

Morgan Byrt, Bailiff of Cricklade

Morgan Byrt was probably the most colourful Crickladian of the 18–19th centuries. He was the last of a family of yeomen who had lived in the town since the sixteenth century, and several of them are buried in the south transept of St. Sampson's church, where their monuments can still be seen.

Morgan, and his twin sister Ann, were born in 1742. His father and grandfather, both named Richard, were influential in the Town and in 1770, aged 28, Morgan was appointed Bailiff of Cricklade by the lord of the manor and former MP, Arnold Nesbitt. In 1772 Morgan inherited his father's estate, which included 23 High Street.

Morgan must have received a formal education, for in later years he acted as an attorney, although he does not appear to have received any legal training. He was very close to his uncle, John Byrt, who was an acknowledged authority on Cricklade borough affairs.

Morgan served as churchwarden of St. Sampson's, overseer of the poor, chairman of the feoffees of Cricklade Waylands, captain in the militia, returning officer and turnpike commissioner. He became the most influential person in the town; his word was law, and at times he displayed both compassionate and ruthless traits.

During the 1780 parliamentary election campaign, Morgan was deeply involved in bribery and corruption, together with Col. Henry Herbert (Lord Porchester), and parliamentary candidates Paul Benfield and John MacPherson. Electors were given bribes disguised as 'loans' of five guineas, which would not be recalled if they voted for Benfield and MacPherson. These corrupt practices were exposed at Salisbury Assizes by another candidate, Samuel Petrie, and were followed by a series of court actions in some of which Morgan was a hostile witness, – but was never indicted. Evidence revealed that he bribed one man with ten pounds, and after the recipient drowned himself in remorse, Morgan collected the money from his widow, – with interest!

As the senior feoffee of Cricklade Waylands, Morgan contrived to convey some Waylands property to his political ally Henry Herbert, Lord Porchester, and when asked to produce the title deeds, he avoided doing so for some time. In 1815 Porchester, by now earl of Carnarvon, sold the manor of the Hundred and Borough of Cricklade to Joseph Pitt, M.P. for Cricklade, and Morgan had to vacate the office of Bailiff.

Morgan wanted a son to perpetuate the family name but deferred marriage in case his wife should deliver a daughter. Instead, he had liaisons with several mistresses with the intention of marrying one who might bear him a son. One of these was a Fairford woman who seems to have bore him a son Joseph, – but the boy couldn't take his name because she married in the meantime. Another mistress was Martha Cuss, whose daughter Mary was baptised 18.7.1790, and although the father was not named, he was probably Morgan Byrt.

Less than a month after Mary was born, another mistress, his housekeeper Ann Tanner gave birth to his son John who was baptised on the 17th August. Morgan must have been disappointed when the child was found to be mentally afflicted.

Morgan's daughter Mary married Robert Jordan, a Chelworth farmer, by licence, on 21.12.1807.

Morgan's health deteriorated after 1820, by which time he no longer held any major office in the borough. He died, unmarried, aged 80 and was buried in the family vault in the south transept of St. Sampson's church where his monument is inscribed: "Sacred to the memory of Morgan Byrt who departed this life January the 26th 1823 aged 80 years".

In his will Morgan left an annuity of £100 a year to "my natural son John Tanner, an idiot" who survived until 1867, – and other minor legacies. The bulk of his estate was left in trust to his "natural daughter Mary", whose husband, Robert Jordan, was Morgan's executor, and after Mary's death to her son, James Byrt Jordan, who was born in 1811.