

A BUSY WEEKEND

Benjamin Smith, the grandfather of Miss Rebecca Smith, was a shepherd to William Bell of Stanion. Part of his job must also have involved horses, for one Friday morning, November 16th 1888, he visited a field along what is now the A43 on the Kettering side of Stanion. There Mr Bell kept a horse which he valued at £60. The horse was missing although the gates were properly shut and fastened. Mr Bell had seen the horse there on the Thursday. The police were informed that theft was suspected and events moved more quickly thanks to an alert constable.

On Thursday night, about 11.45, P.C. West, from Moulton, was on the Kettering – Northampton road some three miles out of Northampton. He met a man leading a brown horse. Whether the policeman had been alerted to the circumstances is not clear; perhaps he had his suspicions, but in any case he stopped the traveller. George Wilmott, for that was the name he gave, an elderly man of no fixed address, told P.C. West that he had bought the horse that day in Kettering market for £15, paid by cheque. Alas, Wilmott could not give the name of the auctioneer, nor the name of the vendor. He had no money on him and said he was walking the horse to London.

There was no cattle market at Kettering on November 16th, P.C. West, his suspicions far from allayed, took the horse and Wilmott to Northampton police station. On the way, Wilmott remembered the name of the farmer/owner – Mr Brown of Weldon. At the station Wilmott claimed he found the horse on the road between Stanion and Kettering.

Back to Benjamin. On Saturday night, the 17th, he heard that a horse had been found and on Sunday he and a policeman travelled to the Woolpack Inn, Northampton, where he identified the missing animal in the stable. Next, Ben, policeman, prisoner and horse retraced their journey. At Kettering police station Wilmott persisted with his story of finding the horse on the road.

The story was not very convincing. In the face of the evidence given by other witnesses, at Kettering police court on November 21st, it fell apart. A baker, Frank Abbott of Kettering, knew Mr Bell (who, among other commercial interest, was a corn merchant), knew this horse and knew that he had last seen it at 4.15 p.m. on the previous Thursday in Mr Bell's field. He identified it as the one in the station yard. John Standley of Stanion had seen the prisoner riding through Geddington without a saddle or bridle that same Thursday towards Kettering. And Ben told the story of his busy weekend, travelling to and fro to Northampton.

That was Wednesday 21st November. Wilmott was charged with horse stealing and committed to stand trial at Northampton Assizes the following day. (The course of justice seems to have been speedier, if harsher, a hundred years ago). Whether William Bell, Ben and the other witnesses had to go once to Northampton is not recorded. George Wilmott had had enough; he pleaded guilty but said nothing else, and was sentenced to 18 months hard labour.

Ben Smith was a shepherd. The local newspapers of the time were full of reports of poachers and other miscreants who were apprehended and brought to justice. Usually the gamekeeper gave evidence. Ben had several time-consuming journeys to undertake along the old Northampton Road, winding through all the villages – I wonder what his thoughts were? Perhaps the outcome gave him some satisfaction. Perhaps he preferred his sheep.

See Kettering Leader 23/1888 – Horse stealing at Stanion.

Pat Kimmons and Bette Britton