

The Higsons of Blackrod and Haigh

Many readers will know the story of James Higson and his wife Elizabeth from his obituary and photograph which are included in the book 'Life and Times at Haigh Hall' by Donald Anderson, a book I love and know well.



James Higson – Gate Keeper Haigh Lodge.

Elizabeth Higson - his wife who was also for a time a servant at Haigh Hall.

James proudly wears his medals, his suit and a bowler hat when on duty - a symbol of his trusted status as Gate keeper.

The photo is possibly at the front of Haigh Lodge at The Plantation Gates on Wigan Lane, maybe to commemorate his retirement.

The information which goes along with the above photograph in the book says that James and Elizabeth were lodge keepers and venerable servants at Haigh from 1884-1909. I realised these dates could not be correct as James died in 1898 and this set me off on a journey to find out more about their 'life and times', a journey I would like to share with you.

James Higson was born in Blackrod and baptised at St Katherines Church on February 3rd 1822. His father was James Higson a weaver and his mother Margaret.

No. 1006.	Son of John James	Margaret	Higson	Blackrod Weaver	J. Whitaker M. A Curate
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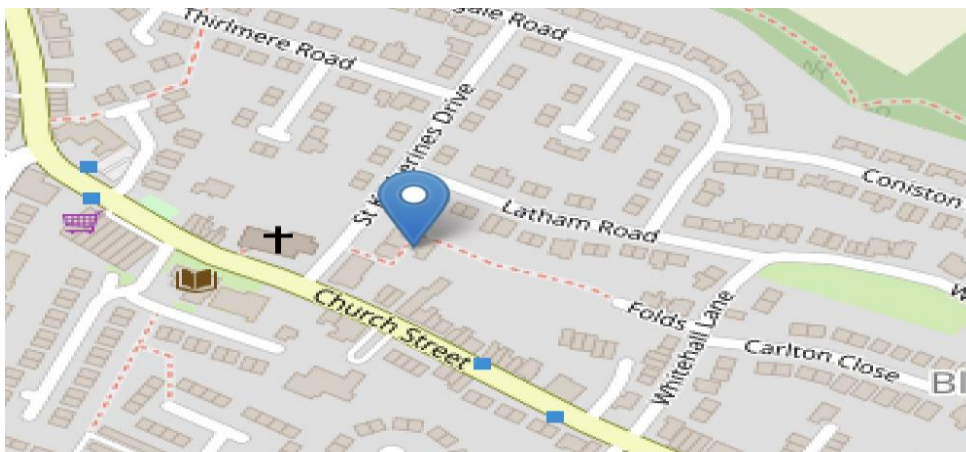


The beautiful Church of St Katherine
Blackrod

Folds is a short section of cobbled road in the village of Blackrod. The houses date back to 1770 and were originally part of a farm. Out of interest, there is only one street called Folds in Great Britain, making it unique.

Anderson, in his book *Life and Times at Haigh Hall* states that the Higson family were bell ringers at St Katherines Church, Blackrod. Folds is just around the corner from St Katherines and there is a narrow cobbled stone pathway leading to the church, making it handy to ring the bells.

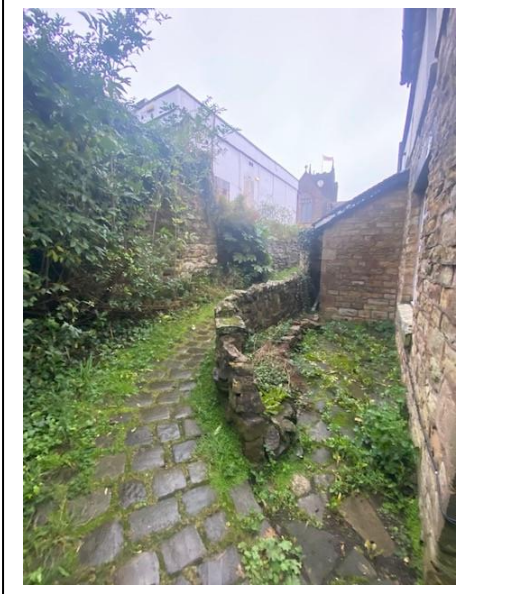
MAP 1 FOLDS location shown as blue drop on map. St Katherines marked by the cross



In the 1841 Census (below) James continues to live with his parents and siblings at Folds, Blackrod.

James and his father John are listed as Plasterers.

John Higson	50	Plasterer	29
Margaret do	50		
John do	25	Coal Miner	29
Peter do	20	do	
James do	20	Plasterer	29
Betty do	15		
George do	11	Coal Miner	29
Paul do	10	do	29
Ann do	6		29



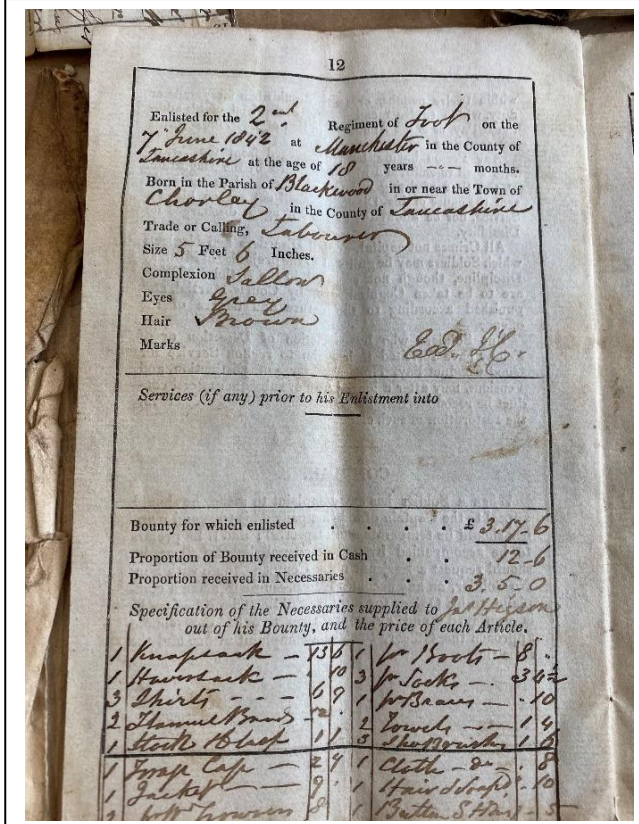
Folds Blackrod

Plastering with his father was clearly not a trade James enjoyed too much, as on the 7th June 1842 James went to Manchester to enlist in The 1st Battalion of The Queens Royal Regiment which would be known later as West Surrey (RWS).

James Higson's War Years



James Higson dressed in his private's uniform Queens Royal Regiment



James Higsons Army Account book dated 1842
Note the uniform he was supplied with ... and cost!

12
Enlisted for the 2nd Regiment of Foot on the
7th June 1842 at Manchester in the County of
Lancashire at the age of 18 years -- months.
Born in the Parish of Blackwood in or near the Town of
Chorley in the County of Lancashire
Trade or Calling, Labourer
Size 5 Feet 6 Inches.
Complexion Yellow
Eyes Grey
Hair Brown
Marks Ed. 26

Services (if any) prior to his Enlistment into

Bounty for which enlisted £ 3.17.6
Proportion of Bounty received in Cash 12.6
Proportion received in Necessaries 3.5.0

Specification of the Necessaries supplied to James Higson out of his Bounty, and the price of each Article.

1	Knapsack	15/0	1	pair Boots	8/-
1	Haversack	10/0	3	pair Socks	3/6
3	Shirts	6/9	1	pair Sausages	1/0
2	Hamlet Bread	2/0	2	Loaves	1/4
1	pair of Soap	1/0	1	pair Buttons	1/0
1	pair of Soap	2/9	1	Cloth	8/-
1	pair of Soap	9/-	1	pair of Boots	10/-
1	pair of Soap	8/-	1	pair of Buttons	1/0

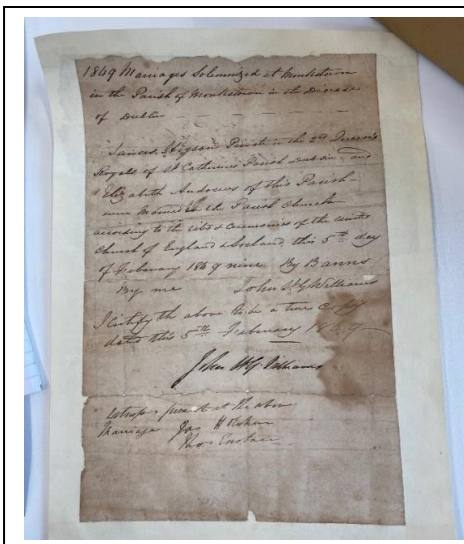
James Higson's account book dated from the day he signed up, 7th June 1842, describes him as a labourer. James' army number is 1779, a number he would keep for the rest of his Army career. He is described as being 5ft 6 inches tall with a fallow complexion (skin of pale brown colouring), grey eyes and brown hair. During his early years as a soldier he met and fell in love with Elizabeth Andrews (thought too of Irish origin) who lived in Heylesbury near Bath.

James served in The East Indies from January 10th 1843 – September 1845. During this time he fought in many battles. While he was stationed near Dublin in Ireland he sent for Elizabeth and they were married in Monkstown in the beautiful Parish Church of St Patrick on 7th February 1849.



St Patricks Parish Church
Monkstown near Dublin

This is a copy of The marriage certificate of James Higson and Elizabeth from Leigh archives D/DZA51/8



No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the Time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
43	5 th Feb 1849	James Higson	24 years	Bachelor	Private in 2 nd Queen's Regt	St. Catherine's Parish, Dublin	John Higson	Labourer
		Elizabeth Andrews	24 years	Spinster		Heylesbury, Bath	Samuel Andrews	Esq

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the United Church of England and Ireland, By Banns by me, *John H. Williams*

This Marriage was solemnized between us, *James Higson* and *Elizabeth Andrews* in the Presence of us, *James Nolan* and *Thomas Justice*

Above - marriage certificate James Higson and Elizabeth Andrews, Monkstown, Dublin

Left – transcribed copy of marriage certificate in Leigh Archives

James then served as a private soldier in The Kaffir War 1851 -1853 in which he was decorated and received good conduct and long service medals. It is documented that Elizabeth stayed with her husband during much of his time as a soldier. For a period of time James was stationed at The Cape of Good Hope and James and Elizabeth had a daughter Elizabeth Ann in 1851. During the 19th Century wives played an important role in supporting their soldier husbands' physical and emotional wellbeing, taking on various unofficial and unpaid roles as cooks, nurses, laundresses and seamstresses.

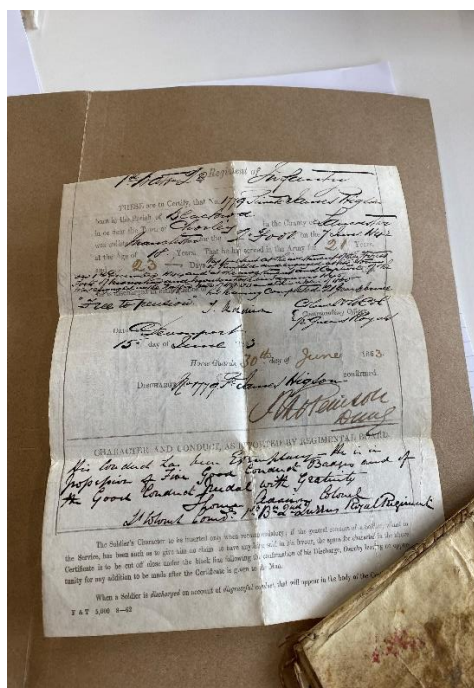
In 1860 James Higson went to China along with 200 hundred other Queens RWS troops and was part of the advance on Taku Forts Peking during the second Opium Wars, in which 201 British troops died. James was discharged from The Army on 15th June 1863 after completing 21 years of service. As well as his medals, James had many letters of recommendation from his commanding officers who praised him for his good conduct sobriety and honesty. His name appeared just once in the defaulters book but the incident was not taken further.

James Higson left the Army on 15th June 1863 after 21 years and 23 days of service. This is documented in his final account book. James Higson's military account books are kept in Leigh Archives 1852-1857 D/DZ A51 and 1848-1863 and D/DZ A52.

James was certified as an Out-Patient of The Royal Chelsea Hospital on the 30th June 1863 and received a pension of 1 shilling and 1 penny per day (equal to about £3.20 in today's money).

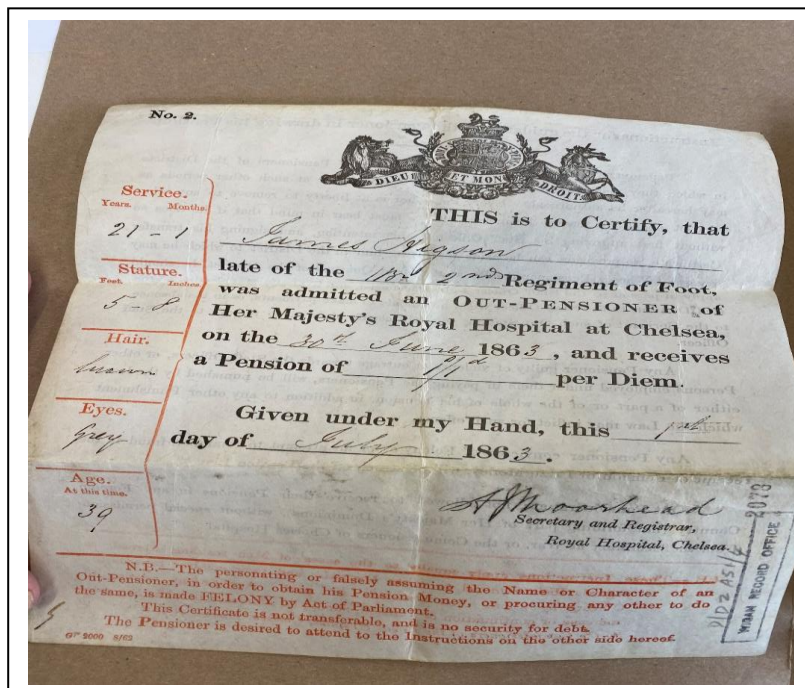
After his retirement James, now aged 39 years was described as still having brown hair and grey eyes but if you note he had grown 2 inches and was recorded as being 5ft 8 inches tall!

James Higson's war years are outlined in his obituary, a copy of which is in Andersons 'Life and Times at Haigh Hall'.



James Higson final Account book

1848-1863



James Higson Certificate Out-Pensioner Royal Chelsea Hospital

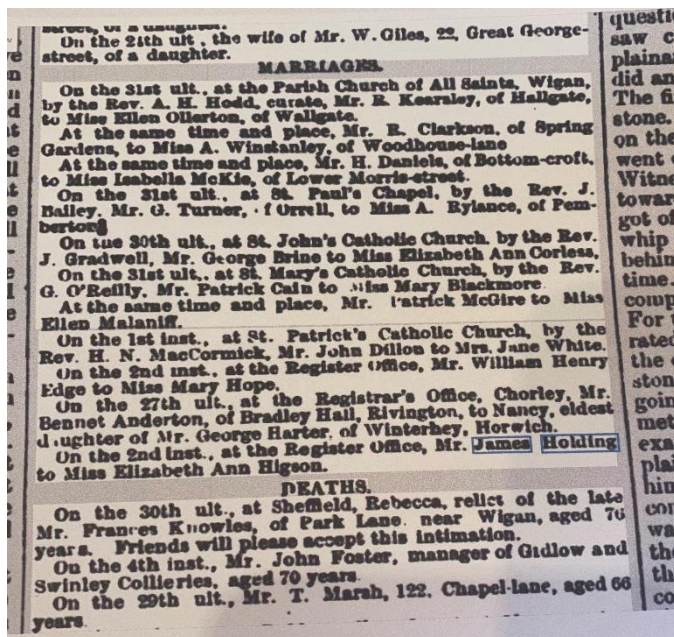
July 1st 1863

When James was discharged from the army he, his wife and child, Elizabeth Ann returned to James' home town of Blackrod.

With his Army record of good conduct and letters of recommendation in April 1864 he secured a job working for Lord Alexander Lindsay, 25th Earl of Crawford and 8th Earl of Balcarres at Haigh Hall, as a watchman. James had five assistants or watchers working for him. Their job was to make sure the local collier families and poor of Wigan were stopped from poaching on the estate. Haigh hall and its grounds were never a great hunting estate but its grounds were home to many hares, rabbits, pheasants and partridges which the estate sold to local butchers. James Higson was later appointed coachman to Mr Wood, The Haigh Estate Manager and then employed as a gardener before he became Lodge keeper at The Plantation Gates on Wigan Lane.

Around June in 1868 James and Elizabeth Higson's daughter Elizabeth Ann fell pregnant to James Holding, a local boy who was living at 8 Farmers Brow, Blackrod. They were both young, Elizabeth Ann was 17 and James 18 years old. Confirming pregnancy in 1860 was difficult as there were no accurate pregnancy tests at that time. Many girls from working families had irregular periods due to poor diet and working conditions so missed periods were common. Pregnancy would only have been truly confirmed when Elizabeth felt 'quickenings', or the baby moving at around 5 months. As a strong church going family, the Higsons may have received the news with disappointment. The Church encouraged the parents of illegitimate children to marry before the birth, reducing the need for Parish support. They would however not have been allowed to marry in Church.

A record of James and Elizabeth Ann's marriage at Wigan Register office appeared in The Wigan Observer on the 6th February 1869. Elizabeth would have been just over 7 months pregnant at the time.



Newspaper cutting from the Marriage column - Wigan Observer 6th Feb 1869


Note the last entrant is that of James Holding and Elizabeth Higson's marriage at Wigan Register Office

On March 30th 1869 Elizabeth Ann and James Holding were delivered of a baby boy which they named James Holding. James Holding's occupation was recorded as a collier. At this time most of the male population of Blackrod were employed in the local pits.

After what would have been the joy of welcoming baby James into the world, tragedy was about to strike. Elizabeth Ann died on June 8th aged just 18 years. Her baby, James, was just over 2 months old. James was baptised on May 2nd 1869 at their local church St Katherines Blackrod. Elizabeth would probably have been too unwell to attend.

Civil Registration of deaths in England and Wales replaced the Church of England's record of burial as the primary legal record of death on 1st July 1837. In 1869 when a person died, the doctor who may or may not have been in attendance, would issue a certificate recording the cause of death. Sometimes the doctor would rely on information from the relatives reporting the deceased symptoms to reach a conclusion and cause of death. As medical tests and post mortems were rarely done, even in suspicious deaths at this time, recorded causes of death were not always accurate to say the least. After the death the doctor's certificate along with details of the person's date of death, age and sex would then be taken by a relative or neighbour to the registrar who would then officially record the death.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH



GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE
Application Number 12250863-4


REGISTRATION DISTRICT		WIGAN						
1869 DEATH in the Sub-district of		Aspull in the County of Lancaster						

Columns--	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
400	6 th June 1869 Blackrod.	Elizabeth Ann Holding	Female	18 years	Wife of James Holding Coalminer	Puerperal Peritonitis Milk Fever 9 weeks acute Bronchitis 8 days continued	James Holding Present at the death Blackrod	6 th June 1869	William Clark Registrar

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.
Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 21st day of October 2021

DYE 557077 See note overleaf

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2011/06 04/21 AP6/A15P  SWIR

Copy of Elizabeth Ann Holdings Death Certificate

On Elizabeth Ann’s death certificate registrar William Clark recorded the cause of her death was puerperal peritonitis and milk fever for 9 weeks, also bronchitis which she suffered for 8 days before she died. Mr Clark records that her husband James was present at her death in Blackrod. No address is given on the death certificate.

James Holding, Elizabeth Ann’s husband and her parents James and Elizabeth Higson would have been devastated when Elizabeth Ann became suddenly unwell after the birth as puerperal fever meant death was expected to be the likely outcome. Puerperal Fever was a devastating disease and the main cause of maternal death in the 1800’s with highest death rates between January and March. Elizabeth Ann delivered James in March. In 1886 the Registrar General reported 3,877 deaths of women following childbirth. Puerperal fever was the recorded cause of death over 65% of those cases. The cause of puerperal fever in 1869 was disputed as the concept of infection was not fully understood or accepted as a cause of illness. Housing and beds were far from clean, hand washing was not regularly done and clothes not often changed, even for doctors and midwives! Also at that time, Blackrod’s only water supply was from local wells or springs which sometimes meant carrying water for long distances. This made household water a commodity not to be wasted.

Elizabeth’s symptoms would have started around 3 days after the birth. She would have had an increasing rise in temperature, abdominal pain, delirium (puerperal insanity), vomiting, increasing thirst and a purple rash. Due to her illness, Elizabeth would have had difficulty feeding baby James. Intermittent feeding would have caused breast engorgement / milk fever and mastitis. Also due to Elizabeth Ann being confined to bed, her weakness and lack of mobility would have caused her lungs to become congested and infected. For the last 8 days of her life the doctor documented on her certificate that she had ‘Bronchitis’. It was probably pneumonia. There was no baby formula in 1869 and bottles were only just being introduced. James would probably have been fed by a wet nurse (the safest option), by cow or goats milk or by a pap boat containing bread crumbs soaked in milk or water.

We now know that puerperal fever is caused by Streptococcus bacteria tracking up the birth canal to the raw placental attachment area in the uterus. Infection then spreads up the fallopian tubes which

then open out into the peritoneum. As the peritoneum does not have its own defence mechanism for fighting infection, the infection would spread through the body - a condition we call sepsis today.

The only treatment available at the time would have been opiates to relieve the pain. After work by Joseph Lister Carbolic acid spray was only introduced into obstetrics in 1870 greatly reducing the death rate from puerperal sepsis - too late for Elizabeth Ann. Penicillin and other antibiotics would not have been available as they only came into use in 1944-1945 just after the 2nd World War.

Searching records for Elizabeth Ann's burial, I was to uncover even more of a tragedy.

I found that she was buried in St Katherine's cemetery on 11th June 1869. I was shocked to see that James Holding, Elizabeth's husband's burial was recorded ten days later on the 21st June. James Holding was placed in the same grave as Elizabeth in St Katherine's Church, Blackrod. James had died on June 19th, just 11 days after Elizabeth Ann's death leaving baby James an orphan.


BURIALS in the Parish of <i>Blackrod</i> in the County of <i>Lancaster</i> in the Year <i>1869</i>				
Name.	Abode.	When buried.	Age.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
<i>James Shepherd</i> No. 1025	<i>Aspurb</i>	<i>June 3rd</i>	<i>31</i> years	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>Elizabeth Ann Holding</i> No. 1026	<i>Blackrod</i>	<i>June 11th</i>	<i>18</i> years	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>David Goulding</i> No. 1027	<i>Blackrod</i>	<i>June 11th</i>	<i>10</i> hours	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>James Holding</i> No. 1028	<i>Blackrod</i>	<i>June 21st</i>	<i>20</i> years	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>Ellen Gerrard</i> No. 1029	<i>Widhaughton</i>	<i>June 23rd</i>	<i>75</i> years	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>James Hodgkinson</i> No. 1030	<i>Blackrod</i>	<i>June 27th</i>	<i>54</i> years	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>Thomas Mofs</i> No. 1031	<i>Blackrod</i>	<i>June 29th</i>	<i>8</i> years	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>
<i>Thomas Brown</i> No. 1032	<i>Blackrod</i>	<i>July 4th</i>	<i>3</i> weeks	<i>J. H. Swallow</i> <i>vicar</i>

Burial records St Katherine's Church Blackrod June 1869

On James Holding's death certificate the cause of death is listed as Typhoid fever for 9 days and kidney congestion. This would have meant that he had already contracted the disease becoming unwell soon after Elizabeth's funeral. Typhoid fever and typhoid were thought to be the same disease in the 1800s.

Typhoid fever is contracted through food contaminated by faecal material containing Salmonella typhi bacteria (related to Salmonella which causes food poisoning). Typhoid is spread by flea and lice faeces deposited close to a bite which becomes itchy causing the person to scratch and inoculate themselves. Symptoms in both cases are very similar causing fever, nausea, abdominal pain, muscle aching, headache, rash, dehydration and in Typhoid fever, diarrhoea. Typhoid fever is not always fatal and in some cases symptoms would last 3-4 weeks before resolving. However in James' case the infection spread through his body probably causing peritonitis and then kidney failure which ultimately caused his untimely death. The certificate states James Higson was present at James Holding's death, notice he signs with his mark X but from previous documentation we know he was able to write well ... another mystery!

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH



GIVEN AT THE **GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE**
Application Number 12250842-5


REGISTRATION DISTRICT		WIGAN						
1869 DEATH in the Sub-district of Aspull		in the County of Lancaster						

Columns:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
	15th Decr 1869 Blackrod	James Holding	Male	20 years	Coalminer	Typhoid Fever 9 days Congestion of Kidneys certified	x The mark of James Higson In Attendance Blackrod	15th Decr 1869	William Clark Registrar

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Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 21st day of October 2021

DYE 557111 See note overleaf

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James Holding's death certificate

James and Elizabeth Higson took care of their grandson James and in the 1871 census 49 year old James Higson and 39 year old Elizabeth Higson were recorded as living with their grandson James Holding, now aged 2 years, at 147, Halfacre Lane, Blackrod. James Higson's occupation continued to be recorded as a Watchman.

James Higson continued to work for the Crawfords at Haigh Hall and was later appointed as coach man for Mr Woods, the Haigh Estate Manager. Elizabeth was also thought to work in the Hall as a servant but we are not sure in what capacity. After this, James became a gardener for one year before being appointed Lodge Keeper to Haigh Hall. It is documented in many sources that James was Lodge Keeper at the Plantation Gates for almost 25 years which would mean he took his post before 1873.



This rare photograph from Leigh archives shows the Higsons possibly in their Garden at the lodge. The garden was to the left of the Plantation Gates as you enter the Plantations.

The 1881 census was a bit of a challenge, as I could not find the Higsons anywhere in Wigan. I of course knew by then that they should be resident at Plantation Gates Lodge on Wigan Lane.

I had to bring in the big guns ... enter Rita Fell, expert in geneology and an even better expert detective!

Rita found that the Higson's name had been transcribed wrongly in the census records and they were listed as 'Hyson'. Their grandson, James Holding was now aged 12 years, Elizabeth 49 years and James now 59 years was Lodge Keeper and resident in The Plantation Lodge.

Rita has reported the mistake and hopefully this will be corrected for future researchers.

James Holding in 1881
1881 England, Wales & Scotland Census
Plantation Lodge, Wigan, Lancashire, England

View original record Add to tree Print More actions

Household members (3 people) Copy to clipboard

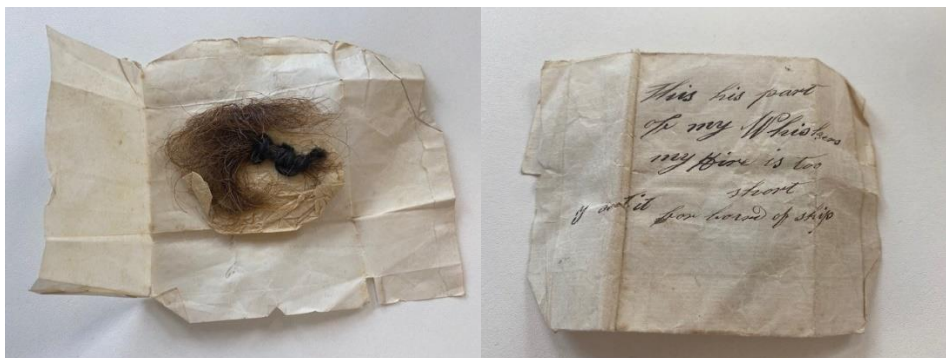
First name(s)	Last name	Relationship	Marital status	Sex	Age	Birth year	Occupation	Birth place
James	Hyson	Head	Married	Male	59	1822	Lodge keeper	Blackrod, Lancashire, England
Elizabeth	Hyson	Wife	Married	Female	49	1832	-	Knook, Wiltshire, England
James	Holding	Grand son	Single	Male	12	1869	Scholar	Blackrod, Lancashire, England

James Served four generations of The Crawfords for over 34 years. For almost 25 years of those, James was lodge keeper at The Plantation Gates. James became well known and well liked by visitors to Haigh Hall and passers by on Wigan Lane. He was always smart in his suite and bowler hat and proudly wore his medals while on duty.

The Higsons spent their final years in the family cottage, Haigh Foundry Cottages on Brock Mill Lane.

James Higson died there on August 4th 1898 when he was 76 years old. On his death certificate it is recorded that he died in Haigh Foundry Cottages, Haigh. His occupation mentions his army career but not his many years as Lodge Keeper for the Crawfords. It states that James Holding, his grandson, was with James when he died of pneumonia.

During my research I found a small relic belonging to James Higson – a lock of his beard! He says in the beautifully wrapped package containing the lock of beard that as he had little hair on his head, he had chosen to snip his beard. It does not mention who the hair is for though!



James Higson was buried at St Katherine's Church, Blackrod in the same grave as his daughter Elizabeth and her husband James Holding. The Higsons would have celebrated 50 years of marriage if he had lived another few months until 5th february 1899

Elizabeth Higson in her husbands obituary writes:

'James was clearly liked in the army and was dearly liked out of it'. 'He never gave me an angry word in his life, he never drank and never kept a penny from me'. 'He was a good kind man, and a better

was never born'. 'We have lived together all these years on Wigan Lane and I don't think we have made one enemy either among the rich or among the poor'.

After James died Elizabeth went to live with James Holding, the grandson she and James had taken in and cared for as a baby.

In the 1901 census it is recorded that Elizabeth now aged 69 years, James Holding aged 32 years and his wife Martha aged 34 years and their two sons William aged 12 years and James aged 9 years were all living at Haigh Foundry Cottages.

Elizabeth died in 1904 and was buried with her husband, daughter and James Holding in St Katherines Church, Blackrod.

In the 1970's all stones that were unsafe in St Katherines grave yard were layed flat and are now overgrown with grass. However, I have been able to trace the inscription on their head stone.

It reads:

Sacred to the memory of Elizabeth Ann Holding who departed this life June 8th 1869 aged 18 years.

Also of James Holding who died June 19th aged 20 years.

Therefore be also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not, The son of man cometh.

Also James Higson who died August 4th 1898 aged 70 years.

Also Elizabeth Higson wife of the above who died December 26th 1904 aged 72 years.

I noticed that the inscription has been transcribed wrongly for James Higson as his age reads 70 years. He was in fact 76 years when he died – the 6 may have been worn and mistaken for a 0 eroded by time when the information on the stone was documented. I have since had this corrected in the records.

Head stone inscription

The property of **JAMES HIGSON** pensioner. Sacred to the memory of Elizabeth Ann HOLDING who departed this life June 8th 1869 aged 18 years. Also of **JAMES HOLDING** who died June 19th 1869 aged 20 years. Therefore be also ready, For in such an hour as ye think not, The son of of man cometh. Also **JAMES HIGSON** who died August 4th 1898 aged 70 years. Also Elizabeth **HIGSON** wife of the above who died Dec 26th 1904 aged 72 years. [MI No 119 South]"