



ROUGH JUSTICE FOR 'LITTLE ABEL'

I am sure that most people walking along the Icknield Way would have occasionally thought about the route in bygone years, speculation prompted by the historical notes in the Walker's Guidebook or perhaps from reading memorials in churches. One such event is recorded as a brief footnote on the pages concerning the route at Strethall. So let's go back to the middle of the 19th century and look at the area around there.

At that time, the area was covered by its own policeman, Constable No. 55, one William Miller of Elmdon. At nearby Newport was the Essex Divisional police station and its commander, Superintendent John Clarke. There was no inspector and sergeants would not be invented for another six years. The largest local town (in Essex) was Saffron Walden which had a High Constable. The main highway in the area (later to become the A11) ran from Bishops Stortford to Cambridge and Newmarket, passing through Newport. The arrival of the railway lay another 25 years into the future.

As a main thoroughfare, the road through Newport was also sometimes used by Superintendent Barnes of the Hertfordshire Constabulary, both constabularies being in communication with the Chief Constables of various smaller police forces in the fenland from time to time. Although the population was solidly agricultural, a class of itinerants, pea-and potato-pickers, gypsies and gangs of criminals also used the main highway and some were well-known to the police.

Upon a knoll, from which on a clear day Ely Cathedral could be seen, is the tiny Strethall Church. Nearby, at Strethall Hall, lived Nehemiah Perry, his brother Thomas and their housekeeper. Four fields away at Catmore End lived Nehemiah's divorced gypsy wife. Her family had never forgiven Perry for the divorce and, ever since their horses had been poisoned, the elderly brothers took with them to bed each night a number of loaded weapons.

On the night of Wednesday 28th February 1849, they went to bed at 10pm but, at 1am, Nehemiah awoke to the sound of someone entering the ground floor of the hall. He woke his brother calling out 'Hall's open Master Thomas, there's something up'. They armed themselves and waited at the top of the stairs. Round the bend in the stairway came a figure carrying a dark 'lanthorn' (an old word for a lantern). It was a man with a sacking mask over his face. By the light of his lamp he saw the ambush and 'with dreadful imprecations' called to his companions to bring pistols.

Reckoning that this constituted a threat to his life, Nehemiah fired and the figure fell. The brothers also dropped to the floor and lay still for hours until it became light and their housekeeper arrived. They had heard the fallen burglar being dragged off but did not hear anyone else leave the house. They inched their way downstairs and on the ground floor found a dead man, shot through the chest. There were signs that a gang had been involved and the constabulary at Newport was summoned, thus allowing Constable Miller to begin his investigation.

News travelled fast and soon the whole village (about 20 persons) came to view the body which, by this time, had been propped up against a wall – forensic considerations being rather few in the mid 19th century. The police put their heads together and soon came up with a couple of suspects already in their lock-up. Technical evidence was gathered, such as that the dead man's socks were darned with a similar blue yarn found on William Goody and William Palmer (presumably those men in the lock-up). These men were later tried for the crime.

The newspaper continued: 'Various officers and others have seen the body of the dead man. Indeed, hundreds of persons have visited the place but no-one has been able to identify him, although some assert that he has been seen in the neighbourhood during the past year with a nut-stall and target. His countenance is of a very forbidding kind and his head bears a general resemblance to that of Daniel Good, who was hung for murder some time before in London. (Presumably this would nowadays constitute a cast-iron alibi!) Some silver and several false keys were found in his pocket. He appears to be about 30 years of age, 5'4" in height with a sallow complexion and dark hair. He appears to have been quite clean shaved within a short time of his death. His right eye-tooth is missing. He had on a white shirt, black and white neckerchief, one white stocking, blucher boots tied in three holes, cord trousers, a drab cloth double-breasted waistcoat, a stout blue cloth coat with pockets inside and a black Paris felt hat apparently bought in Peterborough. A large pair of worsted stockings was drawn over his shoes and this plan seems to have been adopted by the whole gang'.

The next problem was one of hygiene, as the body had still not been identified. The coroner gave the Essex Constabulary his permission to leave the body unburied. It was then placed in the belfry of Strethall Church where the practical Nehemiah charged threepence for gawpers to view it. Finally, Benjamin Taylor, the Chief Constable from Peterborough, made an identification aided by marks and details from gaol records. The corpse was in fact Abraham Green, alias Woods, alias 'Little Abel', a ne'er-do-well known throughout East Anglia.

The body was quickly taken down and packed into a game basket. Bodies for dissection by surgeons were at a premium and Little Abel was sent to the future Sir George Paget at Cambridge with a cryptic note: "Dear Dr Paget, I have shot a burglar. N.Perry"

Already, a Mr Ward of Saffron Walden had fashioned three death masks from Little Abel's battered features. One is at Cambridge, another in Saffron Walden Museum. The third was nailed above the windows of the farmhouse about twenty miles away and there it remains to this day. His breastbone was at one time on display to the anatomy classes for medical students at Cambridge.

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