

Crimes from the past lurking

THE concept of 'anti-social behaviour' conjures up something of a particularly modern phenomenon; however you do not have to delve too far into the past to discover that fighting, drunkenness, theft and even murder were certainly not unknowns and were indeed only too familiar to the inhabitants of the Black Country.

During my family history research, I discovered my Great Uncle, **William Fenton**, was certainly of questionable character and on further inspection found that the road in which he and many of my other ancestors lived was something of a microcosm of the society they had to endure. The road to which I refer is still there today - **Overend Street, West Bromwich**, situated just off the High Street heading towards the M5. The street was a once busy and thriving community of poor, yet hard working inhabitants and local businesses.

Today, however it's an unassuming collection of residential properties, some low key businesses and dilapidated buildings. Only two of the original 90 homes exist but the activities and stories that revolved around this small, unpretentious corner of the Black Country tell a

tale that can easily reverberate today. Some are no more or less violent than today and others perhaps reflect a time when hard working men and women had to eke out a meager existence sometimes by means that could only lead to the long arm of the law stretching out its uncompromising grip.

My Great Uncle to whom I have referred was a coal miner, born in 1858 and like many of his contemporaries worked long and labourious hours in industries that have in many ways now gone. Nail makers, forgers, puddlers and general labouring were the 'careers' of many in the street but at which point William decided on an alternative mode of life (or why) it is not known. His path into largely petty crime shows someone who committed acts which were both premeditated, if not a little pathetic, but who knows how desperate he and others of his ilk were? Life in this corner of West Bromwich in the last quarter of the 19th century was in parts certainly not a pleasurable one and lacked the comforts we certainly take for granted today, so I think it's best our judgments be put aside for now.

William Fenton spent at least two terms at Her Majesty's Pleasure; in 1881 he was listed as a sack maker in Fulham, St. Paul's Hammersmith

By Mike Fenton

(later to become **Wormwood Scrubs**). The crime for this period is not known but some of the following history of this wayward Black Country figure may indeed have lead perhaps to part of the sentence he served as would his other stay in gaol, this time at Birmingham's **Winson Green Prison** in 1891. Here is listed as a shoemaker.

William appears to have got off on the wrong foot at an early age. According to an entry in the Birmingham Daily Post dated January 19th, 1874, he was charged with stealing two wheel barrows and a number of garden implements belong to **Mssrs. Biddulph and Cotterill**. William (only 16 years of age at this time) had stolen them in the December of the previous year, disposing of them by 'moving them on' to a **Martha Cooper** in the **Lyng** area of West Bromwich. He was jailed for 6 months.

From the same Birmingham newspaper dated January 19th, 1885, the now 27 year old William was charged with stealing a handcart belonging to **George Tinsley** of Walsall Street along with a wheelbarrow, the property of **Alfred Palmer** of Birmingham.

Severe

These of course seem quite trivial crimes but the punishment was far more severe than one you would expect today; it is therefore I believe a sign of the utter desperation of many working and poor families of the time that they would risk such harsh treatment for such a disproportionately and minor misdemeanour. William must have thought such acts were worth the gamble as he was undeterred enough to continue his petty criminal career into August of 1889. On the 10th of August of that year he appeared at the Police County Court, charged with the theft of 1 shilling, 11½d, money belonging to a **Maria Perry** of Handsworth. She had met William on August 7th and had been promised some items of clothing in exchange; however William had disappeared. He was subsequently sentenced to **1 month's hard labour**.

On February 18th, 1892, he attempted a similar crime for which he was committed to prison for **3 months** for stealing 2 shillings belonging to a charwoman, **Elizabeth Boot** of Devonshire Road, Hockley. They had both met in Handsworth where William had persuaded the charwoman to advance him the money for some clothing he said he had. The Birmingham Daily Post reports that upon receiving the money, William bolted. It is not known what punishment was meted out on this occasion.

I am glad to say that my ancestral '**black sheep of the family**' was not the only individual representative of the 'criminal classes' resident in Overend Street at this point in time. It seems this otherwise unremarkable corner of 19th century West Bromwich played host to others involved in a variety of activities not



This shows Number 2, Overend Street many years before large scale demolition of the properties. It was also the home of my ancestors James & Hannah Fenton.



This shows the current view of the two remaining original properties of the street. These would have faced the Plough Inn public house (see opposite page).



Where the entrance to 'The Fold' would have been.

meeting with the approval of either the local judiciary or constabulary.

July 6th of 1887 saw one **Alfred Cooper**, of the now mildly 'infamous' Overend Street, charged with an assault on a local police officer. **One P.C. Orme** reported that he was in the street on the evening in question and was taking a person into custody for causing a disturbance. It was at this point that the prisoner Cooper came up and started to kick and strike him. However, Cooper's defence explained that it was the police constable who was the aggressor as he had broken into the house of the prisoner and because some women inside the property started laughing at him, he preferred a charge of assault and then hit Cooper. The case was subsequently dismissed. Similar instances today could be cited so in some respects some things have simply not changed.

Murder

The same Birmingham publication from September 4th, 1884 recalls a story of more significance and a crime far more serious. On the previous day an enquiry resumed at the **Lewisham Arms** Public House in West Bromwich into the alleged **murder** of 31 year old **Elizabeth Haynes**. The deceased had been living in 'The Fold', Overend St with an **Isaac Franks** (aka **Blood Ike**) as his wife. (Incidentally, in 1881, Isaac

Franks was living at number 25, the house next door to where my late father was born in 1926). On one particular morning earlier in the year, she was found lying dead on the kitchen floor. It was alleged that Franks had been abusing her and that he was responsible for her untimely death. One witness gave testimony to the effect that she had heard quarrelling between the 2 and upon entering the house at about 7.30pm Haynes was on the floor with a bleeding head wound. The witness, **Phoebe Welsh**, was asked by Haynes to wash the wound but the alleged murderer told her it was none of Welsh's business. Upon leaving, screams of "Murder" were quite audible. At this point during the inquiry, the Deputy Coroner said something which perhaps underlies the level of crime, both petty and more significant, that existed on this and other Black Country streets at the time. He said "I suppose they are common cries in the neighbourhood?" The witness confirmed this by saying, "I have heard a great many similar cries since I have lived there".

Another witness and resident of the street, **Sarah Taylor**, corroborated the evidence by saying she too had heard the screams and that Franks had said he would "Put the deceased's lights out". At 10 o'clock that night Franks had asked his wife for 2 shillings but was refused.

in the old ancestral cupboard

The witness, Taylor, heard groans shortly after. A further witness, **Ann Fenton** (undoubtedly another of my ancestors), reported similar cries after she had seen Franks come up "The Style" (an area of the street on which you could sit on a wall) and enter the house.

It was further reported that Franks thought his wife was drunk and resented this as he had endured a long day of hard work and thought it both unfair and improper that she should be in such an inebriated state. **Maria Young** of 19, Overend Street recalled Franks saying "Here is a specimen of a drunken woman". After many other witness statements and information received, a **Police Constable Wright** entered the Overend Street home to discover Elizabeth Haynes dead on the floor; an apron and pillow supporting her head. The constable then made his way to the town's **Bromford Ironworks** whereupon he arrested Isaac Franks. The accused replied, "Oh, dear; we had a quarrel, and she fell off the sofa".

Subsequent investigation found the victim's blood on the sofa, floor and on the alleged murderer's front shirt. The post mortem discovered a large bruise over the deceased's left temple and left eye; another extending down the right cheek, 2 or 3 small bruises on the scalp, a large bruise on the left buttock and another on the left hip. There was a large blood clot between the brain and its outer covering. This would have been caused by the breaking of small blood vessels. It was reported that the cause of death was concussion of the brain.

The coroner did not agree that a fall from the sofa onto the floor would have caused such serious injuries and only a substantial blow being the most likely cause. The Deputy Coroner said he believed there had not been any malice on behalf of the prisoner and therefore instructed the jury to return a verdict of manslaughter. After a brief consultation, the jury did indeed return with a **manslaughter** verdict.

The prisoner was then removed. He was subsequently taken before the magistrates at Smethwick and remanded till the following Saturday. **Despite the remarks of the deputy coroner, Isaac ('Blood Ike') Franks was acquitted and duly discharged.**

Other petty crime continued as was evident from further reports in the Birmingham Daily Post, this time from November 18th, 1891.

It reported that a **William Fenton** (not the recidivist already mentioned but almost certainly another wayward ancestor), a 30 year old resident of Overend Street, was charged with assaulting **police constables Wagstaff** and **Bibb** on the 17th of the month. On being arrested for being drunk and disorderly, Fenton became very violent and attacked the police, brutally kicking them in the process. The Bench imposed fines and costs amounting to £2 2shillings, with an alternative of 6 weeks' hard labour.

Insobriety

Levels of drunkenness today are much in the news and the lager louts of yesteryear were obviously as equally prevalent then although no doubt without the access to such a wide variety of products. The following report from November 1st, 1889 indicates further incidents of insobriety. In an article headed, "*Just Returned from America*", an **Annie Jennings**, 25 years old and resident of Overend Street was charged with stealing £3, money belonging to **Arthur Bayliss**, a labourer of Moor Street in the town. Mr. Bayliss had been in the **Plough Inn, Overend Street** (this was situated approximately opposite the two properties that still remain in the street today) where he had seen the accused. She had asked him to have a drink together and he agreed. At some unknown point in time they left the establishment arm in arm, Bayliss becoming drowsy as he did so. On coming around, he found himself in



This shows the Plough Inn. No doubt many of the street's residents forgot their daily problems here before it finally shut its doors in 1975.

Spon Lane; it was already 3 am. At this point he discovered he no longer had the money. Arthur Bayliss had only returned from the United States the same day. Annie Jennings was arrested by **Sergeant Ainsworth**, who pleaded guilty. She was fined 40 shillings and costs.

On July 11th, 1893, one **Mary Anne McTye** was reported to have committed an aggravated assault upon a **Lavinia Getting**. Both women were residents of the much afore-mentioned street. On the night in question, Getting was walking into a shop when the accused asked what she had been saying about her. McTye then attacked her with a key, striking several hard blows to her forehead, inflicting such injuries that she had to be admitted to the town's District Hospital. The arresting officer, **P.C. Parker** said Jennings had claimed

she had been struck first and she had simply retaliated. The Prosecution said Jennings was a violent woman and this had been her 13th appearance; she was jailed for 1 month with hard labour.

Repeated

So, here we see one incredibly small corner of a Black Country town, in the last quarter of the 19th century, with all its Victorian values in situ; yet, these were incidents repeated without doubt in every other similar street and road across Britain.

Overend Street, West Bromwich shouldn't be pilloried for having such a poor record of 'immorality' or general 'bad behaviour'. It requires a balanced and rational mind to view a world in which all of us in

similar circumstances may have just fallen prey to an 'illegal lifestyle' in the same way as did those residents and my ancestors in that somewhat maligned street.

Tracing your family's history is both a time consuming and at times frustrating process. On occasions you simply fail to discover that one piece of the jigsaw that makes sense of the overall picture. However, in the long run, the benefits are enormous and rewarding. The stories become almost real (and perhaps even surreal at times), and ones you can make a tangible connection with. What you unearth can be unexpected, sad, humorous and even a little bizarre – What skeletons will you find lurking in your family's cupboards?

(With thanks to my distant relative **Olive Bedworth** for providing some of the photographs here).



The current view of Overend Chapel, now closed. Is this where the street's inhabitants went to absolve their sins?



Current view of Overend Street, West Bromwich (in 2012), looking towards the town.