

**A HISTORY OF KIRKBY FLEETHAM –
HENRY JENKINS – MAN OF MANY SEASONS
Researched by KEITH PROUD**

HENRY JENKINS – MAN OF MANY SEASONS

Throughout history, there have been countless examples of people who are said to have lived extraordinarily long lives. Every culture has its own stories of such phenomena, most of them so far-fetched as to be incredible. While some can be easily discounted, others might just have at least an element of truth in them somewhere – and some are verifiably true.

When the first census in Japan took place in 1871, the details of a six-year-old boy called Shigechiyo Izumi were recorded. Born on the island of Tokunoshima, more than 800 miles south-west of Tokyo, on June 29, 1865, he lived until February 21, 1986. Having survived to the age of 120 years and 237 days, he became the world's oldest man ever. Izumi's real age could be proved beyond any doubt simply because the records exist to support the claim, but earlier candidates for longevity records were unable to rely on such evidence.

The first English parish registers recording baptisms, marriages and burials were not officially introduced until 1538, and the first full census in England did not take place until 1841. Because of his name and story having been used to market a brand of Scotch whisky called Old Parr, one Englishman is perceived by many as having lived longer than any of his countrymen. He was Thomas Parr, reputedly born at Winnington, Shropshire, in 1483, towards the end of the reign of King Edward IV. When he was 80, he married his first wife, by whom he had two children. At the age of 122, he married for a second time and fathered another child. In 1635, his story was told to Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel, who had him taken to London where he was presented to King Charles I. When Parr died later the same year, aged 152, after having supposedly eaten too much rich food, he was buried in the south transept of Westminster Abbey. There was no way in which his real age could be verified, although what if of interest is that his grandson, Roberts, is said to have been 124 years old when he died in 1757.

There was another Englishman, and a North Yorkshireman at that, who, reputedly, lived even longer than Thomas Parr, and whose story somehow seems more believable.

Henry Jenkins was born in 1501 at Ellerton-on-Swale, on the north bank of the river, almost opposite Catterick. It is recorded that he lived to the grand old age of 169, dying in 1670. There is no documentary evidence of his date of birth but a remarkable testimony was written during his lifetime by an

educated woman called Ann Saville. She was initially sceptical of his claims but having met him and carried out her own research appears to have revised her opinion of the old man.

In 1658, following the death of her father, she had gone to live with her sister and her family at the manor house in Scorton, and in 1661 or 1662 she wrote a letter to Sir Richard Graham of Norton Conyers. In it she told him of her meeting with Henry Jenkins who lived just over a mile away at Bolton-on-Swale and of her subsequent findings:

'Sir, when I first came to live at Bolton, it was told me a man lived in the parish 150 years old, that he has sworne (as witness in a case at York) to 120 years, which the judge reproving him for, he said he was butler at that time to Lord Conyers.

They told me it was reported that his name was found in some old register of the Lord Conyer's servants; but truly it never was in my thoughts to enquire of my Lord Darcy whether this last particular was true or not; for I believed little of the story for a great many years, till one day, being in my sister's kitchen, Henry Jenkins come in to beg an alms, I had a mind to examine him.

I told him he was an old man, who must shortly expect to give an account to God for all he did or sayd, and desired him to tell me very truly how old he was.

He paused a little, and then said that, to the best of his knowledge, he was about an hundred and sixty-two or three.

I asked him what kings he remembered, he said 'Henry the Eighth'; I asked him what publick thing he could longest remember, he said 'Floyden field'; I asked if the king was there, he said 'No, he was in France, and that the Earl of Surrey was general'; I asked how old he might be then, he said 'between ten and twelve, for' says he, 'I was sent to Northallerton with a horse load of arrows, but they sent a bigger boy from thence to the army with them.' I thought by these marks I might find something in history.

I lookt into an old book that was in the house, and did find that Flodden-field was 152 years before, so that if he was then eleven years old, he must be 162 or 163 years, as he said when I examined him.

I found by the book that bows and arrows were then used, and that the earl he named was general at that time, and that King Henry the Eighth was then at Tournay in France, so that I don't know what to answer for the consistency of these things, for Henry Jenkins is a poor man, can neither write nor read.

Here also four or five people in the same parish that are reputed, all of them, to be 100 years old, or within 2 or 3 years of it, and they all say he was an elderly man ever since they knew him, for he was born in another parish, and before any registers in churches, as it's said.

He told me when he was butler to Lord Conyers, that he remembered the abbot of Fountains, who used to drink with his lord a glass of heartily; and the dissolution of the monasterys he said he well remembered.;

In 1739, a copy of Miss Saville's letter was sent to Roger Gale, an antiquarian who lived not far away, in Scruton. Other snippets of information are also recorded about Henry Jenkins and it is perhaps these which flesh out and lend credibility to the tale of this man who, as he was always keen to stress, was 'of humble birth'. As Miss Saville records, he never learned to read or write. When asked if he could account for his longevity, he suggested that it might have something to do with his drinking plenty of tar water and nettle soup, eating a simple diet of bread, cheese, raw onion and cold meat, and always wearing flannel next to his skin. Even beyond the age of 100, he could easily swim across the River Swale and never caught a chill in doing so. Until he was 140, he carried on his occupation as a thatcher and fisherman, principally of salmon, except during the period when he was butler to Lord Conyers at Hornby Castle.

Afterwards, until he was 161, he worked in his garden or did odd jobs every day and his sight was so good that he could still tie fishing flies until a year or so before his death. He was sometimes called to appear at court as a witness or to give information on a variety of matters including rights of way. Jenkins was adept at 'bending with the wind', or going with the flow as we would say today, and needed to be since he lived through the reigns of eight monarchs and one Lord Protector, many of whom were given to tampering with the official religion of the land. Jenkins must sometimes have wondered whether he was Roman Catholic, Church of England, Puritan or a blend of all three.

The Bolton-on-Swale church register entry for his burial in December 1670 records that he was 'a very aged and poor man'. In 1743, an obelisk paid for by public subscription was erected in the churchyard in his honour while inside the church a black marble tablet was set up as a memorial. It reads:

'Blush not, marble, to rescue from oblivion the memory of Henry Jenkins, a person obscure in birth, but of a life truly memorable, for he was enriched with the goods of nature if not of fortune, and happy in the duration if not the variety of his enjoyments. And though the partial world despised and disregarded his low and humble state, the equal eye of Providence beheld and blessed it with a patriarch's health and length of days, to teach mistaken

man these blessings are entailed on temperance, a life of labour, and a mind at ease. He live to the amazing age of 169; was interred here, December 6, 1670, and had this justice done to his memory, 1743.'

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