

An Update to 'The leaves of Time' October 2016

Martin Stockley's and Bob Johnston's book 'The leaves of Time' (LoT) gives a wonderful insight into the history of Speen and some of its inhabitants. The authors undertook detailed research of census data and much more to give us pen pictures in chapter 8 of four of Speen's Victorian characters.

One of those characters was Ann Chilton. My interest in Ann stems from research into my own family history which found her to be my step-great grandmother. My grandfather's first marriage was to Ann's youngest daughter Elizabeth.

As well as Census and other online data I also have access to documents such as wills and conveyances that give more information than was available to Martin and Bob. From these I have a more detailed account of Ann and her circumstances to go along side that in 'The Leaves of Time'.

Ann's husband John Chilton had previously been married to Sarah (surname not known). This marriage produced five children between 1826 and 1835. These were Caroline, Ellen, Ann, Free and Daniel. Unfortunately Sarah died in the first quarter of 1838.

Ann was born in 1819. So she was about 20 years old and 18 years younger than John when she married and became step-mother to his five children then aged between 4 and 13 years. Free Chilton mentioned in the LoT was in fact one of Sarah's children. Rebeckah was the first of Ann's eight children born between 1839 and 1855. The others were Thomas, Jabez, Ellen, Benjamin, Sophia, Maryanne and Elizabeth.

The LoT suggests that the Chiltons ran a shop, and they did - but not from the George farmhouse. In 1844 John purchased premises that already had a long standing shop and bakery. This property is currently called the Old Post Office. It was here that they continued to raise their family. John bought the copyhold from Levi Ward for £220 with a mortgage at 5% interest paid annually.

The LoT rightly describes the family as successful and this was despite some tough and distressing periods. John's three daughters from his first marriage all died young. Ellen died in 1842 aged 14 and Ann died in 1846 aged 16 years. Caroline died probably in her early twenties and certainly before 1855 as she is mentioned as deceased in John's will of that year. John himself died on the 18th May 1855 at the time when his wife Ann was either heavily pregnant with or had just given birth to their last child Elizabeth, who was born sometime between April and June.

So Ann, at 36, was now responsible for bringing up her own eight children then aged up to 16 years as well as running the businesses and assuming the burden of the mortgage which had to be transferred to her. However the businesses must have been doing reasonably well as only 4 years later in 1859 she took the opportunity to buy the freehold of the property from the Manor of Abbots Risborough for the sum of £50.

By 1876 all her children but Elizabeth had married and were bringing up their families elsewhere. Her two step-sons and three sons lived in Speen and her four other daughters lived locally within the Wycombe District. In 1877 Elizabeth married my grandfather George Ridgley and from that time (or maybe from even earlier) he ran the Bakery side of the business.

Ann died on the 1st April 1879 aged 60. In her Will she left £15 each to her two step-sons. The rest of her estate was to be shared equally between her own children, which effectively meant that her property had to be sold. The Will also stated that Elizabeth should 'possess and occupy' the house. Consequently George Ridgley bought the property from Ann's estate in 1881 for £278.

At the time Ann passed away there were 35 grandchildren aged between 1 and 23 years including four by her step-sons. Another 11 grandchildren were born after she died.

I am not yet sure of Ann's origins. I think her maiden name may have been Ward rather than Biggs. Before Ann married, she may well have been employed as a housekeeper by John Chilton to help him with his family after his first wife died. So plunged into the deep end, as it were, Ann rose to the challenge and was raising six children by the time she was 21. She must have grown in confidence character and competence in this role, for Ann had the determination and resilience to successfully manage a large family, both the bakery and grocery shop businesses and, as a widow, the foresight and ability to purchase her own property.

Having done my own research I have to strongly agree with Martin and Bob when they say 'she would have been a figure to have been held in some respect'.

Charles Hendry
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Obviously there are no photographs of Ann Chilton but there is some direct connexion to her by the signature on the mortgage document of 1855.

