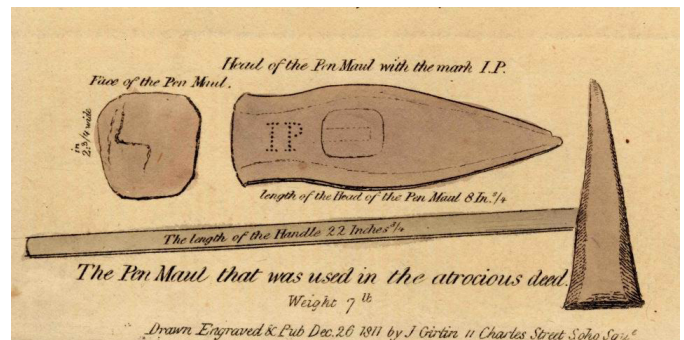


The Ratcliffe Highway Murders of 1811

In 1811, Ratcliffe Highway was a busy road of traders, albeit with a reputation as a rough area. At No. 29 was a draper's shop owned by Mr. Timothy Marr, a twenty-four year old ex-sailor, who lived and worked there with his wife Celia, their baby son, a young apprentice named James Gowan and a servant called Margaret Jewell. Late on the night of 7th December, Mr. Marr sent Jewell on an errand. She returned shortly to find his shop shut. Having no response to ringing the bell, she waited for the parish night-watchman, Olney, to arrive. He also failed to gain entry. John Murray, a neighbour, alerted by the commotion, entered through the rear and found the bodies of the Marrs and Gowan with their heads smashed. Horrifically, the baby in its cradle had its throat cut. The news spread rapidly, reaching the Thames Police Office at Wapping.

Thames Officer Charles Horton ran to the scene and discovered what appeared to be the murder weapon, a large shipwright's maul or hammer and also a large chisel on the shop counter. On the Sunday morning, three separate authorities were investigating this crime: the Parish of St. George's in the East, Shadwell Police Office, under whose jurisdiction the murder technically fell, and the Thames River Police Office at Wapping. These forces cooperated, with John Harriott being invited to Shadwell Police station to take part in the questioning of Jewell, Olney and Murray. Harriott was determined to be proactive, visiting the crime scene and appealing for information. The Thames River Police searched shipping on the river, paying special attention to foreign vessels, reflecting a general xenophobic attitude in London at that time.

Harriott soon had the descriptions of three men seen loitering outside the Marrs' shop before the murders and offered a £20 reward for their arrest. However, in doing so, Harriott overstepped the bounds of his authority and was reprimanded by the Home Secretary. Nevertheless, the Home Office offered a reward of £100 and then raised this to an unprecedented £500, worth £37,060 in today's money. Such large sums indicate the deep impact of these brutal murders.



An image of the murder weapon



John Turner escaping the King's Arms

Eventually the Thames River Police released a description of the maul with the letters "IP" marked on its head. The chisel was identified as one that had been lost by workmen, whilst making alterations at the Marrs' shop.

Despite police efforts, another set of killings exacerbated the panic. On 19th December John Turner raised the alarm that murder was being committed at the King's Arms where he lodged. A small crowd forced their way in to discover the landlord, Mr. Williamson, a big and strong fifty-six year old, his wife and their servant, Bridget Harrington, with their heads beaten in and throats cut. It appeared that the murderer had fled out of the back onto a muddy bank, where a footprint was found. An iron bar, apparently the murder weapon, was lying by the victims. The Williamsons' granddaughter had survived, asleep upstairs. Turner provided the description of a man he had seen bending over Mrs. Williamson's body.

These murders inflamed an already tense situation. More rewards, raised by parishes and public subscription, were offered. Many people were arrested on little or no evidence, especially Portuguese and Irish individuals, reflecting both the panic and the prejudices of the day. Arrests outside

London showed how the panic had spread across the country. Amidst this confusion, John Williams, a sailor who had once sailed with Timothy Marr, was arrested on 22nd. He lodged at the Pear Tree Public House but frequently visited the King's Arms. He was arrested on the tenuous grounds of being seen near this hostelry before the murders, returning late to his lodgings and also possessing more money than usual; the latter he explained as being derived from having pawned some clothes. He was remanded and questioned.

John Turner did not identify Williams as the man he had seen, but did recognise him from his trips to the King's Arms. Mary Rice testified that she had washed Williams's bloody shirt a few days after the Marrs' murder but he claimed that this was the result of a bar brawl. The first real breakthrough came on Christmas Eve, when the maul was identified as belonging to John Peterson, a sailor who had left some possessions at the Pear Tree whilst he returned to sea. Mary Rice's son, William, was able to testify that the maul belonged to Peterson as he and his brother frequently played with it. Inquiries continued and John Cuthperson, another Pear Tree lodger, testified that Williams had washed muddy stockings the day after the Williamsons' murders, indicating a possible escape via the muddy bank.

On Boxing Day, Harriott and Thames River Police Office magistrates directed about ten of their officers to patrol the streets rather than the river, in order to protect and reassure the neighbourhood. They returned to river duty on 30th, after the Parish of Wapping had formed more night patrols. This demonstrated the need for a proper preventative land police similar to the Thames River Police.

The day after Boxing Day, Williams was found hanged in his cell, before he could be questioned any further. It was deemed suicide, with many viewing it as an admission of his guilt. It was decided that Williams' corpse would process around the crime scenes, stopping for a few moments outside each location. On Tuesday 31st December, his body with the maul, chisel and iron bar displayed beside him was duly paraded and then buried at the crossroads of Cable Street and Cannon Street, the traditional fate of suicides.



John Williams' body on display

The authorities believed there was a second murderer but they were never found. Although many were convinced of Williams' guilt, he was never convicted of murder and his exact involvement was questioned at the time: he had alibis and the evidence was highly circumstantial. He also bore almost no resemblance to the man seen by John Turner. Prime Minister Spencer Percival later commented that his "*guilt was still wrapped up in mystery.*" Some historians believe that William Ablass, another sailor with a history of violence, who knew Williams, was possibly the murderer. He was a large man with the necessary strength to overcome the burly Mr Williamson. He also was not able to produce a totally satisfactory alibi.

In the aftermath of the murders, Harriott recommended to a Committee of the House of Commons on policing that the old night-watchmen system should be scrapped, as the murders had highlighted their ineffectiveness and proposed that a new structure of protective and preventative policing, like that of the Thames River Police, should be introduced. Although no new system was introduced at this time, many were convinced of the necessity for police reform.