

Staffordshire Murders

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THE BLOODY STEPS MURDER

Colwich, 1839

Christina Collins was about 37 years of age, diminutive in size although not unattractive and had been twice married; a not unusual state of affairs in the days when a widow's lot was much harder than it is today, both financially and socially. She was the daughter of a middle-class Nottingham inventor, who had had some minor successes with patents involving the lace industry, and it was rumoured that she had some connections with the Covent Garden Theatre in London. Her first husband was one Thomas Ingleby, a Scotsman, who travelled the country exhibiting his conjuring skills in the music halls. Being anything but a shrinking violet, Ingleby boasted on his handbills

– which he gave out to whoever would deign to read them – that he was the 'Emperor of all Conjurers,' but his conjuring skills did not translate into money, for when he died in Ireland in 1832 he left his wife with little or nothing. Christina, from sheer force of necessity, looked around for another husband and was fortunate to attract Robert Collins, who worked with horses and with whom she was soon deeply in love; although it was not until 1838 that they married and went to Liverpool, looking for work. Despite trying his best, Collins found it impossible to get employment in the north and reluctantly decided that he must seek his fortune in London, leaving his newly-wed wife alone in Liverpool, where she found employment as a dressmaker, with Mrs Grice of 3 Crosshall Street.

Robert quickly found work in London and settled into lodgings at 10 Edgware Road and Christina was overjoyed when she received a letter from him asking her to join him and enclosing a golden guinea to cover the cost of the journey. This was more than likely the largest sum of money that Christina had ever had at one time but even that was insufficient to enable her to travel in reasonable comfort by coach. All she could afford was a passage on a narrow boat via the canal system, a journey that would be slow, with little in the way of comforts, but this meant nothing to Christina as she thought of the day when she and her beloved Robert would be reunited.

On 15 June 1839, Christina left Liverpool and travelled by barge to Preston Brook, on the Trent & Mersey Canal, to join one of Messrs Pickford's boats, the Staffordshire Knot, which was due to sail via Stoke-on-Trent, Rugeley, Fradley Junction and thence by Coventry to London. Christina was wearing a dark-coloured gown, a fawn-coloured handkerchief over her neck, and a figured blue silk bonnet with a light ribbon. Everything else that she owned was packed into two small cases.

The crew of the boat consisted of James Owen, the captain, assisted by two boatmen, George Thomas, alias Dobell, who had been with Pickford's for seven years and came from Westborne, and William Ellis, alias Lambert, from Brinklow, near Rugby, who had only been with the boat for a few weeks. There was also a cabin boy, William Muston (this lad's name was also given as Musson). It is highly unlikely that any of the crew, with the possible exception of Owen, could read or write, which might excuse the confusion of names.

The genteel Christina must have been somewhat taken aback at the first sight of this ruffianly crew, with whom she would perforce have to share the restricted accommodation that the barge offered for more than a week, and her fears increased when she noticed that the boat was stopping at regular intervals along the way while the crew, including young Muston, kept up their strength and their spirits by drinking their fill of the local ale. James Owen downed seven pints when the boat stopped at Stoke wharf – where Christina was seen by George Neville, one of Pickford's clerks, sitting in the boat reading a novel – and he carried a further gallon to the boat to keep them going until the next stop at Barlaston, conveniently near to the Plume of Feathers public house. While the boat stopped there, Christina went into the Pickford's office, where the clerk, thinking she looked rather tired, allowed her to doze fitfully until cries from outside told them that the narrow boat was ready to move on.

By the time they reached Walton, near Stone, the situation had deteriorated and Christina was now fearful for her safety. She told Hugh Cordwell, the canal clerk, that she was afraid that the crew would 'meddle with her' in their present drunken state, and, rather unhelpfully, Cordwell advised her that if they did, she must report them at the journey's end! His strictures were interrupted by a loud crash as the boat rammed the lock gates, followed by a torrent of abusive language from the captain. The air turned even bluer when Cordwell remonstrated with James Owen, but eventually things were sorted out and the boat proceeded. While all this was going on, Christina again stepped off the boat and proceeded to walk along the towpath. She walked with such determination that she soon outstripped the boat and Catherine Tansley, the wife of the lockkeeper at Aston, recalled seeing her there at about 8.30 p.m. waiting for the boat to catch up. While she sat, she passed the time by sharpening a penknife on the stone steps.

On arrival at the lock, one of the men on the boat pointed to Christina and shouted, 'Curse her eyes – I wish she was in hell flames,' which, hardly surprisingly, made the poor woman burst into tears. Catherine Tansley also maintained that two of the men on the boat had been quarrelling and George Thomas had said that he would not work the boat any longer 'if she were allowed to be in the cabin' – instead of in the space reserved for passengers. The captain told him to take no notice, but this did not seem to satisfy Thomas, who said that if the captain would pay him the 10s wages he was due, he would leave the boat immediately. Why Thomas was so concerned about Christina being in the cabin with them was never explained. The crew were evidently still very much inebriated but Christina had little choice but to rejoin the boat as it set off along the canal towards Hoo Mill lock, where the lockkeeper's wife, Ann Mills, later recollected that she was awakened at about midnight that night by a woman's cry, which caused her to get up, open the window and look out. A woman was on the deck of a narrow boat, crying quietly to herself, although she did not speak. 'What's up?' cried Ann, and one of the boatmen shouted that they had 'Been in the canal,' at which the

woman stepped off the boat and asked for her shoes, which she bent down to put on. Shortly afterwards, the lockkeeper's wife heard the woman say to one of the men on the boat, 'Don't attempt me - I'll not go down.'

While the boat was in the lock, Ann Mills asked one of the boatmen who the woman was and received the reply that she was a passenger and that she had her husband with her. This quietened Ann's fears somewhat and eventually the boat went on its way. At about 5 o'clock on Monday morning, Thomas Grant, a boatman, was approaching Brindley Bank, near Rugeley, when he saw something in the water. On closer inspection it turned out to be the body of a woman. She was dressed in a blue spotted gown and blue stockings, but without either bonnet or shoes. She was quite dead and although he looked, Grant saw neither footmarks on the canal bank nor any sign of how the woman had got into the water. Manoeuvring his boat skilfully, he pushed the body into the canal side and wharfinger John Johnson dragged the still warm body out of the water. Under the instructions of the parish constable, the body was carried, with some difficulty, up the wooden steps leading to the top of the steep bank and from there was eventually deposited at the Talbot Inn, Rugeley, where the inquest was to take place.

An hour later, Owen's boat passed through King's Bromley and was approaching Woodend lock, when Owen, clearly in a confused state, spoke to the lockkeeper's wife and said to her, 'I doubt we have had a passenger drowned.' When she enquired where, Owen said that he did not know. In answer to further questions, Owen, trembling visibly, said that the woman had been in the canal and that he had pulled her out and put her in the cabin. He said that she had seemed deranged and the only words he could make any sense out of were 'Collins, Collins.'

A little later on, Owen's boat reached Fradley Junction, where they were due to turn into the Coventry Canal. While they were changing horses, Owen told Charles Robotham, the Pickford's clerk, that he had had a passenger on board and that she had drowned herself. She had already attempted this once before, shouting all the while 'Collins, Collins,' which he believed was the name of her husband, and he had pulled her out. When asked by the shocked Robotham why he had allowed the woman to make a second attempt at drowning, he simply replied that he thought the woman was off her head. Owen asked Robotham if he would take the woman's things off the boat, but was interrupted by George Thomas, who said that the woman would follow them presently, which seemingly implied that she was still alive. Meanwhile, William Harrison, the police constable at Fazeley, had been alerted by Charles Robotham of the strange goings-on taking place along the towpath, and was waiting for Owen's boat when it arrived. Before he could utter a word, one of the boatmen burst out vehemently, 'Damn and blast the woman. What do I know about her? If she had a mind to drown herself, she might!' It was clear to PC Harrison that the crew, with the exception of the boy Muston, were inebriated. He quickly summoned assistance and the men, still cursing and swearing, were handcuffed and taken to the police station, where they were questioned further. Owen said that the woman had jumped out of the boat and that he had tried to hold on to her. 'In that case,' said PC Harrison, 'Why did you let her go?' to which Owen had no coherent reply. 'She was a little, fierce-talking woman,' he said, 'And I thought she was not quite right.'

In the cabin, PC Harrison found a bonnet, which was crushed; a pair of shoes tied together, a pair of clogs and an apron. Owen said that the apron belonged to his wife, but the rest were his passenger's. A short time before, PC Harrison discovered that the boy, Muston, had managed to slip his handcuffs, but before he could make off he was promptly locked safely in another room. Muston now said that he wished to be examined and after being shown the body, he identified it as the passenger who had come on board at Preston Brook, bound for London. 'She did not ride in the part of the boat usually set aside for passengers, but was in the cabin most of the way,' he told the policeman.

An inquest was convened at the Talbot Inn, Rugeley, before the coroner, Robert Fowke, and what was described in the Staffordshire Advertiser as a 'very respectable jury.'

According to Muston, who insisted on being heard, the woman had accompanied the three men to the public house when the boat stopped at Stoke Wharf, leaving him behind. They were gone for some time but when they returned, another woman, whom Muston thought was the ostler's wife, hitched a ride on the boat and stayed with their passenger for about three miles, before disembarking. After that, he went to sleep and did not wake up until the boat reached Colwich. According to the young lad, Owen and Christina were in the same bed, the captain being undressed, although the woman had all her clothes on. The woman then got off the boat and went towards the hedge, presumably to relieve herself, and that was the last time he saw her alive.

Arriving at Brindley Bank, near the aqueduct, it occurred to Muston to ask where the woman was. Someone, he said, suggested that she had fallen overboard and Owen, together with Thomas, went back to search for her. Dawn was breaking as Muston brought the boat to Rugeley wharf, where he fastened it up until the two men came back with the news that they had seen nothing of the missing woman.

The young lad may well have been frightened for his life when he was arrested, but his evidence seems to have been a pack of lies. He claimed that the woman had never been in the water at any time, that he had seen no clothes drying and that the men were sober. This last statement was palpably untrue, given the considerable amount of ale that the crew had consumed since they set off from Preston Brook, and he also denied that Christina had ever cried out 'Collins, Collins.' George Thomas was questioned next and confirmed Muston's statement about the captain and Christina being in the same bed together, but denied that she had got off the boat at Colwich lock. He claimed that he fell asleep and was woken by Owen near Brindley Bank and told that the woman had disappeared. The two men went back along the towpath until Thomas decided that he would go no further. No explanation was given for this decision. The deceased had told him that she was a married woman and he had also heard her call out 'Collins' on several occasions.

William Ellis repeated most of Thomas's story but claimed that Christina and the captain were 'uncommonly united.' Again, this seems to fly in the face of what we know about the woman and her relationship with the crew. James Owen was then taken to see the body of the deceased woman, which he formally identified and afterwards answered a series of questions, broadly along the lines of the replies given by Thomas and Ellis. He gave his answers slowly, with much caution, and said that all three men had drunk a quantity of porter at a beer shop in Stoke (he said three quarts and a pint, although Ellis insisted that it was no more than two quarts). All three men stoutly denied that the woman had consumed any alcohol with them. He went on to say that he had gone to bed at Aston lock and had awoken at Haywood lock and found the woman in the cabin, crying. He believed at that time that Thomas had been interfering with her and in reply to his question, she said 'O captain, O my Collins, I will drown myself before I get to London.' When he tried to question her further, the woman burst into further sobbing and waved him away. Owen also claimed that he had borrowed 6s from the boy Muston, with the intention of paying Thomas off, but approaching Colwich lock, the spat between them seemed to have calmed down and he and Thomas were again working the boat together. By the time they got to Colwich, he did not know where the woman was, being too busy with the boat, and claimed that he had pulled her out of the water sometime earlier. However, she then insisted on climbing up on to the cabin top and the last he saw of her alive, she was standing on the towpath at Colwich. He thought that Christina must have got back on the boat before they moved off and had thrown herself into the water sometime before they reached Rugeley. Owen also claimed that the other two men were in liquor and when asked how much, he replied, 'I durst not say how much lest they should dash my brains out!' Neither the coroner nor anyone else commented on the fact that the canal was only 3ft 6in deep along that section, so that if she had fallen into the water while conscious, Christina might easily have waded to the canal bank and would have been unlikely to drown.

Mr Samuel Barnett, a local surgeon, made a post-mortem examination of the body and could find little in the way of wounds, apart from two small external bruises, which he thought of no consequence. He was of the opinion that Christina Collins had died by suffocation, caused by drowning, and further examination showed that no improper connection had taken place. It was nearly eleven o'clock in the evening when the examination finished and the coroner adjourned the inquest until the following Monday morning at ten o'clock, ordering that the prisoners should all be kept separately and not be allowed to communicate with one another. Upon resumption, and after further questioning of James Owen and his two colleagues, during which Owen tried to imply that he was sober, whereas Ellis and Thomas were heavily in drink at the time of Christina's death, the jury gave a 'Guilty' verdict and the three men were charged with the murder of Christina Collins, the boy Muston being allowed to go free.

At the subsequent trial, in front of Mr Justice Williams, which commenced at Stafford on 24 July 1839, Owen, Thomas and Ellis were put up on four separate counts; the first charged them with the wilful murder of Christina Collins by throwing her into the canal, the second was an accusation of rape on the woman, another indictment charged them with common assault and the fourth with stealing certain articles, the property of the husband of the deceased, to which all three accused pleaded not guilty. The boy Muston, it was announced, although originally charged with the others, would now appear as a witness for the Crown. Appearing for the prosecution at Stafford Crown Court were Sergeant Ludlow and Mr F.V. Lee, and for the accused were Mr Godson (for Owen), Mr Yardley (for Thomas) and Mr Beadon (for Ellis).

Sergeant Ludlow opened the proceedings by announcing that he would first move the charge of rape and it was his intention not to offer

any evidence against James Owen, as he was willing to act as a witness for the Crown. Mr Godson immediately rose and told the judge that this course of action was being taken without Owen's consent. Mr Yardley and Mr Beadon, on hearing this surprising news, protested that this would greatly hamper them in their defence of the other two men and the discussion among learned counsel became rather heated, so much so that the judge intervened, saying that as the case was one of supreme importance, he would take the advice of his learned brother Mr Baron Alderson, who was trying a case in another court. He therefore suspended the hearing and when he returned, whatever doubts he had previously entertained appeared to have evaporated and he rather belligerently announced that there was now very little doubt in his mind as to the proper course to be taken in this case. He had known instances, not once, but hundreds of times, when the court had allowed counsel for the prosecution to withhold evidence against one of the accused parties so that they might give evidence on behalf of the Crown.

Sergeant Ludlow then opened his case, which he said was a very important one, involving as it did the life or death of the prisoners. He then proceeded to give a short résumé of the life of Christina Collins and her intention of travelling to London aboard the Staffordshire Knot. The evidence would show, he told the court, that Christina Collins appeared on several occasions to be afraid of some violence from the crew and at one place she was observed to be sharpening a knife. (This may well have been a red herring, as the knife had subsequently been found safely shut away in her baggage.) He would also endeavour to prove not only violence but also coarse and threatening language on the part of the accused men. The boat should have arrived at Fazeley at four o'clock on the Monday morning but was two hours late and the unfortunate woman was by that time missing. Her body was found in the canal at Brindley Bank but whether she was thrown into the water or whether she threw herself in were not questions for the jury's present consideration, but whether the accused were guilty of the particular charge of rape. Evidence would be put forward to show that when the body was discovered, her clothes were considerably rent and torn and her drawers in particular were torn in such a way as to show that she had been used with great violence. Sergeant Ludlow went on to assure the court that he would endeavour to obtain the truth from one of the prisoners (Owen) by admitting him as a Crown witness and stressed that in this, he had no other object but to satisfy public justice. Somewhat surprisingly, Owen then told the court that he would not give evidence, at which Sergeant Ludlow observed that he was not surprised to hear him say so!

Robert Collins was the first witness. He appeared to be in a great deal of distress, weeping copiously and giving the impression to the people crowded into the public gallery of being hardly able to bear the sight of the accused in the dock. He confirmed that the body was indeed that of his late wife, and that although it was dreadfully disfigured, he recognised her from a mark on the ear.

Elizabeth Grice, the dead woman's former employer, was next to enter the witness box and said that although Christina did not possess very good clothes, they were always neat and in a good state of repair. In addition, she was a very delicate kind of person. Cross-examined by Mr Godson, she denied ever having heard Christina claim any connection with the stage or the Covent Garden Theatre. (Whether this connection with the stage was true or not, it hardly seemed relevant to the people crowded into the courtroom.)

William Brookes, a porter in the employ of Pickford's at Stoke-on-Trent, claimed to hear George Thomas use extremely obscene language to the woman, making it quite clear that he had designs on Christina. He also heard her say 'Leave me alone. I'll not have anything to do with you.' Hugh Cordwell also said that Christina had complained to him that the men were drunk and might 'meddle with her.' Other witnesses, including John Tansley, went into the witness box to give evidence of the rough treatment that the deceased woman had experienced aboard the Staffordshire Knot. Ann Mills, wife of the lockkeeper at Hoo Mill lock, told the court that she had been awakened by a peculiar cry, which she first thought was that of a child but on looking out of the window, saw a boat in the lock with a woman sitting on the cabin. One of the boatmen called out that she had 'been in the cut.'

Then it was young Muston's turn to give evidence, which he did, looking thoroughly frightened. He said that he had missed the woman after Hoo Mill lock between three and four o'clock in the morning, and in reply to his query concerning her whereabouts, Owen had told him that 'he was afeart she was drowned.' Cross-examined by Mr Beadon, Muston said that Ellis was asleep when the boat reached Brindley Bank and when he awoke at Fradley Junction, he would not believe that Christina was dead and searched the boat for her, without success.

John Bladon, an employee of the Trent & Mersey Navigation at Rugeley, told the court that there was a defined course of action for a captain to take if he lost a passenger, including making an entry on the way-bill, which every boat carried. When the Staffordshire Knot passed him on the morning of 17 June, no mention had been made to him of any loss.

George Thomas and William Ellis then gave their accounts of what had happened on the Staffordshire Knot. Both claimed they had not seen the woman leave the boat or to have seen Owen pulling her from the water as he said he had done. Ellis also said that he had heard Owen swearing at Christina.

James Owen, who repeated the story he had told at the inquest, followed them. He claimed to have been 'muddled' through drink for most of the time but could recall that Thomas had been trying to molest the woman when the boat reached Haywood lock, and shortly afterwards the woman had attempted to jump into the canal. He had caught hold of her and hauled her back into the boat and remained talking to her until Colwich lock, after which he took up the steering and the woman went missing.

At this stage, George Thomas was recalled and claimed that it was James Owen who had been responsible for the bad language directed at the deceased woman. At Fradley, Owen had told Charles Robotham that there was a passenger missing and on the way to Fazeley, Owen had tried to get the other two men to swear that the woman had left the boat at Colwich lock. Owen, re-examined, denied this and claimed that he had caught Thomas and Ellis going through the woman's boxes and that it was them who had suggested that they should say she got out at Colwich. By now it was clear to the court that the accused were each desperately trying to place the blame on each other.

That concluded the case for the prosecution, which Mr Godson, for Owen, immediately announced was no case at all. The judge seemed to agree for he announced that so far as he was concerned, there was no more evidence of rape than of murder and he thought that there was not a case to go before the jury. He proceeded to tell the jury:

Gentlemen, I in common with you, may suppose that foul play took place on board that boat and about it that night. We may imagine that dreadful deeds were done with regard to this unhappy woman, but in this realm of England, we do not go on mere suspicion; we do not convict except the charge is supported by proofs. The charges are that all three ravished this unhappy woman, but where is the evidence of this woman being ravished at all? You have not heard one word about the state of her person. There is no proof of violence having been committed upon her. It is true that Owen is said to have implied that Thomas raped and murdered her, but whatever suspicion that language may raise in your minds and mine, it is no evidence in law against Thomas, nor is the statement of any one of the prisoner's evidence against another, though it is evidence against himself. I am bound to tell you that there is no proof of their having committed the crime of which they stand charged in this indictment.

With that, the jury returned a verdict of 'Not Guilty.'

At this stage, Mr Sergeant Ludlow applied for a postponement of the charge of murder until the next Assizes, on the ground that if it were not, then a most material piece of evidence would be wanting. One Joseph Orgill, who had at some time been handcuffed to James Owen in prison, was currently locked up in the county gaol on a charge of bigamy and could not be produced in court, but before the next Assizes an application would be made to the Secretary of State for a free pardon, which would then allow him to be a competent witness. All three counsels for the defence resisted this application but the case was postponed to appear before Mr Baron Gurney on 16 March. This time the three men were charged with 'The wilful murder of Christina Collins by casting, pushing and throwing the said Collins into the canal by which means the said Christina Collins was choked, suffocated and drowned.' The accused all pleaded 'Not Guilty' and retained the same counsel. The initial evidence was more or less the same as in the first hearing, and then the recently pardoned Joseph Orgill went into the witness box. He told the court that while he was in gaol, before his own trial, he had occupied a cell with James Owen, who had blurted out his story and had accused Thomas and Ellis of attacking the woman and 'mauling her to death.' After evidence of the post-mortem, which confirmed death by drowning, counsel gave their summing up on both sides, followed by the judge, who warned the jury that in the whole of his experience he had never met with a case which made a larger demand upon the patience, the attention and the discrimination of a jury. Before they could find a verdict of guilty, they must be fully satisfied that the accused threw her into the water and that they effected her death in that way and no other. The evidence of the boy Muston

must be received with great caution. He had been confined in the gaol with two of the prisoners and the jury would also recall that he had claimed not to hear any cries from the woman at Hoo Mill lock, although they had been loud enough to disturb the sleep of the lockkeeper's wife.

Without the evidence of Orgill, the evidence amounted to this: that the woman was taken on board a boat navigated by the three accused men and that her dead body was found in the canal at 5 a.m., still warm. Undoubtedly, as a passenger she was under the care of the persons navigating that boat and they had a duty towards her. Evidence had been given that Thomas had vowed that as his captain had had connexion with the woman, he would do the same and there was heard an entreaty from the woman 'not to attempt her.' There was a question from a witness as to whether she had a protector on the boat, and one of the boatmen answered that she had – her husband – an obvious lie.

The jury must take the whole of the evidence into consideration and if that convinced them that the prisoners were guilty of the murder of this woman by drowning and not by any other means, then they would find them guilty, but if they entertained a fair and reasonable doubt that they did not actually drown her, however disgusted they might feel at their conduct in other respects, and however might be the suspicions that rested upon them, they would find the accused not guilty. The jury then retired but were back within three quarters of an hour with a unanimous verdict of guilty, whereupon the judge donned the black cap and pronounced sentence of death.

In the event, William Ellis was not hanged, his sentence being transmuted to transportation to Australia for life, this good news being given to him just as he and his two colleagues were receiving the last rites on the morning of the execution. The other two were led out in front of a crowd estimated at some thousands and it was reported that as they hung, their bodies were 'much convulsed'.

The executioner was the famous William Calcraft, assisted by a prisoner from Stafford Gaol, George Smith, who volunteered for the job because Calcraft's regular assistant was too drunk to take part! Smith was later to act as executioner to William Palmer (see Chapter Two). Afterwards, William Ellis was seen viewing the dead bodies of his companions and was said to have been much affected by the spectacle.

In a letter to the Staffordshire Advertiser, the vicar of Houghton, the Revd Charles Smith Royds, amended that the boatmen had to work on Sundays and were therefore prevented from attending church service. It would seem that the coroner's jury were of a similar mind, for they wrote a strong letter to the coroner expressing 'their decided conviction of the great impropriety of the carrying on of business by land and water upon the Sunday in the same manner as the other days.'

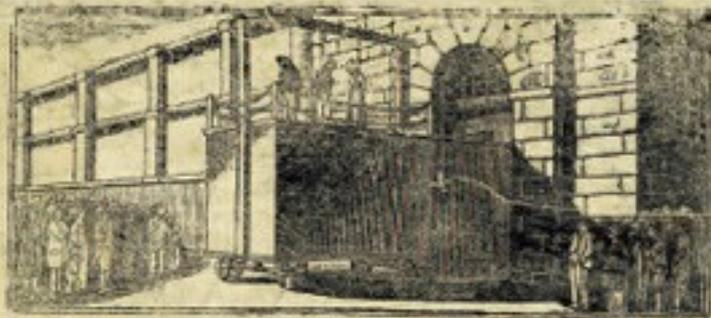
William Ellis got off lightly, although transportation to Australia was certainly no picnic, but Owen and Thomas were convicted on the flimsiest of evidence. It is clear that the ruffianly crew were drunk on that fateful journey, but that was probably their usual state. Although no evidence was produced, it seems likely that other unaccompanied women passengers had had to suffer the drunken attentions of the crew members from time to time and Christina's situation might not have been anything out of the ordinary. The medical evidence was sketchy and we have no idea of the professional competence of Dr Barnett, or precisely what he found in his examination of Christina's body. He mentioned no marks of a struggle, which would surely have been evident if Christina had been fighting for her virtue, but on the other hand, if she threw herself into the canal, why did she not just wade to the nearest bank and climb out? Ever since the murder, there has been a belief that when the body of Christina Collins was being carried up the steps at Brindley Bank, her blood stained the steps indelibly. The original steps have long since been replaced by concrete, but are still known among the locals as the 'Bloody Steps' and it is said that on 17 June 1939, exactly one hundred years after the crime, a Rugeley woman and her daughter saw a figure in breeches and with hair tied back, walk on the water and disappear through the steps.

Today, the grave of Christina Collins at St Augustine's Church, Rugeley, bears a large headstone with the inscription:

To the memory of Christina Collins, wife of Robert Collins, London. Who having been most barbarously treated was found dead in the Canal in this Parish on June 17 1839. Aged thirty-seven years. This stone is erected by some individuals of the Parish of Rugeley in commemoration of the end of this unhappy woman.

As a modern postscript, the story of Christina Collins was the basis for Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse book, *The Wench Is Dead*, with the action translated from Rugeley to Oxford. This author does not agree with Mr Dexter's conclusions!





The Life, Trial, Condemnation, last Declaration, and
EXECUTION OF
TWO OF THE BOATMEN,
At Stafford, on Saturday, April 11. 1840.

For the Wilful Murder of CHRISTINA COLLINS, near Rugby.

At Stafford Assize on Monday the 10th of March, JAMES OWEN, aged 29; GEORGE THORNTON, alias DOBELL, aged 27; and WILLIAM ELLIS, alias LAMBERT, aged 25, were placed on the bar on the charge of the wilful murder of Christina Collins, the wife of Robert Collins, on the 17th of June 1839, in the parish of Rugby, "by cutting, putting, and throwing the said Christina Collins to or into the water," by which means "the said Christina Collins was strangled, suffocated, and drowned."

The prisoners having avowedly pleaded not guilty, a jury was sworn "well and truly to try and give judgement to make known our Sovereign Lady the Queen and the prisoners in the law, and to give verdicts as you according to the evidence."

These men, it will be recollected, were tried at the last Summer Assize, before Mr. Justice Williams, on an information charging them with transmitting a rope upon the body of Christina Collins. After a long investigation, and the case for the prosecution having closed, the learned Judge directed that, although a strong case of suspicion had been raised against the prisoners, yet there was no legal evidence of any sort having been discovered by them, and directed the jury to acquit the prisoners, which they accordingly did. Mr. Justice Williams then applied to the Court to put all the men, under the indictment, in prison, on the ground that a careful witness, Joseph Smith, a prisoner in the goal, who had been convicted of larceny, could not be depended on in the case with his bad character, through an application to the Secretary of State. There, it was understood, had made important observations on legal points. The Counsel for the prisoners opposed this application; but Mr. Justice Williams refused to postpone the trial.

On the present assize, the men had made the same appearance which they did at the last Assize. They had been examined by the learned Judge, and were by him found to be sane.

The learned Judge then directed the jury to give their verdict. They were both in a healthy state of mind, and were dependent on the words of the witness, who had a character, and being accordingly, the Court expressed a doubt for the law in this matter. The learned Judge then directed the jury to give their verdict, and the Court was of opinion that the men were guilty of the murder of Christina Collins, and that they were to be hanged.

Image courtesy of Staffordshire Arts & Museum Service