

## The Leigh/Lea Midwives in Eighteenth Century Chorley

Historically, obstetrics was a female-managed area of medicine. All women, of whatever position in society, relied on the services of midwives when expecting babies. Midwife means “with-woman”, in other words the woman to be with the mother-to-be during the delivery of the infant. The midwife took charge and was therefore in a powerful position. Men were excluded. She would be remunerated for her services but the amount and nature of the remuneration would vary depending on the circumstances. Given the lack of effective contraception, women spent a large part of their married years pregnant and nursing infants. This meant that there was a constant flow of work for midwives.

Midwifery is generally a difficult area to research as midwives, being part time were usually elusive. However, Episcopal Licensing, which had originally been introduced for medical men and schoolmasters, was extended to include midwives and these records which last until the mid-eighteenth century are fruitful sources of information. At first it may appear strange that the licensing system should extend from professional men, usually with a background of education and training, to women who have traditionally been depicted as uneducated and even unskilled. The answer lies in the churches’ concern for the manners and morals of its congregations and the fact that the evidence of the midwife could be vital in bastardy and paternity cases and thus help to save poor law costs for parishes.

Other women were often invited to the birth. These were known as “gossips” and they would usually be either family, friends or neighbours. Gossip was a corruption of “god-sibling”, a person to witness the birth for baptismal purposes.

Any unlicensed midwife was reported by local churchwardens and summoned by them to attend an Episcopal Visitation to obtain a licence. She would be accompanied by witnesses and possibly testimonials. A testimonial for Elizabeth Cornwallis of Norwich in 1702 certified that she “hath for some time past exercised the art of a midwife with good success” and the signatories “do

further esteem her to be a woman of good judgement in the said art, and well qualified to practise the same.”<sup>1</sup>

As with the records of medical practitioners, it is quite likely that records do not fully cover non-conformists and Roman Catholics. However, there appears slightly more formality in the licensing of midwives than medical practitioners. Although by the very nature of their work and the size of the communities they served, midwifery was practised by part-timers, probably some had a wider practice than others, and it would be these who would be licensed. Even so, they would hardly be overworked: Adrian Wilson in his study of midwifery in the Diocese of Ely suggested an average of one birth per midwife per month. Eighteenth century Chorley was a small town with a population of a few hundred so a licensed midwife's workload would not have been great.

It appears that Chorley may have been served by one family of midwives throughout the eighteenth century. This would not be unusual, as although midwifery was largely learned through experience, daughters often picked up the practice from their mothers. In Chorley an Anna Leigh (Lea) was practising between 1701 and 1725. In 1738 Elizabeth Leigh (Lea) was listed twice in the Chester Diocesan records, either as the same or a different person, and was listed again in 1747.<sup>2</sup> The practice of Episcopal Licensing died out in the second half of the century, but in a 1793 trade directory, Nancy Lee was listed as a Chorley midwife<sup>3</sup>. The background of the Leigh family is difficult to ascertain. The original Anna Leigh may well have been the wife of a relatively prosperous “husbandman”, Joseph Leigh. Ann Leigh was recorded as being buried in Chorley on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1726, and her husband later that year on 5<sup>th</sup> December. The inventory to the will of Joseph Leigh, drawn up on 7 December 1726 is quite impressive, totalling £184-6s-2d, including £29 owed to him and a leasehold property valued at £100. It would appear therefore, that if this was husband of Anna the midwife, this was a prosperous family, and therefore the practice of midwifery was not needed for financial reasons, but possibly simply an inherited practice and/or a means of attaining/maintaining social status in the community. The origins of these early eighteenth-century Leighs are not

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in The Making of Man-midwifery Childbirth in England 1660-1770 by Adrian Wilson. 1995. Cambridge Mass. P 31.

<sup>2</sup> Chester Diocese Call and Correction Books.

<sup>3</sup> The Universal British Directory of Trade and Commerce. Vol.2. 1793. London.

known, although it is tantalising to note that Quarter Session records from 1701 and 1704 record a Martha Leigh, midwife in Manchester and Ormskirk.<sup>4</sup>

There is a Leigh family memorial in St. Laurence's, the parish church in Chorley, which records three generations of the family in the eighteenth century.

“Sacred to the memory of EDMUND LEIGH who died Nov 12 1762 aged 76 years also of CATHERINE his wife who died Feb 3 1775 aged 86 years. Also WILLIAM LEIGH, the son of E & C LEIGH who died March 6 1779 aged 49 also MARY wife of the above WILLIAM who died April 29<sup>th</sup> 1785.

Also of MARY LEIGH the daughter of WILLIAM and ANN LEIGH who died 1792 aged 4 months. Also of WILLIAM son of WILLIAM and ANN who died 1795 aged 2 and also WILLIAM 2<sup>nd</sup> son of WILLIAM and ANN who died 1801 aged 6 days.

Also ANN the wife of WILLIAM LEIGH (the son of WILLIAM and MARY) who died 1802 aged 44. Also of WILLIAM son of WILLIAM and MARY who died April 16<sup>th</sup> 1817 aged 59 years and EDMUND son of WILLIAM and MARY who died 4 June 1817 aged 62 years.”

In the latter half of that century, William and Edmund Leigh were major figures in the cotton trade in the town, and owned land and property in other townships, with mining and quarrying interests. They took an active part in the affairs of the town through membership of the Vestry and supported Enclosure. Evidence of their social network can be seen in the number of wills of Chorley gentlemen and businessmen where Edmund and William Leigh are mentioned as executors. When parts of the Weld estate were sold off (originally half of the manor of Chorley), they were buyers. The 1801 Land Tax Assessment shows that Edmund and William owned Nancy Leigh's farm. This was described in Thomas Weld's sale of 1797 to be over 8 acres, a messuage and tenement, leased by Ann Leigh. (Nancy Lee in 1781 and Nancy Leigh in 1791 Land Tax Assessments.)

As mentioned earlier, Nancy Lee was listed as a midwife in the 1793 directory. In 1782 Nancy Leigh was double-assessed for Land Tax, possibly indicating that she was a Catholic. She served as Overseer in Chorley from 1791-94. In the Land Tax Assessment of 1791, and as well as being a Weld tenant, Miss Leigh was listed as a property owner (Stoops). Ann Leigh died in 1805, and was

---

<sup>4</sup> QSP/860/56 Ormskirk -- relief for Martha Leigh, midwife, aged 75. c1701. QSP/909/2 Manchester -- relief for Martha Leigh, midwife. c1704. QSP/909/3 Manchester -- relief for Martha Leigh, midwife. c1704

buried on 15 March. Her will described her as a spinster and her estate was valued between £40 - £100. Ann Leigh was clearly an independent woman of means and stature, and just as Edmund and William re-enforced their social network through executorship of wills, Ann did the same through her practice of midwifery.

The fact that no other midwife has been identified in Chorley in the eighteenth century other than with the name Leigh or a variation thereof must surely indicate a family practice.

No similar family association has been found in the neighbouring township, although there do appear to be long-serving midwives. In particular, Elizabeth Finch was notable having apparently served Rivington and Coppull (townships several miles apart). She was licensed in 1725 and having been widowed, married Henry Ellison of Standish in 1729,<sup>5</sup> and was still listed as a midwife in Standish in 1747.<sup>6</sup> Standish appears to have had several midwives licensed and active at the same time, particularly in 1747, but this may simply reflect the keenness of the local churchwardens.

The only other local township which had licensed midwives was Leyland, which has two in 1728 and one in 1742. The latter, Ann Ellat, had obtained a licence the previous year.<sup>7</sup> Her husband, like that of Ann Leigh, was a fairly prosperous man; he was a mason and on his death in 1771 left to his wife “yearly rents and profits of all those my lands, houses and tenements situate in Leyland.”<sup>8</sup>

The information that we have about the Leigh midwives and Ann Ellat hardly conforms to stereotypical images of filthy, drink-sodden and poverty-stricken old crones which has so coloured the image of the pre-twentieth century midwife. They were women of “middling status” either the spouse of a yeoman, or a property owner herself who undertook her duties as a social responsibility or a charitable service. Early nineteenth century trade directories covering Chorley do not list any midwives. However, that does not mean that the practice of women such as Ann Leigh did not continue.

Over such a distance in time, it is impossible to evaluate the technical competence of these midwives. The evidence that some plied their skills for many years must indicate a degree of consumer satisfaction. However, the

---

<sup>5</sup> Standish Parish Registers

<sup>6</sup> Call and Correction Books Op.Cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Chester Wills.

consumers may not have been mainly concerned with technical skill, and would not have recognised it. Instead, they might have been more concerned with the nursing, post-natal care and support services offered by the midwife.

The majority of women, however, being of lesser status, would be served during and after childbirth by a family member or neighbour who left no historical footprint, being unlicensed and unrecorded in any other way.

John E Harrison