



## Paying for your sins in North Marston

In the 1700s, a North Marston parishioner who was considered to have sinned against God might have been reported to the Court of Archdeaconry of Buckingham, and an order of penance would have been made.

One such example was the widow Elizabeth Ward who was accused of the “crime of fornication and with having a bastard child” in 1783.

The penance was basically about humiliation: a public display of repentance usually performed during a busy church service when all the penitent’s friends and neighbours were present. Sometimes, the penitent was required to wear a white sheet and carry a white rod as an extra degree of humiliation.

The Order of Penance required that

*“Elizabeth Ward is enjoined to be present in the parish church of North Marston upon some prayer day or holy day, on or before the last day of December 1783, and standing near to the Minister’s reading desk shall immediately, after the service has ended, say after the Minister as follows:*

*Whereas I, Elizabeth Ward, have greatly offended Almighty God, to the danger of my own soul and the evil example of others and the great scandal and offence of the Christian Religion, by committing the crime of fornication, with having a bastard child. I am therefore now come hither, being so enjoined to confess this my sinful act, which here I do in a very penitent manner, and am heartily sorry for the same. And I humbly beseech Almighty God to forgive me this and all my other sins, and to assist me with His grace that I may never commit this or any the like sin*

*again; and to the end that I may obtain God's grace and forgiveness I desire you all here present to accept this my confession, and to join with me in prayer, humbly kneeling upon my knees and saying the Lord's Prayer.*

*And of the due performance of this penance the said Elizabeth Ward is enjoined to certify under the hands of the minister and Churchwardens.*

*By the order of the Court,*

*Joseph Burnham, Deputy Registrar."*

There is no record of whether Elizabeth performed this humiliating penance; a failure to have done so would have resulted in a sentence of excommunication being passed by the Archdeaconry Court, preventing her from receiving Holy Communion and setting her apart from other parishioners..

Assuming it was certified by the minister and churchwardens that Elizabeth *had* performed the penance, she would have then been fined the costs and fees for the whole case, and a letter of absolution read out in the parish church.

What became of Elizabeth Ward, we don't know for sure. It is likely she was the Elizabeth Ward who married a John Jackson (both of North Marston) on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1786, three years after her penance ordeal. Elizabeth and John's daughter Jane was baptised on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1786, but whether she was the "bastard child" mentioned in the Order of Penance, we don't know.

**John Spargo**