

JOHN HIGGS, c.1788-1825, Famous Man for Killing Pigs

[Jill Waller, Feb 2021]



To the Memory of JOHN HIGGS, Pig Killer, who died November 28th 1825, Aged 55 years.

*Here lies John Higgs / A famous man for killing pigs
For killing pigs was his delight / Both morning, afternoon and night.
Both heats and cold he did endure / Which no physician could e'er cure.
His knife is laid, his work is done / I hope to heaven his soul is gone.*

Many visitors to Cheltenham Minster churchyard must have wondered about this well-known epitaph. John Higgs was indeed a pig-killer, successful and proud of his chosen profession. The Cheltenham Parish records (held in Gloucestershire Archives; transcribed by the CLHS) show that John was baptised on Christmas Day 1769, the son of John Higgs. In 1802 he married Hester Jordan of Cirencester, in Cirencester parish church.

John's will of 4 November 1825, proved 6 May 1826, which starts 'This is the last Will and Testament of me John Higgs of Cheltenham, Pig Killer', reveals a little more about him. In it John bequeaths all his real and personal estate to his wife Hester, and then, after her decease, to his children: sons Thomas and Charles, and daughter Ann. The property detailed in the will includes a house and shop in the High street, already in his son Thomas's possession, with garden behind, extending to 'the privy and the barn in the possession of An Freeman'; son Charles is to receive three cottages, with gardens in front, situated in Grove Street; daughter Ann is to receive John Higgs' own house, with the garden behind as far as the pig-sty, and another small cottage in Grove Street. John's wife, Hester, is instructed to apply the rents and profits of these properties towards paying John's debt to his brother William, at the annual rate of £20 (about £1,800 today) until the debt is cleared.

The 1806 Cheltenham Inclosure Award map clearly shows the property owned by J Higgs as Allotment number 342, on the corner of Grove Street (east side) and High Street; it is now No.384 High Street, formerly 275 High Street. There appear to be two properties fronting the High Street here, and a range of buildings behind in Grove Street, beyond a garden or courtyard. Another site, No.511, is allotted to J Higgs further west along the High Street, near to where Park Street is now. Shenton's Cheltenham directories of 1800-1803 list two members of the Higgs family in the Lower High Street area – William Higgs, hurdle maker, on the north side, next to the *Cross Keys*, and John Higgs, variously described as a dealer in wood, shopkeeper and hurdle-maker, on the south side

where Allotment No.511 is placed on the Inclosure Award map. When he wasn't killing pigs, which was unlikely to be a full-time occupation, John Higgs was also a gardener. He is listed as such in Gell & Bradshaw's 1820 *Gloucestershire Directory*, evidently making good use of a piece of copyhold land that is mentioned in his will.



Detail from 1806 Cheltenham Inclosure Award map, (courtesy of Gloucestershire Archives, ref.D855/E9.)

John Higgs' unusual epitaph has frequently been quoted in various publications over the years, noted for its humour, but its first appearance in print occurred in *Dolly Dubbins' (Cheltenham) Diary*, a lampoon of a visit to Cheltenham, published in the *Morning Post* in 1829. Dolly refers to John Higgs as a 'celebrated pork butcher' and declares the lines are 'remarkable for their elegance'. She quotes the epitaph in full but the first couple of lines differ slightly from those we see today. Until recently gravestones were often re-carved when the writing became worn, and Dolly's version may be the original:

*Here lies a careful and industrious man / You will scarce find such an one in ten;
 For killing pigs was his delight / Both morning, afternoon and night.
 Both heats and cold he did endure / Which no physician could e'er cure.
 His knife is laid, his work is done / I hope to heaven his soul is gone.*