

Whodunnit?

If you look at the number of crime shows on TV, you can tell we all love a good murder mystery. We all want to beat Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot at their own game! Well, today we had our chance. Ian Morgan took us through a true crime mystery from the 19th century which he invited us to solve by giving us all the evidence from the time. Ian is an expert on the history of crime and punishment and a published author on the subject, not to mention his numerous radio and TV appearances

Even in Victorian times, whodunnits were popular in the form of Penny Dreadfuls like *Black Bess*. However, these were often believed by the public to be factual, thus trial by media was slowly evolving and affecting people's judgement. Was this the case for Henry Wright? This was Inspector Hopkinson's case-and a gruesome one it was too!

Mary Reynolds was a widow and took in lodgers, one being Henry Wright. Also in the house at the time of the crime were her stepson, George Reynolds, her two teenage boys Charles and William and her two toddler grandchildren, William and Robert. At 1 50am on the first of August 1885, Inspector Hopkinson was awakened by a hammering on the door. On opening it, he found Henry Wright holding little Robert who appeared to be on fire. Henry's own throat was badly gouged. Hopkinson sent for the doctor to treat the child and summoned help. They found Mary's house ablaze and the entrances blocked. They managed to rescue George from an upper window, but the other inhabitants were all found dead. Henry, whose throat had been treated, admitted to killing them all!

It took Sansom and his fire crew 7 hours to put out the blaze. Wright was taken to the infirmary where he was deemed to be "not quite right." By now the case was national news. The jury at the inquest was shown the bodies of the victims and the crime scene and found Wright to be "responsible." This led to him eventually being brought to trial. His defence was "homicidal mania" as it was shown that his personality had changed after a childhood accident and the death of his mother. He was also prone to drink. Add to this the seizures he had and you have a very disturbed individual. You would like to think that now we would be more understanding of his issues, but then he was found guilty and subsequently hanged. The fact people brought picnics to his trial was shocking. How can the fate of another man's life be treated as entertainment?

The mystery does not end there, however. No-one who attended that crime scene was unaffected. They even had to replace the fire engine and horses! Only two people did not die young or mysteriously, but they were removed from their duties due to erratic behaviour. What would have been our verdict today? Surely he would have been placed in a secure facility where he would receive treatment? His confession and the public furore were the key factors in his fate, I think.

Some things never change. Look at Prince Harry's continuing battle with media intrusion or how damaged individuals still wreak havoc on innocent lives as at Southport. Over a century later and it's same old, same old. Thank you, Ian, for helping us to exercise our "little grey cells" to try and understand the actions of this damaged man and an even more damaged legal system..

Barbara Pearce

