Essex Police

THE AMATEUR HANGMAN
A Victorian sportsman’s pastime

Sir Claude Ch. de Crespigny

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Details of the tragic death of Inspector Thomas Simmons, near Romford in January 1885, are not easy to come by. This crime is possibly the most obscure of all the murders of Essex policemen. It may be that this obscurity is linked to the fact that, since 1965, the Romford area is no longer a part of this police district.

It is certain that three men were involved in the crime. Two were tried for murder, one was acquitted but another was hanged. Some time later officers were willing and ready to arrest a third man believed to be involved, but he was dealt with elsewhere before they could do so. To describe Simmons' death in this leaflet would be difficult, but the case has many strange facets that can be explored. The part played by Constable 107 Alfred Marden on this occasion has been described in History Notebook Number 4.

The man who was acquitted

David Dredge was a desperado and ne'er do well who sailed very close to the edge in this case. Chased by Constable Marden he fired several shots at his pursuer. Mr Simmons was following two other men, and continued to do so even after he had been shot in the groin. It was suggested that this zeal led to his death. Yet Dredge went back to the horse and trap, from which the officers had commenced their chase, and waited with it, almost until the dying inspector was brought back. It is possible that many courts would have convicted Dredge as an accessory to the murder. He firmly believed that an Essex jury would have sent him to the gallows. But the case was transferred to the Central Criminal Court and he was found "Not guilty." Promptly he was tried for the attempted shooting of Constable Marden and jailed with hard labour.

The man who was hanged

James Manson, alias Lee alias Adams, was a native of Cork, born in 1844 and with a criminal record in England, first recorded in 1871 under the name Adams. He married in August 1877 on his release from prison. Firearms were used in many of the crimes of which he was suspected. These included the shooting of policemen at Quedgely, Glocs in 1878, in Northants, in Bristol, and in "T" Division of the Metropolitan Police, a murder at Old Ford, a robbery at the St.Leger at Doncaster Races in 1884, and many other savage incidents, including some in Essex. No wonder that Metropolitan Police detectives routinely hunted him through the sinks of London which he frequented.

On 23rd February 1885 a bizarre event occurred at Exeter Gaol. A man named John Lee should have been executed. But the gallows failed to work on three occasions and he was reprieved. He was then known as "Lee the man they could not hang." At the same time Manson was arrested on suspicion of murdering Simmons and was charged in the name James Lee. Is it possible that he thought the defiant use of that name might keep him from Executioner Berry's clutches? He fought like a tiger, both physically at the time of his arrest, and later at the Central Criminal Court. He was convicted, sentenced to death and remanded to Springfield Prison. In May 1885 Berry hanged him and local papers described the execution in detail, naming a titled Essex magistrate as being present.

The third man

Six months later three men were arrested in Cumberland and tried for the murder of a policeman near Penrith. James Martin, James Baker and Anthony Bon Rudge were sentenced to death. A rare event, a triple hanging, was planned for 8th February 1886 at Carlisle Prison. News that Berry had again been retained as executioner must have spread like wildfire through the prisons. He had badly botched two executions, at Worcester in the previous May, and at Norwich in November. Doubts about his technique must have terrified the condemned. However the complicated execution went without a hitch (no pun intended). Berry was at his most competent and he had an able assistant "Charles Maldon". Patrons of the County Hotel in Carlisle, who breakfasted at 9am on 8th February, noted that a certain titled guest was present in the dining room. Others were disgusted to find that Berry was also taking of a light meal, they complained that he was "seeking from the gallows."

The Carlisle Journal heard of the Breakfast Room row. Investigative journalism revealed that Assistant Hangman "Charles Maldon" was none other than Essex magistrate Sir Claude Champion De Crespigny. This led to an outcry, with Sir J. Pease M.P. (later the member for Saffron Walden) quizzing the Home
Secretary as to whether the Home Office approved of "amateur hangmen." He was told that the conduct of executions was not within government remit, but were the responsibility of the High Sheriff of a county. Magazines such as "Punch", "France" and "Truth" had fun with pretend characters such as Lord Fitz-throttle and "Sir Claude De Crespigny." The errant baronet was bearded like a lion in his den, at his home, Champion Lodge, Heybridge, near Maldon. He had already been named in a newspaper but the reporter pretended that he was talking to Mr Maldon. Asked: "are you the amateur hangman and why did you step out of your social class?" he replied. "I have a great dislike to ordering people to do things I might have to do myself. It is within the bounds of possibility that I might be High Sheriff within a number of years. We will suppose that one of these 'martyrs', one of these Fenian fellows was to be hanged. Berry is a man who might be assassinated anywhere at any time." He described the necessity for him to have the ability to supervise the way the sentence of the law was carried out. "If I had missed it and we had only half hanged the fellows at Carlisle they might have kicked up a row. I did not do it out of any mercenary motive, as you may imagine." He added that he had attended one other British execution, that of Lee at Springfield in 1885, "in the capacity of a magistrate." Horse Racing was part of the ethos of both gentry and thugs at that time.

"It is a curious fact," Charles Maldon concluded "that two years ago (in 1884) Anthony Ben Rudge met Berry at Doncaster Races and offered to lay him £13 to £2 that Berry would 'never hang' him". The executioner was an invalid police detective, from West Yorkshire. De Crespigny "found him a decent and respectable fellow."

Correspondence enlivened the columns of "Truth" magazine; On 4th March 1886, from Hutton Hall near Brentwood, Joseph F. Lescher, former High Sheriff of Essex, wrote to complain that: "Sir Claude had suggested in his press interview that he had attended Lee's execution at Springfield as a magistrate." Lescher explained that he had given orders that no-one other than his staff and selected reporters were to be present and that De Crespigny had got in by pretending that he had lost his pass. He concluded "he was not present in the official capacity of a magistrate, such personage not being required". Sir Claude was stung into riposte. On 18th March 1886 from Champion Lodge Maldon, Essex: "If the final words of the High Sheriff’s letter are correct, then the Manual of Criminal Law 1881 Capital Punishment, which refers to 'the High Sheriff and a magistrate being present' must be wrong. I give my authority, he does not give his. My pass, which I had omitted to put in my pocket, I posted immediately on my return home to the governor, by whom it was duly received. More than sufficient has been written on the subject. Anyhow, I shall write no more." C.H. De Crespigny.

The missionary and the executioner or "Ludicrous incident at Witham"

Lady Georgiana De Crespigny's thoughts had not been made public but it was known that she was, at that time, desirous of settling a missionary in the Maldon area. Sir Claude had bought a nearby property with the intention of stabling horses there, but her ladyship prevailed upon him to let her missionary use it. On Saturday 20th February 1886 a gentleman speaking broken English arrived at Witham Railway Station and asked for Champion Hall. Fellow traveller's jumped to the conclusion that it was the hangman on his way to have a cigar and a chat with the Hon. Baronet. He was promptly mobbed, a local character enquiring "how many have you hitched up?" The foreign gentleman indignantly denied that he was Berry and made a hurried exit from the station. It was later reported that, on the day following, this gentleman's mission took him to Braxted. Owing to rumour and doubtless to the astonishment of the ordinary preachers of two places at Heybridge, their churches were filled with the faithful who had come to hear "a converted hangman speak." This, the paper concluded, "was a rare bird, who had not been heard of, even in the ranks of the Salvation Army." They concluded "Mr Berry may be, for all we know to the contrary, a man of strong religious feeling, but there is no record of his having combined preaching with his other occupation."

Early in May things appeared to be back to normal as the gentry flocked to Champion Lodge "Steeplechases." Many guests were entertained to luncheon, but was something said? The East Anglian Times of 6th May 1886 reported the resignation of no fewer than nine officers of the Loyal Suffolk
Hussars, in which Sir Claude held a commission. Of the regiment's thirteen officers, only Lieutenant Colonel Blake, Major Gurney, Captain Sir Claude Champion De Crespigny and Lieutenant the Honourable G. Ashburnham had not resigned. Sir Claude was the only hussar present at the steeplechases. Was he no longer a social asset?

Of Sir Claude himself (20/4/1847–26/6/1935)

My earliest thoughts of the baronet were of distaste. Why had he volunteered for such gruesome duty? The more I read about him, the more he emerged as a typical Victorian adventurer, war correspondent, balloonist, soldier and African explorer. He swam the Nile Rapids and had ridden the winner in the Indian Grand National. He once boxed for 120 minutes with a broken finger and modestly admitted to saving the lives of several people from drowning. A friend suggested that he had offered to walk across Niagara Falls on a tight rope. As a keen rider he was involved in all sorts of equine events. On the down side he was quick with his fists and "up before the beat" (the London magistrates) on a number of occasions, for assault. Other injured parties were bought off. At an advanced age he walked 45 miles to London for a half-crown bet. In short, a dangerous hyperactive volunteer.

The family was of Norman/Huguenot descent, but the title was fairly recent, having been awarded to Sir Claude's great-grandfather, after the Prince Regent spent a pleasant weekend at Champion Lodge in 1806. He was made bankrupt in 1871 and had brought an unsuccessful action against his father's estate, in an effort to get the money to buy a commission in the army.

His later military career was uneven. At the age of 15 he was a sailor aboard our first ironclad battleship, H.M.S. "Warrior", now preserved at Portsmouth.

From 1865-1870 he was commissioned into the 60th Rifles, later the Hussars (yeomanry cavalry), and still later held a militia command. He was a magistrate, and Deputy Lieutenant of the County when he died at the age of 82. As an old man he was described as the "hardest,pluckiest man in England, who could box, ride, walk, run, shoot, fence, sail, swim, and beat any man over 50". On Thursday 26th May 1914, when he was 67 years old, Sir Claude met Constable Alfred Frederick Claxton of the East Suffolk Constabulary, when both were on duty at Bungay races. Seeing De Crespigny (a steward, but the officer did not know that) crossing the race track after the race had commenced, he laid his hand on the baronet's arm. He was rewarded with several sharp blows in the face, some strong language, then several more blows in the face. His lordship was not, of course, arrested. Summoned before Bungay magistrates, he pleaded "Not Guilty" but was convicted of assault. He was fined £20 or two months in prison and £5 costs.

Such was one complex figure, before whom appeared the County of Essex's "seekers after justice." He often sat as foreman of the Grand Jury at the Chelmsford Assize. What did those charged with capital crimes think, as they sought justice from a system which stood them before an experienced amateur hangman?

In a similar trap, with a white horse Simmons drove to his death. His headgear would have been a kepI rather than a cap.

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