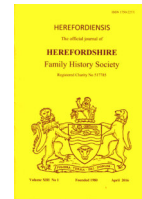


The Deserter and Bigamist

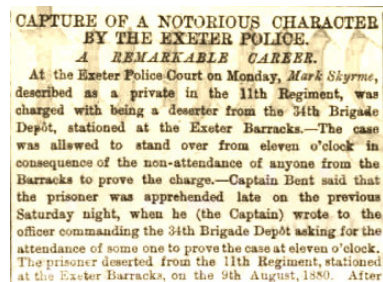
David J Skyrme



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As we each do our family history research, data from records often raises more questions than they answer. This was the case with Mark Skyrme, a descendant of the Skyrmes of Abbey Dore and Vowchurch that I have been researching. Mark was the only child of Joseph Skyrme, a labourer from Vowchurch, and his wife Harriet (née Preedy) of Little Birch. Born in 1850 in Madley, Mark married Emma Sheward of that town in 1869. All seemed to start well, with them having three children born between 1869 and 1874. The middle child William died in 1874. However, the 1881 census finds one of the two surviving children (Alice) living with her paternal grandmother Harriet and her second husband John Jones (Joseph had died in 1854). The other child (Harriet) was with her maternal grandparents William Sheward, a hurdle maker, and his wife Ann. Emma is nowhere to be found while Mark languishes in Hereford jail. What has happened?

Newspaper stories reveal all. A long article in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* of 25th February 1881 tells how he was a private in the 11th Devonshire Regiment and deserted from his post at Exeter Barracks. Investigation into his background revealed that he had been an agricultural labourer who had deserted Emma and his two children around 1877



and came to Exeter to enlist. In December 1879 he married (bigamously) Eliza Mitchell at St Sidwells, then a small village just east of Exeter. He deserted the Army on 9th August 1880, from which time the Exeter police had been trying to track him down. After his desertion the couple had moved to Warwickshire "where he behaved so brutally to her that she had to seek the protection of the police". So he was then in trouble with the Warwickshire police and spent a spell in prison.

After coming out of prison he seemed to lead a life of crime, with charges of three housebreaking cases against him. These occurred in Vowchurch, Abbey Dore and Little Kyre, the latter where he was alleged to have stolen a silver watch. He eluded capture for some months. On trying to track him down the police were told he had gone to America. The newspaper report continues:

"Within the past week the chief constable was urged to increase his vigilance, and to push his inquiries more zealously, as it was believed that the prisoner was in Devonshire, if not Exeter."

After missing him by four days in Monmouthshire, the police finally caught up with the elusive Mark on the 18th February. Subsequent newspaper articles report him being acquitted on housebreaking charges at Hereford in April 1881, while being sentenced to 3 months imprisonment at Worcester midsummer sessions in June for the theft at Little Kyre.

After these tumultuous times, it looks as if he settled down, since the next two censuses (1891 and 1901) showing him living back in Madley as a labourer with his mother Harriet (now widowed a second time). However she died later in 1901 and the 1911 census lists Mark as an inmate at the Abbey Dore Workhouse where he died later that year.

David J Skyrme Membership No. 3192 www.skyrme.info