

An Unquiet Grave: the 1754 Murder at the Holt

The gravestone is a handsome one, and when the midday sun strikes across its face, parts of the inscription can still be made out:

Here lieth the bodies of WILLIAM SPURIET and ELIZABETH his Wife, who were both Barbarously and Inhumanly Murdered at Hopcroft's Holt January the 18 1754 in the 77 year of their ages.



The Spuriets were “well known on the Banbury Road”, having run an alehouse at this isolated crossroads for many years. But latterly their business had declined, and they no longer had anyone else living in.

On the fatal Friday night the couple who helped out had gone home. When they returned on the Saturday morning nobody seems to be stirring. Upstairs they found the bed undisturbed, but several boxes rifled. Downstairs a gruesome scene met them in the kitchen: William lay dead on the floor in a pool of blood, his head battered in six places and one of his fingers almost severed. On one side of him was a broken mug, on the other a candlestick. Elizabeth lay in the chimney corner, still alive but unable to speak, with head wounds and a broken arm. The murder weapon lay nearby, “a green ash club about three quarters of a yard long” [69 cm], which appeared newly cut for the purpose. Two brown waistcoats, two linen handkerchiefs and an unknown sum of money were missing. An Inquest held at the pub returned a verdict of wilful murder by persons unknown.

These details, culled from the weekly *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, are the nearest thing we have to an official account, but a few other strands can be added from other sources. A court cash book shows that the Coroner, James DuBois, held two sessions at the Holt, one on the Sunday and another the next Tuesday – presumably because poor Elizabeth took three days to die, though she never regained her speech. On the Saturday, while she still clung to life, the Rousham agent, John Maccock, wrote to his employer that though William's cash box was empty, the intruder had missed six pounds in another box and seven guineas in an old teapot. He said William had apparently entertained a suspicious person a few days earlier who claimed to be a relative; the man had been given a pair of shoes, but left them behind and stole a pair of boots instead. Years later, village historian William Wing wrote that some suspicion had attached to a Rousham man who had left the district at the time of the murder.

Early the following month, the *Journal* reported that two unnamed persons were being held at Aylesbury prison “charged on their own confession”, but as nothing more is heard of them, they can hardly have been prime suspects. In March the King (George II) offered a pardon to anyone involved who could identify the murderer, while the Duke of Marlborough offered a reward of £50. But by then the trail had run cold and no-one was ever convicted of the crime. One man who seems to have been deeply affected by these events was Steeple Aston's curate, the Revd. Lionel Lampet (1710-1795). An amateur poet, he dashed off an Elegy to the victims, at one point accusing the local Justices of being more vigorous in pursuit of poachers than a thief and murderer:

A simple hare, had he but snapt, or partridge in the wood,

The thief long since, by justice seized, had paid the price of blood.

Lampet may also have been responsible for the less inflammatory lines on the back of the gravestone (now hard to decipher), praying that divine retribution might see to it that the murderer faced the same sentence as Cain. Lampet ceased to be curate soon afterwards, though he remained in the village until his death in 1795, continuing to officiate in neighbouring churches, and serving as schoolmaster at Dr Radcliffe's. If the affair did cost him his curacy, the reason may have been personal: his angry intervention causing an irreversible rift with the Rector, the Revd. John Noel.

GEOFFREY LANE