

Dog Walkers of Henbury, Rejoice!
You have a Hero.

Some time ago I was idly scanning the censuses of Henbury and I came across this 1871 entry for a largish house not far from where I live in Henbury.

Eliza	Head	Unmarried	Age 45	Annuitant	Born Prestbury
Kezia	Sister	"	39	"	"
Ellen	"	"	34	"	"
Sarah Ann	"	"	32	"	"
Jane	"	"	30	"	"
George R Jesse	Lodger	"	50	Civil Engineer Author, history. Artist, etching.	France, British subject

Five single sisters was not that unusual at that time, a rather similar arrangement at my own house at a later date, where three sisters lived together, one did the cooking, one looked after the house and garden and one went out to work to get the money. But it does raise a lot of questions, where did the money come from to buy five annuities, and what and who was George Jesse?

I first imagined this house might be an artists' commune or something like the Haworth Parsonage, a literary circle. But I, being a young, hot blooded, virile male, had other thoughts. Do these ladies 'mother' Mr. Jesse, or as he calls himself an artist, are they his models or the author's muses, or goodness me, but surely not in Henbury, are they his mistresses? I must find out more.

Mr Jesse, from his census description, is clearly a very talented fellow. But interestingly he gives his relationship to the head of the household as 'Lodger', he was not a 'relation' or 'friend' or 'visitor'. Were these ladies, all annuitants, so presumably not short of a penny or two, really in need of a lodger, or was he needed for the usual male household tasks, moving furniture or taking spiders out of the house? So I ask again, who and what is George Richard Jesse, and what's going on here?

Ten years later, in 1881, another census. All still of course in the same house and all the occupants ten years older. George Jesse this time gave his occupation as 'Author, Artist and Hon. Secretary of the 'Society for the Abolition of Vivisection' and Kezia gave her occupation as 'Clerk', which I surmise means she was clerking for George, who this time gave his 'Relationship to head of household' as 'Other'. That must be a unique title in all of the censuses which I have seen. I take it to mean he is now an employer of Kezia. and has really 'got his feet under the table'. So now I look up George Richard Jesse in the Modern English Biography. He came from a line of clergymen, but otherwise I find little of his family. But he seemed very active in the study of the health of dogs.

1862. Corresponded with T. Spencer-Wells and other medical men on ovariectomy.
1869. Pamphlets and cuttings, and MS material on public rights of way. Coll by GRJ
(*Was he seeking out dog walks?*)

1873. A collection of cuttings relating to hydrophobia. Coll by GRJ

1874. Publications, pamphlets and tracts on vivisection. Coll by GRJ

1875 and 1876. Evidence given before the Royal Commission on vivisection. GRJ

1876. Extracts from and notes upon the Report of the Royal Comm on Vivisection.

1877. History of the formation and operation of the Soc for the Abol. Of Vivisection.

1879. Corresponded with the Bishop of Peterborough.

1882. Correspondence with Prof Richard Owen on John Hunter, on aneurysm.

Third Ed. By GRJ, John Hunter and Richard Owen. (*R. Owen founded the Natural History Museum and taught Queen Victoria's children biology.*)

The above are the papers GRJ left in his will to the British Museum. (*They are now in the British Library*)

1871 and 1881. Correspondence with Charles Darwin. Darwin consulted GRJ concerning the history of the English Terrier. The address GRJ gave in his letters to Darwin was 'Henbury'

(*The above papers are in the Darwin archive.*)

The work for which he is really remembered is; 'Researches into the History of the British Dog.....'. 1866. The date shows that this book was published and written while he lived in Henbury. The book was, and still is highly regarded, though not to modern tastes, but the title page tells exactly what it is.

But what about the five unmarried sisters, how did they come to Henbury, and how did they meet up with George?

They were all born in Mottram St. Andrew and lived on the 60 acre family farm on Mottram Common. They would all be 'Farmer's Daughters' which was a very common occupation listed in many censuses. Doing all the chores necessary, unpaid of course.

Shortly before 1860 their mother died, and in 1862 their father, Josiah Fox Taylor followed her to the grave and the five sisters' world changed. There is nothing like a will to find just what a person was like. Josiah's will is quite a long and full of words, for the writers were paid by the line. There are many instructions concerning bequests in the event of marriages that might happen and to unborn grandchildren. All these to be charged to the farm, provided of course it still existed. The farm buildings, the house, stock and fields went to the son William Joseph Taylor, the only son. Josiah had other property, three allotments on Mottram Common, four cottages and their gardens in Mottram St Andrew, a field called the Little Whitley or Common Field, two houses in the Hough in Bollin Fee and a dwelling house near the market place in Macclesfield called The Punch Bowl. These were to be disposed of and the proceeds shared with the two executors, Josiah's son and a relation, William Taylor. I find it strange that this relation was not titled 'cousin' or 'brother' or similar, and leads me to think that he must have been a distant relation, and did the five sisters actually know this person? Whatever, I think it sowed the seeds for what happened next. Josiah's will had little provision for the sisters, the furniture in the 'downstairs room and the three front rooms upstairs' was affirmed as theirs, but little else except the small annuities which were to be charged to the farm, not exactly a safe guarantee. They got nothing else and it appears that Josiah fully expected them to carry on living on the farm. All they could look forward to was another thirty years of chicken feeding, hay making and muck spreading. Josiah was no friend of Womens' Lib, but there must have been a revolt by the sisters led I think by Kezia. Josiah could have named any or all of the sisters as executors, but he did not, maybe his thinking was 'of the times', but he had to be brought up sharp.

The will was signed and witnessed on 12th April 1862 and very shortly afterwards on 30th April there was a codicil. The already signed and witnessed provisions were to stand, but the executor William Taylor, the 'relation', was replaced by Kezia, which meant that the sisters would get a much bigger bequest.

Only 16 days later, 15th May 1862, Josiah died. The sisters were I think smart, for if the

legal proceedings had gone at the usual snail speed, they would have lost their inheritance.

There was a clause in the will that, if the sisters chose not to carry on living in the farm they were to receive £4 to rent or buy a cottage, that's £4 for the lot of them. But what they soon bought was no cottage, but a very nice detached Victorian house with eight chimney pots and a large garden. A room for every lady, and very soon for George too, and a pub and the church nearby. It is my suspicion that the house may have been built for them. Goodbye to the farm and muck of Mottram, welcome to swinging Henbury.

The house was not there in the 1861 census, so I think their house was purchased about 1863. George's book was published in 1866, so I imagine he had done all the research over many years earlier. What he now needed was a place to put it all together, somewhere to do his etchings, and of course to live comfortably, a pretty tall order. What I cannot discover is how these two disparate parties could have come together. I have no evidence that the five sisters had any special interest in dogs. Prior to coming to Henbury, George was in lodgings in Ryton near Durham, he was a railway civil engineer. Possibly he moved south because he had a contract with the North Staffordshire Railway, the Knotty. But why come to Henbury? Was there an agency for like minded persons, a go-between, or a note pinned up in the church porch? I doubt that George would go round knocking on doors. How he and the five sisters met I just cannot imagine, but the result was perfect, for both parties, otherwise they could not have lived together happily I'm sure, for 35 years. George produced his book and much else concerning dogs, and all the sisters must be credited with helping to make all that happen.

George carried on with his research almost up to his death in 1898. The 90's decade was the beginning of the end for the happy association. Eliza died in 1892, Kezia in 1896 and Sarah Ann in 1897. Sometime after 1898 the two survivors Ellen and Jane moved to a smaller house just next door. In the census of 1901 the two described their occupations as 'Retired Farmer', that was a bit 'tongue in cheek' but just still true.

George's will is a wonderful document. He first asserts himself to be the founder in February 1875 of The Society for the Abolition of Vivisection and it's Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. He appoints trustees and executors and wishes to be buried in or as near to as possible to a family grave at Ide, near Exeter. He bequeathed the sum of £10000, (*now over half a million*) to be invested in the shares of any or all of the railway companies, The North Staffordshire, The London and North Western, The Great Western, The South Western and The Midland, (*Were these the Companies for which he had worked, or were they tips for a good return?*) The income to provide for an office for the Society within half a mile of Charing Cross or Piccadilly, London. The objects of the Society being to prevent the making miserable, abusing, alarming, burning, inoculating, creating disease in, dissecting, wounding, or mutilating of living animals, or painfully experimenting upon them in any manner with or without anaesthetic, for medical, surgical, veterinary, physiological, biological, bacteriological, scientific, or any purposes whatsoever.

If any Act of Parliament should be passed for the total abolition of vivisection then after a period of five years the funds of the society should go to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. (*This was a much older society, more concerned for the welfare of working animals, such as horses.*) The etchings and plates for the illustrations for his book, and his correspondence to the British Museum.

The very best is at the end.

'I give and bequeath free of duty the following legacy which I declare shall have priority over all other bequests, that is to say, I bequeath to my trustees the sum of £1400 (*now about £80000*) in shares and stock of the North Staffordshire Railway Company - thereof to Miss Ellen Taylor of Henbury during her life. And I earnestly entreat her without imposing any trust upon her to care for and protect the grave of my dog "Bogie" to the utmost of her power and to provide by her will against it being disturbed by any persons'.

After making his will George left Henbury, he died at Exeter and as he wished was buried in Ide church.

Dog walkers of Henbury, there you are. Have a mass dog walk for George Richard Jesse, and do not forget the five ladies who all helped him for thirty five years, Eliza, Ellen, Kezia, Sarah Ann and Jane.

Roger Bowling



The illustration of the title page is from the 1866 book reproduced by Cornell University Library. Digital Collections.

Sources:

- Cheshire Record Office.
- Devonshire RO.
- Family Search.
- The British Library.
- The National Archives.
- Modern English Biography.
- Free BMD.
- The Darwin Archive

