

Dr James Kittermaster.

When I was a young I lived in Meriden where the name of a road caught my eye: Kittermaster. How strange Whose name was it? My query produced the bare minimum of information: a Victorian village doctor.

It was then well under a century since he had died (aged 87 in 1876) but he'd been more or less forgotten. A salutary thought, for in his time he'd been one of the most significant, influential residents.

I wondered what he had looked like and what of his life story. Many years later researching for my second book on Meriden history, I managed to contact the playwright Michael K whom I discovered was the doctor's great grandson. I soon found in my post photographs of the doctor, his wife and several other members of the family. I met contemporary members some of whom I saw looked very like their ancestor so significant is DNA. Michael had done research on his ancestry and gave me this information to add to mine. By 1990s had become far easier to trace a family background compared with 1960s.

In mid-1780s the vicar of Meriden the Revd Anthony Bliss needed a butler. His widowed sister Susannah Marshall had moved from Allesley to Coleshill or Castle Bromwich and knew of a literate young man, James Kittermaster born 1763 that might fit the bill. She recommended him to her brother. James came to work for the vicar and met and married in March 1788 Margaret a daughter of a neighbouring farmer at Church Farm. She also worked as the vicar's housekeeper at in the old vicarage then in his newly built Ryelye House on the side of the Hill. The vicar and James were the only two men in Meriden to pay the recently introduced Hair powder tax! The Kittermasters remained employed by the vicar for the rest of their lives. James died 18 the vicar in 1815 and Margaret in 1829.

They had 4 children the eldest of whom was a boy also called James born May 1789. Family legend has it that the old vicar took a liking to the child, encouraging him in his own hobby of botany. He sent him as a boarder to public school at Shrewsbury. Ryelye House built about 1796 boasted splendid gardens. By then his servants had 3 more children 2 boys and a girl: Catherine (1791- 1862)married Thomas Birch a Coleshill basket maker then lodged as a widow with William Thompson the farmer at Malt House farm.. She earned a living as a dressmaker, William (1794- 1839) labourer on the turnpike and Richard (1795-1815).

James junior was very fortunate to be adopted by the vicar. He shows us a picture of his early days with Rev Bliss and his nieces Mary and Ann running ahead aged c 10 down the steep steps leading to Old Road and the Queen's Head. He also became a favourite of the headmaster of Shrewsbury School, Dr Butler. He eventually joined the 49th Regiment of Foot, the Warwickshire Regiment stationed on Isle of Wight as a trainee officer. The regiment was then involved in fighting in the Napoleonic Wars. The Army Lists indicate he went to Canada with British forces c 1809 and left c 1811. It is said he wished to emigrate but left this dream to his 3 sons. His illegitimate son Henry was born in early 1810 but no more is known of him. Did he survive? He acknowledged the child so why not marry the mother? Possibly because he was under age and neither his father or the vicar would support this? Had she a Meriden link with the surname Thompson? The Thompsons claimed they were close friends of the Kittermasters.

We do not know when he studied to gain his medical qualifications. Was it immediately after School? Or on leaving the army as a Lieutenant? His marriage certificate of 1813 says he was a 'surgeon; and the 1851 census says he qualified M.D at Glasgow University On 6 January 1813 he married Mary Zachary of Meriden previously of London, a year his senior. Mary (1788-1866) was the daughter of a professional soldier: William Zachary had been invited by the 4th Earl of Aylesford to help create the Warwickshire Yeomanry c 1803 as a home guard to counteract a possible French invasion. He was a Yeoman of the Guard, possibly the captain. From 1813-1815 it is said he and wife lived in the vicarage but on the death of Revd Bliss late in 1815 they had to vacate for a new vicar and began renting a house probably on the Green. The old man left him £200 x year and a revisionary interest in his grand Meriden House, which was rented out. On his mother's death in 1829 he inherited a cottage and field at the top of Meriden Hill near the graveyard. This field of 4 acres was called Hill Orchard. The death of Miss Mary Marshall one of the late vicar's nieces soon afterward brought him additional money so he began to build a house on Hill Orchard Field called 'Church Cottage'. He also gave a home to Anne the young widow of a family friend and possible medical partner Benjamin Beaufoy and his two children. Later In an extension of considerable proportions his wife and Anne Beaufoy began a girls' boarding school, incorporating the ancient stone cottage. The 1841 census recorded 23 pupils there.

In late 1820s Dr K had taken up a new hobby: watercolour painting and pencil sketching. This was a popular activity of the time. We are fortunate to have a collection of part of his work, some of which were originally taken to Canada by his 2 youngest sons, Anthony Bliss Kittermaster b1830 named after the vicar and Albert Reuben b1831. Others descended to children of his second son Revd Frederick Wilson Kittermaster (1819-

1906), a vicar and teacher at Shrewsbury School. These pictures now available as a collection on slides give us an insight into the life of a middle class family often with their friends, their hobbies and children. We also have a wonderful image of Meriden and District just before the invention of photography. It is possible to recognise places especially if one knew the village before the developments of the 1960s and beyond or a site much changed by alterations for example the appearance of the Queen's Head. There are 2 sequential walks: to Holyberry End and to Great Packington. His eldest daughter Anna Maria married the artist Charles Marshall RA, inventor of limelight for the stage and painter of vast dioramas. Rye House was rented out to General Whichcote. Eventually his younger daughter Edith Harriette who never married built Croxall's House in Eaves Green Lane where she died in 1911 a recluse. The Kittermaster memorial was placed just inside the rear gate of the churchyard and nearby their own long term servants, Isaac and Alice Arch.