

# HARRIET KETTLE

Pauper, Prisoner, Patient and Parent  
in Victorian Norfolk

Andy Reid

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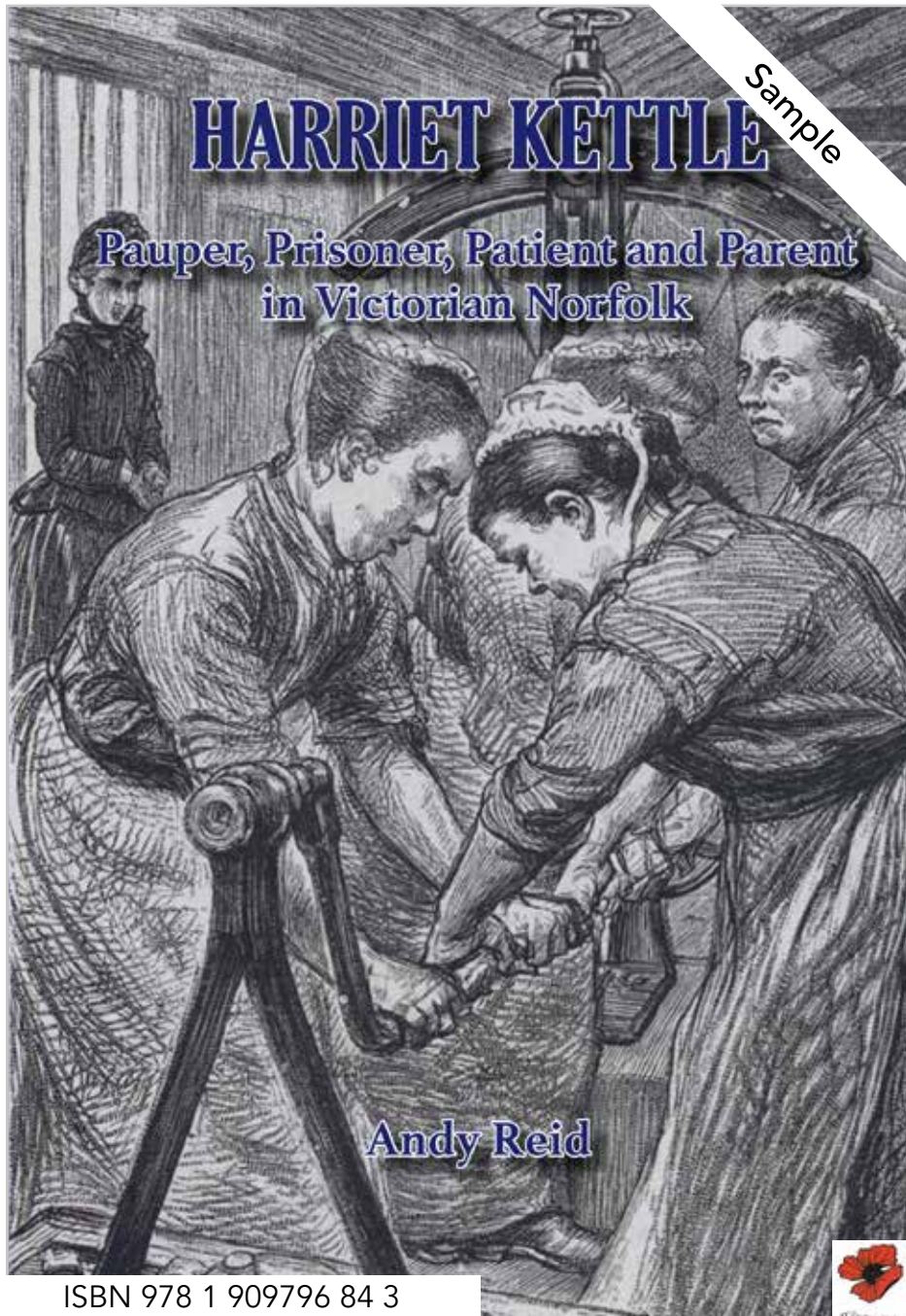
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Sample





Iron bedsteads and straw mattresses introduced into workhouses following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act.



Workroom under the silent system at Tothill Fields Female prison and adopted at Walsingham House of Correction in 1836.

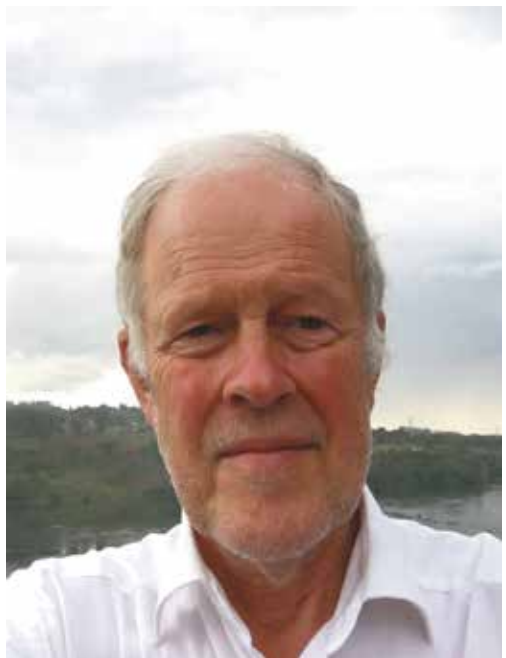
Poppyland Publishing is pleased to announce *Harriet Kettle: Pauper, Patient and Parent in Victorian Norfolk* by Andy Reid.

Harriet Kettle (c1838-1916) was a rebel against authority in Victorian times. With the death of her mother and with her father transported to Australia, she grew up in the workhouse. Becoming a sex worker in Norwich, she got into trouble and was imprisoned several times. Diagnosed with 'moral insanity' she spent periods in asylums before marrying, settling in Toftwood and having four children. Disputes led to her assaulting the schoolmistress at the school and taking neighbours to court. A survivor, in old age, she died in the workhouse.

As well as providing a detailed narrative of Harriet's life, this book explores in depth the contexts in which it was lived: the village of Cranworth, Gressenhall Workhouse, the courts and yards of Norwich, Walsingham and Wymondham Houses of Correction, the Norfolk County Lunatic Asylum, the Bethlem Hospital in London and Toftwood, a suburb of East Dereham. In so doing, it provides a vivid picture of the grittier sides of life in Victorian times.

### **About the author**

Andy Reid taught history at a Norfolk secondary school before taking up an advisory role as Liaison Officer at Gressenhall Museum. He moved to Staffordshire in 1988, working first for the Local Authority and then, for 16 years, as H M Inspector of Schools, while maintaining an interest in the history of Norfolk. For the past 12 years, he has worked as an educational consultant, supporting schools in England and contributing to school improvement programmes in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.



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## In Cranworth: the Gurdons and the labourers

**C**RANWORTH, where Harriet Kettle was said to have been born, was and is a small agricultural village in central Norfolk, 16 miles west of Norwich. In 1836 it was described in White's Directory as 'a pleasant but scattered village and parish'<sup>1</sup>, with an area of 1,000 acres (in later directories, revised up to 1,107 acres) and a population of 323. Cranworth's neighbour to the north west, between it and the much larger village of Shipdham, was Letton. Letton was similar in area to Cranworth (1,000 acres of land according to the 1836 directory, later revised to 1,260 acres) but had fewer than half as many people (133). Letton, despite the extensive acreage of the parish, was a 'shrunken' settlement, parts of which had been gradually deserted in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries owing to the enclosure of arable land for sheep-rearing. Letton's church was in ruins by 1560 and only faint traces of the foundations survive. The ecclesiastical parishes of Letton and Cranworth were united in 1546 and became known as 'Cranworth-cum-Letton', although the civil parishes remained distinct.<sup>2</sup>

The dominant figure in both Cranworth and Letton in 1836 was Theophilus Thornhagh Dillingham Gurdon Esq. (1764-1849), whose family had been established in the area since the 15<sup>th</sup> century and whose name preserved the memory of forbears of his father.<sup>3</sup> TTD Gurdon (as he tended to be known) owned all the land in Letton, which was therefore a 'closed' parish. He owned four fifths of the land in Cranworth, where he was also, 'lord of the manor and patron of the rectory'.<sup>4</sup> His land-holdings extended to several other adjacent parishes as well<sup>5</sup>, his property amounting in 1838 to 4,498 acres. The estate, it appears, was 'well run...commanding good rents throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century'.<sup>6</sup>

TTD Gurdon resided at Letton Hall, described in White's Directory as, 'a handsome quadrangular mansion of white brick, seated in an extensive and well wooded park,' and in social terms a world away from the labourer's cottage in



*Letton Hall, 2020.*



which Harriet Kettle probably spent her infancy. The hall, which replaced an earlier house nearby, was designed by the noted architect Sir John Soane and was built in 1785-8. It was described by Pevsner as ‘not a large house’—that is, by comparison with other country mansions - but the hall and staircase were judged ‘very fine’.<sup>7</sup> The park was expanded shortly after the hall was built by moving roads out of the way and enclosing the land. Game was reared there and shooting parties provided recreation for the Gurdon family and their guests. Sheep-rearing continued, alongside arable and dairy farming; in 1840, TTD Gurdon was celebrated as possessing, ‘decidedly the best breed of Southdown sheep in the county’.<sup>8</sup> The family was not in residence when the national census was taken in 1841, the only recorded occupants of the hall being four female and two male servants.

TTD Gurdon died in 1849. According to the *Bury and Norwich Post*, a Whig-supporting newspaper, he would, ‘be ever recollected as one of those high-minded country gentlemen of whom Norfolk have [sic] a right to be proud; as an ornament to the society in which he moved, as one who took an honourable lead among those politicians who maintained and supported the Whig principles in this county, as the friend of their great patriot, Mr Coke,<sup>9</sup> and as the enemy of no man’.<sup>10</sup>

Letton Hall passed to TTD Gurdon’s eldest son, Brampton Gurdon (1797-1881). At the time of the 1851 census, Brampton and his family were resident at the hall, along with seven female and three male servants. Brampton was a magistrate; he was appointed Sheriff of Norfolk in 1855; and he became the Liberal Member of Parliament for West Norfolk in 1857, serving until 1865.<sup>11</sup> Among the many who enjoyed his hospitality at Letton was Benjamin Armstrong, Vicar of East Dereham from 1850 until 1888, whose diary records several visits there. On 14 August 1855, for example, he wrote: ‘Dined at the Gurdons, surrounded by all that wealth & good taste could suggest. The ladies of the family, as usual, most agreeable, diversifying the evening with music and singing.’ Four years later, on 28 October 1859, he recorded another visit: ‘Dined at Letton Hall, and met an aristocratic party staying in the house. Our dinner plates were silver, & the dessert service Dresden, with 8 powdered footmen to wait’.<sup>12</sup>

In Cranworth, the largest residence was the rectory, occupied by the Revd Philip Gurdon, a younger brother of Brampton Gurdon and someone who, because of the public roles he



*The Revd Philip Gurdon as a young man (Joseph Slater), 1825. (Courtesy Gurdon family)*



*Cranworth Rectory before 1918. (Courtesy Robena Brown)*

performed, was to meet his fellow parishioner Harriet Kettle on many occasions. Philip had been born at Letton Hall in 1800, the third son of TTD Gurdon. He graduated from Cambridge University in 1823, was ordained two years later and, as a young man, played county cricket for Norfolk. Having already become rector of Reymerston in 1825, rector of Southburgh in 1828, and rector of Hackford in 1829, he was instituted to the rectory of Cranworth-cum-Letton by his father (who was patron of all these livings) in April 1832, at the same time resigning from Hackford.<sup>13</sup> His total income amounted to the substantial sum of about £1,200 per year.<sup>14</sup> On his death in 1874, Philip Gurdon was described in the *London Evening Standard* as, 'one of the few remaining pluralists'.<sup>15</sup> Holding multiple incumbencies had been common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but became increasingly rare as the Church of England, responding to the challenge presented by Methodism, reformed itself in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Pluralities Act of 1838 stipulated that no clergyman should hold more than two livings and that they should not be more than ten miles apart. Philip Gurdon might have argued that the three ecclesiastical parishes he served were contiguous and contained little more than a thousand people in total. Philip, moreover, complied with the injunction of Edward Stanley, the reforming Bishop of Norwich from 1837 to 1849, who insisted that clergymen of the Church of England should reside in their parishes.<sup>16</sup>

Three months after becoming rector of Cranworth-cum-Letton, Philip married his wife Henrietta. They moved into Cranworth Rectory, enlarged it in 1840, and by the time of the census of 1841 had five daughters, with the needs of

the family being catered for by eight servants, six female and two male. In 1851, Philip and Henrietta were again in residence at Cranworth when the census was taken; only two of their daughters now remained at home and the complement of servants had fallen to four females and one male. The following year, Cranworth church was restored and partially rebuilt.

Philip Gurdon served Cranworth-cum-Letton as its rector for 42 years. The Church of England did not have a monopoly of organised religion in the parish, however; the Primitive Methodists had built their small chapel at High Common in Cranworth in 1835, with seating for 35 people, and on 30 March 1851 attracted 20 worshippers in the morning, 45 in the afternoon and 40 in the evening, compared with the 200 who attended the one (afternoon) service in the parish church (plus 50 children who attended Sunday school).<sup>17</sup> Philip's attitude to this competitor appears to have been relaxed and inclusive. The Norfolk News commented approvingly in 1863 on his, 'true Christian charity which respects conscientious differences in matters of religion'. The Primitive Methodists in the parish were not only, 'equal recipients with the rest, of the bounty which is so freely scattered through the parish, but one poor woman amongst their number—noted for the respectability of her character and her regular and tidy habits—has actually the charge of the church, where she attends during the single service that is held there every Sunday, and has been distinctly assured—in answer to her intimation that she could not forsake "the people"—that during the rest of the day she is at perfect liberty to attend the place which her conscience best approves'.<sup>18</sup>

Besides being the rector of Cranworth-cum-Letton, Philip Gurdon farmed the glebe and other lands that he held, amounting to about 50 acres in Cranworth alone,<sup>19</sup> and was a breeder of prize-winning poultry. He was also extremely active in the public life of the County of Norfolk.<sup>20</sup> He was a justice of the peace, sometimes sitting in petty sessions alongside his brother Brampton Gurdon. For several years, he served as honorary secretary of the Norfolk Agricultural Association.<sup>21</sup> He was also an ex-officio member of the Board of Guardians of the Mitford and Launditch Poor Law Union and was elected as its chairman in 1852. In that capacity he often came face to face with Harriet Kettle. He was a member of the committee of visiting justices of the county lunatic asylum at Thorpe from 1860 onwards, and he would have met Harriet there too. As a magistrate, however, Philip Gurdon sometimes got ahead of the ratepayers of his district and was not always popular with them. At a meeting held at the Assembly Rooms in East Dereham on 2 January 1863 to protest against the Highways Act of 1862, which Gurdon supported, the Revd H E Knatchbull of North Elmham, an opponent, said of Gurdon that, 'he was a very clever fellow...He had known him all his life, and that he succeeded in everything he undertook, but his tongue



went a great deal too fast'.<sup>22</sup>

Philip Gurdon died at Cranworth Rectory on 1 August 1874 and was buried at the village church six days later. Oddly, there is no memorial to him among the many Gurdon family monuments inside the church (his rather modest grave stands in the churchyard); nor has any obituary been found in the local newspapers. Many of the reports of his death simply referred to him as a 'clerical pluralist' and were limited to noting the livings that he had held and that had become available with his decease. The one exception, improbably, was the *London Evening Standard*, which noted that Philip was, 'much beloved for his genuine kindness of heart'.<sup>23</sup>



*Grave of Philip Gurdon, 2020.  
(Courtesy Cranworth and Southburgh  
Parochial Church Council)*

After Philip Gurdon's death, his household effects were offered for sale, and the particulars provide an insight into the nature of his domestic establishment. The items listed included, 'mahogany, birch and painted double and single wardrobes, ditto dressing tables, chests of drawers, wash stands, looking glasses, cane-seated chairs, toilet sets, mahogany, birch and iron four-post and other bedsteads, excellent bordered featherbeds, hair and wool mattresses, blankets, quilts, Kidderminster, Brussels and other carpets, damask and moreen<sup>24</sup> window curtains, mahogany-framed dining room chairs, mahogany, loo<sup>25</sup> and other tables', and other furniture. There was even a refrigerator.<sup>26</sup> The outdoor effects included, 'an easy-running brougham by Elvin [a coachbuilder in East Dereham], a vis-à-vis basket carriage by Elvin, gig [and] luggage cart', along with harness, saddles, bridles and various tools and other equipment.<sup>27</sup> Philip Gurdon and his family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle.

As well as the Gurdons, White's Directory of 1836 listed the other principal inhabitants of Letton and Cranworth. In Letton, there were four farmers, while in Cranworth the directory mentioned six, along with two shopkeepers, a corn miller, a blacksmith, a wheelwright, a cooper and a schoolmistress.<sup>28</sup> The census returns of 1841 and 1851 recorded the details of the families of the farmers and the few tradespeople and, of course, the people omitted from the directory, who were the most numerous group in the two villages—the families of the agricultural labourers.

In Letton, the four farmhouses were recorded in 1841, three of which contained servants as well as the farmer and his family. The lodges of TTD

Gurdon's gamekeeper and gardener were also noted. In Cranworth, eight inhabitants were described as farmers, five of whom were prosperous enough to employ servants, and there were a grocer, a smith and various other tradespeople. One of the farmers was Amos Potter, father of Robert Potter, with whom Harriet was to clash in court many years later; another was Robert Kiddle, who discovered the theft of grain by Richard Clark Kettle, of whom more below; and a third was John Aylmer, from whom William Clarke stole the ewes and lambs. Not much had altered in 1851. The population of Letton had dropped very slightly from 154 to 150, while that of Cranworth had fallen rather more, from 340 to 310, but the social structure was substantially unchanged.

The tenant farmers in Letton and Cranworth seem to have enjoyed good relations with the Gurdon family, their landlords. The cordiality between them was expressed strikingly in an event less than a month after Philip Gurdon's death. Robert Thornhagh Gurdon (1829-1902), eldest son and heir of Brampton Gurdon, married for the second time in 1874 and the tenants expressed a wish to present the couple with a wedding gift. The bridegroom's parents, Brampton Gurdon and his wife Henrietta, invited, 'all the tenants... with their wives, sons and daughters, to a luncheon and garden party' on 31 August 1874. Henry Stebbings, on behalf of the tenants, presented the newlyweds with a 'magnificent breakfast service' and gave an address in which he referred to, 'the great sympathy and mutual respect which have always existed between the landlord and the tenants of these estates'. He thought that 'the present occasion is one peculiarly fitted for showing our respect to the family, and our great regard for yourselves'.<sup>29</sup> Although it was no doubt in the interests of both landlords and tenants to cultivate good relations, there do appear to have been genuinely warm feelings on both sides. They were to be tested in the great depression in agriculture which began in the late 1870s, when the Gurdons were compelled to lower the rents of the farms, but the relationship of landlord and tenant appears to have remained reasonably amicable.<sup>30</sup>

The lifestyle of the larger farmers of Cranworth and Letton seems to have been not dissimilar to that of the rector, Philip Gurdon, if somewhat less refined. James Kiddle and Robert Kiddle, the brothers from whom Richard Clarke Kettle stole a coomb of wheat in 1834, dissolved their farming partnership in 1837 and the moveable property at their farm near the south-western boundary of Cranworth came on to the market. Offered for sale were '10 capital cart horses and mares, 12 handsome young cows, home-bred steers, 4 bulls, 92 sheep and lambs' along with pigs, '3 good road waggons' and various pieces of farm machinery including 'part of a threshing machine, with carriage'. The farmhouse had 'sleeping-rooms' containing four four-post bedsteads with 'moreen and chintz furniture' and two 'stump bedsteads', together with mahogany chests of

drawers and other furniture. Downstairs was a parlour with 'mahogany card and dining tables, 2 Kidderminster carpets, 6 mahogany chairs, 2 elbow chairs' and other items. In the kitchen and pantry were a range of utensils and a 'Capital 8-day clock'. A dairy and cellar, containing equipment for making cream, butter and beer, completed the accommodation.<sup>31</sup> After the sale, Robert Kiddle continued to farm as sole tenant. Aged 56 in 1851, his farm comprised 350 acres and he employed two house servants as well as the agricultural labourers who worked the land. Harriet Kettle would probably have met Robert Kiddle at Gressenhall workhouse, as he served as the representative from Cranworth on the Board of Guardians of Mitford and Launditch Poor Law Union throughout the 1850s.

The agricultural labourers and their families accounted for over two thirds of the households in Letton and Cranworth in 1841 and 1851. In Letton, many of their cottages lay in an area north-east of the hall called Letton Green. In Cranworth, some were to be found around the parish church and rectory on Church Green, while most of the others (including Richard Clarke's) lay about a mile away at High Common, adjoining the parish of Southburgh. The original common land (along with commons in Letton, Southburgh and Reymerston) had been enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1796.

Harriet Kettle, may have spent at least part of her earliest years in one of the labourers' cottages at High Common, where there were other Clarke households in addition to that of her grandparents. There are no descriptions of the homes of agricultural labourers in Cranworth in the 1830s and 1840s, and so the best indication of the conditions in which Harriet spent her infancy is provided by a general report by Edward Twisleton, *On the Dwellings of the Labouring Classes in the Counties of Norfolk and Suffolk*, which was written in 1840 and was one of the local reports accompanying Edwin Chadwick's national *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of 1842*.

Twisleton stated that a considerable proportion of the labourers lived in cottages with one room on the ground floor and one above it. He commented: 'Although they may be sufficiently commodious for a man, and wife, and very young children, they are manifestly uncomfortable, and the having only one bedroom is even indecent for a man and wife and large growing family; but I have seen many instances where a man, his wife, and six children, of different sexes, have slept together in one room on three and sometimes only two beds'. In some cases, the occupants tried to provide some privacy, by, 'putting curtains to the beds or dividing the room into two parts by pinning old counterpanes together, and sometimes by cutting up and sewing together old gowns and stretching them across the room'. Richard and Ann Clarke's cottage can be imagined to have been like this in the 1840s and 1850s.

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