

THOMAS COLSON alias ROBINSON CRUSOE

April 2020

If ‘The History of Margaret Catchpole, A Suffolk Girl’ by Richard Cobbold (1797-1877) #106 on the web family tree had been a play Thomas Colson’s part would have been barely more than that of an extra, but his single act of disclosure changed her life irreversibly. Many will know that having been reprieved from her death sentence Margaret escaped from prison and was within a whisker of a new life in Europe with her ne’er-do-good lover when she was spotted by Thomas at the Sutton Ferry.



Thomas Colson alias ‘Robinson Crusoe’

Readers will also know that Richard’s Victorian best seller was a novel based on a true story which has led to an apparently eternal debate as to what is fact and what is fiction. Well, our research has shown that Thomas was 100% fact unlike Margaret’s lover, Will Laud, who was 100% fiction. Indeed, as Elizabeth Cobbold (1765-1824) #58 said in *The Suffolk Garland* (1818) “The Ancient Fisherman whose character is portrayed in these stanzas, is not a mere creature of the imagination, but an eccentric being, once resident in the parish of St. Clement, Ipswich, by name Thomas Colson, but better known by the appellation of Robinson Crusoe...” We will come to the stanzas in a minute but first let us look at a book, published in 2017 entitled “The Fisherman’s Family” by Robin Colson.

Thomas seems to have had a reasonable education coming from a family which included his great, great grandfather, Rev. Thomas Colson (c1595-1679) Minister of Badley, Suffolk, who graduated from Jesus College, Cambridge. Young Thomas was nothing if not creative and ingenious; he learnt to become a woolcomber and later a weaver but when the wool trade moved away from Suffolk he entered the Suffolk Militia and, while quartered in Leicester, displaying his usual ingenuity, he learned the trade of stocking-weaving which he brought back to the county of his birth. When this too failed, he became a fisherman on the River Orwell. Needless to say, in poverty, he made his own boat from whatever materials he was able to salvage and Elizabeth Cobbold at the Cliff was one of his loyal customers.

A local newspaper reported him to have been attacked by a nervous fever as a younger man which caused him to labour under the power of witchcraft, and so as to guard himself against its effects he constantly wore around his person a multitude of old horses’ bones, perforated stones and old iron. Having some years previously drifted out to sea on a simple timber raft and survived, Thomas was convinced of his maritime immortality so when on 3rd October 1811 his ramshackle boat went aground near Levington Creek he refused all offers of help. Sadly, the boat was later found, but with no signs of its occupant whose body was washed

up near Harwich Harbour on 12th October. Thomas was buried the following day in a pauper's grave in the churchyard of St. Nicholas.

Elizabeth's stanzas provided an apt description:

*With squalid garments round him flung,
And o'er his bending shoulders hung
A string of perforated stones,
With knots of elm and horses' bones.
He dreams that wizards, leagued with hell,
Have o'er him cast their deadly spell;
Though pincing pains his limbs endure,
He holds his life by charms secure,
And while he feels the torturing ban,
No wave can drown the spell-bound man.*

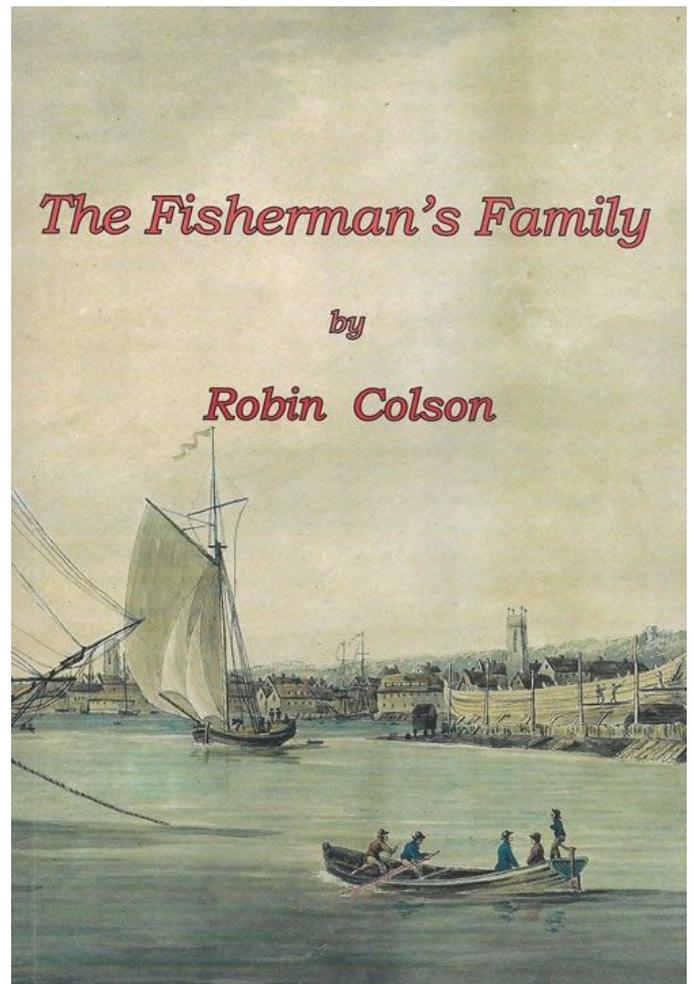


Recognised by Old Robin at Sutton Ferry



Thomas Colson

Thomas Colson (1783-1845) Robinson Crusoe's only son.



The Fisherman's Family'. The illustration being Ipswich from the Cliff

Had he lived, Thomas would have been well pleased with his only son, also Thomas (1783-1845). 'Robinson Crusoe' had married Elizabeth Goode and their only child, Thomas (junior), although born out of wedlock, was legitimised by his parent's marriage when he was 12 years old and went on to become the Engineer for the Croydon Canal which opened in 1809. One of his descendants, many generations later, is Robin Colson, author of 'The Fisherman's Family' which tells the story of this successful and high-achieving family. He lists 50 major civil engineering and construction projects, world-wide, in which they have been involved.

Thomas' headstone reads:

***'Praises on Tombs are Idlely Spent
A Good Name is a Monument'***