

A Wife and a Corpse

By John Butcher

I can trace the family history of the male line in my family back to the late seventeenth century at Debenham. It is quite unremarkable - the usual story of large families with apparent poverty and high infant mortality rates. Many entries in the parish records, but not so much as a single headstone in the parish churchyard! It was quite by chance, therefore, that I glanced through some transcripts of monumental inscriptions for the parish and came across the following entry, the last line of which intrigued me -

[Independent \(Congregational\) Chapelyard. Inscription No 42.](#)

[Sam Butcher & Maria his wife & 5 of their children, Sam, Rob, Hen, Ellen & Caroline, their youngest daughter who died on the day of her marriage, 1 December 1876.](#)

Prior to this I was not aware that there was a Congregational Church in Debenham, and certainly had no indication that my family would have been connected with it. I knew that Samuel Butcher was my great-great-grandfather and his wife was Maria Airey, and I had discovered from the 1841 census that they then had six children: Samuel, Elineor (Ellen), Edgar (my great-grandfather), Emma, Frederick and Caroline.

I had also discovered from the parish records that the banns had been called for the marriage of Joseph Edward Freeman & Caroline Butcher in 1875, and that they had been married on 1 December 1875 at the parish church by the Rev Cornish. Both were of full age, unmarried, and from Debenham. Joseph was a farmer, son of William Freeman, also a farmer, and Caroline was a servant, the daughter of Samuel Butcher, a gardener. Edgar and Emma Butcher were witnesses.

So to the Congregational Church records, a search of which revealed details of the baptisms of some of the children named in the inscription, together with the following references to the youngest daughter, Caroline

[In the Membership Roll, dated 6 March 1871 - Sr. Caroline Butcher, Debenham, admitted. Died 2 October 75, the day after her marriage.](#)

[In the Burials Register, dated 8 December 1875 - Caroline Freeman, d. Dec 2, F, 36 yrs, Natural Causes.](#)

This prompted me to search elsewhere, and in the East Anglian Daily Times for 3 December 1875 I found the following two notices -

[MARRIAGES - FREEMAN-BUTCHER, On the 1st inst, at Debenham, by the Rev. Mr Cornish, Mr Edward Freeman, of the Valley Farm, Debenham, son of Mr William Freeman, late of Aspall, to Caroline, youngest sister of Mr Edgar Butcher, farmer, Stonham, and Frederick Butcher, 61, Carr Street, Ipswich. Both of Debenham.](#)

[DEATHS - FREEMAN, On the 2nd inst, at the residence of her brother, Mr Edgar Butcher, Stonham, very sudden, to the great grief of all her friends, Caroline, dearly beloved wife of Mr Edward Freeman, of the Valley Farm, Debenham, and youngest sister of Mr Edgar Butcher, farmer, Stonham, and Fredk Butcher, 61, Carr Street, Ipswich.](#)

But it is the obituary which appeared the following day, in the East Anglian Daily Times on 4 December 1875 under the heading 'DEBENHAM' and with its own macabre headline, that tells the whole story –

[A WIFE AND A CORPSE IN LESS THAN 24 HOURS - On Wednesday morning last a happy party surrounded the hymeneal altar when Caroline Butcher became the wife of Edward Freeman, farmer. After](#)

the ceremony the party wended their way to the home of a brother of the bride. On the way home the young wife complained of a pain in the body, and shortly after her arrival went to bed, but rose and joined the party at the tea table, but still suffering shortly retired again, and was watched with great solicitude by her many friends. No danger being apprehended a medical man was not called in. At early morn some of the friends left for home, while others watched the young bride, and as the day was breaking discovered that she had breathed her last. The deceased was highly respected and had been for many years a member of the Congregational Church and choir.

Incidentally, a second item under the same heading 'DEBENHAM' reads -

SNOW - A very heavy fall of snow fell here during Wednesday night, lying on Thursday morning six inches deep on the level.

That was the night she died - I wonder what the temperature would have been in that bedroom while she was 'breathing her last'!

It is interesting, too, to note that although all of these entries are to be found in the original records for the Independent Church, there are three different dates shown for this event.

It is also interesting to note the use made of the East Anglian Daily Times, which only commenced publication that year.

Both my great-grandfather, Edgar, and his brother, Frederick, had at long last burst the shackles of poverty that had bound the family to Debenham for at least two hundred years. Edgar had progressed from being first a rat-catcher then a beer-house keeper at Debenham, to being inn-keeper at the Magpie coaching inn at Stonham Parva, and then becoming a farmer at Stonham, and Frederick had progressed from being a Post Office messenger and shoemaker at Debenham to being first a carrier and then owning a leather maker's business in Carr Street, Ipswich (on the site of the present Argos store).

The wording of the Marriage and Death notices almost seems designed to advertise their achievement, especially as it makes no mention of their sister Emma, who was still single and a domestic servant back in Debenham!

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