

Wokingham Remembers

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OUR PAST

A tale of madness and death from a dark forest

This week's contributor is Roger Long, our very own celebrated historian, a world traveller and master raconteur. Roger has sold thousands of books on Berkshire which tell terrifying tales of all things that went and even still do go bump in the night. Set near his home town of Crowthorne, Roger tells us a strange tale of madness and death from the October of 1883.



In the May of 1883, a courting couple strolling in the Broadmoor woods near Crutchley Park, were surprised to hear cries of help coming from a tree. On inspection they discovered a man trapped in the branches. After much assistance supplied by the young man, the gentleman was released from his predicament. He had been lodged in the 'V' of the tree for three days with no sustenance whatsoever.

The thankful beneficiary was conducted to the Crispin public house on the outskirts of the woods and from here (having no visible means of support) to Easthampstead Workhouse.

During the three days from May 20 to 23, whilst he enjoyed the hospitality of the Workhouse, the gentleman's rather mysterious past was checked. He turned out to be a Mr James Henderson of Katesgrove Road in Reading.

Henderson, aged 49, was a widower with two fairly young daughters. He was known to be somewhat eccentric, a self-styled preacher who travelled the country spouting his own rather radical interpretation of the gospels and delivering them from the tops of trees. Henderson signed himself out of the Workhouse after receiving a 'new' set of clothes.

In October of the same year a labourer, Robert Cole, was travelling through the woods from Roundshill to the Crowthorne Inn.

It was just about 12 noon when Cole passed through Hagthorn, a most dark and depressing part of the forest. It was there that he came upon a highly decomposed corpse under a fallen tree.

The young labourer sprinted to Crowthorne where he gabbled his story to an acquaintance. A police officer was fetched and the three returned to Hagthorn with a barrow. Under the officer's instruction, the rotting body was transported to the Crowthorne Inn where it lay in state overnight awaiting the investigative powers of Mr W Weedon, the local coroner.

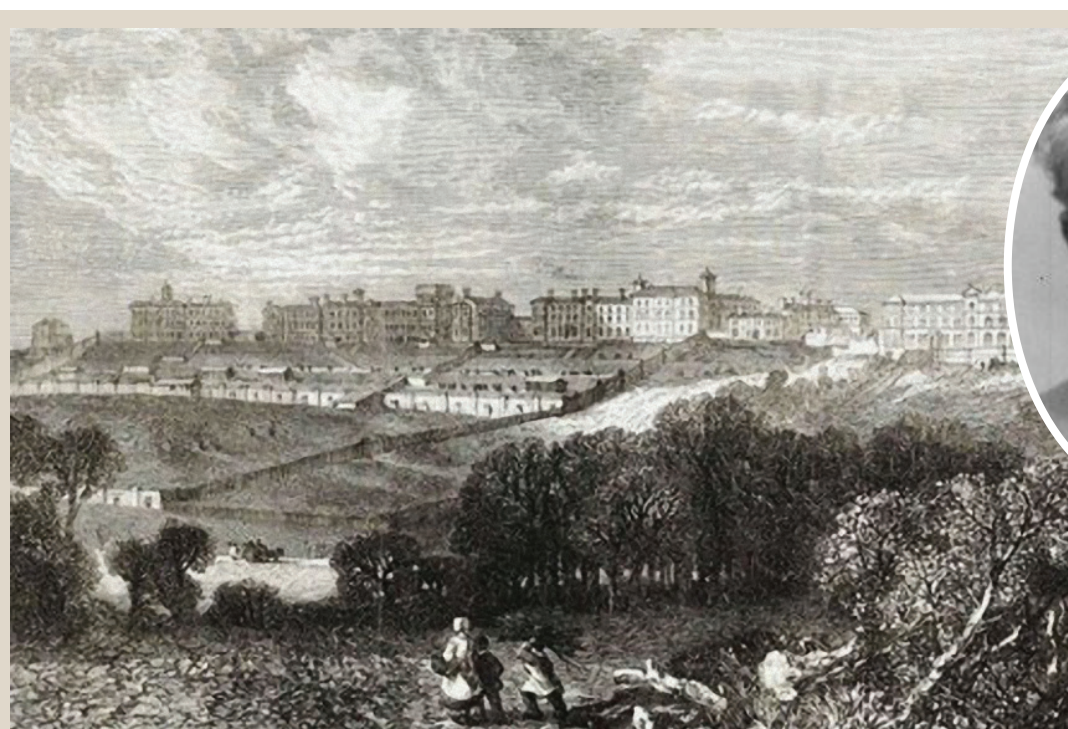
One can imagine the landlord's reluctance to host such an unpalatable guest; pubs were always used for autopsies and as in this case the stench was horrific, not good for trade.

The corpse was finally identified as the same James Henderson, the unenviable task falling to one J P MacNillance of Easthampstead Union (Workhouse). MacNillance was able to recognise the blue overalls as being those he had allocated to Henderson in May.

The cause of Henderson's death will never be known. The Coroner, Mr Weedon, stated that the remains were far too decomposed for even the most general analysis. Suicide, murder or accident, but certainly not natural causes as Henderson was only 49 and said to be fit when he left the Workhouse in May. The Henderson demise will remain one of Crowthorne's unsolved mysteries.

Incidentally, Hagthorn had already been the site of two suicides, one exactly 50 years before the Henderson case. Similarly the body was not discovered for nearly a year later.

By this time the rope with which the man had hanged himself had disintegrated, causing the Coroners Court further problems.



John Staffon, above, escaped from Broadmoor (left) in 1851 and murdered Mary Bowyer, 5. Below, Broadmoor patient Dr William Minor who contributed to the Oxford English Dictionary.

VILLAGE HISTORY

The village of Crowthorne, in parts

Crowthorne is a relatively young member of the western side of the Middle Berkshire network of communities. Its strong village centre supports a sense of identity of which residents such as Roger Long are understandably proud. Here are some points of interest about its forest identity:

■ Crowthorne developed from the building of Broadmoor Hospital and Wellington College during the 1850s and 1860s.

■ There is a tunnel running from Crowthorne Station to the grounds of Wellington College. It was built to protect the students from the nefarious approaches of those people of the forest.

■ One of the greatest contributors to the compilation of the Oxford English Dictionary was a Dr William Minor, a homicidal lunatic and resident of Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

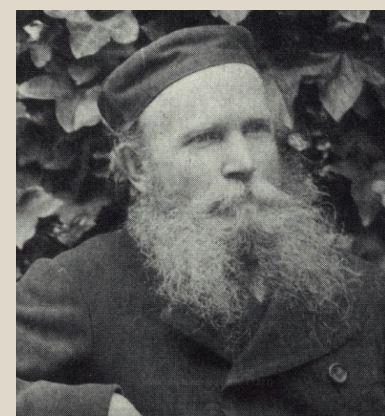
■ Prior to Crowthorne's development in the 1860s the land was a forest inhabited by the poor, the rejected and those who lived outside of the law. As Crowthorne developed as a village, the Dean of Sarum in 1864 decided upon building a chapel of ease to bring

Christianity into this dark forest.

■ The local forest dwellers had little opportunity to earn a living beyond what could be provided by the land. Families began to cut away twigs and branches and from these materials made brooms which eventually became so popular they were supplied to Reading and even as far as Bristol. These families were called the 'Broomdashers'

■ 'Nine Mile Ride' is a road which acquired its name from George III who would ride in small carriages to hunt the deer of Windsor Forest. Queen Anne, a particularly avid huntress, swapped the saddle for the carriage as weight and gout beset her later years. Her enthusiasm for the hunt was unwavering and also exhausting for the court members who accompanied her.

■ The siren which is tested at 10am each Monday morning comes from Broadmoor Hospital in Crowthorne. It is to be used as a warning to the local community if a patient escapes from the hospital. This additional security measure followed John Staffon's escape from Broadmoor in 1951, which resulted in his murder of five year old Mary Bowyer.



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