

Account of Purley on Thames

Storer Trials

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Articles by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 38 published in PPN December 1983 and January 1984

- 38 - The Trial of Anne Catherine Storer and her Butler

As William Wilberforce's campaign to abolish slavery gathered force in the early 19th Century, a 19-year-old negro called Philip Thompson ran away from Purley Park to Reading. It was August 1824 and he had been severely beaten and ill-treated. Since 1772 slaves became free immediately they set foot on British soil, but although Philip had been in England for at least 3 years he was unaware of his free status until he reached the town. There he was taken to an attorney and brought a case of common assault against his former employer, Mrs. Storer, and her coloured butler, Robert William Stewart. The matter came to court in March 1825 in two separate cases.

Born in the West Indies, Philip Thompson was bought as a slave for Mrs. Storer's house, Belleisle, in Jamaica. He was placed under the charge of Robert the butler who was about 10 years older. His duties included cleaning and waiting at table. Under cross-examination he said he had not been taught to read, had never been to church in Jamaica and only twice in England. He admitted that Mrs. Storer looked after him "as she was bound to" and saw that he took his medicine when he was ill, but said that flogging was the usual punishment for any misdemeanour and he was often ill-treated.

One day in July 1824 Mrs. Storer was already up when Philip

rose at 6.00 am. Finding that he had not been up in time to clean the lobby she ordered him to be taken to the "whipping place". After removing his coat, waistcoat and shirt, he then received about a dozen lashes from a hunting whip wielded by the butler so that the blood ran down his back. He dared not cry out in case he received double blows and claimed that although no other servant witnessed the incident, Ely was seeing to the horses in the nearby stables and would have heard. Mrs. Storer was said to have been present and said "Well done, Robert, give him more". Philip claimed he gave his blood-stained shirt to Mrs. Pope the laundress, which she later denied.

Mrs. Storer, who did not appear in court, was described by her lawyer as a "lady of high rank and large fortune" and he thought it "utterly improbable that a delicate and amiable English lady ... should not only order such a cruel infliction, but also be an eye-witness". Several servants were called to testify to her kindness as a mistress; the laundress Mrs. Pope denied seeing the flogging, John May the postillion also denied all knowledge and said that Ely, the only potential witness, had left his job before this event. Mrs. Stevens the housekeeper and Miss Mary Ann Jones, governess to the four Storer daughters, gave their mistress an "excellent character for humanity". Only the former coachman, George Downham said that Mrs. Pope had witnessed the flogging and expressed concern at the boy's treatment.

In his summing up, the Judge told the jury not to make skin colour a test of truth, but to consider that the character of the witnesses, several of whom would not believe the lad, was important. Although the evidence was not corroborated, the jury had to decide if it was true; did Mrs. Storer - an accomplished lady with four daughters - order the flogging and then stand by and approve such a "horrible infliction"?

It took the jury only a quarter of an hour to reach their verdict: NOT GUILTY.

Next month: The trial of Robert William Stewart, the butler.

Jean Debney

38 - The Case of the Ill-treated Servant (contd.)

The trial of Robert William Stewart, the Butler

Last month's story related Mrs Storer's trial for common assault on her servant, Philip Thompson. This month's is that of her butler, Robert William Stewart.

Seated on the dresser in the kitchen at Purley Park on Sunday, 19th August 1824, Philip was cleaning the ivory-handled knives that had been brought from the West Indies. Robert the butler came in from the pantry and was annoyed when he saw that in order to save trouble, the boy was cleaning two knives at a time. He told him off in case he dropped one and split the handle, but Philip answered back and let a knife fall to the ground. As Robert slapped him twice on the face he cut his hand on a knife held up in self-defence. After wiping blood all over the boy's face he left the kitchen but returned later with his hand bound up and said that Mrs Storer had ordered the boy to be flogged. All this was witnessed by several servants: Sarah Sherwood, Jane Brown the laundrymaid, John May the coachman and John Leake the gardener.

Events then took a nasty turn as Robert dragged Philip by the collar and locked him overnight in the damp potato cellar. Through a round hole cut in the door to let in

light, Jane later passed him some tea and bread and butter, and a coloured girl, Myrtilia, brought him a piece of carpet to lie on.

At 5 o'clock next morning, as Jane got up to wash she saw Philip walking towards the stables followed by Robert carrying a postillion's whip. As Philip took off his coat and waistcoat, he noticed that Robert held a piece of cord to tie him up, so he tried to escape. Soon caught, he fell and hit his head on some stone steps, and then was dragged back across the flint yard by a hand and foot. When he caught hold of some railings Robert hit his knuckles so he had to let go. Robert then locked him in a stable and went to fetch Mrs Storer. But while he was gone, Philip managed to jump out of the window and, wearing only his torn shirt and trousers, ran away to Reading. There he found that the relationship between mistress and slave had ceased and he was a free man.

In his defence, Robert's lawyer said that the butler was justified in giving Philip prompt and moderate correction and suggested that the charge of assault had been exaggerated. He regretted that the unconfirmed mention of a "whipping-place" had been made about the house of a "lady of great respectability". Even if Mrs Storer had ordered the flogging, as a lady she could not carry it out; that would have to be done by an upper servant of the household. But, as the judge commented in his summing-up, the imprisonment and tying up could not be justified.

After only a few minutes deliberation the jury brought in their verdict of GUILTY.

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