

A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE IN THE FENS.

Susan (Susannah) Ayres was baptised in Little Downham on 17th October 1847, the daughter of labourer James and Mary his wife. Susan married William Moxon in 1874 and sometime after that they moved to Barnsley, presumably taken there by William's work. William died in 1890 aged 40 and in 1894 Susan married again to Joseph Coward a widower of Barnsley who needed a wife to help with his seven children. In 1901 she decided to pay a visit to her sister Matilda and her family back in Little Downham, a visit that made the local newspaper.

Cambridgeshire Times, November 6th 1901:

Last Monday week Mrs Coward, a woman aged 60, and the sister-in-law of Jonathon Lythell, a farm labourer, in the employ of Mr Wilkin, who occupies a farm near the 100 Feet Bank, at Oxloade, left her home in Barnsley to spend a few weeks with her Fen relatives. She was to have arrived by the four o'clock train, which was met at Black Bank Station by Lythell. Mrs Coward had, however, missed the train, and did not arrive at Blank Bank until the 4.56 down train from Cambridge. Her brother-in-law had meanwhile returned home, confident that she had altered her mind and remained at Barnsley. Nothing further was heard of the unfortunate woman until the following Friday, when she was discovered in a grass field on a neighbouring farm by Mr Pearson. She was in a very weak and exhausted condition, but perfectly conscious, and was conveyed to Lythell's cottage, when a doctor was sent for from Ely. It appears that Mrs Coward, who suffers from partial paralysis of the lower limbs and is unable to rise once she falls, was proceeding alone through the darkness, after having been assisted to rise from the road by a passer-by, towards her sister's house, close to the Wash Bank. She knew the way well, but in the darkness mistook the gate which led into Mr Wilkin's field, and through which she would have to pass. Instead, she wandered into Mr Pearson's grass field, and, catching her foot, fell, and was unable to rise again. That was on Monday night. In that isolated position she remained until discovered, as stated, on Friday by Mr Pearson, and although she had with her a basket containing biscuits, grapes and other things, she was unable to reach it, as it had fallen a yard or two from her, and thus she passed the whole time, night and day, without sustenance. She avers that she was conscious the whole time, and on Wednesday heard the voices of children in the vicinity,

but was unable to attract their attention, and in her position she was invisible from the pathway in the adjoining field. The days were pleasant for the time of year, but the nights were cold, while on one occasion rain fell. In spite of her sufferings, Mrs Coward has not as yet shown signs of any serious illness, and it is confidently hoped that she will quickly recover from the effects of her extraordinary adventure. During the whole three days and four nights, the unfortunate woman had not once been able to stir from the position in which she fell, as was evidenced by the fact of her inability to reach the food so near her, while one arm on which she had fallen was much swollen from the continuance of her weight upon it.

Susan lived on and was buried in Little Downham on 14th January 1907.

Robin Pearl