

## AMENDED VERSION

### THE BLACK SAILOR AND THE FISHWIFE by Terry Kavanagh

My maternal g-g-g-g grandfather John Potter, a black sailor, was born about 1778, but I don't know where. By the 1820s, he was captain of the sailing barge or "flat" *William*, plying between Chester and Liverpool down the River Dee and the Wirral Line of Canal. John married Frances Fisher (a fishmonger) in Liverpool St Peters Church on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1807. He signed his name in the parish register; she made the illiterate cross. They lived for the next ten years or so in Pall Mall, Liverpool, before moving to Chester, the city of Frances's birth.

Here (as elsewhere) not everyone approved of mixed racial marriages; and in February 1824 Frances Potter took two of their neighbours, John James and his wife, to court for using racist language to her. The 'Chester Chronicle' newspaper, dated the 20th of that month, reported that

*"Mrs. Potter said her husband was a coloured man, by whom she had had two twins; and being a little dark in complexion, Mrs. James and her spouse, called them Devils. 'Here's one of the Devils, Gentlemen, as she calls them; (producing a fine fat lad before the Bench) but this is not all: James's wife says, that I'm a stinking —, and that she's a farmer's daughter.' Mr. James: 'No such thing, Gentlemen. You don't know who she is, Gentlemen; she's the Queen [that is, the head scold or abuser] of Handbridge!' Her majesty cast an indignant look at Mr. James and with tears in her eyes said, 'I want to do him no harm, only to keep quietness; and I'll fill their bellies again, as I have often done before.' 'Fill my belly! (exclaimed Mrs. James; with most animated gesticulation) fill my belly indeed! I'm a farmer's daughter, and I'll let you know I want no such thing.' The Magistrates said, their conduct was very violent; they recommended 'a treaty of peace,' and in the hope they should hear no more of the parties, dismissed the Complaint; but...on their reaching their respective dwellings, a reaction took place; and in a quarter of an hour after quitting the Court, Mr. James made his appearance in 'breathless haste', to obtain a summons against Mrs. Potter! In a minute or two afterwards Mrs. P in extreme agitation and fatigue rushed into the room, praying the like indulgence against Mrs. James, who had outrun her. The Mayor very properly sent them both back again without their errand, to their mutual chagrin and disappointment."*

Sadly, racial prejudice of this nature was commonplace. The very words "black" and "white" were heavily charged with meaning long before the English met people whose skins were black. The devil himself was black. If their skin was black, what else could they be but devils. White, on the other hand, was the colour of purity, virginity, innocence, and perfect human beauty.

Anyone with a dark complexion risked being demonized in this way. Two years earlier, in November 1821, Edward Buckley, a fishmonger said to one Betty Price, who was also selling fish in the Chester market, *"there's your black husband"*. And her husband, Charles, retorted, *"Very well, but I have not a horse's face"*. This annoyed Buckley so much that he punched him on the nose.

Of course Betty Price, Frances Potter, and all the other fishwives were themselves well used to trading blows and insults. In July 1835,

*“Haswell, the [police] officer, brought before the Bench Betty Price and Frances Potter, dealers in ‘flat-fish’, whom he charged with fighting in the market on Saturday evening. The officer said he could not explain the origin of this ‘affair of honor’ [sic], but on approaching the market he observed a great crowd of persons, and on effecting a passage through them, he found Betty and Mrs Potter engaged in a regular stand up ‘set-to’. Here Betty, with her flaming full moon face, stepped forward and begged to be heard, opening a bundle which she said contained the debris of her cap, shawl, etc. which she declared were torn from her person by her antagonist, Mrs Potter: ‘For shame of you, Betty, didn’t you tear the cap and bed gown off before I spoke to you, and give me a slap on the face; and then I could stand it no longer.’ The Court here interrupted these noisy brawlers, the Mayor declaring that he would award a punishment in the present case which he hoped would have some effect in putting a stop to the disgraceful scenes which were so frequently enacted in the fish-market. He ordered each of the offenders to find responsible sureties for their good behaviour for twelve months. In addition to this, he convicted Betty in the penalty of 5s. and costs for being drunk; and also gave orders to the superintendent of the market not to allow Betty to occupy a stall for the sale of fish from that day.”*

*It’s a wonder the Mayor didn’t send for the scolds’ bridle or brank in this case. For according to the local press, “One of these useful machines for checking the volubility of an unruly tongue, has long been kept amongst other curiosities in our Exchange. It is occasionally exhibited at the Police Office, when some of the damsels who deal in flat fish in our market are too sharp in their colloquial responses.”*

This and the other scolds’ bridles once kept elsewhere in Chester fell into disuse a few years later. But one of these hellish contraptions is now held by the Grosvenor Museum, and was on display in Chester History & Heritage during their Crime and Punishment exhibition in 2007.