



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Ann Pullen – A Wantage Legend

by Stuart McDonald

“WANTAGE HORRIBLE MURDER

Our town was thrown into a state of great excitement on Saturday morning last, the 31st ult; by the discovery of the most savage and inhuman murder of Mrs Ann Pullen. . .”

Thus ran the opening of a report in the *Berkshire Chronicle* on Saturday September 7th 1833.

Many readers will be familiar with the story of Ann Pullen's death which has generally been set in the Red Lion, a public house in the Market Place. This stood on the site now occupied by the V.C. Gallery.

According to the story Ann Pullen was either a barmaid or, in one version, the landlady there. When she took too long to serve one customer he threw the money on the floor. As she bent to pick up the coins he struck off her head with a blow from a bean hook.

But is this truth or legend? In the early part of the 19th century the town was certainly known as 'Black Wantage'. It was an age of violence (Dickens' novels are proof of that) and people still settled feuds with fists and cudgels but murder in a crowded tavern is perhaps just a little too violent to believe without evidence.

Probably the earliest reference to the incident in local history writing appears in *Wantage Past and Present*, published in 1901 (1) where the writers only mention that “A fearful murder, committed at the “Packhorse Inn” (now the Post Office) is still recalled with horror after three generations”. The first full account seems to be in an autobiography by ‘Lord’ George Sanger, the famous showman, published in 1910 (2). Although he must only have been aged six he remembers coming to Wantage on October 17th 1833 with his father, also a showman, to the Statute Fair to be held in the town on the following day. He gives a vivid account of what his father actually witnessed in the Red Lion and later turned to profit at the Fair by re-creating the murder scene for his peepshow.

Peepshows were a popular form of entertainment and Sanger senior is known to have had equipment at which over twenty spectators could look at one time. Without doubt violence and horror had their appeal. A favourite show of the period was *Murder in the Red Barn*, the story of the murder of Maria Martin, and this certainly was in the Sanger repertoire. It is unreasonable to suppose that a professional showman would miss such an opportunity to introduce something topical for his visit to Wantage. However, the Burial Register in the Parish Church clearly gives the date of Ann Pullen’s death as August 30th 1833. Was Sanger therefore an eye-witness as his son claims? If this fact is open to doubt what about others, such as the name of the public house in which the incident occurred? Already the Packhorse Inn and the Red Lion have been mentioned, and it is the latter which seems to have found favour with later writers.

There was a public house called the White Hart in the Market Place in 1826 (about where Lloyds Bank now stands) but by 1830 this had been pulled down. Its owner, John Brown, also owned the property in Newbury Street known as Amsterdam House and by 1830 he had built a new White Hart on this site. Pigot's *Trade Directory* for 1830 lists a Richard Pullen as the landlord of the White Hart, Newbury Street. Was Ann his wife? A deed of 1838 shows that the property was, by that date, known as the Packhorse. The notoriety which would have accompanied the landlady's murder would undoubtedly have been ample reason for a change of name.

The discrete mention of “a fearful murder” or the robust imagination of someone to whom the drama was perhaps more important than total accuracy have, together with the passage of time, given rise to a Wantage legend. The truth is possibly more prosaic but no less dramatic, as a study of contemporary newspaper accounts shows.

Ann Pullen, a 40 year old widow, was the keeper of the White Hart in Newbury Street. She was murdered in her own kitchen on the evening of Friday August 30th 1833 by George King, a young labourer from Cumnor who was then working in the Wantage neighbourhood. Robbery may have been the motive but the crime seems to have been committed on impulse. Her head was severed, as the *Reading Mercury* put it, “with as much precision and smoothness as could possibly be effected by a Turkish scimitar”.

Because of his strange behaviour that evening King immediately fell under suspicion and was apprehended the next day at Letcombe. On searching him the constable found a purse containing 12s 6d, including a crooked sixpence. The purse and the sixpence were later identified as having belonged to the murdered woman. Recent blood was found on King's coat.

When George King was first examined he said he met a man called Edward Grant with whom he walked to Mrs Pullen's door. Grant went in and then King said he “heard a tumble”. He followed Grant into the house and “found the head of Mrs Pullen cut off”. He subsequently tried to put the blame on Charles Marriott, a Wantage man with whom he had been on the night of the murder. The inquest jury, however, brought in a verdict of ‘Wilful Murder against George King’ and he was committed for trial at the Berkshire Lent Assizes. On the way to Reading Gaol he confessed that he alone was responsible. King was found guilty at the Assizes and was executed on March 3rd 1834.

The idea of creating a peepshow of a murder scene and then showing it in the place where the crime took place may seem horrible by present day standards, but was probably commonplace at the time. How much more gruesome were the actions of Ann's mother and other relatives who

“were so utterly callous to all sense of decency, as on Sunday to make a sort of exhibition of the bloody kitchen and mangled body to all persons who were willing to drink a pint of beer as the price of admission, and on Monday after the close of the inquest, when the body had been placed in a coffin, numbers of persons were admitted on paying for the sight, the neck being left bare that all might see the horrible spectacle of the place where it had been severed from the body”.

Although there is a record of her death in the Burial Register, Ralph Atherton's detailed survey of the monuments and inscriptions in the Churchyard and Parish Church, produced in 1973, reveals no trace of the name Pullen or of any unnamed stone of the correct date to indicate where Ann Pullen was buried.

References

- (1) Gibbons and Davey
- (2) Seventy Years a Showman

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