

SMALLPOX VACCINATION

While it is well known that family bibles often contained contemporary manuscript details of births, marriages and deaths in the family, it is maybe not so well known that family prayer books were sometimes also used for recording family information.

I have inherited a prayer book belonging to my great great great grandmother Anne Drake Tyrwhitt Drake (née Wickham), who lived from 1762 to 1843. Anne signed and dated this prayer book on the frontispiece on 2 October 1822. In the fullness of time she passed this book to her son Lt-Col. William Tyrwhitt Drake (1785-1848) and he too signed and dated it on 15 April 1832. My great grandfather William Thomas Tyrwhitt Drake (1835-1915) was born three years after his father inherited the prayer book.

The early 19th century was a time of high infant mortality with smallpox being one of the most feared killers across all levels of British society. William Tyrwhitt Drake and his wife Emma (née Halsey) were no strangers to infant mortality. They lost 3 of their 6 children to childhood diseases despite him being both an Army officer and

Member of Parliament and their family living without want in a then rural part of the country.

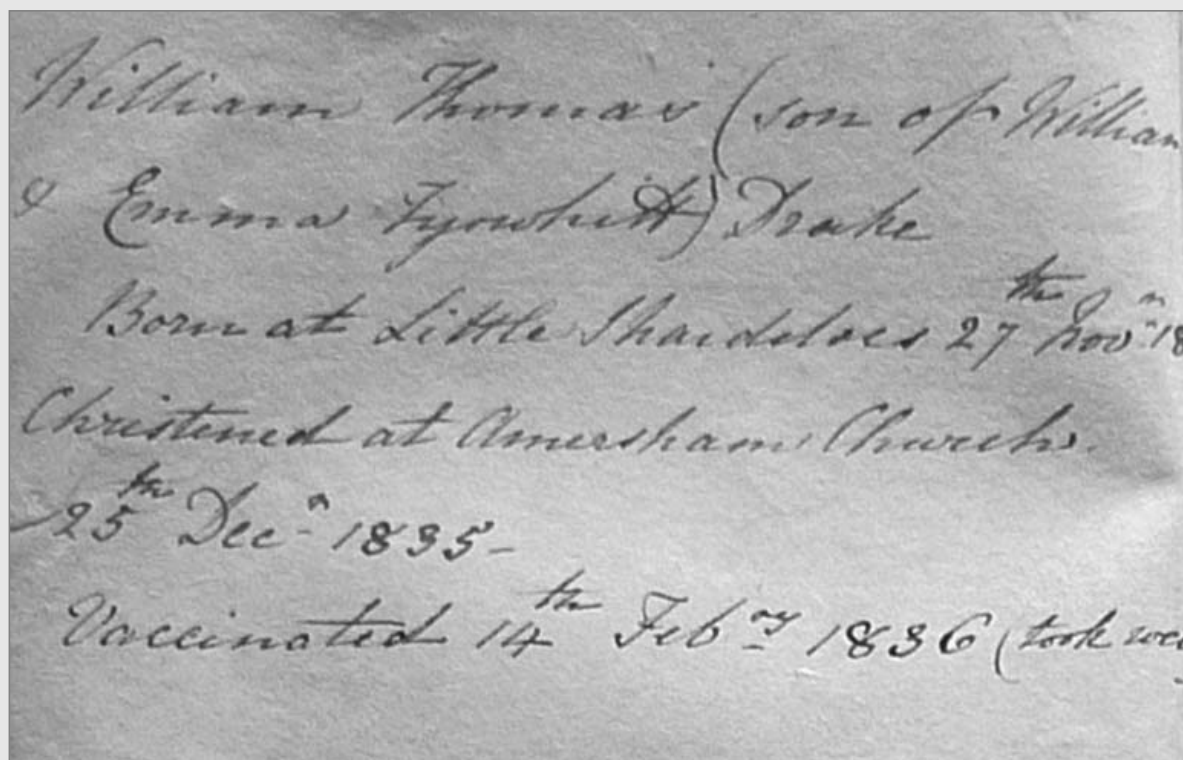
The relief that Emma Tyrwhitt Drake felt and wrote in the prayer book that her son William Thomas was protected from smallpox echoes across the centuries, her text being:

‘William Thomas (son of William and Emma Tyrwhitt Drake) Born at Little Shardeloes 27th Nov^r 1835. Christened at Amersham Church 25th Dec^r 1835. Vaccinated 14th Feb^{ry} 1836 (took well).’

The British government passed several Vaccination Acts in the 19th century. The 1840 Vaccination Act provided free access to smallpox vaccination for all children. The 1853 Act made smallpox vaccination compulsory for all children in their first year of life. Predating the 1840 Act by 4 years, this prayer book record of smallpox vaccination must be one of the earliest in the country.

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& Emma Tyrwhitt) Drake
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