. A probable brother, John, was born about 1740 and married Rose Bryant in 1759. At least five out of six of the children of this union also died in infancy.

St Anne's, the parish church of Siston, dates from Norman times as is evidenced by the original entrance doorway to the church.

The ornamented pillars either side of the doorway each have fluted capitals and a carved lintel. Surmounting these is a wonderful stone tympanum depicting the 'Tree of Life' with intricate ropework and circles carved into the surrounds.

The ancient font, used for our family baptisms for nearly a thousand years, is of cast lead and is one of only nine known to exist in the whole of Gloucestershire (six of these from the same mould as Siston's). Full of intricate detail, it is decorated with bands of foliage at top and bottom.

Siston itself, variously spelt Sistone, Sixtune and Syston³, is a small rural parish even to this day. Lying just outside the modern conurbation of Bristol suburbia and set in the rolling farmlands at the southern end of the Cotswolds, its rustic charm remains untarnished. Of early Anglo-Saxon origins, by the Eighteenth Century the parish was considered part of the Kingswood Forest. This area had been known for hundreds of years for the production of coal - being part of the coalfields stretching from the Forest of Dean to Radstock in Somerset.

Nothing is known of Daniel's early life although it is fair to assume that he was working when he was seven or eight years old. He probably worked on the land, tending the animals, helping in the fields, or scavenging the hedgerows for food. Later, he may have spent his working life down in one of the many local coalmines, or he may have been apprenticed in the textile industry, although by this time the great era of Gloucestershire's wool trade was in decline. It is entirely probable that he had more than one occupation, as there is evidence to suggest that it was fairly common then for craftsmen or colliers to work a smallholding to subsidise the family income.⁴ Apart from which, it was usual for each dwelling to have at least four acres of land for growing vegetables for home use. In all likelihood Daniel was probably a labourer, on the land or in the local coalmines with, little or no secure permanent employment.

There can have been little respite from the hard day-to-day struggle for existence in those years. Perhaps the occasional trip to the local market or a fair may have provided temporary relief. Indeed, it may have been on a busy market day that young Daniel first met Hannah Gay. It is more likely they met at Sunday service at St Anne's church where they were

destined to be married - for in these days it was an offence not to attend church and the Churchwardens noted absentees.

It is difficult to say how events of the time influenced Daniel's life. In 1745 he may have heard about the Young Pretender's Second Jacobite Rising in Scotland and even the Battle of Culloden in the following year for local and national news was often read out in church after the service. Local troubles would almost certainly have affected the family, especially the Bristol Riots of 1753 in which Daniel, by then aged 18, may well have taken part.

The winter of 1752 was hard and food became scarce and expensive - beyond the reach of most of the poor who were reduced to scavenging among the hedgerows. Bristol merchants bought up local supplies of corn to export to Ireland rather than feed the local population. On the morning of Monday 21st May a large band of starving colliers gathered in Kingswood, the parish adjoining Siston, and marched on Bristol. With their numbers increased en route by weavers and other poor people of the locality a small army of several hundred arrived at the Council House where they asked the Mayor to halt the export of wheat.

Some of the more over-zealous colliers went to the quay where they began to unload the grain cargo. They, in turn, were set upon by special constables wielding staves and several arrests were made. Fights broke out back at the Council House, which was stoned, and all the windows were broken. The special constables went into action again with enthusiasm, where *"many of the mob had their heads broke"*.

On their return to the Kingswood area the colliers vowed to return to Bristol to release those of their number held prisoner. Bristol, meanwhile, had been reinforced by a unit of the Scots Greys. On 25th May the colliers massed again and returned to Bristol armed only with stones carried in the women's aprons. In the ensuing riots at least four of their number were shot dead and many were wounded. Twenty nine were taken prisoner including George Gay (a relative of Hannah?). Most of these ended in Bristol's Newgate prison where they stayed for at least a year. No records survive to indicate what became of them.⁵

In the winter of 1756 Daniel's father, Daniel senior, died. He was buried in St Anne's churchyard on Tuesday 14th December. There is no record of what happened to his three daughters, Anne, Mary and Joan, but if they survived to this date they would probably have been married and living away from home⁷. Daniel was to marry Hannah the following year and his brother George in 1763 to Mary Gay (Hannah's sister). Their mother, Anne, may have continued living alone or she may have moved in with one of her children.

Daniel was 22 when he married Hannah on Thursday 25th August 1757 at St Anne's church and three months later their first daughter, Mary, was baptised there on Sunday 27th November. Unfortunately, as was all too often the case, young Mary died within three months and was buried at St Anne's the following February - a further victim of a cold winter, poor food and unsanitary conditions. It should be noted that a *'three month baby'* was not very uncommon then. Before Hardwick's Marriage Act of 1753 and indeed in the years following, it was common for couples to undergo a form of marriage in front of witnesses in which they vowed to take each other as man and wife. Although unlawful in the eyes of the church, this form of marriage was perfectly valid and, indeed, actually accepted as such by the church. It would appear that many of these marriages were later sanctified by a church marriage during the first pregnancy (indeed it has been shown that between one third and a half of all rural brides were pregnant between the years 1558 and 1640 and some 20% after that).⁸

In June the following year, a second daughter was born to Daniel and Hannah. In keeping with common practice the new child, following the recent death of her infant sister, was given the same name and was baptised Mary on Monday 25th June 1759. Again, tragedy struck the young family for Mary was buried at St Anne's the following month.

Four more children were to follow; George, baptised July 1760 (see [Chapter 7](#)), John, Hannah and Daniel. These latter two were further infant mortalities and were buried at St Anne's in November 1772 and October 1775 respectively. Little is known of John other than he was baptised in September 1762, married Hester Marsh of Abson in 1794 and had three

children - Hariott, Thomas and John - in 1795, 1797 and 1799. He died in April 1805 leaving Hester a widow with three children under ten to raise.

From here the fortunes of the family appear to deteriorate. Daniel's Hannah was claimed by the winter of 1789 and she joined her children in St Anne's churchyard on Saturday 28th February 1789. A note in the parish register states "*Pd 10s ... Breakg Grd'*". The reference to breaking ground is usually taken to mean that the family were new to the parish and paid a fee for the first interment in the churchyard whereafter members of the family were exempt from paying⁹. Since Daniel's father had been buried at St Anne's in 1756 without a note of this fee being paid it remains something of a mystery.¹⁰ By this time Daniel was 54 and his two sons, George and John, were 29 and 27 respectively - both married but still living in the parish.

So now Daniel was alone and as he grew older it must have been increasingly more difficult to earn a living. If he were ill for a while or out of work his family would have looked after him but, failing that, the Parish Overseer would have ensured that he did not starve. In 1601, an Act, commonly called the Poor Law, was passed to provide for the systematic relief of the poor and to appoint overseers in each parish to levy rates and arrange for its distribution. The Poor Law would have ensured that regular payments would have been made to him, but they were a mere pittance barely adequate for survival at subsistence level even by the meagre standards of the day. It was quite common for a fortnightly payment of Poor Relief to be about equal to the daily wage of an artisan. In 1662 the Parochial Settlement Act empowered overseers and churchwardens of a parish to remove any newcomer who arrived and occupied a tenement of less than ten pounds annual value, unless he could give security that he would not become chargeable to the parish. The effect of this act was to pen up the labouring classes in their villages and destroy all freedom of movement. Effectively, therefore, even if Daniel was able to work his age by this time would have been against him. He could not leave the area of Siston to look for work unless he obtained a Settlement Certificate (which would assure any new parish that, if he became destitute, Siston would have him back and maintain him under the terms of the Poor Law). A Settlement Certificate would probably be out of the question; firstly because of his age and secondly his family were still in the parish and would have been expected to support him during hard times.

In 1793, England went to war with France until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Throughout this period prices rose dramatically, far outpacing the rise in wages. This, combined with the final surge of the enclosures and the further decline of the agrarian way of life, especially the Gloucestershire wool trade, led to a huge national increase in the numbers of poor and parish relief became the only option for ever increasing numbers.

After Hannah died, Daniel struggled on alone for a further 20 years - at last giving up at the age of 74 in 1809. He was finally laid to rest in St Anne's churchyard in an unmarked grave (as with all Osborn burials in Siston) on Sunday 4th June - hopefully close to Hannah and their four children. A note made in Siston's parish register alongside the entry of Daniel's burial reiterates the interment fee "*Breaking the ground... 10s 6d*".

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CHAPTER ONE NOTES

1. Pronounced 'sye'-ston.
2. All dates in this chapter from the parish register of Siston, unless otherwise stated.
3. A.Mee, "*The King's England - Gloucestershire*" (London, 1938), p253.
4. Ekwall gives the spellings as Systone (Domesday Book), Sixtune (1240AD - quoted from Baddeley's "*The Place Names of Gloucestershire*" and Syston from the Charter Rolls of 1247AD.

5. See J.S.Moore, *"The Goods and Chattels of our Forefathers"* (London, 1976).
6. For a complete account of this event see D.P.Lindegaard *"The Annals of Kingswood, 1750-1775"* (Bristol, 1990).
7. There are no further mention of these daughters in Siston records. They presumably either died and their burials went unrecorded or, less likely, married outside of the parish.
8. See Lewis *"People and Parish Registers"* (London, 1979).
9. See McLaughlin *"Further Steps in Family History"* (Newbury,1990).
10. The mentioning of 'breaking the ground' is quite rare in Siston's parish register and, if McLaughlin is correct, surprising in this instance as it did not occur at the time of Daniel Senior's burial.

Chapter Two

HENRY GAY

Parish Clerk of Siston, Gloucs

*'There goes the parson, oh! illustrious spark,
And there, scarce less illustrious, goes the Clerk!'*
Cowper

In the closing years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First, about the year 1595, Henry Gay was born. The distance, in time, from today is quite difficult to grasp but a very short history lesson helps to broaden the perspective.

It was in this year that the English longbow was finally abandoned as a weapon of war and also the year that Richard Hawkins and Francis Drake left on their last voyage to the Spanish Main. England was at war with Spain and in 1597 the Second Spanish Armada set sail but was scattered by storms. In 1596 Galileo invented the thermometer and in the same year tomatoes were first introduced into England.

In 1599 the Globe theatre opened in London, to be burnt down several years later in 1613. In 1603 Queen Elizabeth died and James IV of Scotland became King James 1 of England, Scotland and Ireland. The following year saw the end of the war with Spain and the year after that saw the events leading to the Gunpowder Plot. In 1606 Shakespeare's "Macbeth" had its first performance and in 1612 the last burning of heretics took place.

Our Twenty First Century smugness might be put in its place by realising that in 1615 coin-in-the-slot vending machines for loose tobacco were introduced into English taverns and two years later one-way streets for traffic control were introduced into London. We are talking about a man who could probably never have drunk either a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, eaten a banana or a tomato or seen a chrysanthemum or tulip.

The exact whereabouts of Henry's birth are not known but it was probably in the parish of Siston, Gloucestershire¹. At the end of the Sixteenth Century and the beginning of the Seventeenth, Henry was the only member of the Gay family in evidence in the parish. All members of the Gay family in the parish over the next two hundred years are directly descended from him².

Henry was obviously an educated man for he was to become the Parish Clerk of Siston and a prerequisite of this not unimportant position was the ability to read and write. Certainly in medieval times the Parish Clerk was, indeed, often in minor holy orders and performed several functions in the everyday life of the church. By the Seventeenth Century however, the ecclesiastical role had diminished and the function was more secular.

As Parish Clerk, and as part of his secretarial and administrative duties, Henry would have kept a notebook in which he entered all parish events such as baptisms, marriages and burials. Either himself or the Rector would then have copied the details of his notebook into the parish register at frequent intervals. Henry, in his role of Parish Clerk, would also have needed an elementary knowledge of accounting, as it was also his responsibility to administer parish accounts. His other duties would have included writing out the banns, arranging and accompanying the Rector on his visits to parishioners, leading the singing in church services, intoning responses, reading the lesson, and so on.

About the year 1618, when Walter Raleigh was beheaded and Francis Bacon was created Lord Chancellor, he was married to Margaret but again the record of his marriage has not yet been found. The first record in which Henry is actually mentioned is that of the baptism of his son, Benjamin, who was baptised at St Anne's, Siston in May 1620, the year the Pilgrim Fathers left Plymouth in the "Mayflower". Henry and Margaret's second son was baptised Nathaniel on 5th September 1624 (see Chapter 3), the year England declared war yet again on Spain and also the year Frans Hals painted the "*Laughing Cavalier*". An extract from

Siston's parish register (see photo below) shows the entry as the middle of three for the year 1624 as follows :-

"It[e]m the vth Daie of September was Baptized Nathaniel Gaye the Sonne of Henry Gaye and Margrett his wife"

This entry is interesting for it was almost certainly written by Henry himself. The parish registers were usually written either by the parson or the parish clerk and since John Honeyburne the parson's signature at the end of the 1623 entries is in a completely different hand, the register was probably written by the parish clerk. Being the parish clerk it was probably Henry who, almost uniquely for Siston's parish registers, added the following interesting snippet to the register in 1625 :-

"Memorandum ye Jeffreyes and Tuckers of Warmley are Rogues whores and Thieves "

Both families were numerous in the parish and the hamlet of Warmley. Henry's feelings towards them will be left to the imagination!

Two more sons were to follow; Samuel baptised on 24th March 1627 and Daniel baptised on 1st April 1628. The final child, Hester, was baptised on 12th June 1639. But just a few years later, as Henry was raising his family in the small rural parish some four miles from Bristol, national events were to come to the fore in the form of the English Civil War. What Henry's politics were can never now be known but it would appear that most of the region's population was decidedly neutral. McGrath comments, on Bristol, that the city was "... *never a committed 'parliamentary' or 'royalist' city, still less a 'puritan' city...*"⁶ The events of 1643 to 1646 would undoubtedly have affected the lives of Henry and his family if only for their proximity to the two opposing forces.

Briefly, fortified Bristol was taken by Royalist forces under Prince Rupert in 1643 and held for two years. By 1645 the city was besieged by Parliamentarian forces that were billeted in the villages around the city - a regiment of foot reaching Hanham (a parish adjoining Siston) in late July or early August. The Royalists made many sallies from Bristol, torching outlying villages such as Bedminster and Clifton in an early example of '*scorched earth*' policy.

On 21st August Cromwell and Fairfax made their headquarters at Hanham. At 1am on 10th September the Parliamentarian forces attacked Bristol and, after a bloody battle in which some 1,400 died, took the city. Throughout this period Henry must have had grave fears for the safety of his family since, to quote McGrath '*War meant the presence of the brutal and licentious soldiery, threats to life and property, taxation on an unprecedented scale.*'

In the aftermath of war the countryside settled and returned to its quite rural existence. The immediate day-to-day life of the village would probably have been little affected by the subsequent happenings of politics and Cromwell's Commonwealth although gradually the austerity of the Puritan ideal would have filtered through to the rural community. It may be that initially the major effect was the iconoclastic destruction of religious images in the church followed quickly by a change in the manner by which church services were held. Henry died in 1653 and was buried St Anne's churchyard - the entry in the parish register (photograph below) states "*December 10th Buried Henry Gay Clarke of this p[ar]ish*". Margaret died in 1672 and was buried on the 29th April.

The Family of Benjamin Gay

Henry's son Benjamin grew up to a life in the local coalmines and is described in later records as a *Colliere*. He married, about the year 1647, to Anne and they had two daughters; Anne (named after Benjamin's wife) baptised 12 August 1649 and Margaret (named after Benjamin's mother) who was baptised 25 July 1652.

In 1653 Benjamin's wife Ann died and was buried on the 2nd February in St Anne's churchyard. In keeping with the custom of the time, Benjamin would have been encouraged to marry as soon as possible, for he had two infant daughters to look after and he could not have given up work to look after them. They would either have been looked after by relatives, fostered out as paupers by the parish or looked after by a new mother. Fortunately for the girls, the latter occurred since Benjamin married again in (about) 1656 - again to a wife called Anne. In the same year however, his daughter Margaret died and was buried on the 9th September.

Benjamin and Anne, his new wife, went on to have a fairly large family. Joane was baptised on the 30th March 1657 but died in infancy and was buried on 14th July 1660. A second daughter, Parnell⁵, was baptised on the 8th November 1657 followed by their first son, baptised Henry, after Benjamin's father, on 24th February 1661. (This Henry, himself, was to have a large family).

After Henry came a second attempt at naming a daughter Joan. She was baptised on 24th February 1663 with her sister Susannah. Joan was, alas, buried the following day. Next came a third and final Joan, baptised on 22nd October 1665, followed on 31st May 1668 by a daughter, Dinah. It was this Dinah who in 1687, when aged 19, received a payment from the parish "*pd for curing Dinah gays legg ... 15s 6d*".⁶ The last child, named Mary, had no baptism entry but was buried on 17th January 1670 - an indication that she died almost immediately after birth.

Benjamin was mentioned by name in the Vicar's Perambulation of the parish of Siston in 1674. His second wife, Anne, was buried on 27th February 1682, the entry in the parish register stating "*Buried Anne the wife of Benjamin Gay, Colliere*", indicating that Benjamin was still alive at this time. The record of Benjamin's burial has not yet been found.

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Chapter Two Notes

1. Siston's earliest surviving parish register is of paper and many of the earlier pages have been damaged, thus making most of the early entries illegible.
2. This fact has been proven by constructing a family tree with all entries of Gay baptisms, marriages and burials as listed in Siston's parish registers to about 1790. All Gay family members so recorded are included on this tree and there appear to be no 'strays'.
3. This, and all other dates in this chapter, are taken from the parish registers of Siston, Gloucs.
4. For a full account of the siege of Bristol, see McGrath '*Bristol and the Civil War*'.
5. The name Parnell is now considered to be obsolete. However its Latinised form *Petronella* gained some popularity during Victorian times.
6. Siston's Overseers Book.