

GIPSY FUNERAL

Highworth, Wilts June 8

The mortal remains of an aged female belonging to this singular people were on Thursday last consigned to the dust in Highworth church yard, attended by a great concourse of spectators, whom the interesting novelty of the spectacle had invited to the spot. The interment was conducted with the greatest decorum, the interest of the scene being heightened instead of *damped* by the incessant rain, which fell in torrents on the venerable uncovered locks of the husband who acted as chief mourner on the occasion and who, with his numerous offspring (forming the procession), "the pitiless storm assailed in vain," but who appeared fully impressed with the sad solemnity of the last duty they were about to perform for one who had been a wife and mother for nearly three score years and ten.

When living she was a perfect *Meg Merrilies* in appearance and is even said she was the identical person whom Walter Scott had in view when he wrote that inimitable character in *Guy Mannering*: be this as it may, for considerably more than half a century has she exercised her *oracular* powers in propounding the "good or bad fortune" of all the fair-going damsels for many miles round. Many a love-lorn maid has she inspired, not merely with hope but with "dead certainty" ... True it is, that her powers of divination in some measure depended on the *generosity* of her applicants and while some *poor* maidens were constrained to put up with the promise of merely a "Gentleman" with a "one-horse *shay*" the boon of half a crown would purchase that of a "Lord" with a "coach and six;" thus proving "that money commands all things," present and to come.

Often, at "fair time" has she been seen to retire with some expecting lass to a remote corner of the church yard, where, like a second Cassandra, "big with the mysteries of fate" would she unfold her anxious inquirer's future destiny and although her predictions might not *always* come true to the exact *letter*, still, "whilst there was life there was hope;" and who would not purchase a year of *such* hopes for the small sum of half a crown?

Perhaps it should have been stated before that the "old lady" made her mortal exit in a lane in the vicinity of Highworth; and inclosed with the body in the coffin were a *knife and fork, with a plate*; and five tapers (not wax, we presume) were kept constantly burning on the lid of the coffin till the removal for interment; after which the whole of the defunct's wardrobe was committed to the flames and her dog and donkey butchered, "in order that they might follow their mistress," a regular and superstitious custom among this people.

(extract "*Jackson's Oxford Journal*" Saturday, June 12 1830)

Highworth Burial Register:- 03 Jun 1830...Constance Smith...80 yrs... 'a wandering Gypsy'