

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Mike Wabe, Foul Murders in East Anglia

Mike Wabe gave an entertaining talk about a gruesome subject to the October meeting of the Heritage Circle. He outlined murders committed in East Anglia during the period 1827 to 1943. Ten of the crimes were solved the perpetrators were hanged. The eleventh murder remains a mystery.

The unsolved case is the Peasenhall Mystery of 1902. A maid, Rose Harsent, was found with her throat cut. It emerged that Rose was six months pregnant and had been in a relationship with a married man, William Gardener. He denied any involvement in her death but there was strong circumstantial evidence against him. Gardener's handwriting was on a note inviting Rose to a meeting on the night she died. A bottle containing paraffin found at the scene had held medicine for Gardener's children. There was blood on Gardener's knife. He had been seen burning rubbish, possibly blood-stained clothes. However, he claimed to have been in bed with his wife on that night and she corroborated his statement. He was tried twice as juries did not reach the required unanimous verdict. On the first occasion an 11-1 majority found Gardener guilty, in the second trial he was acquitted 10-2. The case was dropped.

The other crimes Mike Wabe described were resolved. Seven were committed by men and three by women. Nine of the murderers were hanged and the other was found guilty but insane. Most of the victims were family members. There were three exceptions, William Horwell, a notorious rustler, was found guilty of murdering a policeman in 1844, Robert Browning admitted slashing the throat of a prostitute, Emma Rolfe, in 1876, and Issac Jermy and his son were shot dead in 1848 by James Rush following a dispute over land ownership.

All of the accused were arrested soon after the crime except for William Sherward who murdered his wife during a row in 1851 and then hid her body parts in drains around Norwich. 18 years later he went to the police to admit his crime and he was hanged in Norwich.

In the Red Barn Murder of 1827 William Corder stabbed, shot and strangled Maria Marten in Polstead. Corder left the village in a hurry and kept up the pretence that Maria and he were living happily. He even wrote letters on her behalf. However, Maria's mother had a dream that her daughter was buried in a barn and her body was found by her father. Eventually Corder admitted to the crime.

The three women murderers used arsenic on their victims. Sarah Chesham was the last woman hanged for the attempted murder of her husband in 1850 and is likely to have poisoned her two sons and a baby in her care in 1845. Catherine Foster, aged 17, poisoned her husband of three weeks! Finally, Sarah Dazely murdered her two husbands in 1840 and 1843.

The jury had a huge impact on trial outcomes. They often deliberated for very short amounts of time, for example, in the Browning case for only three minutes. They could also be compassionate. Eric Brown was found guilty but insane after murdering his abusive father and was detained at His Majesty's pleasure from 1943 until release in 1975. Similarly, majority verdicts in the Peasenhall Mystery were totally contradictory.

Most of the 19th Century hangings were conducted in public, often with huge crowds to witness the event. 15,000 people saw Dazely hanged at Bedford Jail. Death did not always end the indignity of the murderer. William Corder's body was given to medical research. It was dissected and displayed to the public. His death mask, scalp and a book bound in his skin are on display in Moyses Hall Museum.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 26 November at Rickingham Village Hall when Sarah Doig will give a talk, *'There is no such thing as a good tax': Government Revenue-Earning Schemes Through the Centuries*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy