The Jury on the body, sat and gave their verdict in these terms –
'They found as how that certain slugs had sent him to the worms'
Voyagers travelling north on the M11 motorway may gaze from their near side windows and view the north-west corner of Essex as a series of seemingly endless hillocks looking down on the plain of Duxford. They form an enclave to the north Cambridge, to the west Hertfordshire. This tiny enclosure has its own bizarre story.

A century and a half ago the area had its own policeman, Constable 55 William Miller of Elmden. At near-by Newport was the Essex Constabulary Divisional 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 was Saffron Walden, whose High Constable William Camplin had himself but a few weeks to live. But, that is another story.

The great highway (which was later to become the A11 road) ran from Bishops Stortford to Newmarket and Cambridge, passing through Newport. Because of the ease of travel it was also a route used by Superintendent Barnes of the Hertfordshire Constabulary. Both constabularies were in communication with the Chief Constables of various smaller police forces in the fenlands.

Although the population was solidly agricultural, a class of itinerants, pea-pickers, gipsies and some gangs of criminals moved up and down the trunk road and were known to police.

Upon a knoll, from which on a clear day you can see Ely Cathedral, is the tiny Strethall church. Nearby, in Strethall Hall lived Nehemiah Perry, his brother Thomas and their house-keeper. Four fields away, at Catmore End, lived Nehemiah's divorced gipsy wife. Her family had never forgiven Perry for the divorce and, after his 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 their beds at 10pm. At 1am Nehemiah awoke to the sound of someone entering the ground floor of the hall.

He woke his brother calling out "Hallsop, 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. It was a man with a sacking mask on 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 flat and lay still for four hours until it was light, and their horsekeeper arrived. They heard the fallen burglar dragged off but did not hear anyone leave the house. They inched their way through the house until, on the ground floor they found a dead man, shot through the breastbone. There were signs that a gang was involved and the constabulary at Newport were summoned. Constable Miller began his investigation.

News carried fast and soon the whole village (20 persons) came to view the body. Forensic considerations were few and people then came from far and wide to trample round the corpse, which Clarke had sat up against a wall. The Superintendents put their heads together and soon had a
A couple of suspects in their lock-up. Technical evidence was gathered, such as the dead man's socks being darned with a similar blue thread to those taken from William Goody and William Palmer, who were later tried for their part in the crime.

An inquest of "agriculturalists" met at Perry's home and, it being plain to all there that he was defending his property and probably his life, he was absolved of all blame. Rather he was to them a hero, and it was put around that a gift of silver plate would not be inappropriate. This was not, however, taken up.

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 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 ago in London. Some silver and several false keys were found in his pocket. He appears to be about 30 years of age; 5ft 4in in height; sallow complexion, dark hair, the whiskers appear to have been worn large, but have recently been very closely trimmed and left very narrow; he appears to have been quite clean shaved within a short time of his death. His right eye-tooth is out. He had on a white shirt, black and white neckerchief, one white cotton stocking, blucher boots tied in three holes, cord trousers, drab cloth double-breasted waistcoat, stout blue cloth coat with pockets inside, black Paris hat, apparently bought at Peterborough; a large pair of worsted stocking were drawn over his shoes, and this plan seems to have been adopted by the whole of the 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, helped by marks and details from Gaol books. The corpse was in fact Abraham Green, alias Woods alias "Little Abel", a ne'er do well known throughout East Anglia.

At this, Nehemiah took him down and packed him into a game-basket. Bodies for dissection by surgeons were at a premium and he 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 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 a farmhouse about 20 miles away and there it remains to this day. His breastbone was at one time on display to the anatomy classes for students at the medical school at Cambridge.

We now live in a much more caring society and it may be of interest to draw some conclusions from this bizarre series of incidents.
Some thoughts and one conclusion.

Was the cavalier treatment of Green after his death the normal reaction of the Victorian gentry when their property was threatened? Was it the first time the local constabulary (less than 9 years old and very inexperienced) had to deal with such a contentious matter? Did the burglaries stop? In the light of controversy over “vigilantes” and the public sympathy for those who injure criminals attacking them or their property it is an interesting precedent.

Should burglar alarm boxes be shaped like a burglar’s death mask? There does appear to be some deterrent value.

Tension had been high in the Cambridge area after a series of daring robberies at isolated manors. The newspaper reports quote an example of which Nehemiah would no doubt have been aware.

Just previously, on 17th February, Miss Tofts of St John’s farm near Cambridge was awakened by a “ruffian in her bedroom”. Mr. Tofts, a brother or relative, jumped from his bedroom window and ran into the town in his nightclothes. His incoherence or his breathlessness resulted in two City officers arresting him and taking him to the police station. There it was all sorted out, then they returned to the farm. The gang, for such it was, had decamped “with money and other booty.” Miss Tofts, despite the time factor, was still safe and unharmed.

Up to now “Little Abel” has had little said on his behalf. The papers were sure it was the same gang that tried to rob the Perry farm. It would perhaps be a kindness to Abraham Green to assume that he did lead the gang at Cambridge, but to attack a presumably defenceless lady was not in his nature. Little else good is likely ever to be said of him.

Did Mr. Tofts do the right thing by running off and leaving Miss Tofts alone? Perhaps the very fact that he did made the gang “decamp” faster.

Should policemen arrest people running around in their nightclothes and apparently incoherent? Nowadays there are now many agencies to help with the problem, though the lonely policeman or women usually has to take the first decision.

The conclusion that can be drawn is about communication. Why become a vigilante when you are already paying for a service, which will come as quickly as it can and quicker if your message is coherent. Give Essex Police a call when you really need them. They will want to help.

Acknowledgments
Thanks are offered to the Saffron Walden Museum for permission to use the photograph of the mask and to “Chelmsford Chronicle” also to Jim Rodgers and Bari Hooper
Further reading “Notes from a knapsack” by George Wherry M.A. Surgeon to Addenbrookes Hospital 1909.