

Joseph Liggins

In May 1872 Joe Liggins breathed his last at Nuneaton Union Workhouse at Chilvers Cotton; he was 66 years old. Victorian workhouses have many sad stories to tell, of hopes dashed and promising beginnings thwarted. But the tale of Joseph Liggins takes some beating.

Liggins was born in the little village of Attleborough, now a suburb to the south-east of the town. Of the 300 or so who lived in Attleborough in the early 19th Century, a few found work making wooden rakes for the local farms, while the rest eked out a meagre existence either as agricultural labourers or as Coventry ribbon workers.

Compared to the life prospects of his fellows, Joseph Liggins was remarkably blessed. His father, William, was a baker on the road to Nuneaton, and made enough bread from his trade to send his lad to school and then, of all places, to St Catherine's College, where he matriculated in 1824.

There was something of *Jude the Obscure* in Liggins, though (as we shall see) it is with another novelist that he is most closely linked. Yet the Hardy-esque template is accurate enough, for Joseph did not complete his degree, and he was sent down - "rusticated" - for some unknown offence.

Liggins was left in the worst of all worlds. Too much education to render him fit for a life of trade in Attleborough, but not enough to secure him a career in the professions. He found a job as far from North Warwickshire as it was possible to get: as a private tutor on the Isle of Man.

Here too things did not work out - the usual tales of drinking and bad company - and in 1833 Liggins was back in Attleborough, where he found work tutoring the sons of some of Nuneaton's wealthier families instead.

Let us leave Joe Liggins to his own devices for a moment and turn to another Victorian publication entirely. In 1857 an issue of *Blackwood's Magazine* contained within it an anonymous short story set in a fictionalised version of North Warwickshire. The story was followed by another, and then another, and - such was the critical reception - that the three tales were issued in the following year as a book. The name on the title-page of *Scenes from Clerical Life*, as the collection was now called, was one George Eliot.

The name was evidently a pseudonym, though none knew the identity of the real author. Yet the writer's acute caricatures of the folk of Bedworth, Nuneaton and surroundings suggested someone with a considerable depth of local knowledge. Those who did not spend their time seeking out if they were in the book tried to identify its author instead.

This would not take them long. North Warwickshire was not awash with literary talent; literacy itself was hardly common. Could it possibly be that lad from Attleborough, who went to university and once wrote for a newspaper?

When Liggins was confronted on the issue he did not actively discourage the idea. No doubt he felt rather flattered to be identified with such an acclaimed publication. The puzzle remained, though, if Joe Liggins had become a great author, then why was he living such a hand-to-mouth existence in the village of his birth?

Then, in the following year, *Blackwood's* published *Adam Bede*, the first full-length novel by the mysterious George Eliot. If *Scenes from Clerical Life* impressed, then *Adam Bede* astounded. Even Charles Dickens recognised that he had a serious competitor in the ring. Pressed for a second time, Joseph Liggins finally confessed that he was, indeed, the mysterious George Eliot.

This was a Pandora's Box Liggins ought not to have opened. One question answered, there were many more to follow. Why was the humble young man from Attleborough not profiting from his gift? Was William Blackwood not paying him? Letters began to appear in newspapers, locally and nationally, berating the publisher for the so mistreating a great writer. The local chergy too became involved in the fuss. Was this not typical of big publishing houses to grind down its poor authors? It was at this point that Mary Ann Evans emerged from the closet, and revealed herself as the true author. The daughter of the land agent for Arbury Hall, Mary Ann had left North Warwickshire for Coventry, and then for London, some years before. It was, then hardly surprising that the locals had failed to remember her. She was, after all, a woman, surely not capable of such great writing.

This was, of course, exactly the reason why Mary Ann Evans had elected to use a male pseudonym. It could hardly have been worse for Joe Liggins. Not only impoverished, but now exposed as a fraud, or, at best, a deluded fantasist. The back of polite society was forever turned against him, and he died, unloved and unmourned, in the Nuneaton workhouse.

But fate, in a twist equally worthy of Thomas Hardy, had one more brickbat to throw at Joe Liggins.

The union workhouse at Chilvers Cotton is no more, of course, though many of its buildings remain as part of the local hospital. It is now the George Eliot Hospital HNS Trust.

How Joe would have loved that name.