



CHARLES HAMILTON

‘Her or him, whichever he or she may be...’

The person first known to the world as Mary Hamilton was born in Somerset in about 1725, the daughter of William and Mary Hamilton.

When she was still a child her family moved to Angus in Scotland (perhaps their country of origin) until at about the age of 14 Mary made a far-reaching decision. She put on her brother’s clothes and set out bravely on the road back to England.

In the years that followed Mary would go by the names of James, George, and finally Charles Hamilton. Amidst so much that is uncertain about a remarkable life it is clear at least that a male name and male attire came to assume fundamental importance as expressions of identity. Mary had become Charles.

In Northumberland Charles Hamilton entered the service of Dr Edward Green, a ‘mountebank’, or seller of quack medicines, then worked for Dr Finly Green before setting up independently as an unqualified doctor. In May 1746 he arrived at Wells in Somerset and lodged in the house of Mary Creed. This much we know from the official records of a subsequent court case, preserved at the Somerset Heritage Centre.

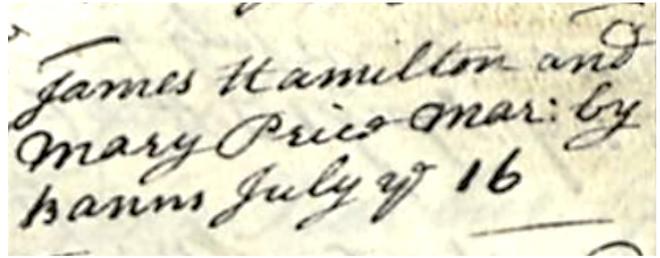
Rumour would soon add further scandalous detail, including a tally of 14 supposed marriages to evidently unsuspecting women. The novelist Henry Fielding would ensure the notoriety of Hamilton’s story by writing a largely fictional account of it in a pamphlet called ‘The Female Husband’, published anonymously in November 1746.

One marriage ceremony certainly did take place. On 16 July 1746, at St Cuthbert's Church in Wells, Charles (or, as the parish register has it, James) Hamilton and Mary Price, the landlady's niece, were married by the Revd Mr Kingstone.

For two months they travelled through Somerset as husband and wife selling quack remedies, until at Glastonbury on 13 September Mary Price confronted the truth of her situation and denounced her supposed husband to the town authorities. He was confined in the gaol at Shepton Mallet to await trial, and on 7 October appeared before the Court of Quarter Sessions in the Great Hall of Taunton Castle.

The magistrates struggled to agree what the crime should be called. They decided eventually that Charles Hamilton was an 'uncommon notorious cheat'. The severity of their sentence, and the terms in which they delivered it, reflected some of the outrage and the perplexity the case had aroused: 'and we, the Court,' they said, 'do sentence her, or him, whichever he or she may be, to be imprisoned six months, and during that time to be whipped in the towns of Taunton, Glastonbury, Wells and Shepton Mallet.' At three-week intervals until Christmas 1746 the humiliation of four public whippings was duly carried out.

No more is heard of Charles Hamilton after that, and no date or place of death has been found. Perhaps it is best to remember him as he was described in a Bath newspaper during his first confinement at Shepton Mallet. He continued even there to sell his remedies and was attended by fascinated crowds who flocked to see him. The newspaper recorded that the 'bold and impudent' Hamilton remained at that time 'very gay, with perriwig, ruffles, and breeches', still defying the world as the world closed in.



Marriage of James Hamilton and Mary Price at St Cuthbert's Church, Wells, 16 July 1746.



St Cuthbert's Church, Wells

