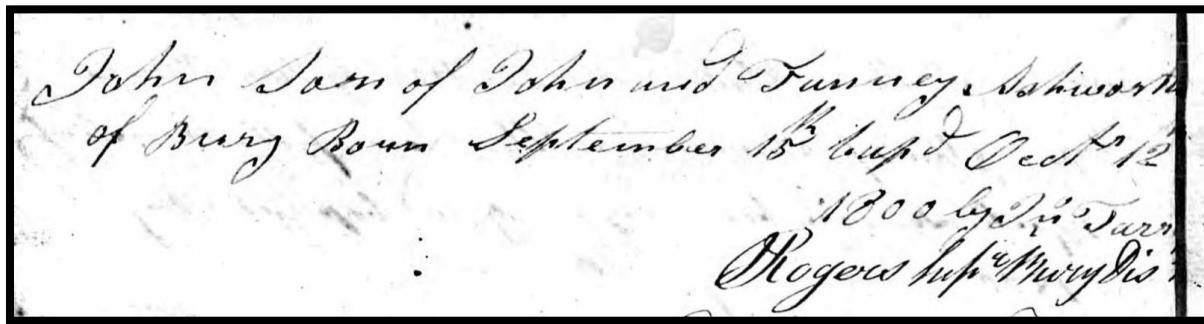


John Ashworth (1800-1834): The Brief and Woeful Life of an Excise Officer

By Janell R. Duxbury © 2024

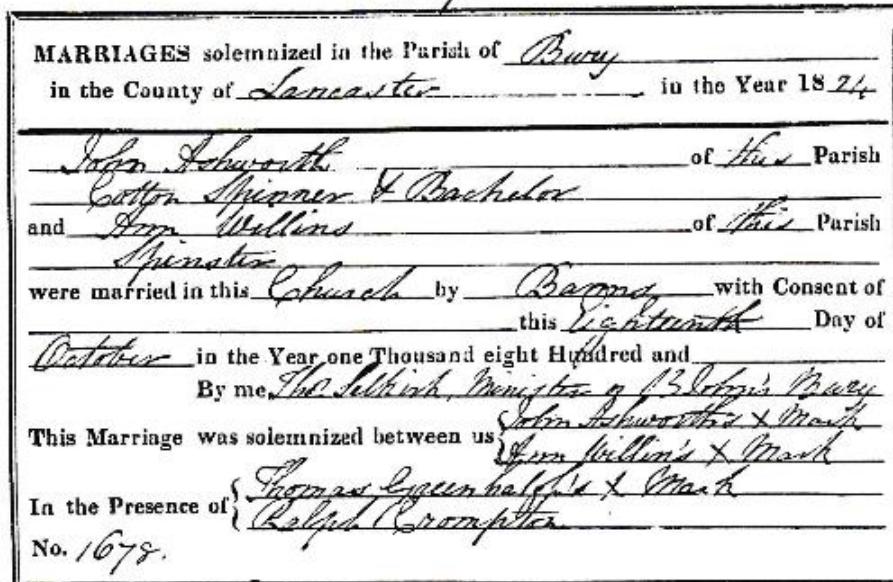
Little was known about my great-great-great-grandfather's work life and death despite decades of genealogical research. Extant records determined that John Ashworth was born on 15 September 1800 into a staunch Wesleyan Methodist and prominent family living in the Pits o'th' Moor neighborhood of Bury, Lancashire. His father was Hatter Proprietor John Ashworth (1767-1852) and his mother was Fanny Norris (1775-1848). John Ashworth was baptised on 12 October 1800 at Union Street Chapel (Wesleyan) in Bury.



John Ashworth Baptism Record 1800 in Bury

John Ashworth and Ann Wellins were married on 18 October 1824 at St. John Chapel (Anglican) in Bury. Ann Wellins, daughter of John and Betty Wellins, was baptized on 18 September 1803 at St. Leonard (Anglican) in Middleton (by Oldham), Lancashire. John Wellins was a weaver.

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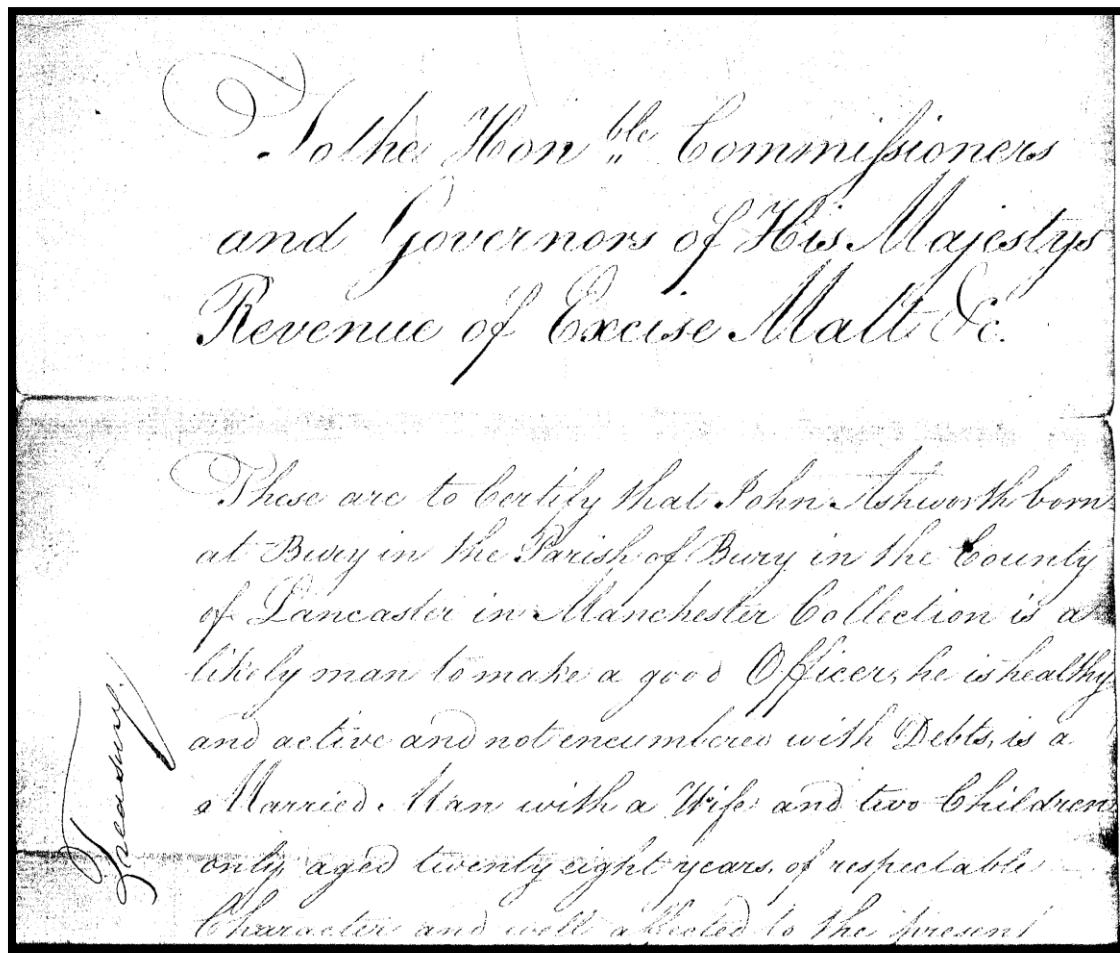


John Ashworth Marriage Record 1824 in Bury

John and Ann Ashworth's children were Mary (1825), Joseph (1826), James (1828), Sarah Ann (1830), and Ellen (1835).

John Ashworth started working as a Cotton Spinner and a Hatter in Bury and later became an Officer of Excise on 19 May 1828 (from John's entry papers), a few months after his son James' birth on 12 March 1828.

John Ashworth's excise entry papers dated 1828 describe John Ashworth as "healthy and active and not encumbered by debts, is a married man with a wife and two children, only aged twenty-eight years, of respectable character and well affected to the present government. He hath been bred a Hatter and proposeth his securities John Ashworth of Bury Hatter and Joseph Ashworth of Bury Confectioner." The persons named were his father and cousin.



National Archives, Kew Reference CUST 116/1/42 John Ashworth. Entry papers for service as an Excise Man (1828) first page

He received instruction in May 1828 at the Excise Office in the Bury District of the Manchester Collection of HM Customs and Excise. Tasks learned were surveying common brewers, victuallers, maltsters, chandlers, soap makers, paper makers, tanners, tawers, brandy, wine, tea and tobacco dealers, and brickmakers. The Board of Excise set up a network of administrative areas called Collections, each of which were subdivided into Districts, which had smaller subdivisions for Excise Officers as either Rides (on horseback) or Divisions/Footwalks (on foot). They are responsible for collecting excise taxes and enforcing excise laws. Their incomes were modest. As Excise Officer post locations often changed, they sometimes moved their families with them for main residences and temporarily on their routes.

A Duxbury Family Website <http://family.hk.com/family/> was created by the late Peter Duxbury and continued by his cousin Ronald Taylor. Some Ashworth information is included in the Duxbury website because of Duxbury/Ashworth marriages. Ronald put me in touch with Valerie Chamberlain, Margaret Parker and Angela Tenant, descendants of John's son James Ashworth. James remained in Bury, Lancashire and Valerie is in possession of correspondence which included seven letters John Ashworth wrote to his parents. Those letters proved to be of significant interest in that they filled in missing gaps about John's life as an Excise Officer.

Locations of John Ashworth Excise Officer postings:

1829 Wrexham, Denbighshire, Wales (south of Liverpool and Chester)

1830-1834 Leeds, Yorkshire (Residences: 1831 Richmond Hill, a sprawl of working-class cottages and terrace houses in Leeds and 1834 Carr Hill, near Leeds)

Highlights from John Ashworth's letters to his parents:

1. From Wrexham, Denbighshire, Wales 29 April 1829

Short on cash and seeing poverty in the area

Bad weather

Inquiring about daughter Mary staying in Bury

Hoping for 14 days leave in July to visit Bury

Asks brother Adam to make him a waterproof hat

“The Excise becomes as easy to me as the planking of light hats used to be so that I find no difficulty in it. I can do my work any day in 5 hours comfortably so that you can be sure that I never go to bed with aching bones.”

“This is a romantic country. I frequently see from the Welsh mountains the ships on the Liverpool Channel.”

2. From Chester, Cheshire 18 June 1829

“So much to pay for traveling and lodging” so can’t send much money home

“We came to Chester on Monday but could not procure lodgings for money and we must have lay in the street all night had not an old woman taken us in out of mere pity.”

“The city is so full of soldiers and their officers.”

“I find a great many temptations in the Excise which if not guarded against will very soon prove any man’s ruin.”

Left daughter Mary with grandparents in Bury but unable to visit this year.

3. From Leeds, Yorkshire 20 December 1830

Short on cash

His parents were poorly so asked to send Mary back to Leeds by coach

“We shall be obliged to make up a bed for her as we have but one for us all.”

Asking to be appointed to a Ride so can take a small house for five or six years

“There was upwards of 80 converted here at the Old Chapel … Mr. Storry is here and a more useful preacher has seldom been here.” [John Storry, Leeds District, Wesleyan Methodist]

Children both very poorly for several days

4. From Leeds, Yorkshire 27 June 1831

Short on cash

“I suppose you never think it worth your while either to come or to write.”

Worried about being sent to Ireland and about liquidating debts

“One reason I have not wrote oftener is because I was afraid you would be disappointed if I did not send some money.”

“I told Mr. Storry the other night I thought it was almost impossible for an Excise Man to live for heaven, but he soon told me he had known many a real Christian in the Excise, so that he left me no ground to stand on.”

Inquiring about Mary, who is back at her grandparents in Bury

5. From Leeds, Yorkshire 9 August 1832

Trying to be a real Christian

Cholera epidemic

Wife Ann joined the society [Wesleyan]

“I should like very much to come to Bury but I am afraid I shall not be able to come this year. I need not assign the reason as no doubt you know.”

6. From Leeds, Yorkshire undated

Poorly with old complaint he had at Chester

Mary back home but “wished herself at Bury again many a time”

“I fully intended coming to Bury at the races but for various reasons which you are not ignorant of I have concluded otherwise.”

“Adam’s letter gave me exquisite pain. I cannot see why that dastardly reptile (should I call him cousin) should taunt him about the money. He must be aware I pay his father more interest for the money than he can possibly get from any other quarter. However if you think the money had better be paid I am willing to sell what few goods we have and pay as far as they will make and I should like to have your opinion on the subject.”

7. From Carr Hill (near Leeds), Yorkshire 15 September 1834

He and wife Ann expect to be at Pits o’th’ Moor in Bury Sept. 17 by coach to Rochdale

“I have been very poorly and under Doctor’s hands nearly 7 weeks. His medicine does not appear to do me any good. He asked me last week where I came from. I told him a few miles from Manchester. He said the air was much more mild and warm than here and I must go immediately and try my native air, if any thing would do me good it would be a change of air.”

“I cannot walk many yards at a time through weakness.”

[John Ashworth died just over a month later in October 1834]

Barn Hill Sep 15th 1834

Dear Parents

1834

I shall perhaps surprize you when
~~I~~ inform you that Tom & myself expect
seeing you all this afternoon on Wednesday
the 17th Inst. without fail. I have been very
poorly and under the Doctors hands nearly
I success. His Medicine does not appear to
do me any good. He asked me last week
where I came from. I told ^{him} a few miles
from Manchester. he said the air was
much more mild and warm than here
and I must go immediately & try ^{the} ~~my~~ ^{the} air.
if any thing would do me good it
would be a change of air.

We shall take coach to morrow morning
(tuesday) and reach Leeds the same
night. Then take the coach at y^r next
morning (God willing) be able to reach
Rochdale by noon at the farthest. now
either Father or brother Adam will
not fail to meet me at Rochdale to give
me a little help I cannot walk many
yards at a time through weakness ^{from your affec} son the Ashworth

Once the date of John's last letter was known a burial date could be determined for a very common name in that area. John Ashworth was buried on 27 October 1834, Union Street Chapel (Wesleyan), Bury, Lancashire. at only age 34.

Name.	Abode.	When Buried.	Age.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
John Ashworth	Bury	Oct ^r . 27 th 1834	35 Years	Richard Seafre

John Ashworth Burial Record 1834 in Bury

John Ashworth was the oldest son in his family but predeceased his next oldest brother Adam Ashworth (1804-1890) who took over the family hat business after his father John Ashworth's death in 1852. Sadly, John Ashworth's youngest child Ellen, who was likely conceived in April 1834, was born on 12 January 1835 after her father died. She was baptised on 17 February 1835 at Union Street Chapel (Wesleyan) in Bury, Lancashire. Her father was listed as John Ashworth, late Officer of Excise. She was buried at the same location on 3 May 1835.

Initially the remaining family stayed in Bury for about twenty years. The 1841 census for Bury, on Paradise Street lists widow Ann with children Mary, Joseph, James, and Sarah Ann. The three older children were cotton power weavers. The 1851 census for Bury on Bell Lane lists widow Ann with son Joseph, daughter Sarah Ann, and married daughter Mary (Ashworth) Seal with her husband and children. Son James was already married by then and living with his family in Bury. About 1855-1856, widow Ann (Wellins) Ashworth emigrated to the United States in Rhode Island with daughter Sarah Ann and son Joseph. To date, no passenger list has been found to document them together. Daughter Sarah Ann (Ashworth) Duxbury's obituary is the only place where this fact is indicated. Ann probably died in Rhode Island, but the date and place are not confirmed. Daughter Mary (Ashworth) Seal, her husband and children followed their family members to Rhode Island in the 1870s. Only John's son James Ashworth remained in Bury, Lancashire with his wife and children, which proved to be very useful in filling out this narrative.

Sources

FamilySearch and Ancestry birth/marriage/death/census records (FamilySearch.org / Ancestry.com)

Smith, Gavin D. "Remembering the age of the excisemen" 31 August 2017
<https://scotchwhisky.com/magazine/features/15789/remembering-the-age-of-the-excisemen/>

National Archives, Kew Reference CUST 116/1/42 John Ashworth. Entry papers for service as an Excise man (1828). Image used by kind permission of The National Archives.

Ashworth, John. Seven letters to parents John and Fanny Ashworth in Bury, Lancashire (1829-1834). [Image and quotes with permission of Valerie Chamberlain, current possessor of letters]