

The Story of Notorious William Darrell of Littlecott

Some mysterious circumstances connected with the last of the Darrell family, who resided at Littlecott, are still traditionally preserved in the neighbourhood, and the extraordinary tale of terror which they involve was a few years since extensively circulated in a note to Sir Walter Scott's popular poem of "Rokeby." The substance of this narrative is as follows:

On a dark rainy night in November, an old mid-wife, who resided in Berkshire, was suddenly summoned to attend a lady in labour, for which she was told she should be liberally rewarded; but as secrecy was necessary, she must submit to be conveyed blindfolded to the place where her assistance was required. She consented, and a handkerchief having been bound over her eyes, she was mounted on horseback behind the person who came for her. After a long and rough journey, she was brought to a house, and led through many seemingly extensive apartments till she arrived at a room, in which, on her eyes being uncovered, she saw the lady on whose account she had been sent for, and also a man of a haughty and ferocious aspect. After the lady was delivered, this man again made his appearance, and snatching the child from the midwife, threw it on a large fire, blazing in the chimney. The child, struggling amidst its torments, rolled from the flames upon the hearth. The man again seized it, and in spite of the entreaties of the midwife and agonised mother, thrust it under the grate and destroyed it by heaping on it live coals. The midwife was then handsomely paid, and conveyed to her home in the same manner in which she had left it. Soon afterwards, the woman went before a magistrate, and disclosed the horrid scene she had witnessed. She had adopted two methods to identify the scene of the murder. While sitting at the bedside of her patient, she cut out a piece of the bed-curtain, and brought it away with her, and she had also taken the precaution to count the steps of the stairs, down which she had been led blindfolded. Some suspicious circumstances attached to the conduct of the then owner of Littlecott House, and a warrant was issued for his apprehension. He was tried at the next Salisbury assizes; but notwithstanding the evidence of the midwife, he escaped punishment, as is reported, by bribing the judge*. His death, a few months after, owing to a fall from his horse, was considered as the judgement of Heaven, and the stile where the accident happened is still called "Darrell's Stile." This event must have taken place in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

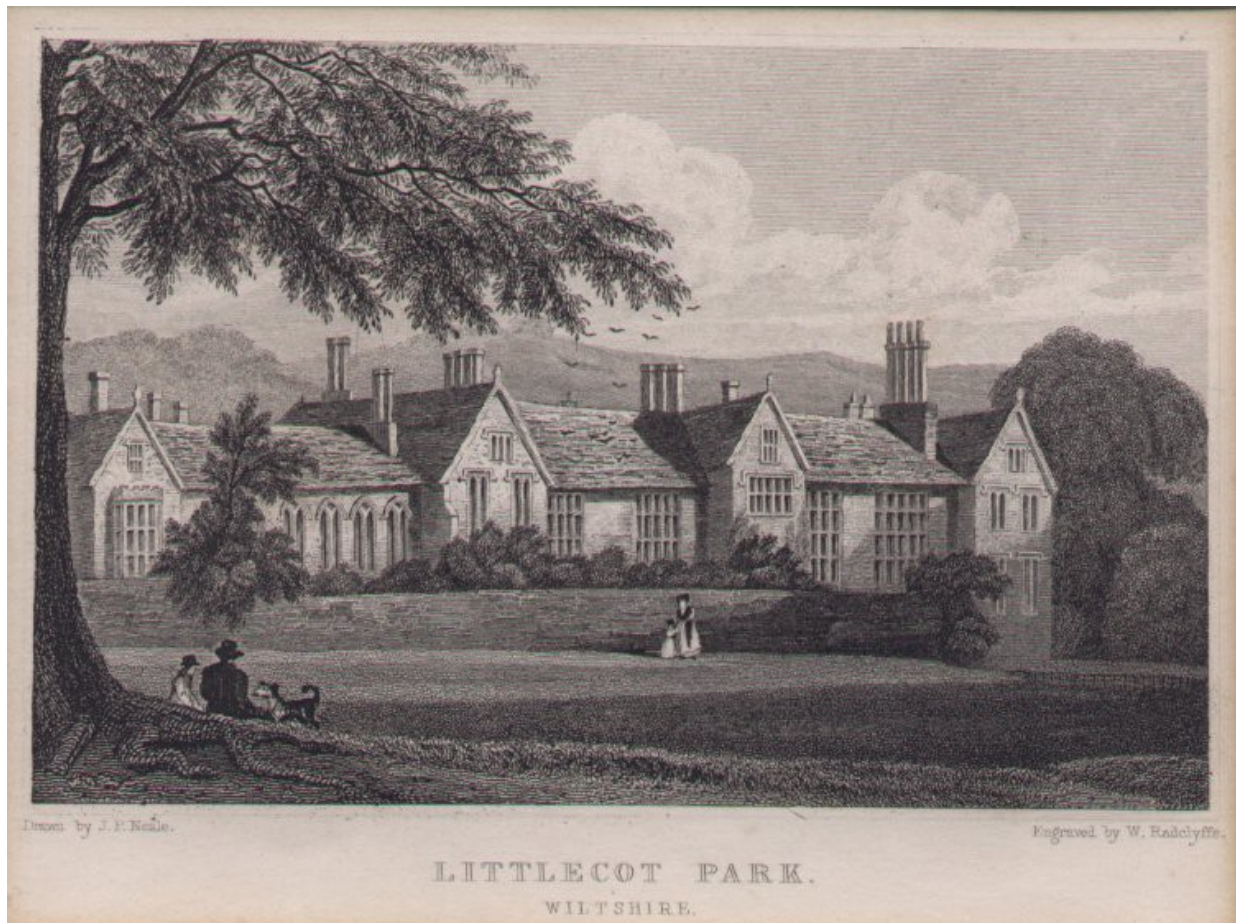
- Aubrey, who concisely notices this story, in his Life of Sir John Popham, informs us, that "The Knight [Sir William Dayrell] was brought to his tryall; and to be short, this judge had this noble house, parke, and mannor, and (I thinke) more, for a bribe to save his life." The female who was

delivered of the infant so barbarously murdered, is said to have been the waiting-woman of Lady Darell. – “Letters from the Bodleian Library,” vol. ii. p. 493.

Source: The Beauties of Wiltshire, by J Britton, 1825

Additional Notes, from the “History of Parliament, The House of Commons 1558-1603, ed. P.W. Hasler, 1981.”

William Darrell, b. 23 June 1539, 1st son of Sir Edward Darrell of Littlecote and Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Thomas Essex of Berks. Member of Parliament for Downton. The murder of the child took place in 1579. He died 1st October 1589.



Drawn by J. F. Neale, published 1824, in *The Beauties of Wiltshire*, by G. Britton.