

A Walthamstow Murder

Walthamstow in the 21st century

Today, Walthamstow is a densely populated outer London Borough with a diverse multi cultural community. It is located in an area where the land rises steadily up from the River Lea marshes to Epping Forest. Today, both of these areas are playgrounds for Londoners. The marshes are part of the Lea Valley Park and Epping Forest is managed by the City of London. It has a well developed transport system with easy access to motorways, overground and underground railways and a central bus hub.

Our local geographical knowledge of the Borough is largely governed by our GPS devices. We know that, on one side, it is bounded by the River Lea and on the other by Epping Forest. But, because it is largely covered by buildings and concrete and because we travel everywhere by car or public transport, generally, we are not aware of the topography of the surrounding terrain .

Walthamstow in the 18th century

For us in the 21st century, it is very difficult to imagine what Walthamstow was like in 1750. Then, it was a collection of small Essex hamlets at Hale End, Wood Street, Chapel End, Church End and Higham Hill. These were linked by a network of unmade roads along which were scattered dwellings. In the entire Parish, there were less than two thousand people who lived in the three hundred dwellings that made up the Parish of St Mary, Walthamstow.

Transport

Two main highways ran from London across the River Lea by bridge and ferry. These were the road that went from Hackney across the River Lea toll bridge to Epping Forest via Phipps Cross (Whipps Cross) to Wanstead. The other main highway came from Tottenham and crossed the River Lea at the Ferry Boat Inn. From there it was called Mill Lane becoming Clay Street, Prior Street and then Hagger Lane (All now named Forest Road) before it went into the Forest at Woodford and continued on to Epping.

The main east-west road went from Waltham Holy Cross to Stratford and heavy goods were sent from the River Thames along the River Lea to the cotton, flour and gunpowder mills that were situated along its banks. The River Lea marsh spread out for nearly half a mile. There were also roads that linked Chingford to Walthamstow. One of these, went along the line of the forest and the other went along the edge of the River Lea marshes.

Working Life

At the bottom of the social structure were the landless labourers who worked on large farms, especially in summer; in winter they were often out of work. Life for working people was very hard. They rose at daybreak and worked hard until dark. They lived in small overcrowded cottages that were lit by rush lights and smelly tallow candles. They drank small beer because the water wasn't safe to drink. Their toilets were privies at the back of the cottage. Water was drawn from a well. When it rained they walked through ankle high mud. Their food was bland and monotonous and mainly consisted of bread, root vegetables and potage with occasional fish and meat.

Killer diseases such as smallpox, dysentery, consumption, and typhus were widespread. The conditions of women were difficult. They did not have many rights and were financially dependent on their husbands or families. An average wife spent some 15 years either in a state of pregnancy or in nursing a child for the first year of its life. People worked an average of 80 hours each week, the average life expectancy was 37 years.

Footpads and Highway Men

The people who lived in the Parish of St Mary, Walthamstow were very aware of the topography of the area. Whether they were poor and walked everywhere or whether they were rich and rode in coaches, they were very conscious of every hill and rut in the road. They knew the marshes and river Lea because these were a major obstacle to travel. They knew the forest because in it lurked poachers who blacked their faces to avoid recognition. There too, were footpads like the *Gregory* gang and highway men. It was a little more than ten years earlier that, in nearby Loughton, the criminal, *Dick Turpin*, had tortured an old lady by roasting her over a fire to get her tell him where she kept her valuables.

London Merchants, Bankers and Public Officials.

The area had a number of large houses that were mainly occupied by London merchants, bankers and public officials. Their well-tended gardens and parks were set in a landscape of farmland, forest, and marsh. The main village had developed around St. Mary's church at Church End, where close to the church was an Alms house, a school and a workhouse.

England in 1751

In 1751, England was enjoying one of its rare periods of peace. Only men with money and property rights could vote and it was the time just before the beginning of the Industrial revolution with all the consequent resulting upheaval.

Sixty seven year old King George II was on the throne. He had been born in Germany and spoke French as his first language and German as his second language. He also spoke some English

and Italian. He married Caroline of Ansbach and they had eight children. In 1751, he had been king for twenty four years. He spend his leisure hours stag-hunting on horseback or playing cards. In 1751, his oldest son died and the heir to the throne became George, his eldest son.

The Murder of Joseph Jeffries

Like many other merchants, Joseph Jeffries earned his living as a butcher in overcrowded, stinking and noisy London and lived in a nice well appointed house in the rural Essex village of Walthamstow.

He was a wealthy, childless man and when his brother died, he adopted his brother's five year old daughter Elizabeth and took her into his house. He brought her up as his own daughter and when she became a young woman, she was his housekeeper. Joseph made his will in her favour and bequeathed to her, subject to her good behaviour, nearly his entire estate.

In her teenage years, Elizabeth seems to have become a precocious young lady and had several liaisons with local young men. (There is also a suggestion that Joseph had sexually molested her when she was fifteen years old) As a result of what he perceived to be her immoral behaviour , Joseph threatened to change his will and disinherit her.

Sometime in June 1751, twenty one year old Elizabeth began an affair with John Swan, her uncle's general servant. Joseph became aware of this and there was an increasing real possibility that he would carry out his threat to cut her out of his will.

For Elizabeth and her lover this situation was a potential disaster. She was a well brought up middle class young woman who would have great difficulty in supporting herself if her uncle threw her out without a penny. Her working class lover would be dismissed and would not be able to get a local job. Both of them, either individually or together, would be forced to leave Walthamstow to seek accommodation and work in London.

Conspiracy To Murder

In this situation they decided that they would murder Joseph Jeffries and make it appear that he had been killed by a burglar. Their opportunity came when near end of June, Joseph Jeffries met a man named Matthews who had just arrived in the area from Yorkshire and offered him temporary employment as a gardening assistant to John Swan.

After Matthews had been at work for four days he was sent upstairs by Elizabeth Jeffries to wipe a chest of drawers. She followed him and asked him if he was willing to earn one hundred pounds. He replied that he was, *"In an honest way"* .She told him to go to John Swan and they met in the garden. John Swan offered him seven hundred pounds to murder their master and he agreed to do the deed.

Joseph Jeffries dismissed him two days later but the plot was still alive and John Swan gave him half-a-guinea to buy a pair of pistols and he was instructed to meet Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swan at Walthamstow on the Tuesday following (July 3rd) at ten o'clock at night when they would commit the murder. It seems likely that this was an attempt to procure weapons that would not be traced back to them.

A Weak Link

It was at this point that a major problem occurred. Matthews was obviously a weak and stupid man and spent the money that he had been given getting drunk at the Green Man at Phipps Cross (Whipps Cross) Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swan were furious that Matthews hadn't bought the pistols but still went ahead with the plot. They obviously needed a third person involved who could be blamed for the burglary and murder.

A Wicked Murder Most Foul

Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swan had worked out a plan where they would both pretend to have been in their own rooms at the time of the shooting. They first staged what was to appear to be a botched robbery by hiding some plate and silver in a sack downstairs. Later that evening they would raise the alarm and claim that Mr. Jeffries had been robbed and murdered by an intruder.

Matthews went to the house on the night of July 3rd. When he arrived he found the garden door on the latch. He went into the pantry and hid himself behind a tub till about eleven o'clock, when John Swan brought him some cold boiled beef.

About twelve midnight Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swan came to him and Swan said *"Now it is time to knock the old miser, my master, on the head."* But Matthews relented and said: *"I cannot find it in my heart to do it."* Elizabeth Jeffries then immediately replied: *"You may be damned for a villain, for not performing your promise!"* John Swan, who was provided with pistols, also loudly abused him, and said he had a mind to blow his brains out for the refusal.

John Swan then produced a book, and insisted that Matthews should swear on his life that he would not disclose what had occurred. Matthews agreed to this with the caveat that, *"Unless it was to save his own life."* Soon after this, Matthews heard the report of a pistol. He left the house by the back way, crossed the ferry and made his way to Enfield Chase.

Elizabeth Jeffries, Arrested, Released and Re-Arrested

Immediately afterwards, Elizabeth Jeffries appeared at the door of the house and called out for assistance. Some of the neighbours responded went in the house where they found Joseph Jeffries dying but they were unable to discover anything which could lead to the supposition of any person having quitted the house.

There wasn't any sign of a forced entry to the house and initially the authorities arrested Elizabeth Jeffries. She pointed the finger at Matthews and an unsuccessful search for him was instituted

However, they couldn't produce any evidence against her and she was released. Upon release she took control of her uncle's assets and began spending them. In the meantime Matthews was located and in order to save his own neck gave a full statement of events. On receipt of this information Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swan were arrested and committed to Chelmsford prison for trial at the next Assizes.

Trial At The Essex Assizes

The trial of Elizabeth Jeffries' and John Swan began eight months later, on March 10, 1752 at the Essex Assizes, before Mr Justice Wright. Matthews was the principal witness for the prosecution and both were found guilty. The Crown counsel summed up Elizabeth's motive for killing her uncle thus *"To alter his will, if she did not alter her conduct."*

As John Swan was a servant of Joseph Jeffries he was convicted of Petty Treason "For the cruel and wicked murder of his late master". Elizabeth Jeffries was convicted *"Of aiding, helping, assisting, comforting and maintaining the said John Swan to commit the murder"*. Both of them were sentenced to hang.

The Execution of Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swann

The execution procession left Chelmsford Gaol at 4 a.m. on the morning of Saturday the 28th of March, with Elizabeth Jeffries riding in a cart sitting on her own coffin and accompanied by the hangman. Because John Swan had been convicted of Petty Treason he was drawn along behind, tied to a sledge, which was a mandatory part of the punishment for that crime. The execution party were escorted by a troop of javelin men and the procession was led by the Under Sheriff of Essex. On arrival at the gallows, which was near the sixth milestone in Epping Forest by Phipps Cross (Whipps Cross) some 23 miles and perhaps 8-9 hours away from Chelmsford, John Swan was made to get up into the cart with Elizabeth Jeffries and stand beside her.

A huge crowd assembled to witness the proceedings. The prisoners did not communicate with one another at all, not even by glance, in the cart. Elizabeth Jeffries was made to stand on a chair as she was of small stature (5ft 1") and fainted several times as she was being prepared for the noose. It was reported that both confessed their guilt and justice of their sentences to a member of the jury who questioned them before they were hanged. After they had hung for the requisite time both bodies were taken down. Elizabeth Jeffries corpse was taken away in a hearse to be delivered to her friends for burial. John Swan's corpse was hung in chains in another part of the Forest near the Bald Faced Stag Inn, in Chigwell, Essex, as a warning to others.

Aftermath – Some Notes and Comments

I have read extensively in an attempt to get to know and understand Walthamstow in this period. Although I've learnt a lot about the merchants and land owners who lived in the big houses, there is very little available about the ordinary people who worked in the houses, toiled in the fields and carried out the crafts and services to sustain life in the Walthamstow hamlets

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This all happened nearly three hundred years ago. Unfortunately, we don't know the location of John Jeffries house but from the available clues it probably was in the Wood Street area.

In the 18th century Walthamstow was part of Essex and the centre of justice was the Essex Assizes at Chelmsford. Joseph Jeffries was murdered during the time of the 1751 Assize and Elizabeth Jeffries and John Swan were held for trial until the 1752 Assize.

Because John Swan was a servant he didn't get to ride on the death cart. He was placed head to the ground on a sledge which was a hurdle, or wooden panel, and drawn by horse to the place of execution.

Later in the 19th century, 'hanging' meant that a rope was placed around the victim's neck on a raised platform and the victim was suddenly dropped through a trapdoor breaking his/her neck. However, in the 18th century 'hanging' meant that victim was strangled to death by the noose.

There would have been a huge turn-out of Walthamstow people for the execution of Jeffries and Swan as it was a local murder and they were executed at nearby Whipps Cross.

Sorry – No relevant pictures available!

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July 2014