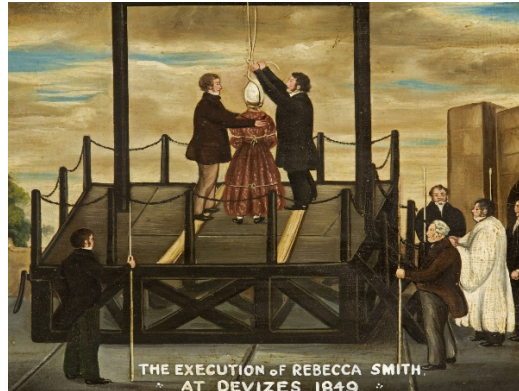


A Victim or a Villain?

The Sad True Tale of Rebecca Smith

- Sally Hendry -



Bratton woman Rebecca Smith was the last woman in England to be hanged for infanticide of her own child. But 42-year-old Rebecca, whose life ended before a huge crowd at Devizes prison in August 1849, hadn't killed just once. She had actually poisoned no fewer than eight of her babies – all before they had reached a month old.

Her crime was made even more of an enigma as at her trial she was described as mild, inoffensive and hardworking, a deeply religious woman who had been raised by a well-respected and loving family.

I first heard Rebecca's story when I was living in Bratton as a young mum in the 1980s. I was told it by local historian Jean Morrison ... and I wanted to know more, eventually authoring a book about Rebecca. My research delved into everything from infanticide statistics to contraception, from farming in the nineteenth century to women's rights (or lack of), from the agonies of a death from arsenic to religious beliefs. And of course I tried to unravel the reasons for her dreadful crimes.

So what do we know?

Rebecca was born in Bratton in 1807. She was the daughter of William and Sarah Pryor and had sisters Sarah, Elizabeth and Mary, and brothers Edward and William. The family were long established in the village with parish records noting Priors, Pryors and Priers as far back as the early 1600s. Rebecca's father was a yeoman farmer with land in Bratton and Westbury. The family attended Bratton Baptist Chapel and its burial ground sadly became the final resting place for all her babies.

We can tell more about the family from the content of the wills of Rebecca's parents, which list not only farming implements and land but also household goods, furniture, plate, linen, china, books, and liquor.

Those wills had a profound effect on Rebecca's life stating that the four sisters were due to inherit money on the death of her mother – and this must have been common knowledge in

a community as small as Bratton. So when Rebecca married near neighbour Phillip Smith shortly after her father's will was proved, there was suspicion that he may have married her knowing that she was due to inherit. That suspicion was later mentioned at Rebecca's trial.

Rebecca's family were opposed to the marriage – Philip being known as a drunkard. Nevertheless, Rebecca did marry him at St James church in May 1831 and their first child Jane was born exactly nine months after the marriage.



The couple started married life in Whites in Melbourne Street. This was a spacious Elizabethan farmhouse, with mullioned windows and a thatched roof [left]. The house, subdivided into cottages for farm workers, was demolished by the War Department which purchased it in 1952.

Married life for Rebecca was tough from the start. As an agricultural labourer Philip faced a seasonal employment that paid little. He was cruel and scarcely ever provided for his family. Rebecca survived through her family helping her out with food and money and by working in the fields where she was paid the same rate as a teenage boy.

Ten babies were born to Rebecca at Bratton, sometimes barely a year apart. Jane, her first born, was the sole survivor. Two of the babies died from natural causes. The seven others, as she later confessed, she killed with rat poison stolen from hayricks.

Her crimes went undetected while she lived in Bratton – but all that was to change dramatically when they moved to Westbury in 1847 with the £100 inherited from her mother's will. The move took Rebecca away from friends and family to live among strangers whose suspicions would lead her to the scaffold.

The family moved to Lower Road, now Leigh Road, where they farmed ten acres of land but the money was squandered by Philip and Rebecca was herself reduced to growing and selling vegetables in Trowbridge market and working in the fields as a labourer. And she was soon expecting again.

Baby Richard, born in May 1849, was pronounced fine and healthy by the midwife but Rebecca was very ill from the birth, suffering from dropsy and malnutrition. Nevertheless, just two weeks later, she struggled into Westbury and purchased a pennyworth of arsenic from the chemist's shop in the marketplace (now Garstons). Just days later baby Richard was dead ... and the neighbours were quick to voice suspicions.

Rebecca was arrested, the baby's body was exhumed from its grave in Bratton Chapel burial ground, and an inquest was held at the Lopes Arms. Among witnesses were the doctors who had carried out the postmortem on baby Richard revealing arsenic in his stomach. Rebecca was sent to Devizes prison to await her trial.

The assize court in Devizes (the planned future home of the Wiltshire museum) was packed for the trial and detailed reports featured in newspapers across the country. Rebecca was

found guilty of poisoning baby Richard and sentenced to death by hanging with presiding Judge Creswell expressing his horror at her crime.



But while in prison awaiting her execution, she confessed to poisoning seven of her other babies at Bratton. This effectively sealed her fate and appeals to commute her sentence to transportation were refused.

On the day of the hanging, the roads to Devizes were packed with carriages, carts and people walking. The canal which ran alongside the prison was also packed with boats for spectators.

Newspaper reports say there were many more women than men and it was not just poorer people. It refers to women dressed in silks with parasols to protect their complexion against the August sun.

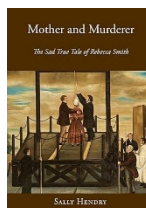
When the bell tolled at 12 o'clock Rebecca was brought up with the prison governor, the chaplain, and the hangman Thomas Calcraft. She died quietly, raising her hands in prayer. Her skirts would have been bound for decency. Her body was buried in the grounds of the prison and covered in quicklime.

So why did she do it?

From my research it appears a perfect storm. Beaten down by a life of poverty and abuse, she may have felt an early death was merciful for her babies. She was powerless to escape her situation for, according to the then law, a husband had ownership over everything from children to any property or money his wife might inherit. Even wife beating and rape was condoned within marriage.

Newspaper reports puzzled over her motives too, with one suggesting "calamity sorrow and bitterness of heart" were to blame, with another describing Rebecca as "a woman to whom happiness had long been a stranger".

And what of the people left behind? Eighteen-year-old Jane emigrated to Australia, married twice, and had children. Phillip's whereabouts remain a mystery however. We know he was described as a sad reprobate who had all his furniture seized for rent and taxes but no reference can be found to his death.



Want to know more? ***Mother and Murderer*** is published by Hob Nob Books and can be purchased at www.westburyheritagesociety.org.uk or from Westbury Museum.

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This article is based on a talk given by Sally Hendry to the Bratton History Association on 16 March 2025. Sally is a history graduate who worked as a journalist on local and regional newspapers. She has written three books on local history and helps run Westbury Museum. Sally can be contacted at sjbh52@icloud.com