

Reepham connection sought for Norfolk 'vagrants'

The characters in this photograph have long been a mystery in Reepham and for a time it was thought the name on the cart was "Hester Banmer", that they were called Jimmy, Hester and Mary Banmer, and that all three lived somewhere in the Reepham area.



Recent research has uncovered a little about their possible background (look at the "r" in Hester and compare it with the third letter of the second name). Their names were possibly James Barnes, his wife Hester Barnes and Ann Mary Burroughs (or Burrows), who were registered on the 1901 England Census as the last entry for Burnham Westgate. They are not listed in a house or dwelling, but are grouped together and entered as "vagrants" and were "All layed out Thorpe Road all night" – it appears they had spent the night in the open somewhere along Thorpe Road on the edge of Burnham Westgate. Other details on the census show that James was born in South Creake, Hester in Sedgeford and Ann Mary in Wells. In the 1911 census Hester and Ann are both inmates of Docking Workhouse. We assume James had died since Hester is described as a widow. (The date of James's death is uncertain because there are several deaths recorded for a James Barnes between 1901 and 1911 in the Docking area.) It is difficult to see how the tricycle in this photo works. The driving wheel spokes are clearly wooden, so the wheel rim should be wooden as well. However, the cart seems to have bare metal wheels. The pedals are recognisable, but what is the long spike behind the wheel? Is it a braking mechanism? And did the two women take turns in the cart or did Ann Mary always have to walk? The look on James's face suggests he was concentrating hard, maybe to keep still while the photograph was taken. Perhaps the Reepham connection was to do with the photographer rather than the people themselves? The Reepham Archive has just found the following rhyme that was written on photographs printed as postcards and sold for twopence:

*Here's Jimmy, Mary and Esther you see,
A typical trio of poverty;
With just a few rags to cover their ribs,
This photo was taken by F. J. Gibbs.*

Fred Gibbs was a nephew of Edward Gibbs (Ironmonger & Seed Merchant).

Janet Archer