

DEATHS BY SUICIDE, DROWNING AND MISADVENTURE IN HAWKSHEAD, 1620-1700

During the eighty years 1620-1700 the registers of the parish of Hawkshead were kept with much care and in great detail. 31 deaths by suicide, drowning and misadventure were recorded, about 1% of the total of 3,060 burials recorded in the register for that period.

Five of these deaths were undoubted suicides - by hanging - four men and one woman. Three had the grace to hang themselves in their own houses, one in his employer's stable and one "in a hollinge" (holly tree - it must have been a very stout one). These events took place in 1633, 1645, 1667, 1674 and 1699; three at the end of the winter (February and April), one in July and one in October. In none of these cases does the register state where the corpse was buried.

H.S. Cowper, the late Victorian transcriber of the registers, thinks it "very probable" that some of the large number of deaths by drowning (16) "were also suicides". But before we decide to agree with this conclusion it will be as well to look at the map. The very large parish with its three sub-divisions of Hawkshead, Satterthwaite and Colton is bordered on the East and South by Lake Windermere and the river Leven, on the West by the Crake, Coniston Lake and the Yewdale Beck, and on the North by the Brathay flowing through Elter Water into Lake Windermere. Apart from the largish lake of Esthwaite and Eeswater, a number of tarns and pools are dotted about the parish into which and through which rush countless becks and gills on their precipitate way down the mountain side to join the big rivers Brathay, Crake and Leven. Plenty of water, therefore, in which to drown, especially when the rivers are in spate after winter snow or summer rain.

When we come to look a little more closely at these 16 cases of drowning, we find that three were children: a girl drowned in the beck linking Near and Far Sawrey, "a poor childe, drowned in Consey Forge", and a boy drowned "by a boat in Windermere Water". There are three further drownings in Windermere: one "hard beneath Ambleside and found at Windermere Waterhead", one found at Consey Nabb, drowned in Windermere Water", and one "James Braithwaite who did goe to the water foote for a boate load of limestones and was drowned in Windermere".

Windermere is, of course, notorious for its sudden storms, but curiously enough there is no mention in the Hawkshead register of a spectacular storm in October 1635 when "the Great Boat (the public ferry boat) sunk about sunsetting, when was drowned forty seven persons and eleaven hourses", all returning (by tradition) from a wedding party at Hawkshead Church.

In 1664 there is a lurid description of a stranger found in Thurston Water, "who had layde soe long in the sayd water untill the hair was comd of his head and his face was sore eaten and disvigered with fishes". He was "buried in his Close (or what remained of them) in the Church=yard att the north syde of the Steeple".

The remaining drownings (only one was a woman) were in the local becks, gills, pools or stongs. There is nothing in the more or less detailed descriptions to suggest that any of them were suicides. It should be noted that out of 16 drownings, 11 took place in the first four months of the year when the rivers and becks were most likely to be in flood, obliterating fords and stepping stones. Indeed, there are clear indications in the register entries that this was so. Of these 11, "Charles Satterthwaite of Coulthouse drowned in the Pool (the beck running into Esthwaite) as he was going home from Hawkshead and was buried in the Church" on the 25th of January 1666. "William Braithwaite of Skellwith departed from his own house in Skellwith the 5th of Aprill (1654) and was found drowned in the water att Arthur Benson field foote neare the Dubb-ings: and was brought to be buried at Hauxheade on Friday the 28th of the present Aprill 1654". It would seem unlikely that either of these two drownings were considered to be suicides at the time.

If we now look at the ten deaths by accident or misadventure we find that the causes were explicitly stated, with one exception, that of "Uxor Robert Braithwaite, slayne in her own house - buried in the Church". There remain five cases where the cause of death is not given, two of which, that of a "wench found at the Braikenthwaite" in 1624 and that of "Charles Wilson of Arneside found dead at Elterwater Park" in 1669, are thought by H.S. Cowper to be deaths from plague, though it is not clear why he should think so: neither 1624 nor 1669 were years of high mortality in Hawkshead, nor were they years of high plague mortality generally. The third case was that of "a poor young child who died by the wayside in his mother's arms"; the fourth, that of "Agnes Rowson, uxor William found dead at Esthwaite and buried in ye Church"; which leaves the "wife of John Robinson found dead betwixt Graythwaite and Dalepke" as the only possible suicide.

It would seem, therefore, that for the period 1621-1700 at most three or four possible suicides should be added to the five definite ones. But the registers give no hint or indication that any of those drowned had deliberately sought a watery grave. We would do well, therefore, to confine our tally of suicides to those five who had undoubtedly taken their own lives by hanging.

If we now try to relate the number of suicides and deaths by misadventure to the size of the population at risk, we shall be able to get some rough idea of how the suicide and misadventure rates in Hawkshead in the seventeenth century compare with those found by Dr. Hair for Nottinghamshire in the early sixteenth century and reported later in this issue. The comparison can only be a very rough one; the numbers involved are small and we can only guess at the population of Hawkshead at this period.

The Muster of 1608 lists 353 persons. If we assume that these represent the men of the parish between the ages of 16 and 60, we should expect them to comprise about 25% of the population so that the number of inhabitants will have been about 1400. This figure is reasonably consistent with the number of baptisms and marriages being recorded in the register at the beginning of the century, giving a baptism rate of 30 per 1000 and a marriage rate of 8 per 1000. These rates are perhaps a little low. If, alternatively, we assume that relatively high baptism and marriage rates prevailed, say, 40 per 1000 and 11 per 1000 respectively, we should infer a much smaller population of about 1000. We shall, therefore, present two rates for suicide and misadventure: a high rate on a population estimated at about 1000 and a low rate based on a population estimated at about 1400. In both cases the rates have been rounded to the nearest ten. The following table places Hawkshead in the context of the information supplied by Mr. Hair.

Rates per million alive per annum

	Hawkshead 1620-1700	Nottinghamshire 1530-58	England & Wales	
			1860s	1960s
Suicide	40-60	40	65	120
Misadventure	230-320	152	540	230
Suicide & Misadventure	270-380	192	600	350

Suicide in Hawkshead in the seventeenth century appears to have occurred at a rate somewhere between that found for Nottinghamshire a century earlier and the rate for England and Wales in the 1860s. Suicide was apparently considerably less frequent than it is today. Deaths from misadventure in Hawkshead, on the other hand, occurred at about the same frequency as they do today, but more frequently than in the early sixteenth century and considerably less frequently than in the 1860s. But perhaps not too much weight should be put on these comparisons for, although Hawkshead registers record deaths of unusual character in extraordinary detail, the numbers involved are very small. And how meaningful is a comparison between the inhabitants of a rural parish, a county, and the whole country,

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Not included in this group of 26 deaths by misadventure is "Thomas Lancaster who (in 1672) for poysonning (the eight members) of his owne family was Adjudg't att the Assizes att Lancaster to bee carried backe to his own house att Hye-wrey where hee liv'd; and was there hang'd before his owne doore till hee was dead, for that very facte then was brought with a horse and a carr into the Coulthouse meadows and forthwith hunge upp in iron Chaynes on a Gibbet which was sett for that very purpose on the south-side of Sawrey Case near unto the Pooll-stand: and there continued untill such times as hee rotted everye bone from other ..." There would appear to be no record in the registers of the deaths of his eight unfortunate victims.

Neither, to conclude on a splendidly anecdotal note, is there included the case of Bernard Swainson. On December 16, 1689 "Bernard Swainson who was Edward Braithwaite Apprentice went with William Stamper a great while within nighte into William Braithwaite Shopp in Haukeshead for to beare him Company a little, and att there meeteinge these three younge youths were all very sober and in good health: and About twelve of the Clocke o'the nighte; they made a Bett: that if this Bernard Swainson could drinke of nyne noggins of brandy: then William Braithwaite and William Stamper was to pay for them; but if Bernard fayld and Coulede not drinke of nyne noggins of brandy then hee was to of his owne Charges for that hee drunke: now this Bernard drunke of those nyne noggins of brandy quickly: and shortly after that fell downe upon the floore: and was straightway carried to his bed where hee layde two and Twenty houres: dureinge which tyme hee could never speake: noe nor never did knowe anybody though many Came to see him and soe hee dyed".

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