

**MURDER AND SUDDEN DEATH
IN MEDIEVAL WIGSTON**

BY W. G. HOSKINS, M.SC.(ECON.), PH.D.

Murder and Sudden Death in Medieval Wigston

By W. G. Hoskins, M.Sc. (Econ.), Ph.D.

IN the short space of ninety-one years, between 1299 and 1390, the people of Wigston were involved in no fewer than eight cases of murder or manslaughter. They were probably no more murderously inclined than other people in medieval days and we must regard this number of violent deaths as typical of the time. In each of these eight cases, moreover, the guilty man received a royal pardon; it is the recording of the pardon among the patent rolls that has preserved for us the memory of these old crimes. Who knows how many more such violent deeds occurred of which we have no record to-day, how many screams in the night from a dark lane or a solitary field? An outlying part of the fields of Wigston was, indeed, known in the fourteenth century as "the robbers' valley" and another part as "the robbers' pasture".¹

Of most of these crimes we know nothing beyond a few bare facts, but of the last in our list, a murder committed on a dark November night in the year 1390, we learn the motive and other details from a chance record among the Hastings manuscripts, and of this we shall speak in due course.

The first case relates to the death of Simon the clerk of Wigston, slain by Adam Erik of the same village, a crime for which he received the royal pardon on May 14, 1299, at the instance of Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford. The latter was the chief mesne tenant of the principal manor of Wigston and a powerful friend at court. We may well imagine that Adam Erik fled from his native village immediately after the crime (which may indeed have been manslaughter rather than murder) and that the remaining members of his family, who were substantial free tenants of the manor, exerted themselves with the lord to obtain a pardon. Both the principal parties in this affair were members of old Wigston families, the Herricks and the Wyggestons, which were prominent in the village from very early times.

¹*Shakresdale* in 1342 (from the O.E. *sceacere*, "robber"). *Shackerdale* Farm to-day on the northern edge of the parish. The other locality was *Saturilese* in 1376, now a lost name.

About the same time occurred another violent death which involved two other well-known families in the village. The patent rolls record on January 22, 1302, a royal pardon, issued at Linlithgow, to John son of John Swan of Wigston, "for the death of John Symond of the same and of any subsequent outlawry" by reason of his service in the Scottish war. John Swan had probably fled the village and joined the army campaigning in Scotland. It was so difficult to raise and keep together an army in 'medieval days that no awkward questions were asked when a man appeared in this way, and many a man was able to expiate his crime by valour in the field. Swan so distinguished himself that his commander was able to procure a pardon that permitted him to see his native streets and fields once again and to walk about a free man.

The Swans appear to have been a hot-tempered family, eager for a fight, for on two subsequent occasions we find them in trouble. On April 12, 1351, commission of oyer and terminer was granted to Richard de Wylughby, Roger la Zousche, Roger Beler, John Waleys, and John de Knyghton, co. Leics., on the complaint of John de Grey of Codnor (who was lord of the manor of Evington) "that Robert Faukus, William Faukus, John Swan, Richard Swan, Henry Swan, William Matheu, John Golner the younger, William Dikun, Guy Martel of Kilby, William Balle, John de Tonge, chaplain, and others carried away his goods at Evington, assaulted his men and servants at Wigston, and imprisoned them at Leicester". It will be seen that three members of the bellicose Swan family appear in this list.

A similar commission was granted "on complaint by Thomas Fox of Evington that the said Robert Faukus and others assaulted him at Wigston, took and imprisoned him at Leicester, and detained him in prison until he made fine with them by £40 for his deliverance, and carried away his goods at Wigston".

It is very possible that the next notice of John Swan refers to a death resulting from this affray, for on September 20, 1352, a royal pardon was granted, at the request of Edward prince of Wales, to John Swan of Wigston for the death of William de Horselegh of the county of Derby. Here again it seems likely that the guilty man had joined the army to avoid arrest and after a year's campaigning had come to the notice of the Black Prince, who had spoken for him with the king.

A similar case, though this time it is a woman who is involved, had arisen in 1343. On September 20 of that year we read in the patent rolls of a "pardon, in consideration of her having for a long time followed the king as well in Brittany as in parts within the seas at her own charges, as William de Bohun, earl of Northampton, has testified, to Alice daughter of Roger de Walton of all that pertains to the king for the death of Adam Godewyn of Wykyngeston, co. Leics., whereof she is appealed, and of any consequent waiver." Once more, the families involved were free tenants of the manor; the Waltons, at least, must have been fairly substantial peasants to have maintained Alice at their own expense during a long campaign. One would like to know the story behind this meagre entry, of how Alice of Walton came to kill Adam Godewyn and in what capacity she could have rendered meritorious service with the king at home and abroad. It is an odd sidelight on medieval social history.

Another case which took some time to clear up was that of John Amy of Wigston, who had killed, accidentally or otherwise, Roger Noreys, also of Wigston. On October 17, 1352, "pardon of special grace" was granted to John, son of William Amy, with respect to this affair. Six weeks later, on November 26, his goods, which had been forfeited to the king, were granted back to him; but the business still dragged on, for on July 4, 1354, another pardon of special grace was granted.

To go back a few years, another representative of an old Wigston family—Richard Astel—found himself charged with killing William de Kylby of Wigston at the neighbouring village of Newton Harcourt. He was apparently confined in Leicester gaol to await trial by "Richard de Wylughby and his fellow justices appointed to deliver Leycestre gaol", who found that he had killed in self-defence. A pardon was therefore granted to him on November 20, 1339.

In 1360 a long list of royal pardons for crimes committed in the past followed a successful military campaign in France. Among those pardoned was John Fytoun of Shawell, a small Leicestershire village close to Watling Street and the Warwickshire border, "for good service in the war of France, as William de Bridport has testified". Fytoun had been guilty of the theft of a horse at a place called Milton and of being "a common thief", and also of the death of Richard Eyrek of Wigston.

Finally, in 1390, there occurred a clash at Wigston which left faint echoes more than fifty years later. The story begins in the Coroners' Rolls for Leicestershire, which are preserved at the Public Record Office.

Inquest taken at Wykyngeston in the presence of Thomas de Queneby, one of the coroners of the King in the county of Leicester, on the Tuesday next before the feast of St. Hugh in the year written above [15th November, 1390] on the view of the body of Adam de Sutton of Wigston by the neighbouring vills, namely, Wigston, Oadby, Knighton, Glen, and Aylestone, and upon the oath of John Friday, Henry Harecourt, Thomas Hutte, Peter Eyryk, William Smyth, John Bryge, Robert Pollyng, Richard Magson, Alexander Bocher, John Smyth, William Draper and John Faukes, who say on their oath that on the Sunday before the aforesaid feast of the year written above [13th November, 1390] Richard Baker clerk of Wigston Harcourt met the said Adam at night in the highway in a certain place called Abouetheslowe in Wigston, coming from an inn, and the aforesaid Richard, because of various quarrels which had arisen between them, struck the said Adam on the head with a staff worth one penny, whereby the said Adam within a short while afterwards died without the rites of the church. And they say that Emma Baker first discovered him. And the said jurors say that Richard killed Adam feloniously on the Sunday in the said year at Wigston. And immediately he had done this he fled. And he has no goods or chattels. The body is viewed by the coroner, but Richard is acquitted by the charter of the King in the presence of William Thirnyg and Richard Sidenham the justices assigned to the gaol delivery on Thursday in the vigil of St. James in the seventeenth year of the reign of Richard II [24th July, 1393].

The patent rolls inform us also that on March 7, 1392, "pardon was granted on the supplication of Nicholas Monketon of Wiltshire to Richard Baker of Wigston Harcourt² for the death

²The Harcourts were chief lords of certain property in Wigston from an early date, and this part of the village (mainly, I think, in the neighbourhood of All Saints' church) was known as Wigston Harcourt, a name which has long since disappeared.

of Adam de Sutton of Wigston, killed there on Sunday before the feast of St. Hugh the Bishop, 14 Richard II".

In a document of 1442 among the Hastings manuscripts at Ashby Castle, copied by Mr. Farnham³, we find the story completed and we catch the dying echoes of the crime on that November night, fifty-two years before. The document begins prosaically enough by recording the receipt of a penny rent from a house in Wigston, held in free tenure, and then proceeds to unfold a tale of old, unhappy things.

The yearly rent paid by the hands of Robert Hutt, to wit one penny at Christmas from Alice Grendon, kinswoman and heir of Richard Mabyll, now deceased, for a certain tenement and four acres of land which Richard Hutt and Amice his wife, the daughter of Richard Mabyll, lately held of Roger Mabyll in chief at a rent as aforesaid besides foreign service to Sir John Fryday, knight, which said tenement lies in Bysserow streete⁴ in Wikingeston between the cottage of Henry Harcourte on the east and the common way called Hawthornegate on the west, and know ye that Richard Hutte and Amice his wife, the daughter of Richard Mabyll, had issue Thomas and John, and Thomas had issue John, which John had issue Robert, the now tenant. And Richard Mabyll the son of Roger had issue Emma and Amice. And Amice the wife of Richard Hutt being dead, a certain John Baker took the said Emma to wife and so had the capital messuage and virgate of land and 13½d. yearly rent, which messuage lies between the said cottage of Henry Harecourte on the west and the capital messuage of Richard Friday on the east. And John Baker and Emma his wife had issue Richard and Alice. After John Baker's death a certain Robert Levy married Emma and after Robert Levy's death a certain Adam Sutton took the said Emma to wife. Afterwards the said Emma died and the said Adam enfeoffed a certain John Weston chaplain in the lands, &c., to the disinheritance of Richard Baker, the eldest son of the said Emma, for which the said Richard

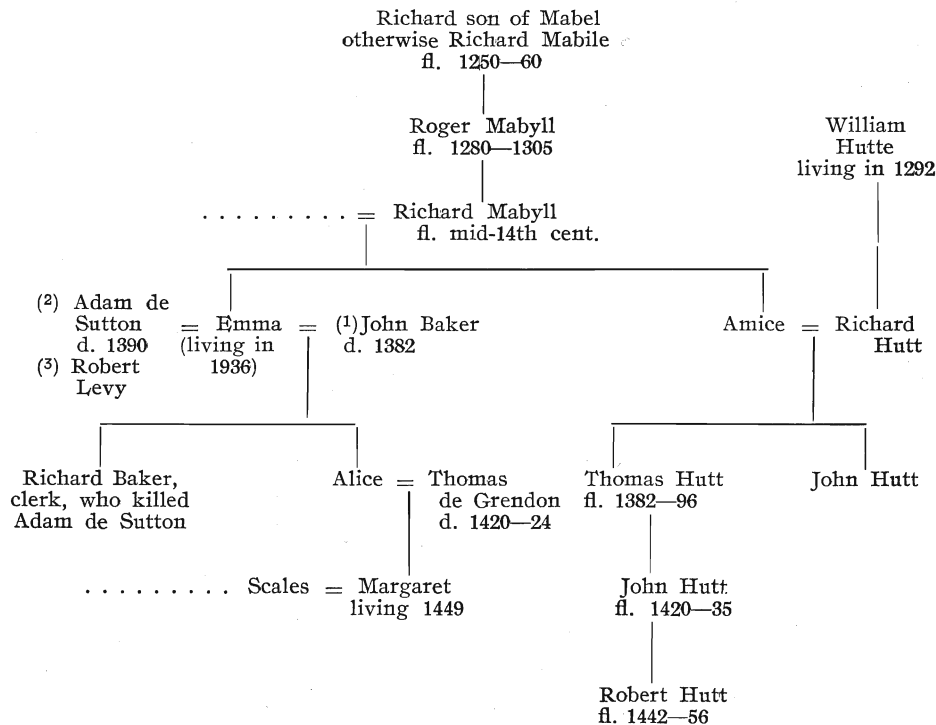
³Farnham MSS. under Wigston (City Muniment Room, Leicester).

⁴This is probably Bushloe Street. There is a Bushloe End in Wigston to-day, beginning by All Saints' church and running westwards towards Blaby. This was the site of the property that caused the crime and the scene of the crime also.

Baker by night killed the said Adam; for which reason the chief lord Sir John Fryday recovered the said messuage and virgate of land by the writ of estreats against Alice Grendon, widow, the sister of the said Richard Baker, made 20 May, 20 Henry IV [1441].

Not only does this record give us a lengthy pedigree of ordinary village families, going back into the thirteenth century, but it helps us also to reconstruct the topography, house by house, of one corner of the village as it stood in Richard II's time; and we can add to this picture from the Wyggeston Hospital records that have been transcribed by Professor Hamilton Thompson. It shows us, too, the "land hunger" of the medieval peasant, as tenacious as any lord or gentleman of his fields and cottages, the small property that marked him out from villein families who had no land of their own but occupied only "at the lord's will".

Descent of the Mabile and Hutt families at Wigston



It is worth while to record the pedigree established by this document (with corrections that will be mentioned subsequently), supplemented from the records of the Wyggeston Hospital.

The Mabile family, who were of some importance in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Wigston, took their name apparently from some woman of position named Mabel of whom we now know nothing. "Richard son of Mabel" appears in Wigston documents dating from the latter part of the thirteenth century. In some records he signs as Richard Mabile and thus became the accepted surname of the family by 1300. The fact that a woman could give her name to a fairly well-to-do peasant family in the Middle Ages is an indication of the social importance of women in some parts of England, particularly in the Danelaw where land held freely by women was not uncommon.

For a short time the north field of Wigston was known as *Mabloue felde*, though its designation as Mucklow field was known earlier and became the accepted name in later centuries. It seems that the unknown Mabel, who lived round about the year 1200, must have held land in this field which included a prominent hill or perhaps a large barrow (Mabel's *low*) sometimes known as *Mokilhow* or "the great hill". As the generations passed and Mabel became a dim and then a forgotten figure, the hill too changed its name and the north field was known henceforward as Mucklow Field. Another woman who gave her name for a time to a part of the west field of the village was Gunnvor, of Scandinavian descent. *Gonewarehil* appears as a name in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and then she, too, passes into oblivion and the hill took a different name.

To return to our record of the murder, however, there are some serious discrepancies in the dating of the story which cannot be explained from the surviving documents alone. Thus we are told in the record of 1442, compiled more than half a century after the event, that Richard Baker killed Adam de Sutton *after* the death of Emma his mother. Now there is no shadow of doubt that the crime was committed on the night of November 13, 1390. Certain records in the Wyggeston Hospital collection establish that John Baker, Emma's first husband and father of Richard Baker, died late in 1382. But another document in this collection, dated July 31, 1396, refers to the house of "Emma Levi", nearly six years after Adam, her supposed third husband, was

killed. Emma was still alive at that date, and so probably was Robert Levi or Levy.

We can only suppose, therefore, that the memorandum among the Hastings manuscripts, compiled so long afterwards, erred in certain material facts. Adam de Sutton must have been Emma's second husband, not her third, and he must have granted away Richard Baker's inheritance during the lifetime of Emma. As the only son of the first marriage, Richard stood to inherit "the capital messuage" and the virgate of land (24 acres) in the village fields, together with the yearly rent of 13½ pence which was in all likelihood a ground rent from other property like the penny from the house inhabited by the Hutts. And we must presume that Adam, her second husband, prevailed upon Emma to grant away this freehold—which was incidentally a typical medieval holding of a free tenant—so that "various quarrels" arose between Richard and Adam which culminated in the latter's death, probably near his own door in "Bysserowstreete", since Emma was the first to find him dead.

The topography of this part of the village can be reconstructed without much difficulty, and several interesting points of medieval social history emerge; but these must be left for consideration at some future time.

Besides the inquest on Adam de Sutton in 1390, the Coroner's Rolls contain a record of four other inquests at Wigston between 1394 and 1405. These are said to be the only Wigston inquests of which any record is preserved, but there must obviously have been a great number of such enquiries in medieval times as the five surviving cases all fall within a period of fifteen years, an average of one violent death every three years. It is a pity that such a great number of inquests have been lost to us, for, as will be apparent from the transcripts which follow, almost every one adds a little to our knowledge of the everyday life of the medieval village, some small fragment of social history that could not otherwise have been recovered, and leaves us with a little picture of life (and sudden death) on a hot afternoon or a cool evening many centuries ago.

Inquest taken at Wigston on Thursday before the feast of Saint Margaret the Virgin in the 18th year of the reign of Richard II [9th July, 1394] in the presence of John Folwyll, one of the coroners of the King in the county of Leicester,

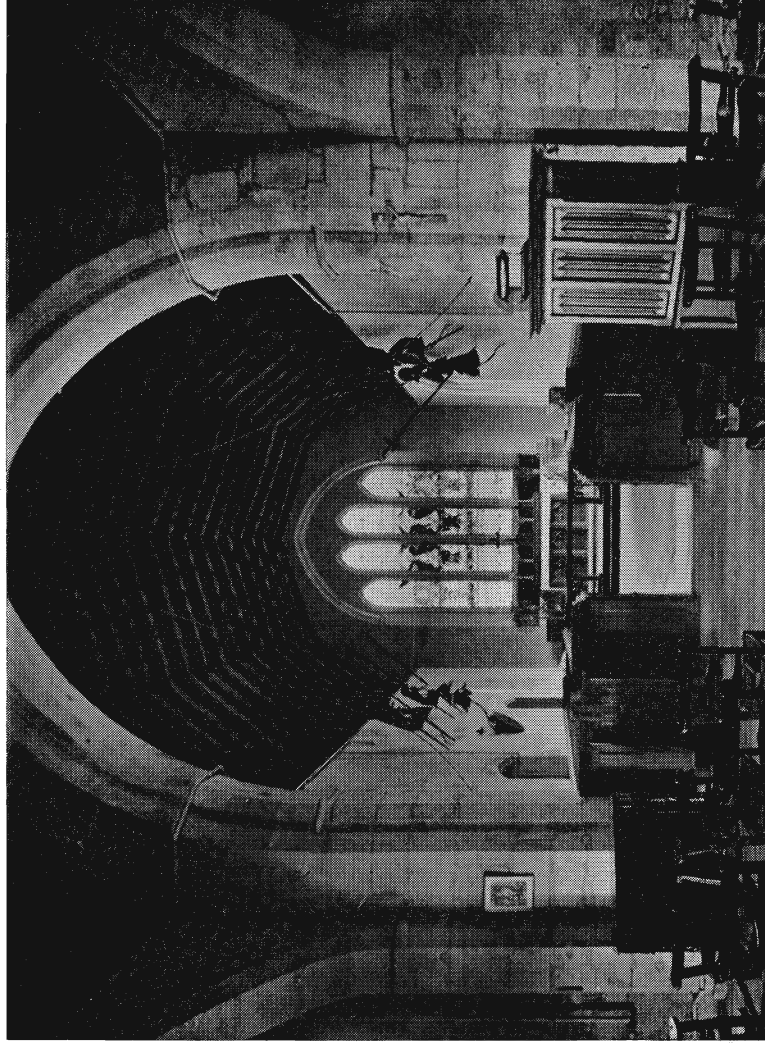
July 4]

on the view of the body of John Haldenby of Wigston by the four neighbouring vills, namely Wigston, Evington, Knighton and Oadby, and on the oath of William Mile, Richard de Shene, Richard de Walton, John Smyth, John de Evington, Robert Cook, John Bette, John Gamull, John Morley, John Brigge, William Mathewe, and William Noreys, jurors, who say on their oath that it happened at Wigston on Saturday next before the feast of the Translation of St. Thomas martyr and in the year written above, in the middle of the night, that certain men of Wigston were keeping watch that night for the aforesaid town as was the custom, and among them were the said John Haldenby and Thomas Draper and the said John and Thomas and their companions were throwing their staves in play at a certain block of wood lying near. The said Thomas Draper, not out of malice or preconceived felony, threw with the staff of the said John Haldenby at the said block of wood and when John went for the staff in order to throw it at the wood it rebounded and by mischance struck the said John Haldenby in the shin whereby John languished until the following Wednesday and then died at one o'clock in the afternoon with the rites of the church. The said Thomas fled immediately after the death of the said John, and he has no goods or chattels. The body is viewed by the coroner, &c.

July 8]

(In margin : accidental death, deodand 1d., chattels none.)

Inquest taken at Wigston on the Sunday next after the feast of Easter in the 18th year of the reign of Richard II [18th April, 1395] in the presence of John Folwyll, one of the coroners of the King in the county of Leicester, on the view of the body of John atte Hall of Blaby by four neighbouring vills, namely, Wigston, Glen Parva, Knighton, and Oadby, and on the oath of Thomas Hutte, Thomas Webster, John de Bryche, John Cok, William Mathewe, William Smyth, Robert Pollyng, Thomas Smyth, Thomas Croft, John Pillok, John Faukes, and William Bochie, jurors, who say on their oath that it happened at Wigston on the Saturday in Easter Week in the year written above, about six o'clock in the afternoon, that the aforesaid John atte



TRINITY HOSPITAL CHAPEL, LEICESTER

Hall came riding on a certain mare in a certain way called Bulslow⁵ and two dogs came running and took the said mare by the leg and the said mare reared at the dogs by reason of which the same John atte Hall fell from the mare on his head on to a certain stone whereby his skull was crushed and thus he immediately died by accident and without the rites of the church. And they say that John Snowe first discovered John atte Hall and he produced as pledges John Cok and William Bochier. The body is viewed by the coroner, &c. The said mare is worth two shillings for which the vill of Wigston is responsible.

(In margin: accidental death, deodand two shillings.)

Inquest taken at Wigston on the Tuesday next after the feast of St. Ambrose Bishop in the twentieth year of the reign of Richard II [10th April, 1397] in the presence of John Folwyll, one of the coroners of the King in the county of Leicester, on the view of the body of William Swan, a boy of fourteen years, by four neighbouring vills, namely, Wigston, Oadby, Aylestone, and Glen Parva, on the oath of John Friday, William Smyth, John Beke, Robert Pollyng, John de Brygge, Nicholas Sconbury, William Mathewe, John Cok, Thomas Smyth, John de Glen, John Morley and John Alot, jurors, who say on their oath that it happened at Wigston on the Wednesday next after the said feast in the year written above, at the third hour in the afternoon, that the said William Swan went to a certain well in the highway which is called Carewell in order to wash his hands and while he was washing he suddenly fell in the aforesaid well and was thus accidentally drowned. And they say that Walter Irisshe first discovered him. And the vill of Wigston is ordered by the coroner to block up and annihilate the aforesaid well within forty days under a penalty of forty shillings. And the body is viewed by the coroner and is buried.

(In margin, accidental death.)

Inquest taken at Wigston on Thursday in the feast of St. Dunstan bishop in the sixth year of the reign of Henry IV

⁵Now called Bushloe End, still the road to Blaby.

19 May,
1405]

in the presence of John Folwyll, one of the coroners of the King in the county of Leicester, on the view of the body of Margaret Roost daughter of Edith Roost, aged eleven years, by four neighbouring vills, namely, Wigston, Aylestone, Glen Parva and Knighton, and on the oath of Henry Harecourt, William atte Welle, John de Glen, Henry Jeke, Robert Symond, John Koc, William Smyth, John Beke, John de Brige, William Cook, John Randulf, and William Bocher, jurors, who say on their oath that it happened at Wigston that the aforesaid Margaret was driving the cart of her aforesaid mother in the field of the said vill and she wished to jump from the said cart to the ground in order to mend the harness of one horse. Though the said cart was standing still and not moving, Margaret fell on her head and thus accidentally broke her neck and immediately afterwards died and she did not have the rites of the church. The body is seen by the coroner and is buried.

(In margin : accidental death.)

So, for a brief space of a hundred years or so, a few of the long-dead inhabitants of Wigston, and their far-away crimes and accidents, are resurrected. Of most of the people who lived with them in the old village, whom they passed in the street and worked beside in the field, we know nothing. They lived sober, uneventful lives that never called for legal record. Of these, who died peaceful deaths that called for no enquiry, "the greater part must be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the register of God, not in the record of man".