



EDUCATION SPOT by Tony Knight

BABY FARMING

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Despite its innocent enough title, baby farming was an horrific Victorian practice in an era when there was limited contraception and the moral society still looked down on children born out of wedlock. The 1834 Poor Laws reformation regarded poverty and illegitimacy as moral issues which needed to be remedied. The New Poor Law was designed to restore virtue and stimulate thrifty, industrious workers. The Bastardy Clause absolved the putative father of any responsibility for his bastard child and socially and economically victimized the mother in an effort to restore female morality.

Regulated adoption agencies and social services didn't exist and instead, it was common for untrained women to offer adoption services to unmarried mothers. In return for the baby and an agreed amount of cash, the "agency" would offer to find a good home for the child and many mothers parted with their children in the belief that they would have a better life than that which they could offer.

It is probable that some were sold to childless couples and others fostered/adopted for a few pounds. Unmarried mothers were often so desperate that they answered the adverts placed in newspapers by seemingly reputable people....the so called baby farmers.



Murdering of unwanted children by their mothers typically resulted in the death penalty in Victorian Britain. Most of the reported cases took place in London but there is no doubt at all that there were incidents in every large City including Southampton and Portsmouth where a transient population and appalling living conditions were evident.

A few of the baby farmers found killing off the babies less arduous than finding new families to adopt them. Murder gave a quick profit without the need to provide childcare, at their own expense.

In an age of high infant mortality, deaths of babies and small children attracted little attention and were actually quite common. Where a baby's body was found, it was usually impossible to trace the mother as forensic science was not sufficiently developed.

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Six baby farmers were hanged in England and one each in Scotland and Wales over the 40 year period from 1870 - 1909 – less than 100 years ago!

New legislation was subsequently passed by Parliament to protect babies and small children, including the Children's Act of 1908. The Government later introduced proper regulations for adoption and fostering which finally brought an end to baby farming in Britain with adoption registers commencing in 1927.

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