

# CRIMINAL CROYDON

**It's a fair cop! We Croydonians don't have a law-abiding past, despite the town's history as a site for the assizes, pillories, many court buildings and gallows. We've harboured highwaymen and smugglers, smashed up stained glass, covered ecclesiastical neighbours in smoke from our charcoal, and diddled savers out of their money! In recent times our streets were one of the alleged birthplaces of the vicious and reprehensible craze so wrongly nicknamed 'happy slapping', which involves young thugs using mobile phones to take photos of each other duffing up a victim. Increasingly violent cases have involved gangs ordering pizzas and then attacking the delivery men.**



One of Croydon's current courts

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Now a library, once home to a political hostage

# HIGHWAYMEN

**The countryside around Croydon provided both rich pickings and a refuge for highwaymen and smugglers. London Road was used by travellers passing south from London, and the robbers could hide in the Great North Wood. The hills of Addington and Sanderstead were full of hiding places for smugglers of brandy, tea, tobacco and Belgian lace. The penalty for being a highwayman was, of course, death.**

Croydon had so many gallows that we once had two places called Gallows Green. Gallows Green near the Red Deer pub in Smitham Bottom saw the last official hanging in Croydon in 1749. The other Gallows Green was in Thornton Heath, opposite Thornton Heath Pond, as shown on a map from 1724. One man escaped from the gibbets in Waddon Marsh Lane when the rope around his neck broke.

The woods and commons surrounding Croydon were seen as contributing to lawlessness; foot patrols were set up and woods along the highways were cleared to protect travellers. As late as the 1840s a doctor living in Norwood fired pistols into the darkness to ward off potential thieves lurking on the remnants of the common.

The main road running from London to the south coast passed through Thornton Heath. The gallows, or gibbet, stood on the corner of what is now London Road and Brigstock Road, opposite the Wheatsheaf, a coaching inn. As many as six people a day could be hanged there. The bodies were either buried or used for medical science. The gallows were said to be made from timber taken from the Great North Wood, the haunt of gangs of desperate 'footpads', a lower class of highwayman that couldn't afford a mount. Six highwaymen were executed

in Thornton Heath in March 1722 and another four in April 1723. It is believed that most men executed there would have been highwaymen. Were the pickings rich or the times desperate?

With such active gallows, Thornton Heath seems a strange place to choose for a hideaway. In addition, the Winter Quarter Sessions of the county of Surrey were held in Croydon, with the Assizes alternating between Croydon and Guildford until 1887, in a building opposite the Ship Inn in the High Street. That didn't dissuade Dick Turpin, the infamous and semi-legendary highwayman, from living there. It is said that his mother lived in the village and Turpin had a building where the station now stands or, according to Berwick Sayers writing in 1925, a safe house situated near Thornton Heath Congregational Church. He evaded the local gallows by fleeing to York, but he was caught there and hanged in 1739.

The landlady of the Wheatsheaf was quoted in the *Croydon Guardian* in 2004 as saying that the inn was used to hold prisoners before they were hanged on Gallows Green. A team of 'ghost hunters' from UK Paranormal Investigations held a vigil in the inn in 2004 and came up with the usual 'orbs', captured on digital cameras but not seen with the naked eye. They also heard rustling noises.

A much-repeated story involves William Clewer, the infamous Vicar of Croydon who got the job after the Restoration despite his anti-royalist activities during the Commonwealth. He often incurred the wrath of his parishioners, and his misdemeanours included theft, extortion, gambling and visiting a bawdy-house. He nevertheless managed to remain in post until his death in 1702. However, the dastardly parson did not have it all his own way. According to Smith's *Lives of Highwaymen*, the notorious highwayman O'Bryan (also quoted as O'Brien and described as a footpad) once held him up in Acton, now a suburb of west London. When Clewer claimed his riches were all safe in Croydon, O'Bryan demanded Clewer undress and give him his gown. The gambling parson proposed a game of cards, and O'Bryan consented. Beaten by the highwayman, Clewer had to walk to Croydon dressed in nothing but his shirt.

The Jolly Sailor public house in South Norwood was the haunt of smugglers and highwaymen, according to an unnamed history book referenced in the *Croydon Times Diamond Jubilee Souvenir Number* from 1921. What actually happened there isn't mentioned. However, the Lambeth Borough Police website says that smugglers with packhorses laden with contraband from the coast would make their way through Norwood to the capital.

The Catherine Wheel in Croydon High Street was one of the less reputable public houses in Croydon. According to an article by James Hodder in the *Croydon Guardian* originally published in the 1950s, it catered for pilgrims but also 'less innocent travellers'. It was

regularly visited by highwaymen who would steal the purses of fellow guests. The original inn stood where Coombe Street crosses the High Street and was pulled down in 1760, to be replaced by the New Inn. The pub has been known as the Crown and Pepper since 2001.

An article in the *Croydon Guardian* in 2005 quotes Hampton Hamilton, writing in the *Surrey Magazine* in 1900. It concerns a highwayman by the name of Alexander, who amassed a fortune and bought land in Coulsdon. He lived there and robbed travellers, even after he had built his legitimate business, the Red Lion. Stagecoach drivers would avoid the inn because the area was notorious for highway robberies. It became more popular after Alexander put up a sign offering free ginger wine for coach drivers. The passengers would be robbed while the drivers were drinking. He dug a secret tunnel from the wine cellar to an outbuilding so that he could slip away without arousing suspicion. During renovations (at an unspecified time) several rusty knives and 'defensive weapons' were found embedded in the earthen floor of the subway, interpreted as belonging to the victims who dropped them when they were being dragged along. It is speculated that the remains of Alexander's victims were buried on Farthing Downs. The murderous highwayman was caught when an elderly customer overheard him discussing plans for a robbery. He was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment. The newspaper reports the Local Studies Library's spokesman as saying that he was extremely doubtful that the story was true, although he confirmed that the area was rife with highway robberies - nearby Smitham Bottom was boggy and dark, a prime location for highwaymen, and

coaches had to take the lower ground so were more at risk.

Another highwayman active locally was James Cooper, who was executed and hanged in chains for murder and robbery at Smitham Bottom in 1749. *Legends of Croydon* tells of another (unnamed) highwayman executed on the same gibbet after a career terrorising the Brighton Road. He had an eye for the ladies and one day saw a 'strapping wench' approach. He asked her for a dance, she agreed. She then tripped him up and put a pistol to his head. She turned out to be a 'he', who bound him to his horse and led him away.

There is a story attached to Slines Pond on Limpsfield Road, near Chelsham/Warlingham. One version says that 'almost a century ago' (which seems to place it in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) a highwayman scared the team of horses pulling a coach, causing the coach to drive deep into the pond, drowning all the passengers. A ghostly coach is said to rise out of the pond, all lit up, with the passengers screaming at the windows. Another version dates it to November 1809, blaming a drunken driver of a Royal Mail coach, but there is apparently no record of such an accident around that date. A mail coach did plunge into Thornton Heath Pond in 1891 in heavy fog, possibly with a drunken driver, but this could just be a confusing coincidence.

# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

**Croydon must be proud of its gaols. It's had plenty of them, whether temporarily housed in other buildings or purpose-built. It also regularly held Surrey Assizes. The town had gibbets a-plenty, used for hanging notorious highwaymen in Smitham Bottom and Thornton Heath, and the surrounding hills were reportedly heaving with smugglers. Surrey Street had stocks and a whipping square. More recently the courts have seen some well-known names up before the judge or magistrate. However, not all criminals get their comeuppance, including the infamous Rev. Clewer and an unnamed man who sold his wife. And recent criminal cases include some very disturbing occurrences.**

## CROYDON ASSIZES

Mass football on Shrove Tuesday was well established in Kingston by 1797, when local magistrates posted bills declaring it to be banned. The bills were ignored - various players were arrested and convicted at Surrey Assizes in Croydon. They were discharged by the judge and warned not to offend again.

The Assizes were held opposite the Ship Inn in High Street. A host of criminals left from here for the gallows in Thornton Heath. One man escaped from the gibbets in Waddon Marsh Lane when the rope around his neck broke. Many were highwaymen, but there were also smugglers of brandy, tea, tobacco and Belgian lace. The last official hanging in Croydon was in 1749 at Gallows Green in Smitham Bottom.

## ANIMAL MUTILATIONS

The RSPCA reported in 1998 that 47 cats and rabbits had been found butchered in London and south-east England. One animal was found in a Norbury garden in August 1998 with its severed tail by its side. When the *Croydon Guardian* reported in 1999, there were still suspicions about a number of the deaths, presumably

some of the grislier ones, but the RSPCA did not want to jeopardize its investigations by revealing specific details. Most of the cases were solved by the RSPCA with the Metropolitan Police. Post mortems revealed that the cats had been killed in road accidents or died by natural causes. The mutilations had largely been caused by scavengers such as foxes, crows and dogs.

Then another grisly tale emerged in 1999. A Croydon family found its tiny, deaf cat, Holly, dead. It looked like a traffic accident, but the vet reckoned that the internal injuries were due to the cat's being held down by a foot and attacked with an 'implement' that ruptured the appendix. The following week another of the family's cats came home doused in paraffin and with a rag round its neck, as if someone had tried to hang it. The family was reported as considering putting down its other two cats to spare them the same fate. Holly's owner had seen children 'messing around' with Holly on the day she died and had taken her inside. The police believed that these were isolated incidents and recommended that the family should watch to see which schoolchildren used the route past their

house.

The Croydon Cats Protection League stated that it knew of cat mutilations 'a while ago' that looked like sacrifices, as the animals had had their throats cut and had been drained of blood. A few animals had also been found in South Norwood Lake. In an article in the *Croydon Post* in January 1999 they had issued warnings to cat owners after 100 mutilated cats had been found in London and the South-East. There was a suspicion that they had been killed for ritualistic purposes. However, the article isn't clear about the period of time over which these victims were found, and some may well have been included in the RSPCA figures and therefore counted twice.

In June 2005 the *Croydon Advertiser* reported that more cats had been found decapitated. A woman found her 11-year-old cat's headless body in the garden. The suggestion was that the head may have been kept as a trophy. The veterinarian consulted by the family said that foxes were not involved, as it was not a bite but a clean cut. It was also clearly not a road accident. The cat's claws were broken and it had a dislocated hip, suggesting that it had struggled hard. The local police sergeant believed that more than one person must have been involved in order to hold the cat still. Another beheaded cat had been found nearby just two days earlier, but the story only came to light after the other case was publicized.

### ORDEAL BY FIRE

Ducarel, writing in 1783, describes punishment meted out to two Croydon women in 1200. The pair stole some clothes in Croydon and were pursued to Southfleet. There they were imprisoned

and tried by Lord Henry de Cobham. They were 'adjudged ... to undergo the fire ordeal, or examination of the hot iron.' Ducarel continues, 'By this foolish and impious test of innocence, one of them was exculpated, and the other condemned, and afterwards drowned in a pool called Bikepool'.

According to Ducarel, some writers claimed that ordeal by fire was 'confined to persons of high rank' and ordeal by water to the common people, but this case implied the distinction was not strictly observed. This method of trying the guilt or innocence of a criminal was not abolished until the reign of Henry III.

### WITCHCRAFT

Practising witchcraft or paganism is, thankfully, no longer an offence. However, it wasn't such a good idea if you wanted to safeguard your place in the Whitgift Almshouses. Residents were selected by the archbishops of Canterbury and had to be at least 60 years old and preferably live in Croydon or Lambeth. They could be expelled for heresy, casting charms and witchcraft.

Whether the legendary Mother Hotwater was a witch is a moot point, but this is claimed by several sources. She was certainly regarded as someone to be avoided by lone travellers. Some tales had her as a witch, others just as the murderous owner of the George Inn on George Street. Of course, there's no proof that she even existed!

### THE GEORGE INN

According to the *Croydon Guardian*, this was one of the less reputable public houses in Croydon. It stood opposite the Chequer on the southern corner of George Street. Some accounts call it the George and Dragon, others just the George. Several duels were fought in

the meadow that lay behind it, with the losers allegedly buried on the site. Landlord Humphrey Wild was hanged by the Sheriff of Surrey on the gallows tree at Croydon Common for the 'wilful slaying' of Robert the Carter in 1490. His successor was arrested for harbouring 'pestilential rebels' and lost the inn. In 1570 it was the scene of a bloody affray between some of the town's carters and a band of travelling horse dealers.

According to an article first published in the *Croydon Guardian* in the 1950s, from 1604 to 1610 the George was the 'headquarters' of William Clewer, Vicar of Croydon, who combined his ecclesiastical role with that of highwayman. However, Ducarel's account puts Clewer's death in 1702, making him an unlikely drinker at the inn in 1610. He was certainly up before the Old Bailey in 1690 for his part in the kidnapping and forcible marriage of a young heiress, according to the court's website. He was acquitted, as the young woman was judged to have consented.



Who, me, guv'?

The reputation of the inn got steadily worse from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and some people claimed it was a 'death trap for travellers whose mortal remains were reduced by boiling them in kitchen cauldrons' (was this

Mother Hotwater at it again?). An order was made by the country sheriff for the closing of the inn, and in 1820 it was pulled down after 500 years of 'discreditable existence'.

## CHARCOAL BURNERS

Colliers were sometimes unpopular for shortchanging their customers by selling them ash and dust. Eleven Croydon charcoal burners were taken to court for this offence in 1568 by a London merchant. A lot of people envied the charcoal burners, including commoners without access to wood and tanners who needed to cut bark, but this does not mean that there were no unscrupulous individuals.

Sometimes the charcoal burners were the victims, sometimes they were the perpetrators. A legend tells of Elsie, the daughter of Cardinal Pole's bailiff. Pole's unnamed nephew and an unnamed charcoal burner were both in love with Elsie. The angry Cardinal ordered his nephew abroad, so he stole from the palace to meet her at 2 a.m. to say goodbye under a giant oak by the Wandle. Elsie was late and tripped over her lover's body - she screamed, and the charcoal burner came out of his hiding place, mad with jealousy. She fled and flung herself in the Wandle.

Archbishop Grindal unsuccessfully took a charcoal burner to court because smoke had swept into the grounds of the Archbishop's Palace while Grindal was there. Grimes, the collier in question, had a farm called Colliers Water, and his kilns constantly billowed black smoke over the archbishop's lands. Grindal asked him to stop the discharge, but Grimes refused. The charcoal burner had influential friends in the City Guilds, and they took his side. The defendant was acquitted by the

jury. Francis Grimes, the 'Collyer of Croydone', was respected rather than liked and knew that the Londoners needed his charcoal. He became a 'traditional character' in dramas.

What goes around comes around. Charcoal is back in fashion again for those long summer weekends when there's nothing better to do than dirty your neighbour's washing and put the health and wellbeing of your family and friends at risk with undercooked sausages.

### CROYDON ROUGHS

In the early 1800s the estate in Addiscombe previously leased to Lord Hawkesbury, a British Prime Minister, was bought by the Honourable East India Company. It accommodated up to 150 cadets at a time. There are many stories about their escapades and their heavy drinking, but they didn't have it all their own way. Croydon 'roughs' used to waylay any cadet foolish enough to stray into Croydon without his companions. In 1861 the company's military organisation was disbanded and the establishment closed.

### FAKE TOW TRUCKS

A strange story was reported from South Norwood in 2002. Mick Vincent, Croydon Council's team leader for abandoned vehicles, reported that 'mysterious philanthropists' were 'faking tow trucks to look like council vehicles and tidying up dumped cars from the roadside'. He saw one towing away a vehicle on Portland Road that had been marked by the Council as abandoned. There had been several occasions when Council services had gone out to pick up an abandoned vehicle only to find it gone. Mr Vincent believed there were two such trucks in operation - they had 'Abandoned Vehicle Removal'

printed on the side. The story then went cold.

### DROP THE DEAD DONKEY!

William Simmons was a rag-and-bone man who used donkeys. He lived at Noah's Ark in the Shirley Hills. Around 1850 he mutilated himself to avoid going to war. Some residents found a dead donkey (as one does!) one night and propped it up against Simmons' door. When he opened it next morning the dead donkey fell on him.

### JUMBO BLOCKAGE

Kennards department store, now demolished, had a reputation for bizarre selling techniques thanks to its Australian managing director, Robert Driscoll. Driscoll used chimpanzees and other circus animals to promote bargains. He was once reprimanded for blocking North End with elephants used to advertise a 'jumbo sale'.

### WIFE-SELLING

It doesn't just happen in Thomas Hardy novels! As recently as 1894 a man living in lodgings in Middle Row allegedly sold his wife for a pot of fourpenny ale to a fellow lodger. He even obtained a formal receipt. What became of the poor woman is not recorded.

### CHURCHILL KIDNAPPED

Crystal Palace FC's mascot, the famous nodding bulldog called Churchill, was kidnapped in summer 2005. This particular Churchill is (or was, if his demise is confirmed) a 7ft tall version of the bulldog used in the Bromley-based insurance company's TV adverts. It was said to be worth £5000 to the company, but nothing to the thieves. When available, the dog entertained fans at Selhurst Park and also made promotional appearances and school

visits. The club launched an investigation to trace him.

## FREEMASONRY

The saying goes that 'charity begins at home', and in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a freemason in Croydon took this too literally. Davidson Lodge was built in 1852 as a charitable institution. Subscribers made a small donation each day for three years to raise money. Problems arose when the Grand Master, HRH the Duke of Sussex, refused to back the scheme as he hadn't been consulted, and later a freemason ran off with hundreds of pounds. It was made a Grade II listed building in 1973 and Age Concern now occupies the building.

## JABEZ

Despite being known as a philanthropist and temperance campaigner, Croydon's first mayor, Jabez Spencer Balfour, was also known to be a liar, adulterer and cheat who perpetrated an infamous fraud in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He had a string of businesses, but his ventures collapsed in 1892 with huge debts. The failure of the Liberator building society left thousands of people destitute. Jabez had been the company's 'moving spirit' and he fled to Argentina accompanied by a female ward half his age. He was eventually traced by a Scotland Yard detective who kidnapped him on a high-speed train travelling across South America. The sign on the Ship public house once showed the vessel that brought the disgraced Jabez back from Argentina. The detective that caught him had been a leading member of the team hunting for Jack the Ripper. Jabez spent 14 years in prison. The name Jabez means 'bringer of woe' - it's a pity his investors didn't realize that.

## VANDALISM

State-sponsored vandalism was responsible for the destruction of many things during the Civil War. Croydon and Surrey were firmly in the hands of the Roundheads, but many members of the local gentry were Royalists - they kept quiet. Clewer, of course, switched sides as it suited him. In the parish church there is an ancient gothic tomb showing a man and woman belonging to the influential Warham family, whose arms included a goat's head. The inscriptions are believed to have been torn away during the Civil War, when a man called Blease (or Blese or Blease) was paid half a crown to break the church windows, which were made of painted glass.

## INCEST

The parish records for 1595 record the burial of Margaret Cheriar. She had been made to stand for three market days in the town and for three sabbath days (i.e. not continuously) in the church, dressed in a white sheet with a paper on her 'back and bosom shewing her sin', which was incest. The shame of her punishment proved too much - she stood there for one Saturday and one Sunday, but died the next Sunday.

## ANCIENT LIGHTS

The right to light has been an established part of English law for about 400 years. Just opposite Woodside tram stop, which was once a railway station, there used to be a sign on a wall declaring 'ancient lights'. In 2005 new housing was being built there. If a window has been in existence for twenty years it gives the property owner rights to the light and fresh air it provides. This stops neighbouring residents from completely blocking the light to someone's window in any way. This right lapses after twenty years, if the

grantee of the right consents to give it up, or by acts from which an abandonment of the right may be inferred. The sign vanished some years ago, so presumably the occupier no longer claimed the right.



Ancient lights - this sign once hung opposite Woodside station

## ANCIENT RIGHTS

It was an ancient custom that the commoners of a parish had the right to use the common for grazing animals or collecting wood for fencing and fuel (hence the phrase 'by hook or by crook', which reflects the implements they used), and cutting turf for roofing or fuel. One such common was Farthing Down in Coulsdon. Croydon Common stood to the north of the present East Croydon. All that came to an end with the Enclosure Acts. Although the Act of 1756 was aimed at preserving woodland for building ships for the navy and the Act of 1773 was intended to improve cultivation and ensure a better food supply, the end-result was that peasants and parishioners were gradually robbed of their ancient rights and denied access to land that they didn't own.

In Croydon a group of 'local gentlemen' went a step further to line their own pockets. An application they made led to an Act in 1797 that enclosed 2950 acres of fields, commons, marshes,

heath, waste and woods. Just 230 acres were set aside for the inhabitants, but these were fragmented and scattered. The trustees obtained an Act to enable them to sell the land. The proceeds were used to build a new town hall, a butter market and an enlarged burial ground at the parish church. Most cottagers were illiterate and couldn't take advantage of any legal avenues open to them.

## ATTEMPTED REGICIDE

Duppas Hill is was used for various sporting events, including racing, sometimes attended by Elizabeth I while she was in Croydon visiting her Archbishop. The Pope excommunicated the Protestant queen, and there were several plots to assassinate her. At one race a Catholic priest armed with a gun attended, but the queen was not present. The priest, one George Beesley, was tortured and confined in the Tower of London, before being hanged, drawn and quartered in Fleet Street. The would-be regicide was recently beatified, according to the *Croydon Advertiser*.

And who was it who was kept a prisoner in the Old Palace? You'll have to read Royal Croydon for that.

# MOTHER HOTWATER

**Many, many years ago the George Inn stood on the site now occupied by the NatWest Bank in George Street. Stories circulated about the innkeeper, one Mother Hotwater. Several peddlers and travellers known to have stayed there were never seen again. Legend has it that they were robbed, murdered and buried beneath the vaults of the inn, which was then haunted by their troubled spirits.**

Town gossips reckoned Mother Hotwater was a witch, and rumours spread about a special closet in her possession. In this she would place dirty crockery, pans and clothes, returning the following morning to find them clean. Any other little task she wanted seeing to would also be performed. Needlewomen would say, when busy, 'I wish we had Mother Hotwater's closet!' When a draper's shop later occupied the site, a closet is said to have been nailed up and never opened again!

Another tradition attached to her was a prophecy that she would rise from her grave when she had been dead for 100 years. Although the date of her death is unknown, this anniversary must have passed long ago.

So who was Mother Hotwater, whose activities covered an unlikely number of years? The name 'Hotwater' does not appear in the lists of people buried in the parish church, but the name 'Atwater' does. An entry in the Register of Croydon Church for 1788 records the death of a Mary Woodfield, alias the 'Queen of Hell', who lived in the almshouses and was buried on 18 February. Could this have been her? And how did she manage to wangle a room in the almshouses with a sobriquet like that?

Perhaps the story of the murders can be

explained by various discoveries of human remains in George Street. In 1596 Archbishop Whitgift was building his almshouses, more correctly known as the Hospital of the Holy Trinity. Samuel Finch, vicar of Croydon, was employed by Whitgift to oversee the construction. Skulls and bones were found in a trench next to the George Inn while the foundations were being dug. Finch reported in a letter to Whitgift that he believed the site used to be some waste place 'wherein (in the time of some mortalitie) they did bury in'. He was also aware of talk about the finding of bones on the site picked for the maypole: 'beside there be many that can remember, when they digged in the myddest of that streate to sette a maypoale there, they found the skull and bones of a dead person'. Another skeleton was discovered there in 1937 when the street was remade.

An early report of a skirmish following the Battle of Lewes states that soldiers returning to London were killed in their lodgings, believed to have been the cluster of inns which once stood in the Crown Hill area. However, this skirmish between Londoners and Royalists is believed by most sources to have taken place in Norbury. An increasing number of ancient burial sites are being found in central Croydon, so maybe this legend reflects discoveries from an earlier age.