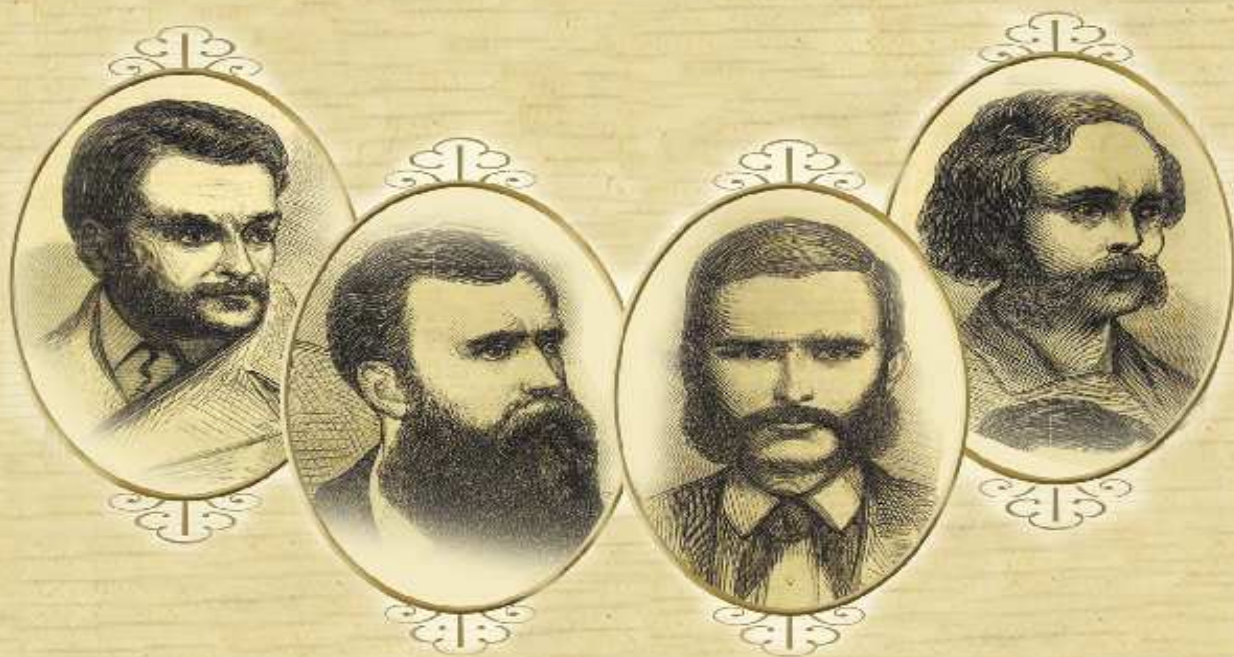


# CASEBOOK: CLASSIC CRIME

ISSUE 4 APRIL 2016

## THE THIEVES OF THREADNEEDLE STREET



Read the article by  
Nicholas Booth!

# CASEBOOK: CLASSIC CRIME

Planes, Trains & Capital Gains

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# EDITORIAL BY BEN JOHNSON

In my student days, I was the victim of a burglary; although, given the area of Sheffield in which my tiny one-bedroom flat was situated, I was probably lucky to only experience this on one occasion (Seriously, just Google “axe attack Sheffield” and you will be able to see my old neighbourhood in all its glory!).

Being the victim of such a crime is a terrible thing. It becomes impossible to relax in your own home, and the sense of anger and anxiety which follow are something which can seriously play on your mind for months to follow.

You may then think it is strange that I spent a year of my life writing the biography of a famous Sheffield burglar, exploring his antics and dragging his cowardly crimes back into the limelight after a century of almost obscurity.

The rogue in question was Charles Frederick Peace, a master of cat burglary and cunning disguise, and a man whose life was entirely deserving of being immortalised. But why glorify the acts of a common thief?

Well, in my humble opinion, it is no different to the way we feverishly read gory accounts of historic gruesome murders. We are fascinated by the depths to which a human being can sink, and allow these macabre stories to enter into our cosy conscience as a welcome distraction from our everyday lives.

However, in addition to this, we are all fascinated by ingenuity and cunning, something which every article in this edition contains in bucketloads. It is simply human nature to admire the meticulous planning and daring getaways that feature in some of the most audacious robberies in history.

The collection of articles featured in this edition explores a varied range of remarkable robberies, from an audacious parachute jump into the clouds of anonymity, to the brazen threat of the ultimate Highwayman.

Along the way, we also take in a notable case of murder on the railway tracks, a gang of thieves operating within the beating heart of central London, the incredible story of a man whose life and crimes took him the entire length of the nation before his demise, and a robbery which changed the future of an entire nation.

So, as you put your feet up and settle in for a night of crime in the literary sense (having first checked the doors and windows are locked), rest assured that you aren't unusual in finding fascination in the exploration of these crimes, some of which highlight not only the depths than a human being can sink to, but also the pinnacle of what the human brain is capable of.

There is nothing wrong with feeling a little admiration for some of the dastardly folk featured in this edition (the criminals, not the writers); they were cunning, clever, and operated at the height of their dubious profession...unlike the b@stard who stole my laptop.

I sincerely hope that you enjoy the fruit of our collectively warped minds, and send our best wishes to each and every one of you. Without our readers, we would simply be the kind of odd people who know a lot about macabre things!

Ben Johnson

P.S If you enjoyed my article on Charlie Peace, the full biography (Charlie Peace – Murder, Mayhem and the Master of Disguise) is released in August by Pen and Sword Books.

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# A LEGENDARY LEAP

by Joe Chetcuti

**M**ost internet search engines will direct you to one of the most captivating acts of air piracy of its time: The Wednesday November 24, 1971 hijacking of Northwest Orient Airlines Flight 305 by a mysterious individual whose name was presented to the public as DB Cooper. The crime remains the only unsolved skyjacking in U. S. aviation history. The internet, along with numerous books written on the matter, can provide plenty of detailed information about this memorable flight. It was a journey that was supposed to have been a routine 170-mile trek across the skies from Portland to Seattle. Speaking as someone who lived through that news story as it unfolded, I can offer you a perspective on the general attitude of Americans toward this daring

for us to throw newspapers onto house porches that contained headlines of some aircraft being illegally diverted from American air space to Cuba. More than 50 such hijackings occurred during the three-year period of 1969-1971. There were hardly any security measures in effect in those days to prevent a weapon-toting crook from taking control of an aircraft.

I recall my first ever plane ride when I flew to Orange County Airport in southern California. This was in July 1971, and I boarded a Hughes Airwest plane in San Francisco. There was no need to walk through any metal detection devices and I didn't have to empty my pockets in front of security personnel. The contents of my carry-on luggage weren't scanned, and non-ticketed family members were free to walk right up to



parachutist. It was an attitude that evolved from an initial feeling of astonishment to awe as the news spread over the airwaves on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday. People were amazed that a normal-looking middle-aged man could so boldly jump out of a Boeing 727 jetliner while carrying \$200,000 worth of extorted money. The diver leapt into an evening rain storm, and for over forty years, his spectacular performance has remained legendary in status.

This may sound odd by today's standards, but it was relatively easy for a commercial civilian jet to be skyjacked in 1971. My older teenage brothers and I were paperboys in California back then. It was common

the gate with me. A plane ticket and a boarding pass were all you needed in order to proceed, and no accompanying form of identification was even required. But airport security sure transformed itself soon after Cooper leaped into fame four months later. The man bluffed his way to the tune of \$200,000 by presenting a briefcase containing batteries, wires, and red sticks to a stewardess during a flight out of Portland. The consensus has always been that this was a harmless briefcase, especially since the color of dynamite is actually yellow and not red. The deceiving "explosives" were convincing enough, however, for Northwest Orient Airlines to deliver

the cash to Cooper as he sat in the plane while it refuelled on the runway in Seattle. After the "briefcase bluff" succeeded, the installation of metal detectors at airports quickly became a major priority. The need for this upgrade in security was further hastened when DB Cooper copy-cats soon began to pop up and hijack flights for ransom money, too. Fortunately, none of the copy-cats got away with it. But nonetheless, the authorities still bestowed a greater importance to safe air travel, and the spark that got the ball rolling was Cooper's well-executed exploits on Thanksgiving eve. An insurance company had to reimburse \$180,000 of the ransom money paid to Cooper, so obviously, it was in the best interest of the insurance industry to use its influence to encourage improvements in airport security.



After the Cooper hijacking, the copy-cats did not receive any long-lasting notoriety.....

Another public safety measure that went into effect directly because of the hijacking of Flight 305 was the requirement that the pilot have control of all doors on commercial flights.. That wasn't the case on November 24, 1971. After the extorted money was delivered to him, Cooper safely released the passengers in Seattle, and then he ordered the plane to take off once again. While the crew were isolated in the cockpit, Cooper manually operated the "aft stair door" of the airborne Northwest Orient jet while standing alone in the cabin. The pilot had no idea whether or not the skyjacker was still on board when the aircraft eventually landed in Reno. When a search of the plane was made, it was discovered that Cooper was long gone, having

previously parachuted out of the Boeing 727 with all the loot. From that moment, the FAA looked for measures to prevent passengers from controlling the doors.

When I recall the attitude of Americans towards Cooper, it is best to first remember the mood of the people toward hijackers before the famous leap occurred. These criminals were hated. Air pirates were looked upon as cowards who endangered the lives of innocent unarmed travellers. The persistent hijackings to Cuba were often motivated by political reasons that the average American citizen couldn't care a less about. Many hijackers were Spanish-speaking foreigners who simply wanted to get around the U.S. Government's "travel ban" to Cuba. Not only did the American public loathe these foreign air pirates, they also became frustrated that the Cubans did not even make these hijackings a criminal offence until October 1970. Fidel Castro went to the Havana Airport in August 1970 to prevent the capture of newly arrived hijackers, but instead, the Cuban leader got his first look at a Boeing 747 jet. That type of aircraft had just been conveniently hijacked to Havana. Americans looked down upon these scofflaws and they offered no sympathy at all to other hijackers who were military deserters or armed criminals on-the-run. These lawbreakers were hoping to obtain refuge in Cuba and not face extradition. Skyjackers were held in contempt by the public, and rightfully so. The only time ire wasn't directed upon these crooks was when it became established that a particular air pirate was a victim of mental illness.

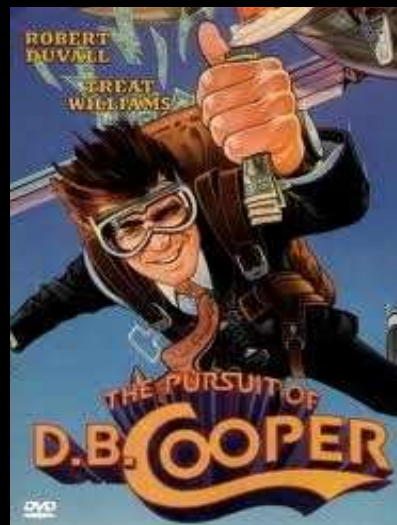
After the Cooper hijacking, the copy-cats did not receive any long-lasting notoriety. For the most part, not one of their names are remembered right off the cuff. They weren't original thinkers, but instead, they climbed aboard the Cooper bandwagon and were

looked upon as egotistical thrill-seekers. The public didn't shed a tear when one of those copy-cats, a former Green Beret named Richard McCoy, was subsequently imprisoned and later killed in a shootout with the FBI.

So if this was the feeling toward hijackers before and after Cooper's leap, then you'd think that the attitude of Americans toward Cooper himself would be similar. But it is here where things did not fall into place as one might expect. The hijacking of Flight 305 has never become a remembrance that incites anger or hatred. The mere mention of the name DB Cooper provokes just as many smiles as it does serious expressions. It has been like this from the start, and

this unique public reaction has stood the test of time.

Look at all this memorabilia. Here we are in 2016 and all these items are selling on the internet in commemoration of a skyjacking that occurred over four decades ago. These souvenirs do bring back memories. I distinctly remember seeing DB Cooper hats and t-shirts being worn by his fans in California during the 1970s. My brother attended Portland State University in the autumn of 1977 and he returned home telling us that DB Cooper was still a hot topic on campus. Not only was his merchandise purchased, but also adventurous trips were often organized by students in order to hunt down the ransom money.



People dreamt that the currency was loose in the wilderness area where the jump was thought to have been made. It was almost fashionable for collegiate students in that part of the country to claim they went on a DB Cooper hunt. The whole experience became embedded into the social fabric of young collegians and wide-eyed adventurers.

So why has this fugitive of justice been treated so admirably by a good portion of the public for all these years? I think the number one reason is that nobody received the slightest physical injury during the hijacking. I suspect that this peddling of memorabilia would not happen if people had died as a result of his crime. This wasn't like the skyjacking of Air France Flight 139 where Israeli passengers were

targeted and death eventually ensued. (1) The Cooper hijacking was executed far differently. People noticed that this air pirate did not physically hurt innocent travellers, and they took into account the words of those in the demolition field who agreed that the "briefcase bomb" was most likely a fake.

Another reason for his popularity was due to the fact that Cooper had deliberately employed measures not to alarm his fellow passengers of what was happening while they were in the air. He was not a terrorist. The Northwest Orient jet circled Seattle for an additional few hours while the pilot announced that a slight mechanical problem was delaying the landing. In reality, the delay was due to Cooper's demand that the delivery of the parachutes and money be coordinated with the arrival of the plane.

Many people saw Cooper as a well-dressed, reasonably articulate, English-speaking American with no political agenda. With all the Cuban shenanigans going on at the time, the Northwest Orient hijacking was perceived by some as an odd but refreshing change to these types of crimes. Many Americans could relate to a man like Cooper. He didn't hijack this flight for the purpose of promoting some screwball cause conceived by a radical fringe group. His objective wasn't to force the Pentagon to end the war in Vietnam or to provoke the liberation of some jailed activist. (2) Those types of criminals received little support from the general public in the early 1970s. Cooper purchased his own cocktails on the flight during the hijacking and he gave a tip to the stewardess. He didn't take a hostage and force the person to jump with him as was originally feared when he demanded four parachutes. The middle-aged skyjacker simply wanted the money. Yes he is guilty as sin, but his demeanour did not inspire fervent hatred from his fellow citizens. There was to some extent a degree of organised safety and natural courtesy in his methods. For the most part, these aspects of his persona were not adversely received by the public.

One of the joys of being a paperboy back in the 1970s was that we got to go "collecting" door-to-door on the first of the month at the homes of our customers. It was a simpler age where people would invite the paperboy into their homes and speak of current events. They would pay the young lad his money and add some candy or coins as a tip for his delivery service. November 1st was always a good day for collecting because we'd get the left-over Halloween treats as a bonus. Needless to say, when making the collection rounds on December 1, 1971 the DB Cooper story became a dominant theme. Within 24 hours, the man's great leap was enthusiastically discussed as families assembled for the traditional Thanksgiving

dinner. From there the conversation naturally flowed through neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces. Everybody wanted to share their opinions, so a paperboy would hear a variety of comments during his December 1, 1971 collection rounds. I recall that the majority of opinions on that day contained very little animosity towards Cooper. With one daring dive, the man captured the imagination of the public. Books, television documentaries, and a motion picture starring Robert Duvall followed in his wake. In current times, we have seen the development of web sites in his honour with message boards announcing when the next Cooper symposium will take place. Those gatherings often occur in hotel conference rooms. The FBI has never closed the book on the case, and the agency receives new "tips" on the Cooper hijacking every year. As a young paperboy, I figured that the Cooper story would linger on for a while, but I honestly didn't think it would last well into the next century..

I can't deny that Cooper has a loyal fan base and has achieved respectable notoriety in many circles of society. The silly products depicting his crime continue to sell, his popularity is maintained in social media, and nobody has ever successfully duplicated his feat. The court of public opinion has often looked favourably upon this skyjacker. This especially holds true when the jury consists of fellow American males. It was a daring plan followed by a bold execution. Nobody got hurt and Cooper took home the money along with all the "glory". History has treated him kindly, and as time goes by, the accolades do not seem to let up. As for my personal assessment about him, I don't think my mind will ever change. I admit that he has won the hearts of many and his popularity is unquestioned. But when a man opens a briefcase to a stewardess during an airborne flight, and quietly implies the threat of mass murder, I cannot bestow any admiration. No subsequent displays of courtesy, mannerly demeanour, or dare-devil escapes can tip the scale on this.



Over the years the consensus is that the man got away with it. Nobody ever discovered his corpse or his parachute despite the fact that the projected landing area has been combed over for decades. The feeling has been that Cooper was a veteran parachutist, but not an expert one. He knew how to strap himself into a parachute without assistance, thus displaying his experience, but he foolishly neglected to ask for a crash helmet as part of his demands. No expert would have made that mistake. I do not argue against the conclusion that Cooper might have been an active participant in the Vietnam War. 727s were used in that campaign in order to parachute-drop supplies to ground troops. Cooper may have selected a 727 to hijack due to the knowledge he gained about that particular aircraft during the war. The man also purposely asked for military-style parachutes while the plane refuelled in Seattle, and during the landing approach to that airport, Cooper confided to the stewardess about his knowledge about McChord Air Force Base. (3) Vietnam personnel who dropped crated supplies out of the aft section of 727s were required to wear parachutes during their missions. They also had a basic training in parachute jumping. The knowledge acquired by crewmen from this training would have been useful if an accidental fall occurred while they conducted their duties during a flight.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. The hijackers took the plane to Uganda where 148 non-Israeli passengers were released and safely flown to Paris. Of the remaining hostages, 102 were rescued when Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu led a commando raid into Uganda. Netanyahu and three hostages lost their lives in the raid. All the hijackers and 45 Ugandan soldiers were killed. The soldiers belonged to Idi Amin and were in support of the hijackers. Netanyahu's younger brother would eventually become the Prime Minister of Israel.
2. In January 1972, a D. B. Cooper copy-cat (Garrett Brock Trapnell) hijacked a TWA flight and demanded over \$300,000 in cash. The release of the incarcerated Angela Davis was also included in his demands.
3. The Air Force Base was only a 20 minute drive from the airport in Seattle. Two fighter jets were launched from that base to trail the Northwest Orient Airlines jet while it was in flight.

#### INTERNET SOURCES

[http://simviation.com/hjg/aircraft/boeing/b727-100/b727-100\\_northwest\\_orient\\_1969\\_051\\_n463us.jpg](http://simviation.com/hjg/aircraft/boeing/b727-100/b727-100_northwest_orient_1969_051_n463us.jpg)

[http://img.timeinc.net/time/photoessays/2008/10\\_disappearance/disappearance\\_cooper.jpg](http://img.timeinc.net/time/photoessays/2008/10_disappearance/disappearance_cooper.jpg)

<http://www.zazzle.com/db+cooper+gifts>

# Krayology Review

or

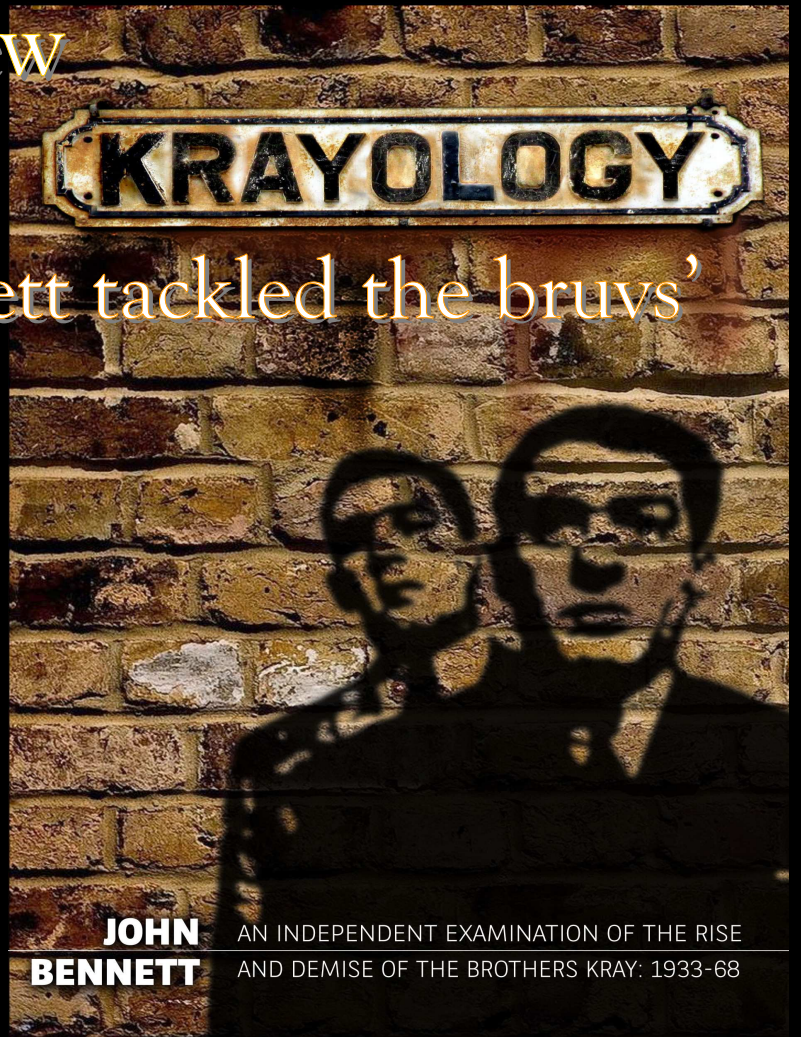
## ‘When John Bennett tackled the bruvv’

By Mickey Mayhew

Boy, have I waited a long time for this book. It had pride of place on my Christmas list, and then there were whispers of a delay, due to a change in the cover - for what it's worth, my only criticism of this book is that I preferred the old photo montage cover). And then all of a sudden Christmas had come and gone - and no Krayology. I reconciled myself to it, although not getting my own way never went down all that well with Mrs Mayhew's little marvel. So I wangled myself a word or two with Adam Wood, head honcho of Mango Books, and proud publisher of Krayology, and secured myself a review copy courtesy of the Whitechapel Society Journal. And they say that nothing in life is free!

But to the book itself.

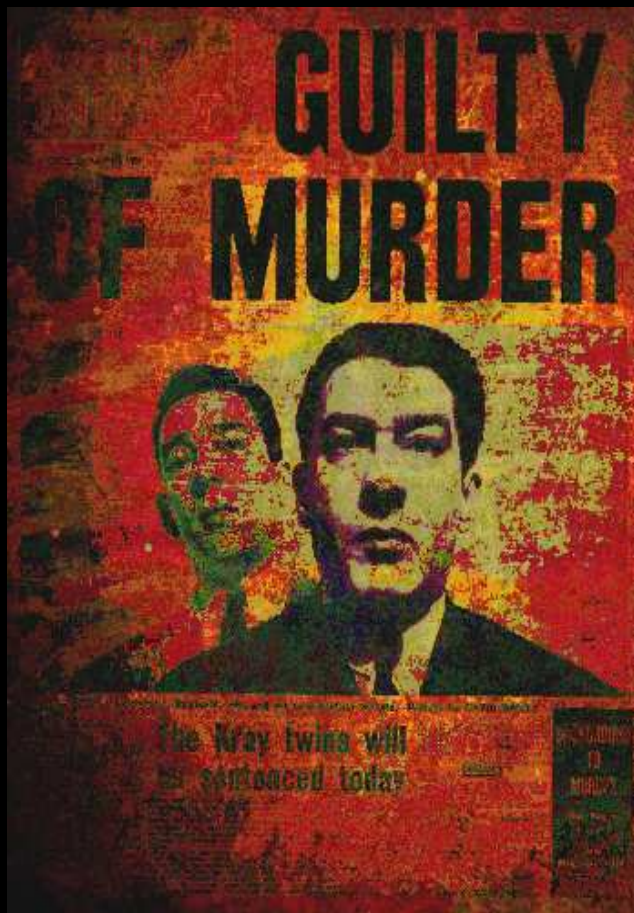
Well, there have been many books about the Brothers Kray over the years, from the original Kray Bible, otherwise known as John Pearson's 'The Profession of Violence' (and its follow-up, 'The Cult of Violence', a somewhat alarming title to consider when you're dyslexic and the author's name mixes in with said title), to books written by every Kray henchman currently out of prison and still breathing. It has reached the point now where it wouldn't be at all surprising to see something penned by the man who glanced at Ronnie Kray once from across the street on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1967 and then went on with the rest of his life before realising what a cash-cow said sighting actually was. And you see, having been present at several of the author's talks in the past, that's the sort of dry wit I was expecting from this book. But John Bennett (I was told to drop the author's name in as much as possible) shrugs off his sly comedic stance and instead skewers perhaps the best follow-up to Pearson's Kray Bible there could possibly be, and at the same time firmly secures



the study of the genre for all of us who were getting a bit bored in calling ourselves Ripperologists. I'm now a Krayologist; I just haven't submitted any of my essays yet.

The book focuses firmly on the rise and fall of the two bovversome bruvvavs from Bethnal Green, drawing on a wide variety of sources and putting forth a variety of new facts and also spinning a distinctly different take on some of the more well-known tropes of bruv lore. And it has fold-out maps!! Fold-out maps of the Krays' East End!! And a family tree!! I was so psyched, I held the book upside down and shook it, hoping for a 5-inch Ronnie Kray in purple tux action figure with detachable revolver accessory to fall out. The author - that's John Bennett, by the way - sweeps aside some of the more fanciful claims about the Krays and cuts a sharp knife - see what I'm doing here?! - and really gets to the bones of the business. This is Pearson's Kray Bible for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and like Pearson, John Bennett (ka-ching!) sets out his store in the book's thoughtful afterword. Fans of the recent Tom Hardy movie 'Legend' will be pleased to know that the book is so up-to-date that the film gets a mention, although not





the fact that Hardy's Ron was clearly channelling his inner Tommy Cooper. Footnotes give the book an added academic air, and the select bibliography will point any potential Krayologist in the right direction where further reading is concerned.

In short, and all attempted witticisms aside, I cannot recommend this book highly enough, and chances are, if you're a member of the Whitechapel Society, you've bought it already! But if you're still in the process of deciding whether to buy it or not, then take it from me that it is an essential addition to any overburdened Ripperology shelf - if for no other reason than to reassure your normal friends (if you have any) that you don't spend all your time looking at grainy mortuary photographs of dead women. No, you also spend your time poring over the minutia of the lives of a pair of dead gay (well one of them certainly was) gangsters who did good where their mum was concerned. And finally, while most books often boast of 'never-before-seen' photographs livening up the centre pages, the pics in Krayology really are true crime snapshot virgins, so let your eyeballs lap 'em up.

Krayology is published by Mango Books, and available in all half-decent bookstores and online, in both print and Kindle versions.



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**IT WOULD BE A CRIME  
TO MISS IT!**

# Peace by Piece

## The Remarkable Tale of Charlie Peace

By Ben Johnson

Sheffield is one of the largest cities in the UK, yet in the annals of famous crime, seems to have been under-represented as a setting for tales of villainy and gore. Fleeting mentioned in a couple of famous cases, Sheffield was the Alamo to Peter Sutcliffe's last stand as a brutal killer, and the destination to which the long-suffering wife of Reginald Christie would often disappear, leaving her husband alone in the house of hidden horrors that they shared.

Yet, from this city came one of the most intriguing, and notorious criminals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A murderous burglar, who is still studied by a handful of scholars and historians; yet is largely unknown to most crime and history buffs outside of the South Yorkshire area.

His wax effigy in Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors was once a popular attraction, given his unique physical appearance, yet the incredible tale of his life and crimes began to disappear almost as soon as the wax was melted; rendered down to form the likeness of some other scoundrel.

The story of Charlie Peace paints a picture of a small and deformed man with a famously volatile temper, but with an irrepressible passion for the arts, and who could briefly claim to be the most wanted man in Britain. It is almost a heinous crime itself that the fascinating story of this criminal genius has been allowed to slowly disappear from the history books.

### Peace Delivered to Angel Court

Born in Angel Court, Central Sheffield, on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1832, Charles Peace was the son of a former wild beast tamer, who had settled down to work as a shoemaker and live a suburban, and respectable, life. It was from his father that Charlie inherited his love of animals and the arts.

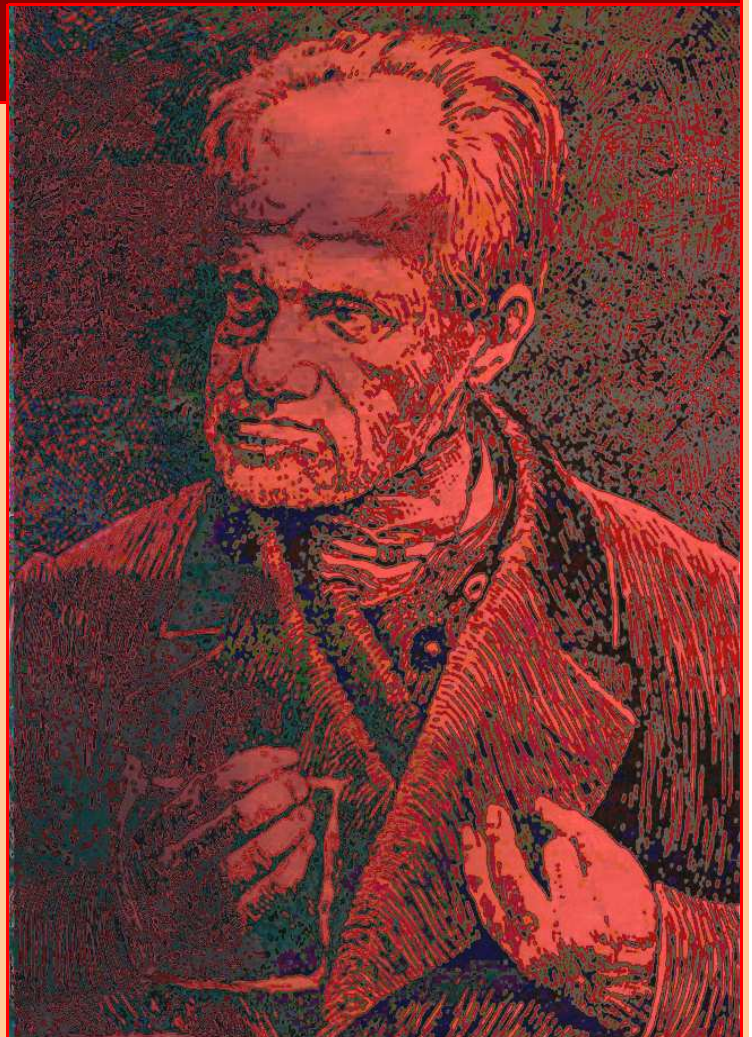
He became a talented violinist at an early age, so much so that he was described as The Modern Paganini on the bills of the local concerts in which he often performed. He also had a flair for the Japanese art of Origami.

However, it was an accident whilst working as an apprentice at a local steel rolling mill that was to change his, until now, relatively happy life. Struck by a piece of red hot steel, Peace lost two fingers from his left hand, and was left with the characteristic limp that would stay with him until his death.

For such a talented violinist, and Origami enthusiast, the loss of his fingers must have been a substantial blow, and it was after his recovery, full of anger and pain, that Peace chose to earn his money by other means.

By the age of twenty, the disillusioned Peace had become something of a habitual burglar. His small, wiry, stature and renowned athleticism was perfect for the purpose of shinning up drainpipes and squeezing through windows in the dead of night.

However, he wasn't yet the criminal mastermind he was to become, as police records show that he had served at least four custodial sentences by the time he reached his mid-thirties. Once known as a respectable young man, Peace was now a man to



avoid at all costs.

He was also a man who learnt from his mistakes, and began to travel further afield to commit his crimes, carefully selecting his opportunities. It is known that in his later career, he crossed the Pennines to ply his trade in and around Manchester.

Indeed, it was in Manchester that he met a widow, Hannah Ward, who had a young son named Willie. The couple were soon married, and had a daughter of their own, Jenny. However, this change of home life did not deter Peace from carrying on his criminal activities.

If anything, it was during this period that Peace's criminal mind developed into that of an immoral genius, aided by another accident that was to leave him with further disfigurement, but also opened up a whole new world of criminal possibility.

### The Changing Face of Evil

When living as a criminal, traits such as a limp and a disfigured hand are a serious disadvantage, making identification far easier than that of a nondescript, instantly forgettable person. Peace had to rethink his strategy, and a broken jaw sustained during a robbery was to be the answer.

By the time his injury had healed, Peace discovered that he



was able to dislocate his jaw at will, something which changed his appearance so much that he almost could have been a different man to anyone who approached him in the street.

He had also learned that he could suffuse his face with blood to alter his colouring. That combined with his changeable jaw line meant that he could take on the appearance of a mixed-race man at relatively short notice.

He also dabbled with means of changing his colouring in a more permanent way, experimenting with oils and juices to stain his skin, finally settling for walnut juice as his colourant of choice. This chameleon-like way of changing his appearance is believed to have helped him escape the police on many occasions.

It was at this point that Peace decided that it was safe to return to his hometown, and moved the family to a home in the eastern Sheffield suburb of Darnall, right in the city's industrial heartland. The busy streets and thriving factories would provide a more anonymous setting for his exploits.

Finding a home at 40 Victoria Place, Peace also used the opportunity, and much of the proceeds from his crimes, to set himself up with his own legitimate business, which was to double as the hub of his criminal enterprise.

His artistic background allowed him to become a gilder and picture framer, whilst also selling musical instruments. It would appear that Peace was resuming his love of the arts, and recreating for himself the respectable appearance that he had long since lost.

However, Peace became something of a Dickensian Fagin to a few criminal amateurs who operated in the poorer areas of the city. His talent for disguise and the techniques learnt during a long criminal career stood him apart from these more amateurish youngsters, who looked up to him as an inspiration.

But Peace was too clever to divulge his methods to more than a handful of fledgling criminals - it would seem that he wanted to keep his secrets, but also had a deep desire to be recognised, and lauded, for his unique skills.

The real talent behind his public appearance was now his air of respectability, however, this new and improved character would have soon been exposed if anyone had realised that most of the

items on sale in his shop were stolen from households in other areas of the city!

It was while living in Darnall that Peace was to meet the family who would play a leading role in his downfall, unwittingly angering the beast that still raged inside the dark heart of this twisted and disfigured soul.

## The Unwelcome Guest

The Dyson family lived next door but one to the Peace residence. Arthur Dyson was a civil engineer, who had travelled considerably, and met his Irish wife, Katherine, whilst working in America. The two had a five year old son, and were the epitome of suburban respectability, at least outwardly.

Peace was commissioned to frame some of the Dyson's family portraits, and was immediately smitten with the tall, attractive Mrs Dyson, known as Kate to her friends. Surprisingly, she reciprocated, and began to attend concerts and other events with the short, ugly, and disfigured Peace.

It would seem that the Dyson household was not the picture of domestic bliss it publically portrayed. Kate had a reputation amongst family and friends as a heavy drinker, and she and her husband were known to argue frequently.

The unlikely romance between Charlie and Kate grew; the two were even photographed together at the Sheffield Fair. As the house between the two residences was empty, the alleyway became their meeting point, and their extra-marital trysts became more and more frequent.

Arthur Dyson was aware of the friendship between the two, but one would suspect he was blissfully unaware of the affair, as he often allowed Peace to visit the family in their home, and even encouraged their numerous social engagements.

However, it would appear that the penny began to drop in June 1876, as Arthur began to become annoyed at Peace's constant presence in his home. It was at this point that Dyson told Peace he was no longer welcome in his home.

This was clearly not to Kate's liking, and she began to send affectionate notes to Peace, detailing her husband's daily agenda, and informing him of when it was safe to visit the house. However, it would appear that the long-suffering Arthur got wind of this, as he produced a note of his own.

In a gentlemanly manner that would seem almost laughable in this day and age. Dyson left a note in the yard of Peace's home, reading; "Charles peace is requested not to interfere with my family."

This appears to have been the catalyst that triggered Peace's violent temper, and shortly after, as the two men came upon each other in the street, Peace deliberately tripped Dyson and walked away laughing to himself.

That evening, Kate was standing outside her home, in conversation with two friends about the incident between Peace and her husband, when Peace strode across to the group and demanded to know if they were talking about him.

Kate, who it would seem though the incident was a step too far, and had taken the side of her husband, replied that they were. With a face like thunder and a menacing voice, Peace produced a revolver and shouted; "I will blow your bloody head off and your husband's too."

The police were immediately informed by the terrified Kate, and a warrant was granted for Peace's arrest the next morning. However, knowing that he had gone too far, Peace had rounded up his family in the dead of night, and absconded as he had done so many times before.

The family took temporary lodgings in Hull, where Mrs Peace found work at some dining rooms, and Charlie provided extra income by resuming his career in burglary. Although on the run from the police, Peace was bolder now than ever, and

used his talent for disguise more and more frequently.

It is known that during this time, Peace returned to Sheffield several times, but was never identified or questioned. This is probably due to the fact that, in disguise, he bore very little resemblance to the man wanted by South Yorkshire police.

The dust had begun to settle in the Dyson home by this point, and Arthur was more than relieved to be free of the amorous criminal that had plagued his family over the last few months. Yet he took the precaution of moving the family to a new home, some six miles away in the suburb of Banner Cross.

However, the day of the move was to be spoiled by the return of Peace, who had clearly been fed information as to the Dyson's whereabouts, possibly by one of his criminal cohorts. As the wagon carrying the Dysons and their possessions pulled up outside the house. The front door opened, and there stood Charlie Peace.

The bad penny had returned, and brought with him a warning to Arthur. Blocking the doorway and grinning from ear to ear, Peace announced; "You see, I am here to annoy you wherever you go."

A heated argument took place in the street, during which, Dyson reminded Peace of the warrant which was still out for his arrest. This was laughed off by Peace, who claimed not to care for the warrant, or the police.

Peace did, however, take his leave, and called into a nearby shop for some tobacco, before once again disappearing into the distance. He wouldn't be seen again in Sheffield for several months, but during this time, he took a step further down the ladder of depravity.

## Trans-Pennine Peace

Knowing that the police would have been informed of his little show in Sheffield, Peace travelled to another of his old haunts, Manchester, where a terrible crime was about to be committed - one which would shock the north of England.

John, William and Frank Habron were brothers, who had travelled from Ireland to work as farm labourers in the Manchester area. They were employed by a farmer, Francis Deakin, who owned a large piece of land in the affluent area of Whalley Range.

The three slept in an outhouse on the farm, and were known for both their hard work and honesty, but also their legendary style of revelry. The brothers were no strangers to strong drink and womanising. It was after one of these drunken nights that two of the brothers were summoned by a local policeman.

Constable Nicholas Cock cautioned William and John for being drunk and disorderly, and, although the charge against John was dropped, William was fined for his behaviour at the local magistrate's court.

After the hearing, the three went to the local pub, the Royal Oak, to celebrate their light slap on the wrist, but as the beer flowed, they were said to have made several threatening comments with regards to their treatment by Constable Cock.

That night, the unfortunately-named policeman was on duty with his colleague, Constable Beanland, when they noticed a man loitering near the gate of a recently vacated house. The man, who

appeared elderly and stooping, entered the grounds of the house, and the policemen split up to follow him.

A few minutes later, Constable Beanland heard two shots being fired, and ran to investigate. He was joined by a passer-by, Mr Simpson. In the darkness they found Constable Cock, who had been shot in the chest. He died within the next hour.

However, the unknown, stooping assailant had managed to flee the scene, and without a positive identification to rely on, the police had to act on evidence that was circumstantial to say the least. Reports from the Royal Oak gave them a motive, and a set of names to pin the crime on.

The Habrons were immediately arrested at the outhouse in which they were all sleeping. In what could have possibly been a fabrication, the police claimed that a light was extinguished within the outhouse as they approached; this was surely a sign of guilt?

The three were taken to Northumberland Street police station and locked up until an investigation of the murder scene could be carried out in the morning. This was to be the last night the three would spend together.

A footprint at the crime scene was matched to a boot owned by John Habron, and some empty cartridge shells were found in William's waistcoat pocket. The youngest brother, Frank, was later released without charge, but the two older brothers were sent for trial at Manchester Assizes.

The trial began on 27<sup>th</sup> November, and the prosecution were adamant that one of the two brothers was the cold-blooded killer of a policeman in the line of duty, a crime so serious that only the harshest punishment would suffice.

Several witnesses claimed to have heard the threatening comments made in the Royal Oak, and one eyewitness even claimed to have seen William inspecting a revolver in an ironmonger's shop in the afternoon of the day in question.

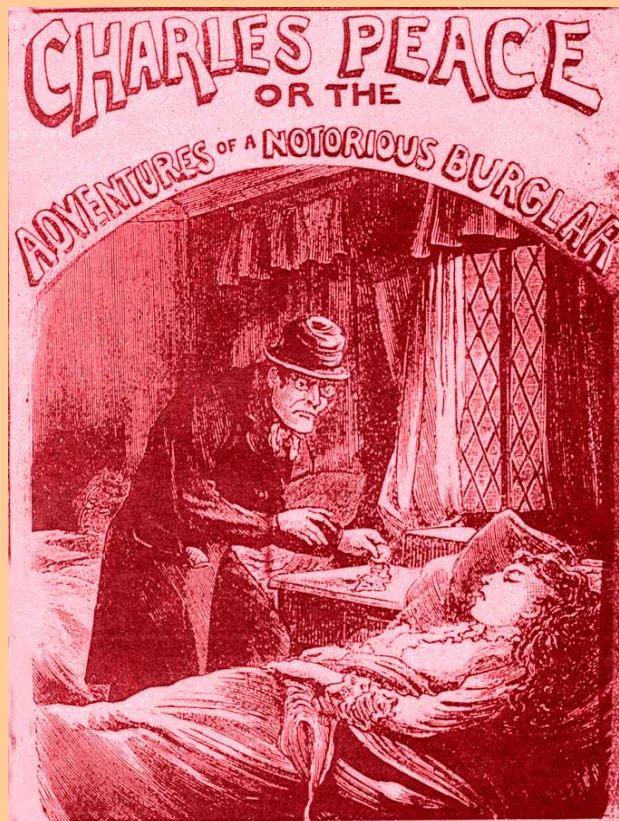
Despite the testimony of the passer-by, Mr Simpson, who still maintained that the man was elderly and stooping, Constable Beanland positively identified the tall, young, William Habron as the killer of his colleague.

Francis Deakin, the Habron's employer was convinced of their innocence in this matter, and even claimed that the waistcoat in which the shells were found had been his, which he had given to William, and probably left the shells in there himself.

The jury took two and a half hours to reach their verdict. John Habron was found not guilty, while William was found "guilty of wilful murder, with a recommendation for mercy, on the grounds of his youth."

An appeal would come later, and, handing down the only punishment allowed by law for the killing of a policeman, the judge donned his black cap and sentenced nineteen year old William Habron to the gallows.

While spending the next month in the condemned cells, William maintained his innocence, and was eventually granted a reprieve by the Home Secretary, Mr Cross, to penal servitude for life, but not on the grounds of his innocence, but on the grounds of his age.



Given the convict number of 1547, William Habron was transported to Portland Prison, situated on Portland Island near Dorset. He would not see freedom, or his brothers, for a long time yet.

The trial of William and John Habron had been a media sensation, and the courtroom had been full to bursting for the whole duration. Many people had wanted to witness justice being carried out against the killer of a local policeman.

One such spectator, who could have been described as elderly and stooping, watched the proceedings intently from the public gallery, remained in place until the death sentence was handed down. He then boarded a train to Sheffield. That man's name was Charlie Peace.

he had dropped a package containing some notes and letters.

When examined by the police who arrived a short time later, the package was found to include the note which Arthur Dyson had left in the yard to warn Peace to leave his family alone. It also contained the notes sent between Peace and Kate Dyson.

Dyson was taken to the house of the local shopkeeper, Mr Gregory, before being carried to his own home, where he was propped up in a chair. By this time he was senseless and moments from death. He died at 10:30pm, just before the doctor arrived.

Dr Benson found that the bullet had entered the left side of the forehead, and was lodged in Arthur Dyson's brain. Peace could not have made a more accurate shot if he had been five yards closer, and in broad daylight.



## The “Banner Cross Incident”

Buoyed by his remarkable, and callous, escape from the law, Peace decided to try his luck even further. He returned to Banner Cross, and the scene of his previous attempt at mischief at the expense of the Dyson family.

He asked a woman in the street to take a note to his once-beloved Kate, asking her to meet with him, but the woman flatly refused and took her leave of this strange little man. After prowling the streets for a while in search of a messenger, Peace headed for a local pub.

Outside the Banner Cross Hotel, Peace became engaged in conversation with a labourer named Charles Brassington. The conversation soon moved to the Dyson family, and Brassington walked away as the comments became more and more offensive.

Meanwhile, at the Dyson's home, Kate joined Arthur in the parlour, after putting their son to bed. Little did they know that their tormentor had returned, and was about to make his most frightening appearance yet. After a while, Kate headed into the yard to use the outside lavatory. It had already grown dark, and she fumbled her way through the yard, before closing the door of the privy. Moments later, as she opened the door, she was greeted by a sight that would terrify her to her very core.

Charlie Peace stood in front of the privy with a revolver in his outstretched hand. “Speak, or I'll fire” he shouted at the terrified woman. Kate screamed and backed into the privy, locking the door as she made her futile escape attempt.

Arthur Dyson heard the scream and came rushing from the house into the yard. On hearing her husband come to the rescue, Kate came running out of the privy toward her husband. By this time, Peace had begun to flee the scene.

Dyson pushed past his hysterical wife and gave chase. The two men ran through a passage, down some steps and into a forecourt. Peace, having had a head start, waited for Dyson to emerge from the darkness, before firing a shot in his direction.

The shot missed, but Peace again pulled the trigger, this time the bullet hit Dyson in the forehead, and he fell to the ground just as his wife caught up with the chase. She screamed; “Murder! You villain! You have shot my husband!”

By this time, Peace had scaled a garden wall and was disappearing across the pitch black fields towards the area of Greystones. But he had made a rare error. In his haste to escape,

A few hours later, Kate had regained her composure enough to give a statement to the Sheffield and Rotherham Independent. The following excerpts are taken from that very interview; “Peace is a picture frame dealer by trade. He is a man of very bad character...when he came to live by us in Darnall, he wanted to make disturbances between me and my husband...He seemed at first a very kindly man, having birds and parrots and so on. He enticed people to go in and talk Mr Dyson used to go in, but after a while Peace seemed to put an evil eye on us, and then he threatened my life.”

She went on to describe the events leading up to the murder of her husband, giving every detail as to his harassment and threats towards the family. She then described in her own words the events of that night.

It is interesting that her long statement contains no references whatsoever to her short-lived relationship with Peace, in fact, she goes out of her way to paint a picture of a wicked, evil man, a man who had finally succeeded in destroying her family. “He is connected with low, bad places in every city – Manchester, Liverpool, and other towns. He told Mr Dyson so. Mr Dyson said he was a very bad man, which he knew from some pictures he saw. We removed her partly to get rid of him. He told Mr Gregory (the shopkeeper) he should follow us wherever we went. He has told people Mr Dyson owed him hundreds of pounds. He is a defamer and a murderer – that is the only name I can call him.”

## Mayhem in the Midlands

The inquest was held at the Banner Cross Hotel, and several documents created during the hearing name Peace as the killer. It was then that Sheffield police issued a description of Peace, to be circulated around every police force in the country. “Very slightly built, height 5 feet 4 inches, hair grey; lacking one or more fingers from his left hand; cut marks on the back of both hands; cut marks on his forehead; walks with his legs wide apart; speaks somewhat peculiarly, as if his tongue was too large for his mouth, and is a great boaster.”

For any other wanted man, a description this detailed would have led to their capture in no time. However, Charlie Peace's talent for disguise again came to the fore, as he managed to create a new identity, hiding his distinguishing features with extraordinary success.

He fashioned a tube, into which he placed his disfigured hand, he then attached a hook to the end of the tube, giving the appearance of an entirely missing left hand. Again, he also used walnut juice to alter his skin tone. Christening himself "One Armed Jemmy", he travelled the length of the country, plying his trade as a burglar in Bristol, Derby, Nottingham and Oxford. When he had made enough money and the hunt for him was dying down, he returned to his long-suffering family in Hull.

The fruits of his disguise were so impressive that he even managed to fool his own daughter on his return. He wasn't to stay in Hull for long, as he once again fired his revolver during a robbery, this time missing completely.

The risk of staying around was too great, and Peace once again left the scene, this time travelling to Nottingham, where he became romantically attached to a thirty year old widow by the name of Susan Grey.

It wasn't long before the two were living together. They forged the tale that they were man and wife, Mr and Mrs Thompson. Carrying on with his life as a burglar, the two lived happily for a short time in the relative safety of Nottingham.

However, one night, police attended their home, wishing to question Peace in regards to a burglary that had taken place in the vicinity. The risk of capture was too great, and after somehow persuading the police to leave the room while he dressed, Peace escaped through the window.

This time he fled to the teeming anonymity of London, taking lodgings in Lambeth. He sent for Susan, and the two started a new life together in the city. Once again, Peace took as hop which sold musical instruments, and the proceeds of his many burglaries.

Unbelievably, Peace also sent for his family in Hull, lodging them in the house next door to the one that he shared with Susan Grey. One can only assume that his actual wife felt that Peace could provide for them, and made the best of a humiliating experience.

## Lying Low in London

Having dyed his hair black, and now sporting round spectacles, similar those one would imagine a bank clerk to wear, Peace was now a picture of respectability, however, his relationship with Susan Grey had soured, to the point where he described her as "a dreadful woman for drink and snuff."

On 10<sup>th</sup> October 1878, Peace had noticed an unusually high police presence in the vicinity of his premises. He decided to hole himself up in his house, blaming Susan Grey for tipping off the police to his whereabouts.

That evening, the doorbell rang, and on his doorstep stood a policeman. Having escaped justice for so long, Peace decided to make another attempt at escape, and jumped through the dining room window and ran down the garden path. He turned to the lone policeman, waving his revolver, shouting "Keep back, or by God, I'll shoot you." Unfortunately for Peace, Constable Robinson was made of tougher stuff, and lunged at him, as Peace fired three shots, all of them missing the mark.

Another shot was fired, which pierced the policeman's right arm, but still he came, he wasn't going to let this villain escape. The criminal career of the murderous Charlie Peace would be over within seconds.

Disarming Peace, Constable Robinson hit him with the revolver several times, and had over powered one of the most wanted men in history by the tie his colleagues came to his assistance. A search of Peace's pockets an array of tools, including a crowbar and jemmy.

Initially charged with the wounding of Constable Robinson, Peace was held in Park Row police station, but his true identity was soon to be discovered. It would appear that he was a good judge of character.

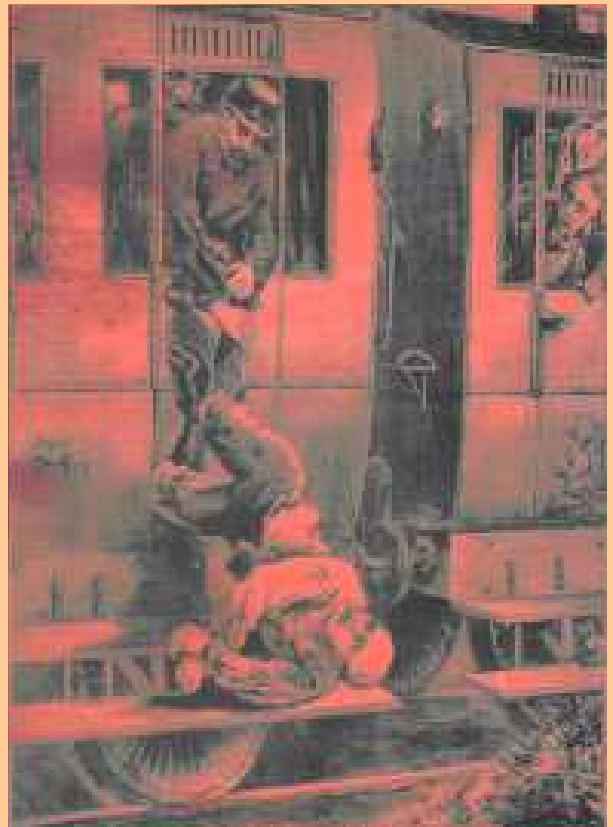
Susan Grey had indeed betrayed him, and had claimed a £100 reward. His real family tried to flee back to Hull, but were arrested for possession of stolen goods, and subsequently returned to London to also receive justice.

Peace was tried at the Old Bailey for the attempted murder of Constable Robinson, under the name of John Ward, alias Charlie Peace. The jury took little time to convict him, given the strength of the evidence against him.

Before being sentenced to penal servitude for life, Peace was allowed to say a few words, and he remained as boastful, and deceitful as ever; "My Lord, I have not been fairly dealt with, and I swear before God I never had the intention to kill the policeman...If I had the intention to kill him, I could have easily done it."

## A Different Kind of Homecoming

Early in the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879, Peace was placed in handcuffs and boarded the 5:15 train to Sheffield with two warders, to stand trial for the murder of Arthur Dyson. He had already made this journey once before, to enter his plea at a preliminary hearing.



During the first journey, the warders had become annoyed at the number of times Peace made excuses to leave the carriage to use the lavatory. This time, they came equipped with waterproof bags, which could be used, then thrown from the train window.

As the train passed through Worksop, Nottinghamshire, Peace asked for one for the bags, the chain that bound his hands was slack enough that he could attend to himself, and he faced the widow to empty his bladder into the bag.

As one of the warders pulled down the window to dispose of the bag, Peace made an extremely dangerous leap through the window, only to find that his foot had been caught by one of the warders.

Frantically kicking and flailing, Peace eventually managed to kick off his shoe, and fell hard onto the frozen ground beneath. The other warder had been frantically trying to pull the communication cord, which inexplicably had not worked.

By the time the cord had been pulled by passengers further down the train, Peace was some distance away, but this time, he would not be making his escape. He had tried one escape too many, and his luck had run out.

He was found lying near to the track, bleeding from his head and unconscious. It wasn't long before he came round, complaining that he was freezing to death, and in great pain. However, he received no sympathy, and he was delivered to Sheffield in the guard's van, arriving at the court at 09:20am. By this time, the court was aware of the events that had taken place on the train. The packed courtroom was told that Peace would be receiving treatment, and the trial would go on without him on that day.

He had a severe concussion and a terrible scalp wound. It was not until 30<sup>th</sup> January that Peace was fit to appear in court, and on this day, he was told that he would be tried at Leeds Assizes, due to the gravity of his crime.

The trial itself was a one-sided affair, as the number of witnesses and the amount of evidence against Peace were quite overwhelming, indeed, when given chance to speak, Peace chose not to repeat the bravado of his previous speech in court, he simply muttered "it's no use me saying anything."

The judge, Mr Justice Lopes had heard enough, this habitual and violent criminal would never be a menace to society again.

## “For that I done, but never intended”



Donning the customary black cap, the judge handed down the only sentence that was available to him in such a case, Charlie Peace was to be taken from this place, to a place of execution, and then hanged by the neck until he was dead.

Surprisingly, it would appear that Peace took heed of the warning given to him by the judge, in which he advised him to "prepare for eternity." He became penitent, and was a model prisoner until the day came for him to meet his maker.

He chose to do the right thing, and admitted to the murder of Constable Cock. It would appear that he had been racked with guilt over the imprisonment of William Habron, and he took this opportunity to make amends.

Habron was immediately released, and would later be awarded £800 in compensation, a small fortune in those days. He was also given a pardon by the Home Secretary, who is believed to have been extremely embarrassed by the whole affair.

On the day before his execution, Peace was visited by his family, who had now chosen to forgive him for the pain and

shame he had put them through. After saying a prayer together, Peace handed his wife a card, and on it was a message which he asked to be printed as his funeral card. It read; "In Memory of Charles Peace, who was executed at Armley Prison, Tuesday February 25<sup>th</sup> 1879, For that I don (sic) but never intended."

On the freezing cold morning of his execution, Peace was in good spirits, eating a hearty breakfast and complaining about the bacon. He even made a joke as the warden complained that he was spending too much time in the lavatory, saying; "You are in a hell of a hurry, are you to be hanged or am I?"

## “Can Mr Marwood Cure This Bad Cough of Mine?”

In such a tale as this, it is often the case that the victims are forgotten, such is the fascination in the story of the killer himself. However Charlie Peace was a criminal mastermind, and a fascinating character.

That isn't to say that he wasn't an evil and depraved man, that he certainly was, but the story of Charlie Peace should live on, alongside tales of the Ripper and other famous villains of our nation's darker, and more macabre history.

Perhaps it is fitting then, that the last we hear of this story comes from the man who extinguished the spark behind the eyes of Charlie Peace, the Hangman (Mr William Marwood) who once and for all rid the country of this mischievous murderer, and master of disguise.

"A firmer step never walked to the scaffold...I admired his bravery; he met his fate like a man; he acknowledged his guilt... During the seven years I have officiated as an executioner, I never met a man who faced death with greater calmness.

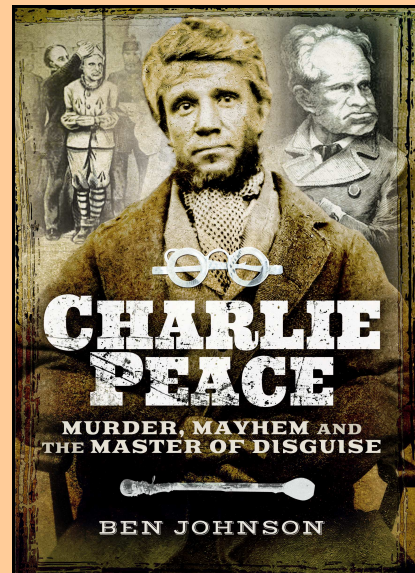
"The bravery was an outcome of his nature, he was ignorant alike of weakness and timidity... he had been suffering from a bad cough for days, and the night before his execution, he said to one of his warders 'I wonder whether Mr Marwood can cure this bad cough of mine?'"

"A man who jokes about being hanged to cure a cough is no coward."

Charlie Peace died instantly, and is buried within the precincts of Armley Prison.

Ben Johnson's debut book, "Charlie Peace – Murder, mayhem, and the Master of Disguise", a full length account of the extraordinary life and times of Charlie Peace and those who knew him well, is released in August 2016 by Pen and Sword Books.

Visit [www.benwjohanson.org](http://www.benwjohanson.org) for updates and details of his other upcoming publications.



# The fatal shooting of PC COCK

By  
**Angela Buckley**



PC Cock

We follow on from the article charting the crimes of Charlie Peace with this account of the shooting of PC Cock

It was just before midnight on Tuesday 1 August 1876, and PC Nicholas Cock was patrolling his regular beat in a leafy suburb of Manchester. It was a cloudy, but dry evening and there was little moonlight. The police officer was walking along a wide footpath, overhung with trees, towards the edge of his beat at a major intersection, marked by the 'Jutting Stone'. Two men joined him for the final few yards: PC James Beanland and law student, John Massey Simpson, on his way home after a night out. After exchanging pleasantries, Simpson left the others and continued on his way.

Simpson was 150 yards away when he heard two loud shots ring out. He turned round to see flashes of light behind him in the pitch black. Hearing screams of, 'Oh, murder, murder; I'm shot, I'm shot', he rushed back to the spot, where he had met the officers, to discover PC Cock slumped on the pavement near the garden wall of a large house. Even in the dim light, Simpson could see the unmistakable stain of blood spreading across his chest: Nicholas Cock had been shot.

Nicholas Cock was 21 years old and had been in the police force for just eight months. Born in 1855 in Liskeard,

Cornwall, he was originally a copper miner but, after becoming unemployed, had moved to Cumberland to work as a mining engineer. He joined the Lancashire Constabulary on 13 December 1875, transferring into the Manchester Division on New Year's Day. Cock was 5 feet 7 ½ inches tall, with a pale complexion, brown hair and grey eyes. He was unmarried. The newspaper reports described him as of medium stature, and 'very powerfully built'. The locals referred to him as 'the little Bobby', perhaps due to his youth or lack of experience.

The fatal shooting of PC Cock took place two miles from the city centre of Manchester, at West Point, a junction of three main roads, bordering Chorlton-cum-Hardy and Whalley Range. This relatively affluent area was quite isolated, with fields, farms and large residential houses. When PC Cock and his companions stopped for a brief chat on that dark night, they spotted a stranger making his way around the corner into Seymour Grove, the road leading into Old Trafford. The man passed under the flickering light of the gas lamp and paused, appearing hesitant about which way to go. He was stooped and his gait was uneven; key details about which PC Beanland and John Simpson would later disagree. The man was wearing a short brown coat and a chimney pot hat.

After Simpson had left, the two police officers decided to investigate further and PC Beanland followed the man towards a vacant house, a little way up Seymour Grove. Beanland entered the property through the garden gate and held his lantern up to the windows to peer inside. He tried the door, but it was locked. Satisfied that the house was secure, he turned back towards West Point.

In the meantime, PC Cock had followed his colleague, unaware that the suspected felon had doubled back before reaching the house. In an attempt to escape, the man almost ran into PC Cock and fired the first shot wide as a warning. When he realised that it had failed to deter the officer, the would-be burglar shot him at point blank range in the chest. PC Beanland ran back to West Point to find his colleague bleeding on the ground.

PC Beanland blew his whistle and soon more officers arrived on the scene. They hailed two passing night soil men, who transported Cock in their cart to the local surgery. By the time Cock was settled on Dr Dill's sofa, it was almost 1am. The bullet had passed through his ribs into his spinal column, causing a massive haemorrhage.

Dr Dill tried to revive the semi-conscious police officer with brandy and water, but ten minutes later he died.



# THE ARREST

As soon as Superintendent James Bent, of the Manchester Division, received the news that PC Cock had been shot, he knew who had committed the act: 'I suspected these men from the first.' His prime suspects were the Habron brothers, three Irish labourers who lived close to the scene of the murder. John, 24, Frank, 22 and William aged 19, were employed in the nursery gardens of Francis Deakin, of Firs Farm, and they lived in an outhouse in his grounds. They had crossed the path of PC Cock many times before and issued threats to the young police officer. Even before PC Cock had died, Superintendent Bent sent his men to the farm to surround the small brick building, where the brothers were purported to be. Bent visited PC Cock at Dr Dill's surgery, and then joined his colleagues at Deakin's nursery. It was 1.30 am, on Wednesday 2 August, less than an hour after PC Cock's death.



**Superintendent James Bent**

When the initial group of policemen had approached the building, they had seen a light in the window, but by the time Bent arrived it had been extinguished. Bent enlisted the help of the nurseryman, Francis Deakin, so as not to alarm the occupants. Deakin knocked at the door, calling out, 'Jack! Is Jack in?' Movement was heard within and the lock on the door was turned. Bent and his men rushed in holding lamps. All three brothers were naked and in bed. The superintendent ordered them to get up and to dress in the clothes they had been wearing during the day.

On a search of the building, Bent found a half-burnt dip candle, in an old candlestick near the fireplace, which was still warm and soft, in keeping with the earlier appearance of light. He also noted that John and William's boots were wet and

muddy. Both clues indicated that the men had gone to bed late, which was considered unusual for labourers, due to the physical nature of their work. However, all three claimed that they had been asleep since 9.30 pm. As Superintendent Bent arrested and handcuffed the trio, they 'hung down their heads, appearing very nervous': yet another indication that they were guilty.

# THE LAW ENFORCER

By 1876, Superintendent Bent had served in the Lancashire Constabulary for almost 30 years. James Bent was born in Eccles, near Salford, in 1828. His father was a member of the Old Watch and his nightly task was to call the hours as he patrolled the local neighbourhood in his low crowned hat with its customary yellow band.

When Bent was seven years old, he began work in a silk mill. He would have worked long hours, probably as a 'piecer' or a 'scavenger', replacing broken threads or darting under the machines to pick up bits of silk. Children were treated harshly and Bent frequently had wheals on his arms from the overlooker's leather strap.

On 7 November 1848, just before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, James Bent joined the police force. He was promoted several times, reaching the position of superintendent in 1868. Married with four children, he became an important man in the local community as well as a highly successful law enforcer. By the time of the shooting of PC Cock, Bent had been involved in many high profile cases, infiltrating racecourse gambling

**Even before PC Cock had died, Superintendent Bent sent his men to the farm to surround the small brick building, where the brothers were purported to be.**

syndicates, tackling burglars, garrotters and escaped prisoners. He had faced the wrath of striking colliery workers, which had left him with serious injuries. A man with a strong personality, he was uncompromising in his judgement, which extended to his own men, who were transferred as soon as they displeased him. As for his attitude towards the criminal fraternity, Bent's favourite adage was, 'Always believe everybody guilty until you prove them innocent.' This was certainly true for the Habron brothers.

# THE INVESTIGATION

Superintendent Bent's belief that one or more of the Habron brothers was responsible for PC Cock's death was based on his knowledge that they had frequently threatened the constable. Fond of a drink, the brothers had been cautioned many times by 'the little Bobby' whilst on nights out at their local haunts of the Royal Oak public house and the Lloyd's Hotel, both in Chorlton-cum-Hardy. Many witnesses later testified to the ongoing feud between the brothers and the officer. Matters came to a head when Cock summonsed William and John Habron to appear before the county

magistrates for drunkenness in July 1876. William was fined 5 shillings and costs, whilst John's case was adjourned to 1 August. Various 'friends' of the Habrons tried to intervene on their behalf, but PC Cock remained intent on prosecuting the men. His testimony ensured William's conviction.

On the day of John Habron's hearing at the county police court, Cock shared his concerns about the brothers with Superintendent Bent. He told his superior that he wasn't afraid of them, but wanted him to know what had passed between them. Furthermore, three months earlier, when watchmaker Frederick Wilcox had cleaned John Habron's watch, John had recounted an argument the previous evening with Cock outside the Lloyd's Hotel. Wilcox recalled Habron's chilling words: 'If that "little Bobby" ever does anything to me or either of my brothers, by God, I'll shoot him!' This was enough evidence for Superintendent Bent, who wasted no time in building his case against them.

In the early hours of the morning on 2 August, at the outhouse on Firs Farm, Bent began collecting his evidence. He already had the half-burnt candle and William's wet boots. He also found some percussion caps in William's waistcoat pocket. William had no idea where the caps had come from, and suggested that they had already been in the pocket when Francis Deakin gave him the coat.

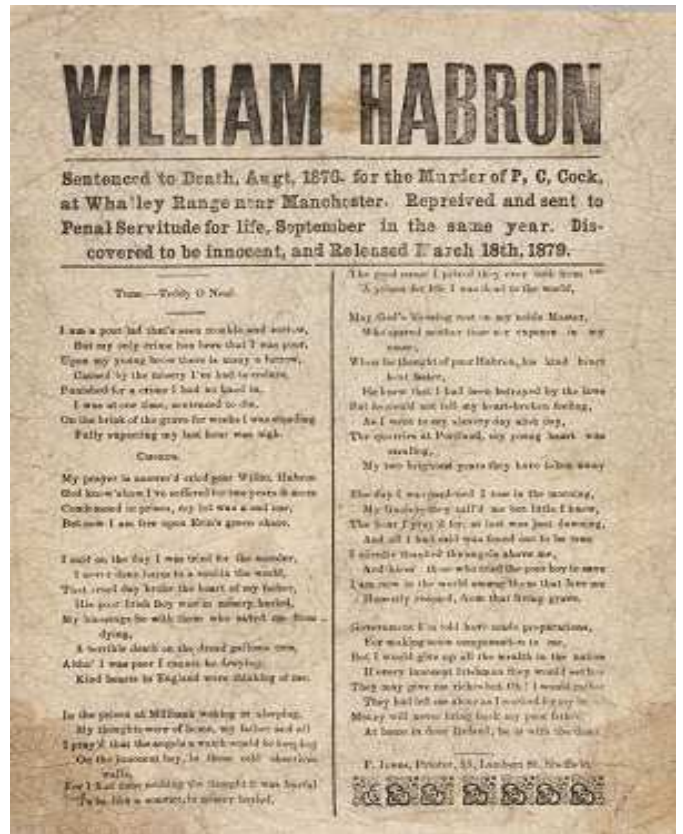
The three men were taken to the local police station for further questioning, while Superintendent Bent returned to the crime scene. As the day dawned, he spotted footprints in the lane leading to Deakin's farm. Although it had rained heavily, there were a number of distinct prints amongst the cinders in the sandy path. Believing that the prints came from either John or William Habron's boots, Bent sent to the police station for the footwear. Whilst waiting he placed a box over the prints to preserve them from further damage and the increasing curiosity of bystanders.

Bent compared the prints and found that one of them corresponded with William's left boot. The number and position of the nail marks in the outer and inner rows were identical. The nails near the toe of the boot and the marks made by the worn down heel also matched the print. Bent made an impression in the ground with the actual boot, and the new print corresponded with the one already there. An experienced boot maker confirmed the matching patterns.

Together with the candle and the wet boots, the recently-made boot prints appeared to contradict William's assertion that he had been home in bed by 9.30 pm. That evening he and his older brother, John, had been drinking in their favourite watering holes, which was corroborated by witnesses. There was no proof, however, that they had returned to the farm at the time they said. Frank Habron had not joined his brothers and remained home all evening. Superintendent Bent also discovered the marks from a bullet on the garden wall near to the spot where PC Cock had fallen. He removed the brick for analysis and concluded that it could have been made by one of the bullets fired at Cock, as the brick was about six feet high and the deceased was almost 5 feet 8 inches tall. According to the inquest, the bullet that had passed through PC Cock's spine was conical shaped from a copper cartridge, and fired from a .442 revolver. In spite of a thorough search of all nearby ditches, fields and pits, the murder weapon was never found.

The day after the murder, key eyewitness, John Massey Simpson, was called to the police station to identify the main suspect, William Habron. He confirmed that the mysterious man was wearing clothes similar to William's. They were

about the same height, but the man had been stooped and walked 'in a faltering, loose kind of way'. Simpson hadn't gained a clear view of the man's face but his impression was that he had been older than Habron.



PC Beanland's description contradicted Simpson's; he asserted that the stranger had been about 22 years old, of medium build and with a fresh complexion. He had walked quickly and in an ordinary fashion. Beanland later stated that William Habron was 'something like the man I saw on the night of the murder.'

Superintendent Bent's final piece of evidence was the testimony of ironmonger, Donald McClelland, who claimed that William Habron had entered his shop, prior to the shooting, to enquire about a revolver. When McClelland had refused to lower the price, William had left without making a purchase. Later the shopkeeper discovered that some cartridges were missing. He identified William in court as the possible thief.

## THE TRIAL

The first hearing took place on Thursday 3 August, at the Manchester County police court. The gallery was packed with spectators as all three Habron brothers were charged with the wilful murder of PC Nicholas Cock. The case was then adjourned to allow time for the inquest to take place. The ensuing enquiry went through several stages until Frank was released, and John and William were referred to the assizes court.

At the Manchester Winter Assizes opened on Friday 27 November, John and William Habron came before Mr Justice Lindley. Apart from recapping the events and evidence so far, the trial centred around the whereabouts of the Habron brothers on the afternoon of 1 August, after John's hearing for drunkenness and before Cock was shot. The ironmonger's statement suggested that William was intending to use a firearm, but others had seen the brothers working peacefully at

the nursery all afternoon, picking raspberries and tying up lettuces.

Nurseryman Francis Deakin said that his employees were 'very peaceable men', despite having told Bent at the time that William was 'one of the most abominable tempered fellows' he had ever known. Several witnesses reminded the court of the arguments between the deceased police officer and the brothers, and PC Beanland repeated his assertion that the man he had seen in the vicinity of West Point on the night of the murder was William Habron. The discrepancies in the descriptions of the stranger given by John Simpson and PC Beanland were noted, but it was agreed that there was a 'resemblance.'

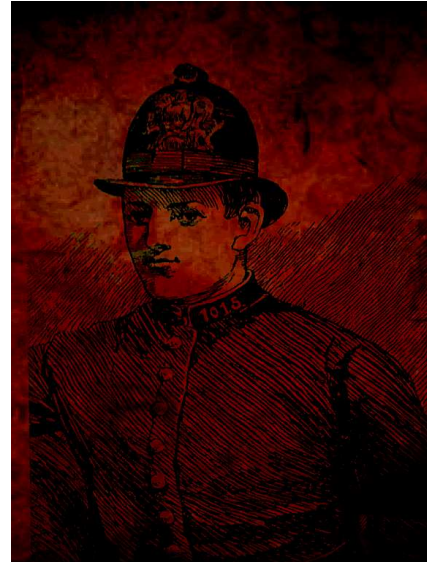
At the end of the second day, the jury gave their verdict: John Habron was acquitted, but his brother, William was found guilty. As the judge donned his black cap to pronounce the death sentence, pale-faced William clutched the rail of the dock. In a tremulous voice, he whispered, 'I am innocent.'

## THE RELEASE

William Habron was released in March 1879, not long after Charlie Peace's confession. Superintendent Bent recounted the event in his memoirs over a decade later. Unapologetic for such a serious miscarriage of justice, Bent cast the blame onto the witnesses: I believe it was their contradictory statements which caused William Habron to be convicted, more than any evidence given by the police.

He described how the sensational case had become the subject of intense public interest. Many people had written to the police, both in support of and against the Habron brothers, which had influenced the initial outcome. When William was released, Bent was satisfied with the decision and pleased about the result. He concluded his account by emphasising that it was his duty to investigate the case and that he had made enquiries on behalf of both sides. After William Habron left Manchester for Ireland, Superintendent Bent remained in post for another twenty years, until his death in 1901.

Nicholas Cock was buried in the churchyard of St Clements, not far from the Lloyd's Hotel, where the Habron brothers used to drink. His gravestone - which has since been moved to the HQ of the Lancashire Constabulary - bears the moving epitaph: An able and energetic officer of the County Constabulary who on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1876, while engaged in the faithful discharge of his duty was cruelly assassinated.

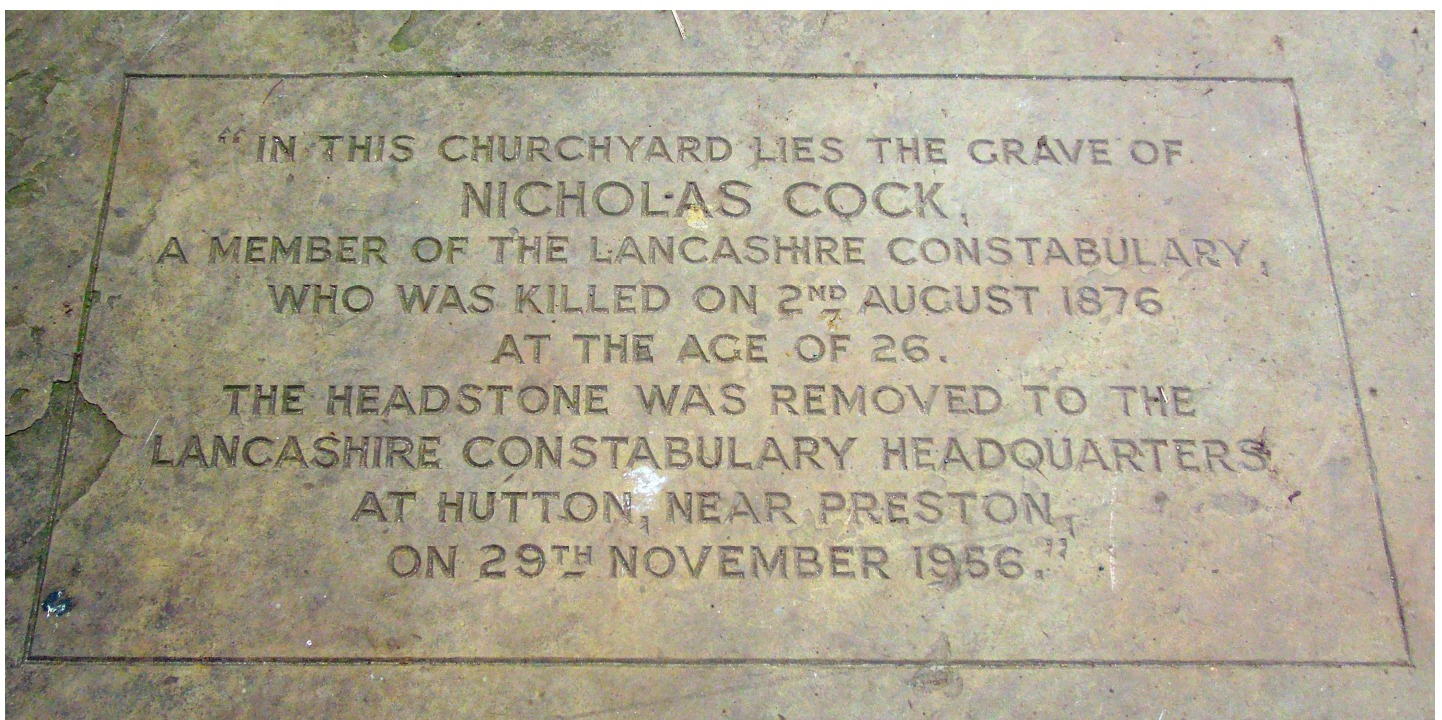


Angela Buckley is the author of *The Real Sherlock Holmes: The Hidden Story of Jerome Caminada* (Pen & Sword Books, 2014).

She has shared stories from Detective Caminada's casebook on BBC radio and TV, and in national magazines and newspapers. A regular contributor to a wide range of publications, Angela has written many articles about Victorian crime. She is a member of the Crime Writers' Association.

Born in Manchester, Angela's family home is close to the spot where PC Cock was killed.

Angela writes a blog about 19<sup>th</sup> century crime on her website: <http://www.angelabuckleywriter.com>





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# Stand and Deliver

## Dick Turpin and the Essex Boys



By Edward Stow

*I'm the dandy highwayman  
Whom you're too scared to mention  
I spend my cash  
On looking flash  
And grabbing your attention*

(Adam Ant)

**H**ighwaymen tend to have a romantic image as Gentlemen of Road or latter-day Robin Hoods - gallant dandies who wooed finely dressed ladies even as they robbed them of their jewellery.

The most famous of them all – Dick Turpin - was commemorated, nay honoured, with a Carry On film and a 31 episode children's TV series starring Richard O'Sullivan, a 1970s heartthrob better known as 'The Man About the House'. I recall going to a play about Dick Turpin in 1970 at London's Mermaid Theatre.

He was suitable fare for children as someone to look up to and a role model for the nation's infants!

The 1970s seem to have been a high point in retrospective Dick Turpinism – the apogee being Adam Ant's 1981 no 1 chart-topper 'Stand and Deliver', which was no doubt helped along by all those '70s youths viewing the subject-matter with rose-tinted highwayman spectacles. Or was it the fact that the video that accompanied his chanson featured a young Amanda Donohoe being relieved of her valuables?

Dick Turpin was born in 1705 in the Bluebell Inn, in the small picturesque north Essex village of Hempstead. He is still commemorated by a sign on the exterior pub wall.

The actual cottage he lived still stands just opposite. When he lived there it was the local butchers shop, run by his father John, and a place where cock fights supposedly took place. It is a highly desirable Grade II listed thatched cottage today, with many of the original features as well as all the mod cons, two reception rooms and three bedrooms. It sold for around £350,000 a few years ago but has no Blue Plaque.

The church where Dick was baptised on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1705 is historic and quaint – but there is no commemorative inscription on the font. However I feel these omissions have more to do with Britain's traditionally lack lustre approach to tourism, rather than any embarrassment over Hempstead's most famous – or infamous – son.

At an early age Dick moved to the even more chocolate box village-cum-small town of Thaxted, a few miles to the



The Bluebell Inn in Hempstead where Dick Turpin was born

west, where we can still find a large half-timber building called 'Dick Turpin's Cottage'.

Yes another cottage.

It is likely that he was following in his father's footsteps by operating as a butcher from these premises. In 1725 he married Elizabeth Millington and opened another butcher's business soon after that in Buckhurst Hill - now a Central Line commuter town on the north-east outskirts of London.

So far this is a not very glamorous start to his life.

Buckhurst Hill is near Epping Forest where then, as now, deer abounded. But they were not there to be caught and eaten by the locals – not legally anyway – as poachers could be transported to the colonies.

Perhaps the legitimate butchery business was slack. But it's more likely that Dick was naturally drawn to criminality. Whatever the case may be, it seems that he soon fell in with



The black and white timber framed house in Thaxted is called Dick Turpin's Cottage but was probably in fact premises used as a butchers shop.

a gang of deer poachers known as either the 'Gregory Gang' (after two brothers who were the early ring leaders,) and also the 'Essex Gang'. And as the authorities began clamping down on poaching the gang gravitated to raiding houses and robbing the unsuspecting householders. Up to fifteen gang members would be involved – armed with guns and ready to beat anyone who resisted and using threats of extreme violence they ransacked the houses and took away all the valuables they could carry. Between October and December 1734 they attacked a number of houses and isolated farms in their immediate vicinity – two in Woodford followed by others in Chingford, Barking and Hainault. These very urban locations were deep in the Essex countryside during Dick's lifetime.

In early 1735 the gang moved their operations further afield – raiding houses in Charlton and Croydon – both south of the Thames, but on 1st February 1735 they returned to Loughton in their old Epping Forest stamping ground. Once there, they raided an elderly widow's house – threatening to torture her to force her son to reveal the whereabouts of her valuables and literally terrorised the neighbourhood.

It is possible that they used the Rose and Crown in Clay Hill (it is still there, just north of Enfield) as a safe house during this period, as it was allegedly run by Dick Turpin's grandparents. It was also a safe but short distance away from where their attacks had been taking place.

In this brief but vicious spree the gang must have stolen several thousand pounds worth of cash and other treasures - worth a good £500,000 in today's money. What did they do with it? They must have had enough for them all to support themselves for a couple of years if they were careful. Like the equally vicious later 'Essex Boy' gangsters it seems certain that they immediately blew it on consumption – drinks, horses, clothes, more drink and selling valuables to fences for a fraction of their worth. Intelligence is never conspicuous among those who resort to crime and the sensible disposal of illegal assets – or making their money work for them so as to enable them to give up their lives of crime – never happens.

The violence escalated and the gang's worst attack to date took place a few days after the Loughton raid on 4<sup>th</sup> February.

This time the target was the property of a 70 year old farmer called Joseph Lawrence in Edgware, now a north London suburb. It may be significant that Edgware was an easy ride from the Rose and Crown. I suspect they used the pub as a base to case this target.

The gang burst into the farm. Lawrence was stripped and Turpin personally beat him with his pistols. While Lawrence was being tortured, one of the Gregory brothers took a servant girl upstairs and raped her. The gang got away with just £30.

A few days after this, the same gang viciously attacked a farm in Marylebone and obtained £90. The farmer's wife, daughter and a female servant were beaten up. Gallantry was the last thing on the minds of the Essex Gang. The greater the level of random violence, the smaller the takings. We were

not dealing with a band of later-day Robin Hoods or Merry Men, taking from the rich to give to the poor. What we had was a gang of vicious animalistic thugs robbing struggling farmers of their life-savings and raping any women who were unfortunate enough to be there.

Their crimes shocked society. Everyone was on the look-out for the gang. Horses were as recognisable as cars are now. Strangers were also less common. The gang were not the most intelligent criminals and did not act in an inconspicuous manner.

Prior to attacking Lawrence's farm they had idiotically stopped for drink in the Nine Pins and Bowl – a pub in Edgware just a mile from the farm. The landlord had provided hay for their horses. By chance on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1735 (just a week after the Edgware attack) the landlord had business in Bloomsbury in central London and he saw the same horses outside another pub. He found a constable and a group of citizens arrested three of the gang after a brief struggle. The youngest of the apprehended Essex gangsters – John Wheeler aged just 15 – promptly grassed up the others.

Turpin and some of the gang fled back to Essex – robbing another house in Chingford on the way. It seems that the ease with which they could rob unsuspecting householders by threatening and using extreme violence had become a drug – a compulsion. Even while on the run they robbed. They were beyond the law, outside society and without respect for its conventions and boundaries.

Some of the gang foolishly stayed in Westminster where a few days' later two more of them were arrested – again while boozing. They attempted to pull out their pistols but were overpowered before they could fire. A large quantity of stolen property was recovered from their lodgings.

There was a hue and cry about the remaining gang members who seem to have hidden out in Epping Forest. The London Gazette of 24<sup>th</sup> February 1735 carried this wanted notice:

**"Richard Turpin, a butcher by trade, is a tall fresh coloured man, very much marked with the small pox, about 26 years of age, about five feet nine inches high, lived some time ago in Whitechapel and did lately lodge somewhere about Millbank, Westminster, wears a blue grey coat and a natural wig".**

The captured members (minus Wheeler) were tried and on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1735 and hung at Tyburn. Over the next few weeks the remaining members of the gang, including the Gregory brothers were also captured and hung. After a rampage of just six months, six of the gang had been executed, two died in prison, one turned informer, and one female fence was transported to the American colonies.

With their colleagues' corpses rotting on the Tyburn gibbet, the only regular gang members left at liberty were Dick Turpin and Thomas Rowden. Two may have been company, but you needed a bigger crowd to raid houses or isolated farms. It seems likely that this is the reason why Turpin now turned to highway robbery.

The constant need for money meant that they did not wait long. By July 1735 they were regularly holding up unwary travellers in the Epping Forest area. Who did they rob? Anyone they came across. They robbed humble pedlars and anyone with a horse. In August they shifted their operations to what is now south west London – Barnes, Kingston, Putney and Hounslow Heath - with £100 on their heads. However things got too hot and they seem to have laid low for a while. In July 1736 Rowden was arrested for counterfeiting but Turpin seems to have stayed in hiding - possibly in Holland. It seems that his instinct for self-preservation was a little stronger than that of his erstwhile comrades.

But he couldn't stay out of sight for long. Probably his money ran out. Turpin created another small gang and by 1737 was at it again – holding up coaches, robbing travellers and stealing horses. In February 1737 he was almost arrested in Puckeridge in Hertfordshire where he had stayed with his wife, a maid and a servant – which indicates that Turpin had not been living a life of penury.

Soon after this began the train of events which was to lead to Turpin's demise.

In early May the gang stole a horse and took it to Whitechapel to sell. There are stories that Turpin had served his apprenticeship as a butcher in Whitechapel. He certainly seems to have regularly visited that district which was then a suburban village. Perhaps this was because he had familiarity with the area due to having worked there in his youth.

Whatever the case may be, the horse's owner was somehow traced to the Red Lion pub.

It has been suggested that this pub could have been the Old Red Lion which used to trade from 217 Whitechapel Road, opposite the London Hospital, and which is now a clothes shop. However the current 19<sup>th</sup> century building disappointingly offers no possibility for stabling. Furthermore this location was sparsely built up in 1737. For example the London Hospital was built on open land in 1757.

A much more likely location was the Red Lion and Spread Eagle which stood at 94 Whitechapel High Street – in the heart of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Whitechapel. It is now a non-descript 1920s built commercial premises but it still has an archway that used to allow access to stables and a straw and hay warehouse behind, but which now leads to a rough car park. It is just a few doors down from the White Heart, one of the few remaining pubs in the area that is much

frequented by 'Ripperologists'.

All-in-all the Red Lion and Spread Eagle makes a much more satisfying location for Dick Turpin's denouement. The horse's owner, a friend and the parish constable staked out the Red Lion waiting for the thieves to return to collect the horse. One did and on being apprehended immediately confessed that the rest of the gang were nearby. It is striking that these villains never balked at immediately squealing on their comrades, but perhaps it was to save themselves from the certainty of a grisly death on the end of a noose.



**Dick Turpin shoots Thomas Morris at 'Turpin's Cave'**

Almost immediately Turpin's main lieutenant, Matthew King, was also apprehended, but he resisted. The commotion attracted Turpin's attention and he rode up. In the confusion a shot was fired – perhaps by Turpin himself. King dropped mortally wounded and Turpin fled the scene. King lingered a week before he died cursing his erstwhile partner as a coward.

Turpin fled alone back to Epping Forest – by tradition to a location near Loughton Camp, an Iron Age Hill Fort deep in the woods. His hide-out was known for generations as Turpin's Cave, although it was probably no more than a scraped-out hollow in the earth bank of the Hill Fort.

However Epping Forest was no longer a safe haven. On 4<sup>th</sup> May he was discovered by Thomas Morris, the servant of one of the Keepers of the Forest. Morris attempted to arrest Turpin who shot and killed him. Very soon after this, a reward of £200 was put on Turpin's head. There was no way now for him to stay in any of his old haunts. He seems to have stolen a horse and ridden away to Brough on the River Humber in Yorkshire where he was to spend his last months of liberty. Interestingly he called himself Palmer – a corruption of his mother's maiden name – and passed himself off as an honest horse trader. It seems he actually made his money by stealing horses over the Humber in Lincolnshire and taking them to Essex to sell, returning north with the proceeds.



This trip up to Yorkshire is the nucleus of the later legendary story that Turpin rode overnight the 200 miles to York on his trusty steed Black Bess. This is an impossible feat and one that had been attributed to an earlier highwayman called John Nevison who allegedly rode from Rochester in Kent to York in 1676 to establish an alibi.

Turpin managed to stay at large for about 18 months after killing Morris, but the strain was evidently too much for him. In October 1738 he shot another man's game cock (a cock used for cock fighting and a valuable asset in that period). He then got embroiled in an argument over this and threatened to shoot a local man. Turpin, as Palmer, was taken in front of Magistrates and refused to be bound over to keep the peace and so was sent to a local jail. Turpin had several opportunities to avoid this situation developing yet just let it happen. While in custody the authorities looked into 'Palmer' and discovered rumours that he made his money from stealing horses. Realising that the case was potentially more serious than being just a local fracas Turpin was transferred to York Castle to appear at the Assizes.

To compound his stupidity, from his cell Turpin then wrote a letter to his brother in law who was still living in Hempstead. His brother in law didn't accept the letter which was returned to the local main post office in Saffron Walden. By chance, James Smith, the post master there had taught Turpin how to write and he recognised the handwriting. The letter was opened and Smith immediately realised that Turpin was calling himself Palmer and that he was in York Castle. Smith went up to Yorkshire and on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1739 he identified Turpin and claimed the £200 reward.

Turpin was sent to trial on 22<sup>nd</sup> March facing three charges of horse theft which was a capital offence. Turpin's denied the charges but his main defence was that he was unprepared for the trial. Nevertheless he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

On 7<sup>th</sup> April 1739 Dick Turpin was hung at York's Tyburn gallows. Not for brutally breaking into people's houses and torturing people. Not for the murder of Thomas Morris, nor for highway robbery. But for stealing three

**"Turpin behaved in an undaunted manner; as he mounted the ladder, feeling his right leg tremble, he spoke a few words to the topsman, then threw himself off, and expir'd in five minutes."**

horses. And he was arrested for killing a bird. According to the Gentleman's Magazine:

He was swiftly buried, but his corpse was just as quickly dug up by body snatchers. However Turpin's notoriety and his legend was already starting to flourish. The citizenry of York tracked down the grave robbers and the body was recovered and reburied.

What does Turpin's criminal CV consist of?

For a period before October 1734 he assisted a gang of poachers in disposing of their illegal deer meat though his butcher's shop. Then he graduated to being a fully-fledged member of the Essex Gang and for six months between

October 1734 and March 1735 raided people's houses. From March 1735 to the end of December 1735 he operated as a highwayman.

Then he kept a low profile until February 1737 when he again operated as a highwayman and horse thief. This phase lasted just until May 1737 when he fled north after murdering Thomas Morris. Then from May 1737 to October 1738 he lived as a horse thief in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. The episodes of his career as a Highwayman were rather brief – perhaps nine months in 1735 and just four months in 1737. Highwaymen did not tend to have long life expectancies. Turpin was unusual in that he managed to live a life of crime for a good four years before he came to his inevitable end. Most such criminals ended on the gibbet far sooner – as evidenced by the fates of the other members of the 'Essex Gang'. The simple explanation is that sensible or intelligent people do not resort to such dangerous lifestyles. These criminals lacked the ability to plan and think ahead, but lived for the moment and indulged themselves rather showing caution. Normal lifestyles were dull and boring to them and only fit for 'others' - their prey. They were not able to fit into normal society as evidenced by Turpin's almost gratuitous behaviour in killing the game cock. Interestingly, there is virtually no difference between the 'Essex Gang' of the 1730s and the 'Essex Boys' of the 1990s.

It is also noteworthy that the 18<sup>th</sup> century forces of law and order were usually capable of apprehending miscreants quite rapidly. There would seem to be two reasons for this – beyond any bungling by the criminals. If the crimes were such as to provoke public horror – as was the case with the house invasions and the indiscriminate highway robberies – then virtually everyone readily became the eyes and ears of the law. Secondly, society was much less mobile. Strangers were more noticeable. Strangers who were clearly not of the Gentry but who had ready money would have been rarer still.

For some imperceptible reason Turpin's legend grew stronger than that of any other Highwayman. It started almost before his body could be reburied, with Richard Bayes' 'The Genuine History of the Life of Richard Turpin'. Bayes had been involved in the shootout at the Red Lion as one of the group that tried to arrest the gang.

The tales grew and the actions attributed to other Highwaymen – such as the Black Bess story – were conflated with that of Turpin. These stories came together in the 1834 novel 'Rockwood' by William Harrison Ainsworth. In 1846 Madame Tussaud made a waxwork of Turpin. Collectables and memorabilia soon followed – Staffordshire pottery statues, limited edition prints, ballads and penny dreadful novels.

Before the Krays he was Britain's biggest celebrity criminal. But while he was briefly a Highwayman, he was no gentleman of the road.

**Edward Stow is a member of London's Whitechapel Society and his historical researches have been published in many magazines. His historical guided walks have met with much critical acclaim**



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# THE THIEVES OF THREADNEEDLE STREET

## *The Victorian Fraudsters Who Almost Broke the Bank of England*

N I C H O L A S   B O O T H

**W**hen the world's economies were collapsing at the end of 2008, I was spending a great deal of time in the United States. As subprime debt seemed to devour everything in its wake, businesses were running scared. Corporate travel allowances were pruned. It was amazing how cheaply you could travel around the U.S. I remember being in a taxi in San Francisco and hearing about the discovery of the Bernie Saunders Ponzi scheme.

Later, in Florida, I even met some people who he had defrauded.

The next Easter, I happened to be staying at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, and one of the oldest and most famous of the city's buildings. All this stuff in the news prompted a thought: when was the world's first global economic collapse?

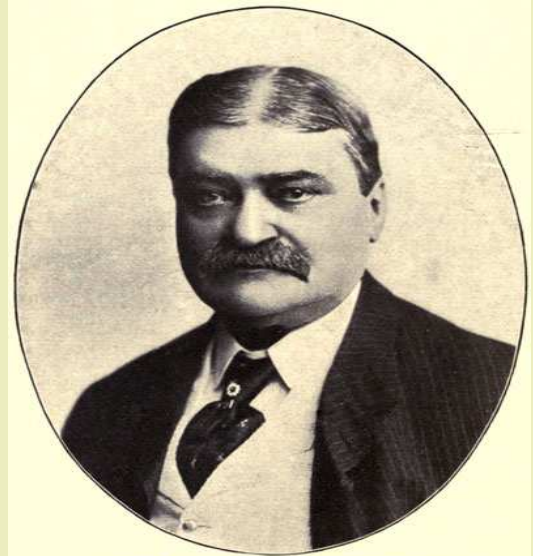
We all know about the Wall Street Crash in 1929, but had there been any before that? The answer was yes. The first had been in 1873, with what became known as "the great panic" of that year. The reasons why were depressingly familiar.

The railroads, steamships and the telegraph were the first harbingers of globalisation. Financial information and interest rates could be shared to make foreign trading possible. Rampant speculation - particularly on the railways - swept through the money markets all over the world. And, as in recent times, overheated economies very quickly caught cold.

In May of 1873, a bubble of insolvency burst, taking with it, the Vienna stock market. A global slump followed which was then accompanied by bankruptcies, rising inflation and galloping unemployment. By September, there was chaos on Wall Street when a number of banks failed and panic and near riots on the streets of Manhattan.

As I read up all about this, something caught my eye. There were several references to "The Great Forgeries on the Bank of England". In the spring of 1873, a quartet of American fraudsters was making headlines all around the world. Over a three month period at the start of that year, they had literally carried out daylight robbery. They successfully removed £100,000 from the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street - as the Bank was usually known - by use of fraudulent documents. Had it not been for a small, laughable error they might have got away with even more. It was, as one newspaper remarked at the time, "the most remarkable story of daring forgery and fraud that the world had ever known". And it was followed by a manhunt quite unlike any other.

Fittingly, railways and steamships were involved. The Victorian internet - the transatlantic telegraph -- carried news and arrest warrants across the Atlantic. The fraudsters were chased across three continents. There were narrow escapes across rural Ireland, through Scottish cities, on ships heading towards Manhattan, and most exotic of all, in Cuba, where the most elusive would eventually be captured - only, to escape again. The story had a supporting cast of femme fatales, bribed officials, corrupt policemen and, almost inevitably for the time, ladies of the night. Central to the story was how the Old Lady hired, via its Manhattan attorneys, "the greatest detective in America" which is how one of the fraudsters referred to William Pinkerton. Pinkerton was, scion of the famous detective agency, and was responsible for their capture.



WILLIAM A. PINKERTON

In an odd coincidence, Pinkerton had actually died in the Biltmore Hotel.

That was nearly a century earlier, at the end of 1912, as he normally wintered over in California. A few blocks away in a Los Angeles law library, I read both his obituaries and a valedictory address he had given six months before he died. By then, he was the grand old man of law enforcement, then in his 78<sup>th</sup> year.

"Thirty years ago, New York City and other large cities were infested with people [who were] high class professional thieves," Pinkerton told a gathering of police chiefs in Toronto. "These men were well-dressed, frequented high-price cafes and spent money lavishly."

Pink, as he was usually known, was clearly nostalgic for this vanishing breed of gentlemen fraudsters who were defined by their relative intelligence and sophistication. Where once such criminals were elegant and educated – “silk hats”, Pink called them – they had now been replaced in the first years of the new century by small time hoodlums.

And then, came a phrase that jolted me as I read the transcript of his speech.

“The frauds on the Bank of England were committed by a successful gang of forgers,” Pink recalled. “By a lucky chance, I happened to be in England on business for our agency and met these men on the streets.” Pink had warned Scotland Yard but they did nothing. By the time he got onto the case, the fraudsters were well on their way to removing \$1million which, as he remarked in Toronto, “was recovered aside from what they had squandered on notorious living.”

A light bulb went off in my head. Here was a great, untold story. If you imagine a cross between Ocean’s Eleven and a real life Sherlock Holmes, you’ll get a sense of what The Thieves of Threadneedle Street is about. Using never seen before records, reports and trial transcripts, my book recreates the full extraordinary story. It pays particular attention to the subsequent case at the Old Bailey which, in the phrase of one of the lawyers involved, termed “the most remarkable trial that ever occurred in the annals of England.”

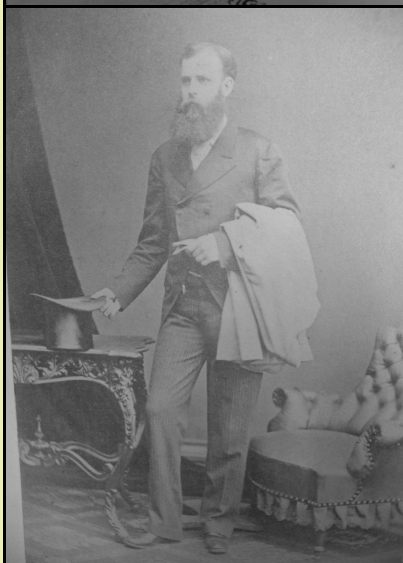
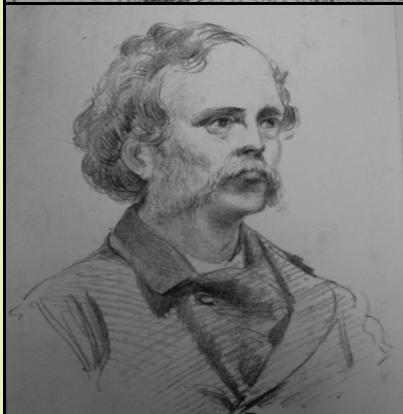
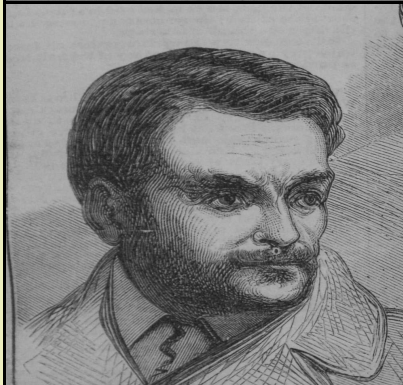
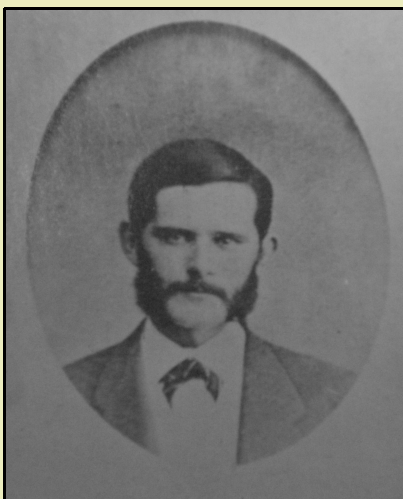
As I delved deeper into the archives, what amazed me was that nothing was quite what it seemed on the surface. The fraud was so complex that I got the sense that even the criminals themselves couldn’t keep track of what they were doing. I discovered that in their earlier endeavours they had enjoyed the protection of the New York Police Department. They later even bribed their warders in an ill-fated attempt to spring them from the Old Bailey.

Fact is stranger than fiction.

Nobody could have ever dreamt such a plot up.

I was hooked and was desperate to tell the story for the first time.

When the fraud was discovered in March 1873, the City of London police started to follow the paper trail. Fairly quickly, they determined that the main perpetrators were American. There were two names – Frederick Albert Warren and C.J.Horton – which kept popping up. Several investigators wondered if they were the same person – but weren’t sure.



From the top -  
Austin Biron Bidwell  
George Bidwell  
Edwin Noyes Hills  
George Macdonnell

In fact, there were more than forty aliases used by all four of the fraudsters – and it took weeks of work by the lawyers to piece it all together.

While they were on the run, the cops had a couple of lucky breaks.

The manager of a swanky hotel in St James reported her suspicions about a recent American visitor who had disappeared in mysterious circumstances. The mother of an innocent girl who had been dating another “Yankee” realised the description of Warren or Horton sounded suspiciously familiar. Against her best wishes, her daughter had married this fellow (she had actually fainted during the ceremony in Paris) who originally had introduced himself as Dr. Hibbey. That was not his real name, which had put her back up the Summer before. Wondering what to make of it all, a postcard from the newly-weds suddenly appeared from the West Indies. She reported it to the police and the police telegraphed Willie Pinkerton with her son-in-law’s real name.

Austin Bidwell was just twenty seven years of age and his life, to date in one contemporary account “surpassed the imaginations of our famous novelists.” Along with his elder brother, George, they had been carrying out cons for many years. For the first time, I have traced many of them which have never been reported before. Yet many mysteries remain because they both often used each other’s identities – as well as many others.

But in the spring of 1873, there was no doubt who was behind what they called this “big thing.” Austin Bidwell started it all off, paying in genuine money into the Bank England under the name of Warren. Once he had left England at the end of January, the others maintained a flow of fraudulent transactions by mail.

In other words, the main perpetrator had fled the scene of the crime. It was part of Austin Bidwell’s incorrigible genius, that he then used his honeymoon as his getaway.

George Bidwell, who was eleven years older, was a baleful influence who many thought too clever by far. When the fraud was discovered, he disappeared to Ireland and had what he termed “an extraordinary series of adventures.” Rascal that he was, George Bidwell had left his girlfriend behind as she was

arrested by the police on Euston Station with a bag of gold sovereigns. Had they been ten minutes earlier, the cops would have arrested him, too.

All the fraudsters were womanisers. By far the smoothest was the most accomplished of them, George Macdonnell. A few days after the fraud's discovery, he had reached Liverpool, seen the police and double backed to the south coast. Somehow, he had managed to escape as far as Manhattan where he denied all knowledge of the fraud.

Back in London, they had jettisoned an "innocent man" as he termed himself.

Edwin Noyes Hills was the final member of the gang.

Using a false name, he had been arrested in the foyer of a bank even though he continued to claim his innocence. Willie Pinkerton knew that he had been involved with the others for many years. "Their life during the last ten years has been one of forgery and swindling," the bank's solicitors, Freshfields, noted that Spring. "Finding that America did not offer a sufficiently wide field for their energies or possibly becoming too well known there they changed the scene of their operations to England and the continent of Europe."

But the key to their capture was the indefatigable Willie Pinkerton.

As he later acknowledged, he had indeed spotted Austin Bidwell in London six months earlier. He knew all of them of old and that they weren't on a grand tour purely for the sightseeing. When Pink promptly arrested him in Cuba, he later told Austin that he had been seen.

All the colour drained from his face.

"Pinkerton, for God's sake why did you not speak to me in England!" he exclaimed. "I would have given you \$50,000 to mind your own affairs and not to do as you have done. You have ruined me and the whole party."

That, in a nutshell, is the story of my book.

The backdrop is, of course, what was known as "a human awful wonder of god", the City of London itself, with its dangerous corners, narrow streets and Bow Street Runners. Many of the policemen were later involved in the Jack the Ripper saga. Yet beneath the glittering of the gold the fraudsters bought with forged documents, there was an all too familiar story: of greed, hubris, stupidity and that nothing could ever go wrong when economies are roaring. Sound familiar? That was why I was intrigued by the story. Oddly, war had had a lot to do with it. Thanks to the reconstruction in the U.S. after the Civil War, and more recently, in Europe after the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, the financial faucets were opened as never before. The years of the forgers' greater roguery – from 1866 to 1872 – were, in the phrase of the official historian of the Bank of England, "a gigantic hinge on which the history of the later nineteenth century turns."

What he termed "furious" industrial activity around the world had been underwritten by British investment. "The normal pulse of international finance," wrote Sir John Clapham, "is becoming such as once would have suggested high fever."

As the fulcrum of the world's most successful trading nation, by the spring of 1873, the City of London was teetering between "a narrow ledge between prosperity and

ruin" as another historian has called it.

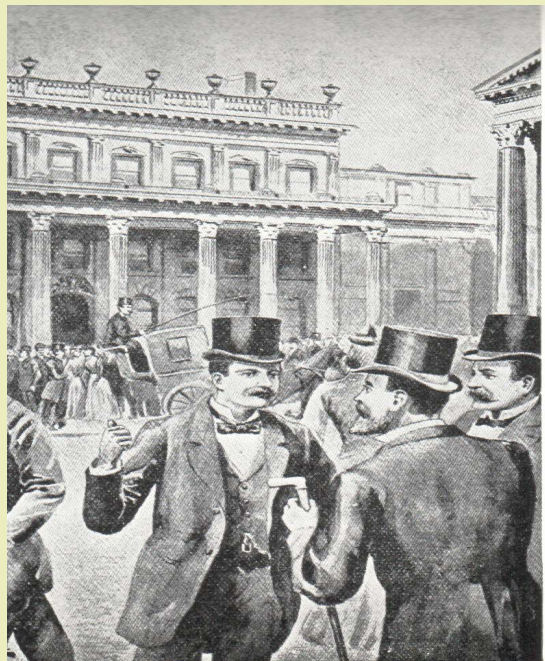
Today, we have internet banking and bitcoin.

In Victorian times, they had something called "Bills of Exchange" – essentially, glorified IOUs -- which were traded all around the world. Though they had been around since ancient times, by the Victorian era they had made international trade possible. "A bill on London", as it was known, was every bit as solid as coins and notes of Her Majesty's realm.

By the start of the 1870s, the City of London was awash with them.

But they were not regulated and, as another historian has written, "foreigners made increasing use of the London capital market and international finance grew swiftly." The fraudsters realised that the best way to "raise the wind out of European economies" (as one of them said) was to strike at the heart of the system.

The Bills were essentially underwritten by the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street.



*Standing outside the bank on May 1st 1872, Austin called it 'the softest spot in the world' and stated that they could 'hit the bank for a million as easy as rolling off a log'.*

All they had to do was look the part and pose as genuine entrepreneurs. As they were dandified and vain, they invariably got away with it. Like all fraudsters, they were taken at face value – as were the bills that they started to forge. In this way, they were able to spirit away vast sums of money.

Nobody checked. They were treated as genuine customers.

The Old Lady simply wouldn't believe that anyone would dare attempt defraud her. As I show for the first time, even when its officials were presented with evidence that something was wrong, they didn't do anything. Willie Pinkerton was not the only voice in the wilderness.

Weeks before, its own cashiers hadn't noticed a signature didn't match up on one of the gang's bills, or the week before that there was a misspelt name.

It was only a fluke that on March 1st, 1873, everything hit the fan.

In a very real sense, I followed in their footsteps. In October 2010, I started the research properly and that meant delving into all the records. In the past, nobody had gotten any further than the front door of the Old Lady herself. But now, in a new age of openness, the Bank of England – and its splendid archivists - couldn't have been more helpful. Over the next couple of years, I made any number of repeated visits to the Bank to delve through an astonishing cornucopia of material.

Thank goodness for Victorian rigour. All of the original material from Freshfields had been copied by hand; alas, the originals were later destroyed in the Blitz of 1940. Similarly, the Pinkertons' archive before 1871 is thin because of the Chicago Fire in October of that year. But everything else – police reports, treasury correspondence and contemporary diaries – are also available, some of it in the National Archives in Kew.

At the heart of the book – and the focus for the story I tell – is the great court case which saw them prosecuted at the Old Bailey. It was the highlight of the summer of 1873. People queued to watch them and enjoy – as the extract shows – the wonderful sense of theatre which accompanied them. There had been twenty three preliminary hearings at the Mansion House in the late Spring; and then, eight days at the Old Bailey. I diligently read through and copied all the more astounding exchanges on the stand. There was drama, absurdity, anger, farce – and at its conclusion, the inevitable, when the judge had had enough of their antics and threw the book at them.

As I looked into it, it was clear that there were a lot of myths about the great forgeries upon the Bank of England.

The City Police essentially made a mess of their investigation, which the bank solicitors knew, but kept quiet about. The U.S. attorneys were only too well aware that, on his arrival in Manhattan, George Macdonnell was protected by the police which led to another series of trials in the United States.

As most of the participants on the stand were under oath, the story I tell is as near as possible to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but. Almost inevitably, the only people who weren't truthful were the fraudsters themselves. The two Bidwell brothers wrote their own biographies and, to be fair, were trying to remember events that had taken place many years earlier. Both were hopeless at the chronology, and worse, either misremembered events or deliberately made things up.

They were all serial fantasists.

In his own memoirs, George Bidwell says that when they learned about the arrest of their patsy, he and Macdonnell went into the bank to try to grab hold of Edwin Noyes Hills. They didn't; George was in the Albermarle Hotel with his mistress when Mac rushed in. Austin Bidwell

tells an even more dramatic story of Willie Pinkerton arriving in Havana involving a dinner party, sharing some champagne and grabbing a gun as he tried to escape. It couldn't have happened as the Pink's own files show he didn't get there until ten days later. Yet even Willie Pinkerton, for all his resolute honesty, added to the myths when he embellished some of the stories in the later years of his life.

What is also remarkable is that – at the time - there was a widespread feeling that nobody ever got to the bottom of the story. As a result, *The Thieves of Threadneedle Street* begins with one mystery – who was the “W. Austin Bidwell” around whom their first recorded forgery took place in 1864? – and ends on another. A few months after both Bidwell brothers died in 1899, a destitute old man in New York claimed on his deathbed that he had been involved. Who was he? And what had he really done?

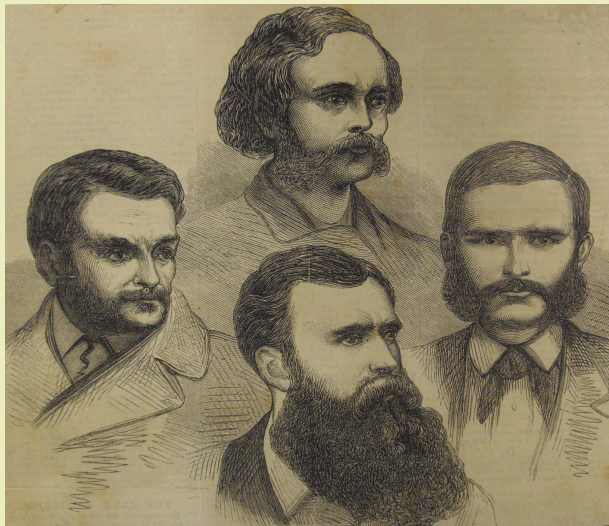
For all these mysteries, there is only one certainty.

We haven't learned a thing. Greed is still around. Bankers are as much to blame as the criminals. There will always be failures in the financial system. On the day the book came out in the U.K. last summer, something like a trillion dollars was wiped off the value of the stock market. That was Black Monday in the Far Eastern markets. Just a few weeks ago, an

official survey revealed that fraud and cyber crime is being committed in the U.K. every four seconds. In 2015 alone, there 5.1 million incidents and 2½ million cases of computer crime such hacking and spreading viruses.

The technology may have changed, but human nature hasn't.

Will we ever learn? I very much doubt it. For now, sit back, buy the book and enjoy a good old fashioned detective story with a rollercoaster ride through Victorian London.



**A former newspaper journalist and television executive, Nicholas Booth is the author of a handful of books, the most recent about curious characters in history. He tweets as @ThievesBook.**

**Watch a video at**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwJE4wjGW\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwJE4wjGW_Y)

**In the UK, buy the book at:**

<http://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/publication/The-Thieves-of-Threadneedle-Street/9780752493404/>

**In the U.S., browse:**

<http://pegasusbooks.com/books/the-thieves-of-threadneedle-street-9781681772400-hardcover>

# For the Greater Good The Bezdany Raid

By William Donarski

**T**he history books are awash with tales of daring robberies and thrilling heists, yet the hatching of these elaborate plans is usually born out of greed and avarice on the part of the thievish, yet often criminally ingenious protagonists.

However, it is almost unheard of for an act of such violence and deliberate plotting to have been undertaken with good intentions. Yet, in Eastern Europe, 1908, one of the greatest train robberies ever carried out was staged with the ultimate goal of achieving freedom for millions.

At that time under Russian and Austro-Hungarian occupation, Poland was on its knees amidst a surrounding collection of empire-building neighbours. Yet, a group of brave men and women were about to take the law into their own hands, and begin a course of action which would ultimately lead their nation to freedom.

This twenty-strong group of revolutionaries were putting their lives on the line for their country, and many of their names would be added to the lists of national heroes in the Polish history books. Their cause was not self-gain or greed, it was to provide their country with the funds necessary to rescue Poland from the clutches of brutal occupation and oppression.

Yet, this stunning and meticulously planned raid is largely unheard of outside the former Eastern Bloc, so it is with great pleasure that we present an account of the Bezdany Raid; the crime that saved countless lives, and began a chain of events which would result in a nation's freedom, and the maps of the world to be reprinted.

## A Nation Surrounded

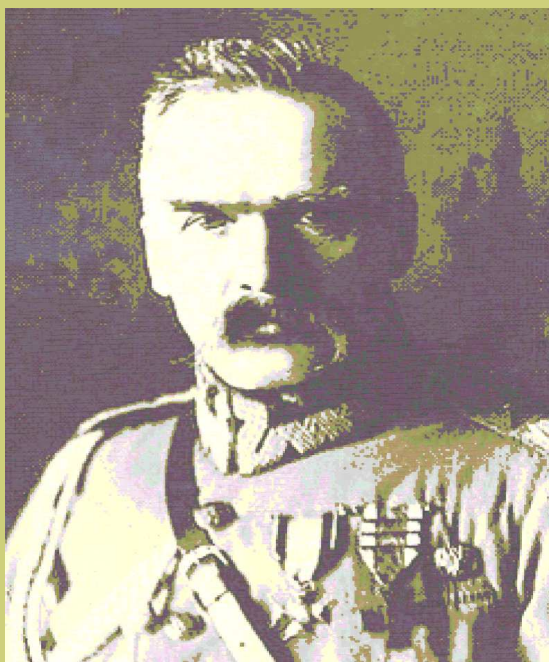
The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an uneasy struggle for power across Europe, with larger nations seeking to expand their borders at the cost of smaller and weaker neighbours. In this immediate prelude to the Great War, several armies were constantly on the move, entering foreign lands and raising their flags upon the stolen soil. Germany was furtively looking west, amassing a military which could punch a hole in the defences of France and Belgium, and take the land which the higher powers believed would aid in the political and economic growth of the Fatherland. Such was the threat from Germany that the eyes of the world were concentrating upon these matters, and as such, a collective eye was closed to the activities of other nations.

With the gaze of their rivals for Central and Eastern European power being firmly fixed on France and the Low Countries, the Russians saw an opportunity to make gains of their own, namely the predominantly peaceful and

agricultural nation of Poland, which, certainly not for the last time, sat meekly between the borders of Germany and Russia, praying that they would not be forgotten by the West.

However, it wasn't only Russia that was seeking to steal advantage of the political unease. The newly powerful merged nation of Austro-Hungary was also keen to expand its borders northwards, and as such, a group of long-suffering nations lay in its path towards power, with Poland being the final goal, and the most coveted gain.

However, the Polish people were not to be defeated, and after tolerating decades of occupation and political interference from its larger neighbours, a group of revolutionaries hatched a plan to strike back at the powers that governed their very existence, and in the process, begin the journey towards the formation of the Second Polish Republic.



Józef Piłsudski

## Twenty Well-Meaning Thieves

The leader of the revolutionary gang was Józef Piłsudski, who was very much the epitome of the Eastern Bloc hero. Sporting a huge moustache, and being well known as a local strongman in Zułowo (now part of Lithuania) where he spent his formative years, Piłsudski was a man who had a history of standing up for himself and others.

At just twenty years old, he had been arrested as part of a conspiracy to assassinate Tsar Alexander III, and although his involvement could not be proven, he was exiled to the astonishingly harsh conditions of the Siberian Gulags. This, however, did not break his indomitable spirit. Upon his eventual return to Poland, Piłsudski wasted no time in becoming an active member of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), and was to lead a number of strikes and riots against the Russian regime. It was at a PPS meeting that he was to meet his future wife and co-conspirator, Maria Juszkiewiczowa, with who he was also to write articles for *the Robotnik* (the Worker) newspaper.

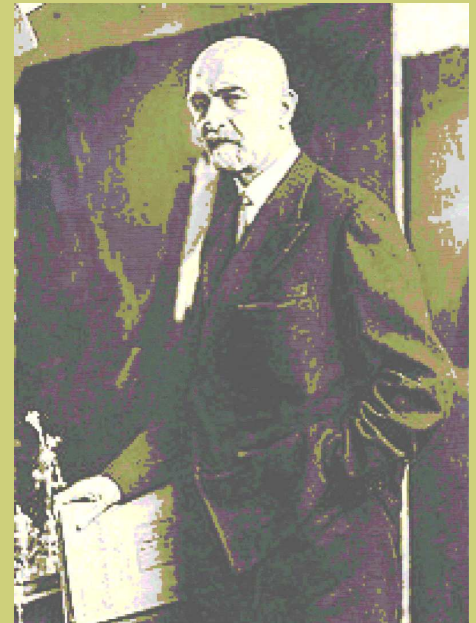




**Tomasz Arciszewski**



**Aleksander Prystor**



**Walery Sławek**

Joining the couple in this group were Tomasz Arciszewski, a former steelworker and trade unionist who had a history of rabble-rousing and political dissent, Aleksander Prystor, a former soldier and formidable debater, and Walery Sławek, also a former soldier and dissident, who was the long-term right hand man of Piłsudski.

Joining the five founder members were another eleven men and three women, all of whom had been personally recruited by Piłsudski and Juszkiewiczowa during secret meetings at their home. With the personnel assembled, all that was needed was a name and a plan of action. The name of the group, *Bojówki* (Combat Team) came quickly, and a plot to strike against the Russians was soon to follow.

## **The Plot to Pillar**

Whilst under the occupation of two empires, the group decided that the only way to spread their message and fund their activities was to be in league with the devil, and approached the Austro-Hungarians (the lesser of the two evils) with their intentions to hamper the progress of the Russians, with the ultimate aim of driving them from Poland.

The Austro-Hungarians were only too happy to hand illicit funds to the group, and to turn a blind eye to their conspiracies. As such, recruitment grew at an alarming rate, and within a year, the *Bojówki* boasted around 750 members across the nation. However, the event which was to be entered into the history books would feature just Piłsudski's twenty-strong team, based in Krakow.

Having been previously incarcerated in Siberia, Piłsudski had taken a back seat in previous plots, but as he himself had enforced a rule that every member of the must take part in at least one armed attack, he imposed that rule upon himself, and chose to lead the group in their most audacious act of dissidence.

The focal point of the plot was a mail train which carried Russian tax revenues from St Petersburg to

Moscow, taking in a circuitous route which crossed into present day Lithuania (then part of Poland). The plan was to ambush the train as it passed through the small town of Bezdany, and relieve their occupiers of their expected tax revenue.

For weeks the group took time to familiarise themselves with the area, and especially the little train station which was to be the epicentre of the plot. By the time the appointed day arrived in September 1908, every member of the team had been repeatedly drilled in their responsibilities, and each had taken the time to write their own last will and testament, knowing that their task was an extremely dangerous one.

## **Bullets Fly in Bezdany**

The day of reckoning arrived, and with it came an air of determination within the *Bojówki*, there was no fear on show, as the group knew that without intervention, their lives in Poland were to be as miserable as ever, something to which Piłsudski addressed in his own last will and testament, which was posted to a friend that morning.

"I am not going to dictate to you what you shall write about my life and work. I only ask of you not to make me a 'whiner and sentimentalist. I fight and I am ready to die simply because I cannot bear to live in this latrine which is what our life amounts to...so now I am staking everything on this last card. I may die in this 'expropriation'"

As the train slowed at the station, Piłsudski was the first to approach, leading his masked comrades from the front. Quickly, the group split into two, with Piłsudski's group storming the train armed with guns and bombs, and the other group taking control of the station, and severing telephone and telegraph wires whilst holding any onlookers at gunpoint.

The carriage which held the money was quickly identified, and was occupied by a group of Russian soldiers,

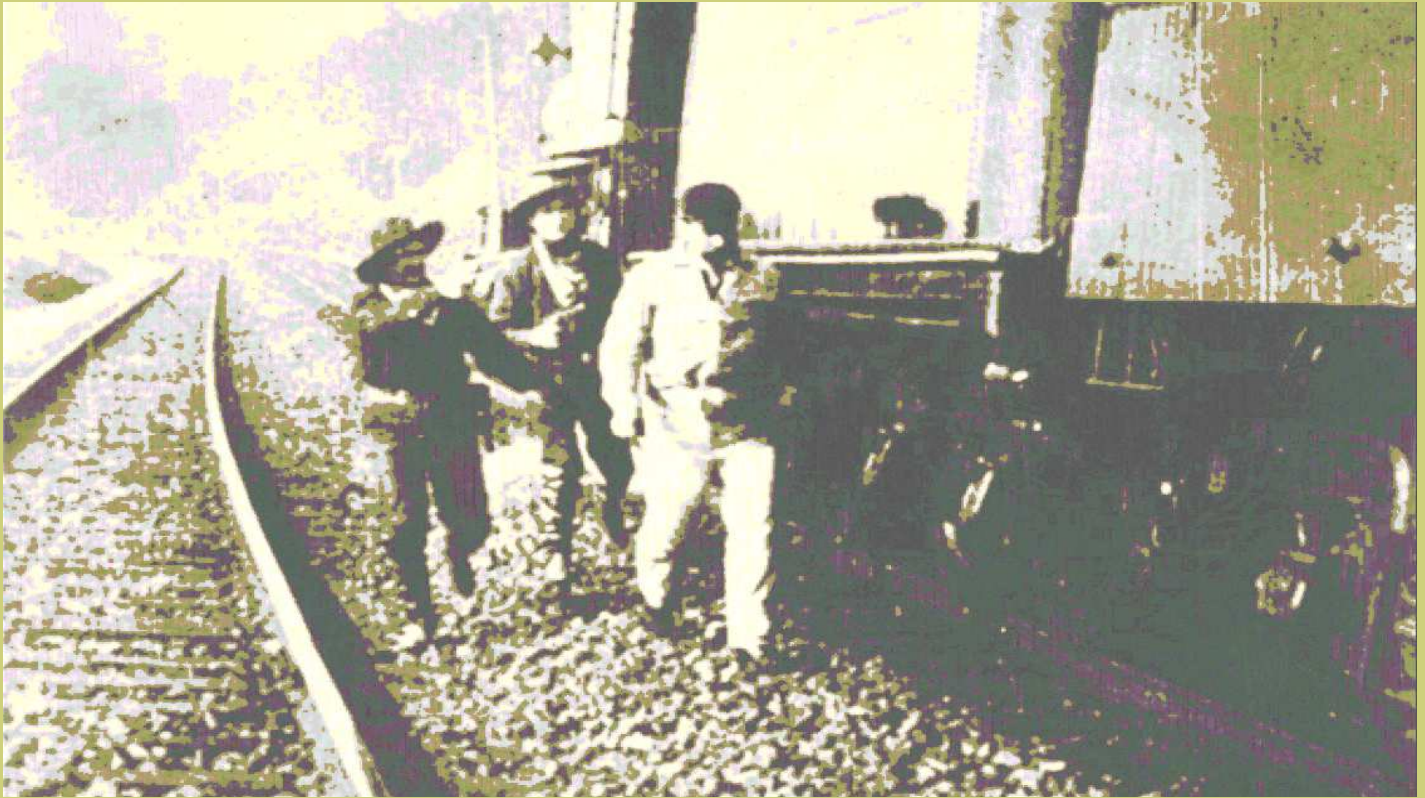
who had been tasked to guard the carriage with their lives. Two bombs were thrown into the carriage, and as the soldiers quickly alighted before the explosion, a firefight took place, during which one Russian soldier was killed, and five injured.

As the *Bojówki* once again became one unit as the station had been secured, the Russians were outnumbered, and despite their orders, surrendered to the surrounding mob, before being bound and locked in the captured station. Only one obstacle now stood in the way of the marauding *Bojówki*.

radiated in all direction from the station, leaving a tangled web of trails for the authorities to follow.

As the group was not local to this area, and they had taken the decision to cover their faces with scarves and masks during the raid, the identity of the robbers was almost impossible for the investigating Russian military to ascertain, yet, as with all aspects of the raid, care had been taken to ensure that none of the raiders headed straight for Krakow.

Over the coming weeks, the *Bojówki* members trickled back into the city, one by one, they reported to Piłsudski at



**Aftermath at Bezdany Station**

## **The Disappearing Raiders**

As the gunfire died down, and the soldiers were overrun, Piłsudski and Sławek carefully prepared the dynamite they had brought with them, in order to blow open the armoured vaults within the reinforced carriage. The subsequent explosion shook the foundations of the station, and within moments, the whole team was descending upon the smouldering carriage armed with sacks.

The vaults were emptied before the ringing in their ears from the explosion had ceased, and as quickly as they descended upon the train, the group scattered in different directions, each carrying as much of the stolen loot as they could shoulder. The crime had been executed perfectly, and only a clean getaway stood in their way.

Some disappeared in awaiting carriages, or quickly disappeared over the horizon on horses which had been tied to a fence a short distance from the station. Piłsudski made his getaway by the nearby river, after running to the boat which had been previously moored by the bank for this very purpose. The routes of the retreating raiders had

a covert meeting place, and delivered the sacks of money which they had protected since escaping the crime scene. It would have been easy for any of them to disappear with their share of the loot, but such was the camaraderie of the *Bojówki*, all members were soon accounted for.

## **The “Rescued” Roubles**

The proceeds of the raid were breathtaking, even to Piłsudski and his team. They had taken over 200,000 Russian roubles from their occupiers (around 5 million pounds in today’s money). By chance the raid had taken place during an unusually large move of funds, as the roubles had been intended to fund a new tram system in occupied Vilnius.

The *Bojówki*, upon hearing of the intended use of the money, felt no remorse at depriving their countrymen of a new tram system. They were sure that the nation would rather ride old trams in a free country, than travel in relative comfort under Russia occupation. The money would be put to good use, and not one kopek would be taken by any of the *Bojówki* members.

Instead, the money would be used to fund the growth of the PPS, and to recruit new members of the *Bojówki* across the length and breadth of the country. The influx of cash ensured that no longer would Piłsudski have to approach the Austro-Hungarians with cap in hand for money and permission to act; the control of their nation had now moved closer towards Polish hands.

The next six years would be a continuation of the struggle, but with funding available to ensure that the occupiers of Poland could never sleep soundly in their beds. Strikes, riots and armed raids continued as the continent drifted further towards the inevitable war, a war which was to also play a huge part in the resurrected Polish state.



**Logo of the Polish Socialist Party**

As the Great War took hold, the members of the *Bojówki* now became legitimate military fighters, and the skills gained during the previous decade proved invaluable to the Polish army, as they fought bravely against the occupying Russians, Germans and Austro-Hungarians in guerrilla warfare, often staging covert attacks to aid the *Entente Cordiale*.

## From Robbery to Revolution

Many of the *Bojówki* were killed during these military operations, but those who survived were treated as heroes in the post-war independent republic. The bravery and selflessness of the participants brought the rewards which were never taken at the time of the raid. Indeed, four of the *Bojówki* now have their names written indelibly in Polish history, as they were chosen to lead their country.

Józef Piłsudski became a legitimate politician, and was elected Chief of State from 1918-1922, before becoming First Marshal of Poland (1920-1926) and was eventually given the title as the de facto Prime Minister of Poland in 1926, before being replaced by another familiar name. Piłsudski died in 1935. Ironically, an armoured train is now named in his honour, ("I Marszałek"—"the First Marshal") as well as several universities and monuments.

The man who took over the role of Prime Minister of Poland was fellow raider Aleksander Prystor, who governed the nation from 1931 to 1933; he was then to become Marshal of the Polish Senate. The skilled propagandist was arrested in neutral Lithuania by the NKVD (Soviet Secret Police) in June 1940, and died in the hospital wing of Moscow's *Butyrka* prison in 1941.

Walery Sławek, Piłsudski's closest aide was to serve as Prime Minister of Poland three times during the 1930's, however, ideologies were no to everyone's taste, and he was eventually removed from power and placed into a non-public role. Slighted by this; and helpless to aid his nation in the looming Second World War, Sławek committed suicide in 1935 by shooting himself in the mouth. He left a letter to his successor, the contents of which have never been revealed.

Tomasz Arciszewski was to have the dubious honour of leading his country in exile, as he was appointed to the post of Prime Minister from 1944 to 1947, during which he led his occupied nation from London, presiding over the only period in Polish history where the government had been displaced. Arciszewski stayed in England, and died in 1955. He was buried in Brompton Cemetery, London.

## The Legacy of the Looters

The Bezdany raid is largely unheard of in the West, but will always receive a wry smile when mentioned in Poland. This act of theft and violence was undertaken for the greater good, and played a direct part in unsettling the occupying nations which had previously held the country under their hash and self-serving regimes.

There are very few cases where we can feel respect or camaraderie for those who commit crimes, but the rare examples generally seem to exhibit the "*Robin Hood Effect*" in which the perpetrators have acted selflessly, and decided that the misappropriation is justified if the proceeds are taken from an unjust cause, and distributed to the worthy.

The importance of the raid in Polish history is reflected by the fact that four of the raiders were not treated as common criminals, but were to be appointed to the highest position their government could offer. Most thieves risk their freedom for ill-gotten gains, but the *Bojówki* risked their lives for a better future, without ever directly benefitting from the proceeds of the robbery.

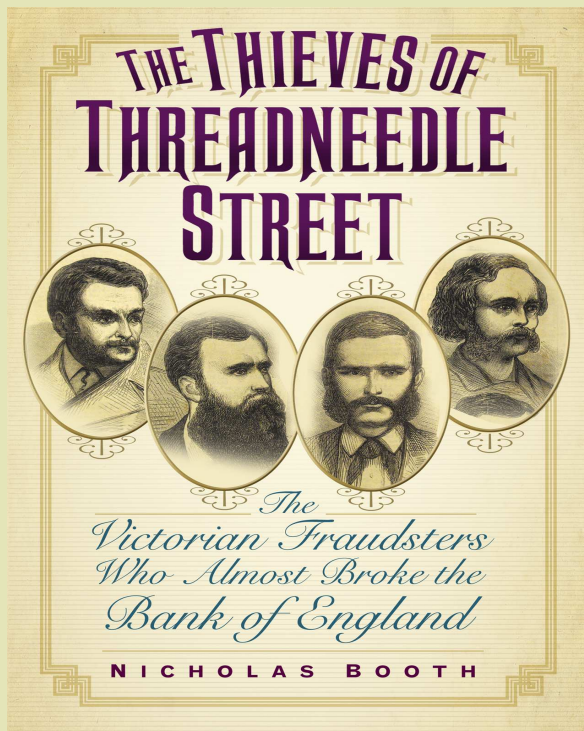
Unfortunately, the details of what was to become of most of the *Bojówki* have been lost to the ravages of time and the devastation of war, but the families of the Bezdany raiders will know what was to become of them, and will no doubt feel an unusual pride in having an armed robber in the family.

In many ways, this was *the* Great Train Robbery.

The meticulous planning, flawless delivery and successful escapes can only be held in great respect by crime aficionados, and the absence of any greed or bad intention means that for once, we can applaud the crime and its perpetrators.

# BOOK REVIEW

By Ruby Vitorino



*“A Promissory Note -or Bill of Exchange- is a financial instrument in which one party promises to pay a determinate sum of money to another at a fixed future time “*

*An accepted Note or Bill can be sold for early payment to a bank at less than its face value ('discounted'). The Bank will then collect the full value of the Note from the first party when the payment becomes due -which might be months hence. The Bank keeps the profit earned on the Note.*

*Alas! In the early 1870s it was not the custom of the Bank of England to verify the authenticity of the acceptances on each Note before buying them -so smug and secure felt the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street. She was laughably shallow, snobby, and greedy when faced with charming well-dressed American confidence tricksters brandishing forged Promissory Notes, 'worth' thousands of pounds, for sale every day....*

...inevitably, they were caught, and Nicholas Booth's brilliant and ultimately haunting book 'The Thieves of Threadneedle Street' is the woeful tale of “The Victorian Fraudsters Who Almost Broke the Bank of England”.

This is a good title for the book, for it is as much about the men behind the crime as it is about the crime itself. And as I read it, I got the distinct feeling that Booth had lived with them, and had gotten to know them well while writing about them. Perhaps the ghosts of the Bidwells needed Nicholas Booth, with the intelligence and sensitivity that he has, to tell their story?

The four who stood accused in The Old Bailey in 1873 were the Bidwell Brothers, (Austen and George), George Macdonnell, and Edwin Noyes Hills. And theirs was a cerebral crime.

There is a public fascination with 'cerebral crimes' - where no violence is used, and there are no readily identifiable victims to tug at the heart strings. It is easy to admire the cleverness of these men with their understanding of the international banking system, their skill in creating and passing forgeries, and their nerve in trying to swindle the Bank of England out of very large sums of money. There is always public sympathy for the underdog, and perhaps many people would have liked these four young men to have succeeded in a crime against a major institution. Everyone hates banks and bankers - don't they? - the latter perceived as almost heartless robbers themselves? So, Nicholas Booth had to tread a thin line in order to present us with an honest, rounded, portrait of the criminals - who were not very nice people once the shiny surface has been scratched, and not admirable at all (or at least, not before they sought redemption).

William Pinkerton was the famous detective who pursued Austen Bidwell to Cuba, and the book also tells his story. The Pinkerton Agency were Private Detectives specifically employed by banks to protect them from fraud (and as any 'Ripperologist' knows, Inspector Abberline famously headed the European branch of the Pinkerton Agency in the 1890s, after having worked on the Jack the Ripper case).

I have seen some of Nicholas Booth's publicity for this tome, and he has certainly promoted the Bidwell Gang as glamorous 'Oceans 11' style criminals. It is a good way to sell the story, and I don't think that Booth could have presented the thieves differently, since it is clear that their good looks, well-cut expensive clothes, personal charm, charisma, evident intelligence, and 'exoticness' (being American) were contributory factors in bamboozling the clerks of the Bank of England into accepting the forgeries.

Still, the thieves made silly mistakes that confounded commentators at the time. And why? Given the large amounts of money that the thieves had already amassed on the Continent and in South America, had they not used all their brains and talents to invest the money in honest schemes and make their fortunes that way? George Bidwell advised his brother, Austen - who was determined to marry an innocent woman - to do just that, but Austen preferred to stay loyal to the masculine camaraderie, and shared secret excitement of organised crime. The thieves may have had the intellectual capacities and imagination for swindling - but they were fools. To paraphrase Austen Bidwell 'I was a wise fool, not a foolish fool, but a fool'. Booth tells us that they didn't even seem to have enjoyed the money very much. Certainly they spent cash on themselves - Macdonnell was a dandy, and George Bidwell liked the equivalent of Victorian 'bling' jewellery, and enjoyed dressing up his mistress. They ate and drank well. However, they didn't live the high life, splashing their cash around. Hills lived like the clerk that he professed to be, coming home every evening to his mistress at his modest lodgings, even though he had bags of cash piling up in his room. Austin Bidwell said later that the money never had the same value as money that had been honestly earned (but that comment was coloured by bitter hindsight and a desire for rehabilitation).

What they all seem to have had in common, and which clearly contributed to their downfall, was a misogynistic



1 Austin Bidwell. 2 Geo. Macdonnell. 3 Officer. 4 Geo. Bidwell. 5 Officer. 6 Edward Hills. 7 Mr. Straight, Q.C.

MACDONNELL SPEAKING TO MR. STRAIGHT, Q.C.

attitude to women that bordered on contempt. (As they were practised confidence tricksters, women fell victim far too easily to earn their respect). They clearly never understood the quote 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned', although they had been warned about it by George Engels (an early member of the gang), who was alarmed by George Bidwell's burgeoning relationship with the young prostitute Nellie Vernon. Engels got out in time. Austen Bidwell (who hated Nellie, and vice versa), referred to her as a\*\*\*\*, and thought that she had talked to the Police, when he spoke of her after his arrest in Cuba. Probably, Nellie didn't know that George Bidwell was a serial womanizer, with his wife and children living in America, until she read it in the papers. Unless Austen had told her, that is. She apparently never knew that George had tried to get a message to her after going on the run. Tantalizingly, Nicholas Booth tells us that Nellie was pregnant when George left, but doesn't tell us what happened to her after the trial...for which I was sorry.

Austen Bidwell seems to have had a classic Virgin-and-Whore complex. The 'virgin' was the delicate blonde Jeannie Devereux, later described as "very good-looking and extremely simple...has been very little in society and knows very little of the ways of the world". She was straight from school. "Not at all Smart, but a thorough lady", was another conclusion. The good mannered, American

businessman - in his late twenties- "swept her off her feet", according to Booth, who portrays Jeannie as a heroine straight out of a silent movie. We almost expect Jeannie to end up tied across the railway line as Austen twirls his moustache. Jeannie seems all coloured in pink and white, whilst her mother (Austen's personal nemesis) is portrayed as a looming, handbag-wielding presence, who tried to stop her daughter marrying a man who confessed to using an alias, had a mysterious lifestyle, and large amounts of cash. Nicholas Booth seized upon Jeannie as a human victim of the fraud, in an effort to allay sympathy for Austen Bidwell. I confess that I thought that Jeannie was a typical woman in that she turned against Austen, not only because she discovered that he was a criminal but chiefly because the newspapers had falsely attributed his brother George's family to him, and she learned about Austen's relationship with Frances Grey from the papers. Frances Grey was the whore, of course, who had an affair with Austen Bidwell (with attendant love letters and tearful partings) under yet another alias. She knew him as 'Dorie' whilst she was working as a waitress in a bar on the notorious Haymarket. She believed that she was having a relationship with her 'Dorie' at exactly the same time (it later transpired) that he was courting his beloved Jeannie. Austen Bidwell might well have believed that he loved Jeannie - but the threats and menaces that he sent her as he was held prisoner,

because she refused to stand by him, show the true state of his emotions. He was a manipulative and controlling personality.

Edwin Noyes Hills seems the most stable, living an almost respectable life in Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, in lodgings with 'naïve' Miss Ellen Franklin. Sadly, he also used an alias and a tissue of lies throughout the relationship with Ellen, who was another prostitute. He would no doubt have abandoned her and left abruptly, had he not been arrested. It was through ignorance that Ellen testified that Hills had not only lied to her about his job, but he had been increasingly nervous in the time leading up to his arrest - a testimony that showed that Hills wasn't an innocent man 'used' by the gang (as he and they professed), but one of the villains.

The worst of them was George Macdonnell - a handsome, flamboyantly-dressed, brilliant forger, and one of the masterminds behind the whole operation. Nicholas Booth evidently did not like him, describing his massive ego as "overweening" or "overbearing". Macdonnell, in his guise as Austin Bidwell's Doctor, took Frances Grey as his mistress after Bidwell scarpereed - only to stand her up at Liverpool Docks, whilst he made his escape, alone, from the other end of the country. So there is no surprise at the glee with which Grey testified against him. However, the disdain with which Macdonnell treated his landlady takes the biscuit for me. Despite having thousands of pounds in cash, he was petty enough to leave his lodgings without paying the rent. This action resulted in a search of his room by his landlady, where she found some blotting paper which, when held up to a mirror, revealed that Macdonnell was one of the Bank of England fraudsters. It even showed his escape route.

The Thieves of Threadneedle Street' is a very moral tale, when all is said and done. Yes, we might marvel at the complicated and painstaking setting up of the crime, and the acting skills of the gang. Who could forget Austen Bidwell shaking the hand of the manager of The Western Branch of the Bank of England, and being offered sherry and biscuits? or the nerve of George Macdonnell when laundering gold in the bank which he has just robbed? But the outcome for all four of the convicted thieves leaves us in no doubt at all that crime does not pay. An Institution such as the Bank of England operates greatly upon trust, and when that trust is broken, and by Americans no less, then the vengeance has to be such as to wipe any sort of pride from their faces forever and ever.

Booth says that a "strange, stunned hush" spread over the Old Bailey as the sentence was passed. Austen Bidwell described the moment that he was given 'Life' as also "the moment the old judge solemnly condemned me to what was death". Austen was aged 28 at the time. "There was a low indescribable murmur of amazement... pervading awe". Nicholas Booth describes the 'head shaking over the verdict. Nobody had been killed, no one lost houses or livelihoods. Losses were recouped, most of the money retrieved' "The Primrose Way had come to an end" wrote Austen. The sentences were 'draconian' - not 'just' life...but with 'hard labour', although, had the punishment been light, the thieves would surely have continued to conduct their lives dishonestly. Still, Pope's famous line "to break a butterfly upon a wheel" seems very apt.

Austen spent 18 years in Chatham Prison, on a starvation diet: 5oz bread, 5oz meat a day, and soup on 5 days. He weighed just over 9 stone on release. His body weight must have been mostly muscle as he dug in the "mud, mud, everywhere" of the docks. His face was florid and he spoke like a ventriloquist without a dummy - a trick learned so not to attract the attention of the guards, we're told. He read the bible and preached sermons to himself. As for being a 'lady's man' that side of his life was over: "I had gone into prison a vigorous young man ...I came out worn down, youth was gone, middle age fading, old age seemed settling down on me".

George Bidwell refused to do hard labour in prison - and consequently spent most of his time lying down, in Dartmoor Prison, attached to a ball and chain, his hips and knees wasted, and his muscles atrophied. He made two suicide attempts and for a long time "never saw blue sky, sun, nor twinkling stars". Mrs George Bidwell, "That Noble Woman" actually stuck by her husband.

Both Hills and Macdonnell were left with mental health issues. Hills was described (perhaps unjustly) as a "snowy haired, hopeless though perfectly harmless idiot". Mac's face was ravaged and he became a homeless petty criminal.

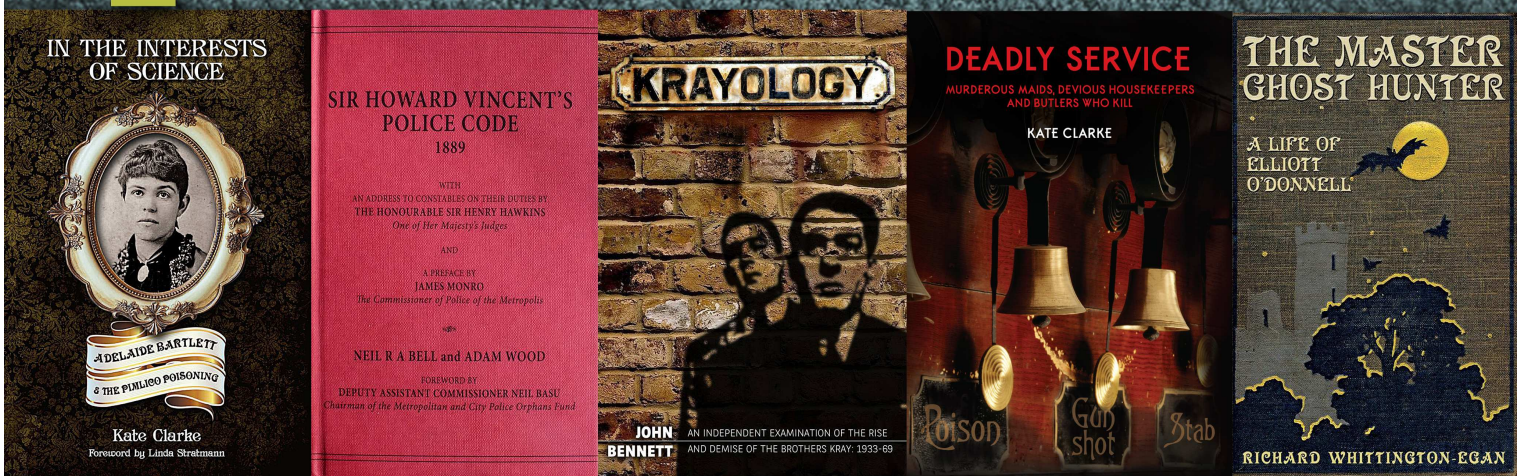
I was interested to learn that both of the Bidwell brothers were literary with George writing poetry in prison. Both of them tried to run an 'anti crime' magazine called 'The Crusader' on his release, and both produced memoirs. As it happens, one of their brothers, Benson Bidwell (who was convicted of confidence trickery) wrote a 'fantasy' novel, which is now much sought after, called 'The Flying Cows of Biloxi'. I found it almost unbearably tragic to learn that the lecture tour that the Bidwell Brothers had undertaken after their release, and the sale of 'The Crusader' (which were both attempts to earn honest money, and by telling their story show that crime really didn't pay), came to nothing. It came to nothing because the Great Bank of England Fraud was yesterday's news. What was so heinous a crime that it merited the most severe sufferings being inflicted one day, left the world indifferent the next.

This is a book which might be used as a reference book in many ways, as well as being a cracking tale. But ultimately it leaves you with the un-quiet voices and the restless souls of the Bidwell Brothers, who died paupers within two weeks of each other. I thoroughly recommend Nicholas Booth's book, *The Thieves of Threadneedle Street*, particularly if you are contemplating a life of crime!

**Nicholas Booth will be appearing at the Ripperologist 21st Birthday Party & Casebook: Classic Crime London Conference this September. Full details will appear soon on our website at:- <http://www.ripconference.com/>**

**Please go to the website for payment details & regular updates!**

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# and things that go bump in the night.



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