

Embsay-with-Eastby History – Annie Erskine's Story

One summer's morning in 1869, the Reverend Henry Martyn Stallybrass, a Congregational minister, then living at Rockville House, Embsay, was called out by his two domestic servants who had heard strange noises in the undergrowth on Brackenley Lane where they had been collecting kindling for the fire. At first he thought it was just a hedgehog, but cautiously flicking aside the grass he found a new-born baby, carefully wrapped in a bed sheet. He called the doctor who found the baby was healthy but only a few hours old. So then the police were called – Sergeant Carr arrived and very quickly accused one of the servants of being the mother who had abandoned the infant. Perhaps it was her nervous laugh when questioned that gave the young woman away. Having at first pretended astonishment at finding the baby in the undergrowth, she quickly crumpled under the questions, and admitted the baby was hers. She was promptly arrested and charged with concealment of a birth.

Annie Erskine was just 20 years old, a blacksmith's daughter from Scotland. She had been a domestic servant in Rockville House for just 3 months. When the case came before the magistrates at the Petty Sessions court in Skipton, Rev Stallybrass and the other domestic servant claimed they had been unaware that Annie was pregnant, and had not realised she had given birth secretly in her bedroom during the night. This is not as unlikely as it may seem to us today – after all, in 1869 dresses were still quite full and could have hidden a pregnancy. Indeed, it was surprisingly common in the 1860s for servant girls to be able to hide pregnancies from their employers and even fellow servants – scarcely a day went by when the newspapers of London did not report similar cases of secret pregnancies and “baby-dropping” by servant girls.

So why was Annie, as were so many other Victorian domestic servants, driven to such desperate extremes? As an unmarried mother, Annie would have lost her job and her reputation. The Lying-in (maternity) hospitals would not have admitted her, and she would not have been able to afford a doctor or midwife. There would have been nowhere to go for help except the dreaded workhouse. The outlook for any baby born in the workhouse was very poor indeed – he would have been lucky to survive his first year of life. Annie had hoped that in helping her employer to “discover” the foundling, her baby would be adopted by Mrs Stallybrass, and at the court it transpired that the lady of the house had been considering this - until the truth came out about the mother's identity. Once Annie admitted the child was hers, the legal system allowed her to apply for child maintenance from the father if she became dependent upon poor relief, but she would have had to prove his identity beyond doubt. Instead, Annie claimed the child's father was dead. This left the authorities with no option but to send her back to her parish of “settlement”. Since she had been in Embsay for less than a year, that meant she had to back to where she was born.

So what happened to Annie and her child? Contrary to what might be expected of a Victorian court, she was treated with some sympathy, and was not imprisoned. Instead they summoned her mother, who came down by train, to take her back

home. Annie had told the magistrates she did not want to go back to her parents – we can imagine her embarrassment and perhaps fear of their reaction to their daughter's transgression. Baby Michael Clark Erskine (the clue to the father's identity no doubt is in the name, although unfortunately it hasn't helped us to track him down in the historical records) was brought up by his grandparents in Penninghame near Newton Stewart in Wigtownshire, in southern Scotland. Within 2 years, his mother returned to England to seek employment (or perhaps to escape her parents?) and became a domestic cook for a doctor and his young family. One wonders if she ever saw her son again. In 1881 Michael is at school, still living with his grandparents, but after that he disappears from the records. Sadly, Annie too disappears from history.

This is just one of many stories being uncovered by the Embsay Research Group about people who lived in Embsay in the past – we hope to bring you more in the future.

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