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OUR PAST

Did Rosa kill her baby or was it the Forest Road?

This week local historian ROGER LONG tells of the mysterious story of Rosa Rose, accused of murdering her son and a case investigated by Mr Leveson Gower JP to assess if there was a case to answer. The drama unfolded along the Forest Road, which ran through his large estate of Bill Hill.



THE story starts in Reading... Rosa Rose, an attractive girl of twenty six, gave birth to her second illegitimate child in early December 1869. Rosa was staying with a Mrs Emily Hearne and her daughter in Church Street Reading.

The birth had been traumatic and Rosa had become weak and thin, but nevertheless, the baby boy survived and Rosa decided he was to be called John Rose.

In spite of being unwell, Rosa decided to visit her mother in Warfield and the Forest Road would help her trek the required 12-mile walk. The route could be precarious, but the road itself was in decent condition and there were established houses (including Bill Hill) along the way if she encountered any problems.

Mrs Hearne was concerned because Rosa and her mother suffered a poor relationship, but nevertheless encouraged the reunion.

Rosa walks the Forest Road

On the Friday of 17th December, Mrs Hearne, a nurse fought through the awful wet and blustery weather to visit a patient in her care.

The visit was interrupted when her daughter Alice rushed in to say that Rosa had returned and was in an awful state. Mrs Hearne made her way back to her home to see Rosa, but not before Alice had blurted out "Mummy, little Johnny is dead".

The sight that met Mrs Hearne at home was distressing indeed. Rosa was standing in the hall motionless, soaking wet and still holding onto the body of her son. Events then moved quickly. Mrs Hearne, having ascertained that baby John was dead called Mr Muggeridge, the local doctor. He arrived and following a few checks decided the baby had died by drowning (correctly) and called the police.

Rosa muttered "I fell in a ditch with him last night". Rosa was arrested and arrived at Reading Gaol still exhausted from childbirth, the recent journey and the immediate loss of her son.

Magistrate John Leveson Gower of Bill Hill, was required to investigate the case prior to the court hearing and was an excellent choice due to his local knowledge of the area. Rosa would have walked the Forest Road during her journey to see her mother and by twist of fate, passed through Mr Leveson Gower's Bill Hill estate.

Rosa arrives at the Stag and Hounds to rest

Rosa explained how she left Mrs Hearne's house on the 16th December and returned the next day. Rosa said she could not afford the coach fare and decided to walk the 12 miles to her mother's house; a decision foolish in the extreme given her poor condition and the day's appalling weather.

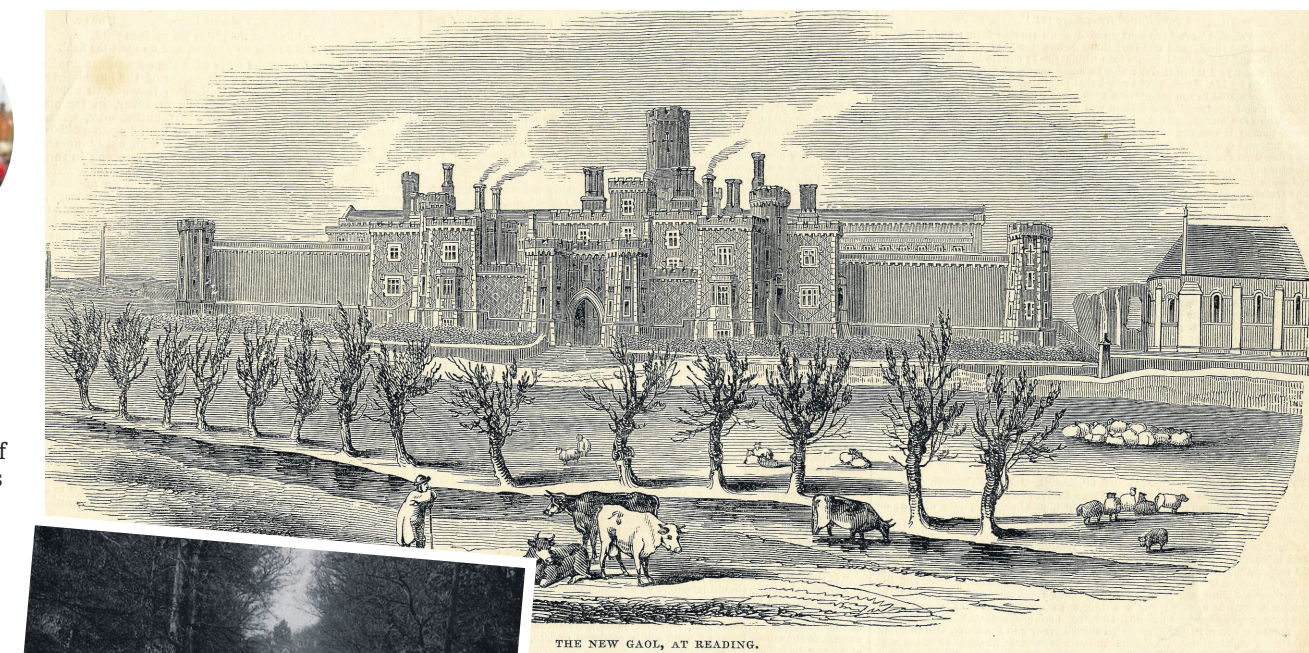
Rosa passed though Binfield and arrived at the Stag and Hounds public house at around 4.30pm and was met by the publican, Harriet Roberts. She told Justice Leveson Gower that Rosa had requested brandy but advised her to take a pot of tea given her distressing condition. By this time it was already dark outside.

Rosa continued her journey over the Cut at Pitts Bridge and towards Warfield, arriving by early evening according to witness George Lamb. He saw Rosa knock on her mother's door and when it was unanswered, left to return on the road on which she arrived.

Darkness, confusion and death

Rosa stated that she became disorientated in the dark and lost the road falling into a number of ditches. She found a hut to stay the night and strangely stated that "I think I could hear the baby murmuring outside the shed, but I could not be sure. I was too exhausted to move".

She fell asleep and waking later with drenched skin she found John and believed him (rightly) to be dead. Carrying the baby towards the road she



Rosa Rose stopped at the Stag and Hounds before continuing her journey. She was later sent to Reading Gaol while her case was considered.



tripped over her petticoat several times and therefore discarded it. The police later found the petticoat and it was measured to be less than 200 yards from her mother's house and 80 yards from the nearest path.

Mr Leveson Gower asked if she had seen her mother at all during her visit and when Rosa answered in the negative, he asked her if she was upset about the baby why did she not go back the 200 yards to her mother's house rather than the 12 miles to her friends? Rosa's response was that she was disorientated and that her friend Mr Hearne was very much like a mother to her.

This was a strange account of Rosa's 24 hours; how could she leave her son outside of the hut? Why too exhausted to bring him out of the rain, but later able to walk the return journey? Why did she not go back to her mother's house just a few hundred yards away rather than the 12-mile hike back to Reading? Strangest of all when the police went through her personal belongings at the time of her arrest, she was found to have 19 shillings and sixpence in her pocket. This was a

large sum at a time when wages for the working man was approximately £15 per annum and could have provided a coach ride 50 times over

How did she come across this amount of money? Unsurprisingly Mr Leveson Gower decided there was a case to answer and Rosa was sent to trial for the murder of her son John Rose.

Was she found guilty? The trial was never heard as the judge considering the proceedings simply believed her story and Rosa walked free.

A strange end to a strange tale, but

the story provides a strong picture of the Forest Road and the precarious nature of life in the mid-Victorian period.

We find it hard to believe someone can become disorientated so easily, but today we rarely experience true darkness or the complete absence of light at night time. The moors around this part of Berkshire even today can be a barren place, where the ground can be solid at one point and then quickly becomes a sodden bog.

So be warned when venturing into this Dark.

Bill Hill on Forest Road

LAST week, we met some of the prominent personalities who lived around Emmbrook, Hurst and Binfield in the second half of the 19th century.

One of them was John Leveson Gower, a lawyer and magistrate who lived at Bill Hill, a large house situated next to the Forest Road.

The Leveson Gower family included Dukes, Lords and Countesses and, like others of great privilege in the area, he ensured a connection with the community, supporting local needs as they arose.



Bill Hill House in Forest Road.
Picture courtesy of berkshirehistory.com

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