

Pickled Parson of Sedgefield

In 18th century England, clergymen often received some of their income in the form of a tithe.

This was a tax consisting of one tenth 'tithe' of a crop, a herd, or the harvest from a woodland. As time went on, cash payments replaced actual crops.

The Reverend John Gamage was Rector of St Edmund's Church in Sedgefield in the 1730s and lived with his family in the nearby rectory.

As winter approached, he and his wife looked forward to the paying of the tithe, due annually on the 20 December. But disaster was to strike in 1747 when, only a few days before the tithe was due to be paid, the Reverend Gamage suddenly died.

Fear struck into the heart of his widow.

If her husband was not able to collect the tithe, then Mrs Gamage and her family would starve. Faced with the likelihood of that devastation, Mrs Gamage took matters into her own hands. She had to find a way of delaying the news of her husband's death, just long enough for the tithe to be safely received.

Brandy was the answer, and lots of it! Because the Rector's wife had taken the decision to preserve her dead husband's body by pickling it in brandy and then pretending that he was still very much alive.

She propped his body in a chair which was positioned next to a window so that, to anyone passing by, it looked as though the Rector was alive, and expectedly waiting for his parishioners to visit and pay their dues.

Her cunning plan had the desired effect. Tithes were handed over without anyone questioning the utter silence with which the Rector accepted his dues.

But Mrs Gamage still had one more task to complete. The day after the tithe had been safely gathered in, she announced that her husband had suddenly died. A death certificate was issued by an unsuspecting doctor, but Mrs Gamage had not allowed for her dead husband's feelings.

The rectory suddenly began to experience strange ghostly goings on, and it was clear that the late Rector did not agree with his wife's deception of his parishioners.

For many years the Pickled Parson continued to haunt the rectory, until almost 50 years later when a major fire destroyed the building.

However, it is said that the Pickled Parson phantom is still haunting Sedgefield, roaming the grounds between the Old Rectory and St Edmunds Church.