

CASE STUDY TWO

Did my ancestor meet Oliver Cromwell?

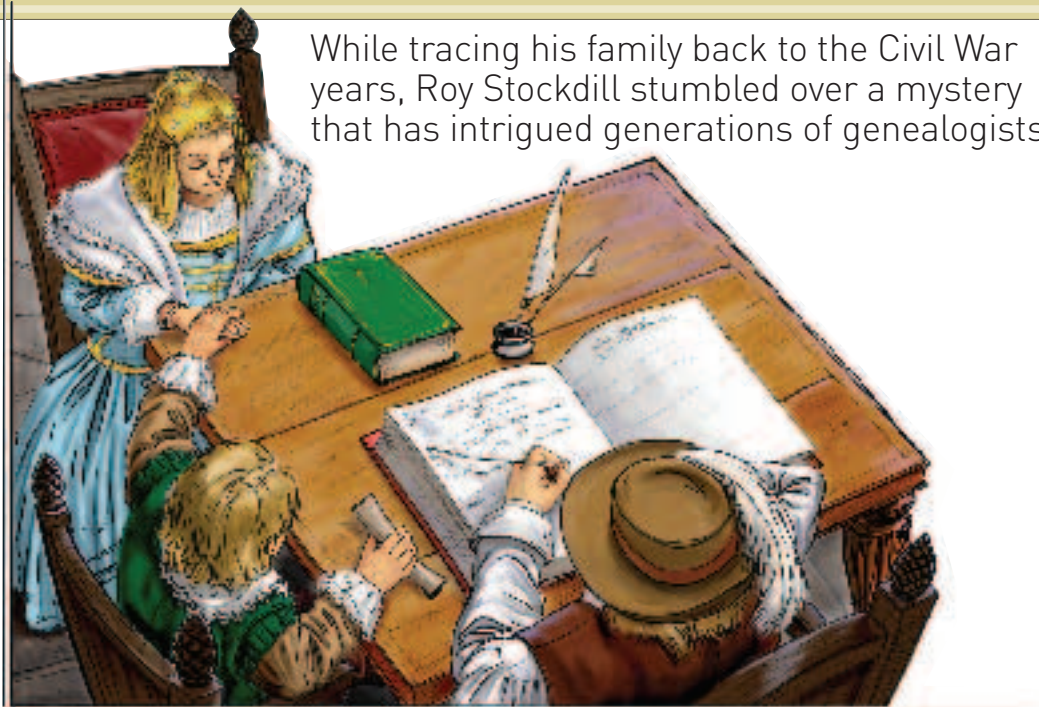
My favourite personal haunt is the Yorkshire section in the Middle Library on the first floor of the Society of Genealogists' premises in London. The SoG has the largest collection of printed Yorkshire parish registers outside the county itself. With an ancestry that is mostly Yorkshire-based, I have spent many rewarding hours combing through antiquated records.

On this occasion I was investigating an ancestral line originating in the parish of Kirkby Malham, which lies in one of the most beautiful parts of the Yorkshire Dales. I had a great-great-grandfather, Richard Bracewell, born at Kettlewell in the Dales in 1818. Through the 1851 Census and the International Genealogical Index (IGI), I traced the Bracewells to Kirkby Malham. It was here that Richard's parents, William and Elizabeth – my 3x great-grandparents – were married on the 5 November 1816.

I found William's birth at Kirkby Malham in 1794. He was born to William and Ellen Bracewell (nee Shackleton), who were married in the parish on 13 May 1779. Shackleton was a new name for me, so I was thrilled to find that the SoG had a copy of the transcribed parish registers from 1597 to 1690, published by the Yorkshire Parish Register Society in 1938. Moreover, the index contained many Shackleton references. I sat down to copy out the Shackleton entries, but when I reached the Commonwealth period immediately after the Civil War, I came across an entry that made me sit bolt upright! It read as follows ...

The I.M: betweene John. Ellin of Malham & Anne Tayler of Hellifield [pische of] Long Preston was published three severall Markett dayes in the Market. place att Settle 12th, 19th, 26th June. 1655. JE & AT was married 25th July in the presence of John Lawson of Malham & John Shackleton of the same & others before me, Olyver Cromwell R.

On the next page there appeared two further entries with similarly mysterious references to Oliver Cromwell. One was for the marriage of Martine Knowles, of



While tracing his family back to the Civil War years, Roy Stockdill stumbled over a mystery that has intrigued generations of genealogists

Kirkby Malham, to Dorothy Hartley on 17 January 1655/6. The other referred to the reading of banns in June 1656 for John Armeistade and Mary Aucoacke, but with no marriage date given.

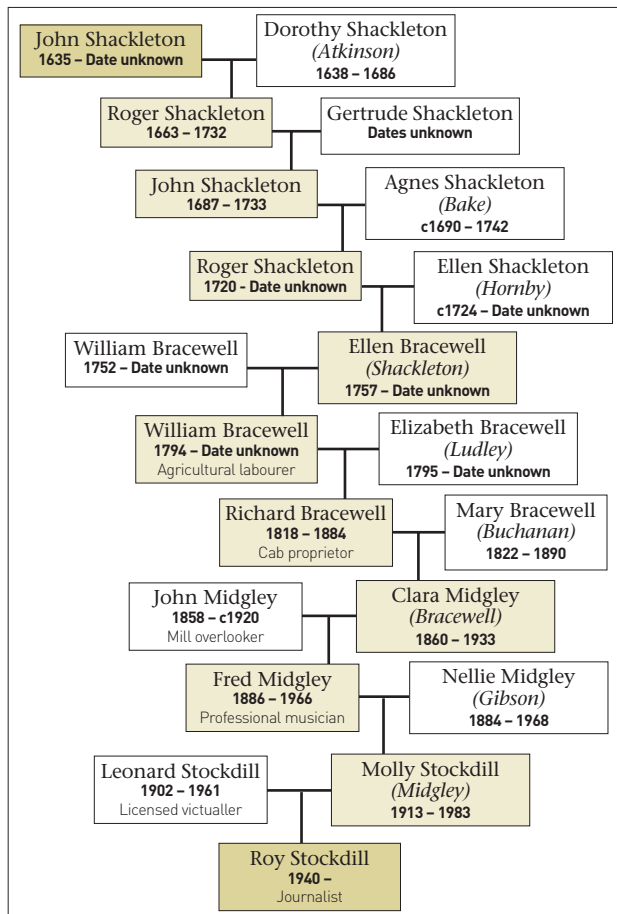
CROMWELL'S SIGNATURE

The transcription of the Knowles-Hartley marriage ended with the phrase, 'before me Oliver Cromwell Re', while that for the Armeistade-Aucoacke banns finished with 'Oliver Cromwell below'. Mightily intrigued, I found the SoG also possessed a copy of a rare book, *The Parish of Kirkby Malhamdale*, published in 1933 by antiquarian John William Morkill. This discussed the Cromwell entries in some detail, and included a plate which showed Cromwell's supposed signature.

Little did I know it, but I had stumbled upon a mystery that had fascinated generations of historians before me. Two fascinating questions begged to be asked. Why was Oliver Cromwell apparently conducting marriages in what must have been a very remote part of Yorkshire? Supposing he had done so, could John Shackleton who witnessed one of the ceremonies be a distant ancestor of mine?

My researches were hampered by the fact that the original registers containing the Cromwell signatures were stolen

LINK TO THE PAST





LORD PROTECTOR: **Oliver Cromwell** died in 1658 having committed regicide and turned England into a republic

from the Parish Church of St Michael the Archangel during the 1970s. Fortunately, they had been transcribed and published in 1938 and there are other sources available, including the bishop's transcripts, a reconstituted index to the registers devised by a former vicar of Kirkby Malham in 1914 and the IGI extractions from the bishop's transcripts. With these aids, I was able to build a family tree that suggested – I use the word deliberately, since I do not claim absolute proof – that the John Shackleton who witnessed the first 'Cromwell ceremony' in July 1655 was my 8x great-grandfather.

RECORDING MARRIAGES

The records show a John Shackleton baptised at Kirkby Malham in March 1634/5, son of Roger, who was probably the same John Shackleton who married Dorothy Atkinson on 18 September 1662. It is from this couple I believe I trace my lineage. However, the provenance of the Cromwell signatures is a far more contentious issue. Most authorities I consulted seem to believe they were forgeries, made either at the time of the marriages or later. But who in their right mind would have dared to forge the Lord Protector's signature in the registers? And if they were forgeries added at a later period, what could anyone hope to gain?

An Act of Parliament in August 1653 virtually prohibited the clergy from holding marriages. Instead, ceremonies consisted of both parties making a declaration before a Justice of the Peace who then pronounced them man and wife. The task of recording marriages, as well as births and deaths, passed from the clergy to a lay official called a Register (not a Registrar). Banns could be called on three successive market days in the nearest market place – as seen in the entries cited above, where the banns for John Ellin and Anne Tayler were called in the market place at Settle, the nearest town to Kirkby Malham.

“What was Cromwell doing conducting marriages in a remote part of Yorkshire? And could John Shackleton, a witness at one marriage, be my ancestor?”

CASE STUDY

FACT OR FORGERY

Was Cromwell here?

Apparently signed by Oliver Cromwell and stolen in the 1970s, these entries from Kirkby Malham's parish registers have caused serious controversy...

The following are transcripts of the marriage entries at Kirkby Malham which were supposedly signed by Oliver Cromwell. These edited entries are given in full in the book by John William Morkill.

In the third marriage, the final sentence was left unfinished and the signature of Oliver Cromwell had been crossed out. Whether the marriage ever took place is uncertain; however, it does appear in the transcribed registers published by the Yorkshire Parish Register Society in 1938 and on the IGI.

Marriage No 1

The Intended marriage Between John Ellin of Malham in the pische of Kirkbiemalhamdale and Ann Tayler of Long Preston was published openly in the Markett place at Settle. And the said John Ellin and Ann Tayler was married the 25th of July 1655 in the psence of John Rawson of

Malham in the pische Kirkbie malhamdale and John Shackleton.

Marriage No 2

The Intended marriage Betweene Martine Knowles of the pische of Kirkbiemalhamdale and Dorothy Hartley of the pische of Marton was published in the Open Markett place att Settle. Martin Knowles and Dorothy Hartley was married the 17th of January 1655.

Marriage No 3

The marriage Betweene John Armeisteade of the pische of Long Preston and Mary Ancoacke of the pische of Kirkbie malham was published openly in the Church of Kirkbiemalhamdale. And the said John Armeistead and Mary Ancoacke was married...

This major loss of power infuriated many clergymen and provoked much opposition to Cromwell. They were turbulent times and any assessment as to whether the signatures in the registers are genuine is a murky exercise. One significant fact, though, is that despite the remoteness of Kirkby Malham in the 1650s, it is probable that Oliver Cromwell visited and stayed there. For his great friend, Major-General John Lambert, a prominent Parliamentary commander in Yorkshire, was the Squire of Calton and had his home in the parish.

John Morkill says, "As a close friend of Lambert it is quite likely and even probable that Cromwell paid occasional visits to Calton, and no less so that while there he would consent to officiate at a marriage, especially if the request came from one who had fought by his side in the war, or from a protégé of Lambert." Morkill also had his doubts about the signatures. His principal objection lay in the fact that in the first marriage entry – the one witnessed by my ancestor – Cromwell's Christian name was written as Olyver, but in the two later entries it was Oliver. Morkill comments, "Cromwell was an educated man and is not likely

YORKSHIRE

RECORDS

The Society of Genealogists' library at 14 Charterhouse Buildings, Goswell Road, London, has a large collection of Yorkshire material, with many parish registers in printed form. The Society also has copies of bishop's transcripts on microfilm. Visit www.sog.org.uk for more details.

to have felt any uncertainty as to the spelling of his name. Moreover, at the date of these marriages, except to family members or to intimate friends, Cromwell signed himself 'Oliver P' (Protector)." This was his official signature, and on a

SPOT THE FAKE:

Copies of all the original parish records show the three Cromwell signatures. A fourth authentic Cromwell signature is at the bottom for comparison



“He would be a bold man who attempted to forge the signature of Cromwell, when a personal friend like Major-General Lambert, lived in the parish”



YORKSHIRE ANCESTORS

Kirkby Malham

A treasure trove of genealogical records exist for Kirkby Malham

Kirkby Malham is a large and sprawling parish, which originally contained eight townships. It is located in the Craven region of Yorkshire, which lies in the famous Yorkshire Dales.

In Yorkshire many parishes were so large they were sub-divided into townships, which were often the principal unit of local administration, such as for the poor laws. It is a rural, moorland parish and includes some of the most rugged and spectacular sights in Britain, including a massive, curved wall of rock almost 300 feet high called Malham Cove and a lake 1,300 feet above sea level, known as Malham Tarn.

An excellent website devoted to the history, geography and topography of Kirkby Malham is maintained by David Fowle – at www.kirkbymalham.info/KMI/kirkby.html. Those with ancestors from Kirkby Malham will find this a treasure trove of genealogical information. The John William Morkill book, *The Parish of Kirkby Malhamdale*, has been republished in aid of the Kirkby Malham church restoration fund and details of how to order a copy can be found on <http://kirkbymalham.info/KMI/malhamdale/morkill.html>. The book is also available on a CD-ROM from Archive CD Books (www.archivecdbooks.co.uk).

PARISH CHURCH: St Michael's church Kirkby Malham, dates from around the end of the 15th century

Archangel. He speculated that the Register, hearing Cromwell was staying at Calton with Lambert, took his book to Cromwell to get it signed. Hence the possibility that Cromwell could have been present at the first marriage which my ancestor witnessed – even though it would have involved a fast coach ride to get him back to London three days later! Mirroring my own thoughts, the Rev Baron adds, “He would be a singularly bold man who attempted to forge the signature of Cromwell, when a personal friend like Lambert, who would be quick to detect the fraud, lived in the parish.”

I concede the balance of the evidence is that Oliver Cromwell's signatures in the Kirkby Malham registers were probably forgeries. However, surely family historians can be allowed a little romantic indulgence now and then? And the fantasy that a remote ancestor might have actually met the great man at a wedding – and, who knows, perhaps enjoyed a bit of a knees-up afterwards – remains with me! ■

BY ROY STOCKDILL

A family historian for 30 years, Roy edits the *Journal of One-Name Studies*, and is Vice-Chairman of the FFHS. His particular interest is in Yorkshire research.

marriage document it seems unlikely that he would have used any other.

TELLTALE LETTERS

However, what Morkill regarded as the most suspicious feature of the signatures, was the cryptic word or three letters which followed the name in each case. “The first letter of the word is ‘R’, and the second ‘e’, but the third is less easy to identify,” he writes. “Local tradition pronounces it to be ‘g’ and interprets the letters as the first syllable of the word Register. The letters obviously represent the first syllable of a word and, apparently, of a word that seems to indicate some official rank of the writer.”

It isn't easy to think of a word which begins with these letters and could fulfil these conditions. Although both Register and Regent have been suggested, why would Cromwell describe himself as either one of these? Morkill goes on to suggest that with these criticisms in mind, the signatures are probably not genuine. But, even if they are forgeries, it is still possible that Cromwell was actually present at the marriages. He argues that Cromwell could have signed the register at a later date, or that some ingenious person thought the honour conferred on the families by having Cromwell at their wedding should not be forgotten, and obligingly supplied an imitation of Cromwell's signature.

An obvious query which might help to solve the puzzle is where was Oliver

BMD RECORDS

CIVIL REGISTERS

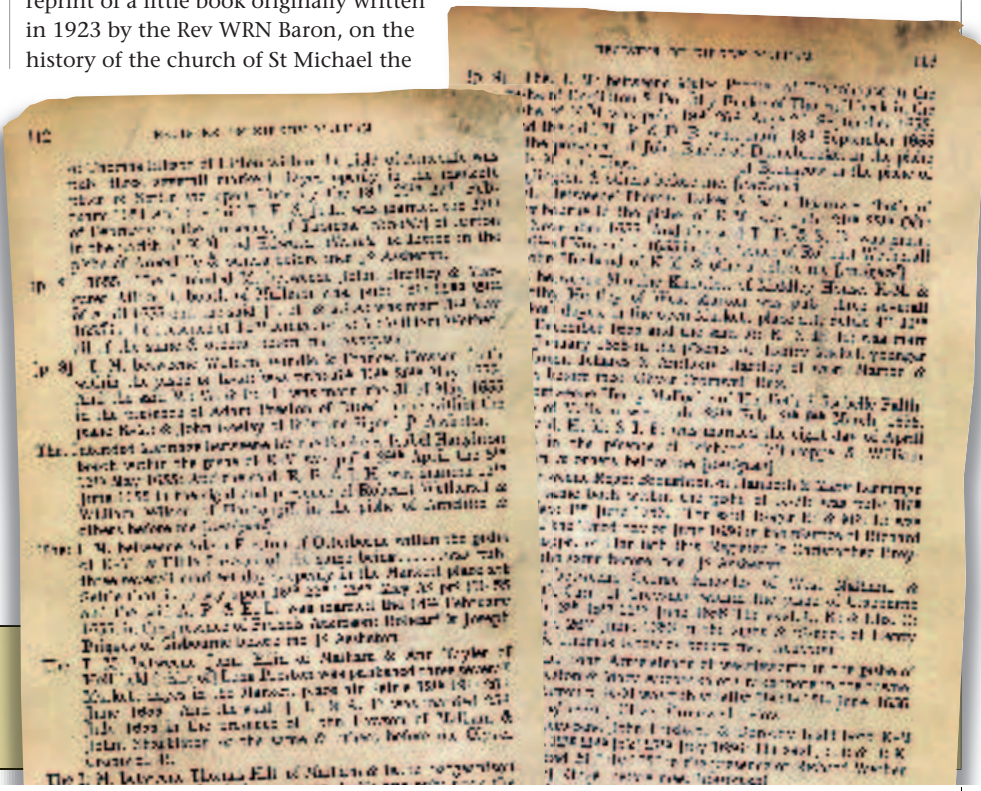
From September 1653-1660, births and deaths were recorded as well as baptisms and burials. Marriages took place before a magistrate and banns were read in the marketplace. Many Royalists opposed Cromwell's laws and refused to baptise their children, so 'missing' ancestors may have been baptised as older children after 1660.

Cromwell on the dates in question? Morkill addresses this, too, “The earlier marriage was on 25 July. On 28 July, Cromwell addressed a letter from Whitehall to Mr Secretary Thurloe.” It then becomes a question of whether Cromwell could have made the journey from Yorkshire to London in three days. Morkill has greater doubts about the signature on the second marriage as, “It is recorded that on that day Cromwell conferred a knighthood on Colonel Thomas Pride at Whitehall.”

SOLVING THE MYSTERY

On a visit to Kirkby Malham I bought a reprint of a little book originally written in 1923 by the Rev WRN Baron, on the history of the church of St Michael the

PARISH REGISTER:
Pages from the Yorkshire Parish Register Society's registered 1938 transcription of the records for the parish of Kirkby Malham



Picture courtesy: Kirkby Malham PCC, www.kirkbymalham.info