The Boot Lace Murder – A mystery for all time?

Great Yarmouth is known as a resort of entertainment, amusement and wonder. But what lies behind the façade of neon reveals a more dark and sinister side. Let me tell you the story of ‘The Bootlace Killer’. Cemented in history and folklore as a tale of love, death and mystery the circumstances surrounding the events are still talked about to this very day.

Our account begins like many others, with a whirlwind romance. Mary Jane Clarke and Herbert John Bennett were young lovers who married shortly after meeting in 1896. Bennett, who worked with the Northfleet Co-op and Clarke, a music teacher, both engaged in shady fraudulent activities, with Bennett being described as a petty thief and ne’er-do-well. Following a miscarriage in 1897, their first child, a girl named Ruby, was born in 1898.

The pair drifted apart and by the summer of 1900 they had separated, living in different parts of London. Mary had taken lodgings at a flat in Bexley Heath under an alias of Mrs Bartlett, while Herbert had found a place to live in Woolwich. It is also at this time that Herbert met Alice Meadows, his new love, and started working for the Woolwich Arsenal. It is from here where our story turns to Great Yarmouth.

Shortly before 9pm on Saturday 15th September 1900 Mary Bennett, wearing a sailor hat atop of her golden hair and a noticeably new shirt, bodice and skirt walked down the South Quay and turned into the narrow alleyway known as The Rows. At the time GY had 145 Rows, gloomy manmade lanes, running parallel to each other. Some so narrow you could raise your arms and touch both sides at once. Being slightly built, just a few inches over 5 feet tall, she was heavily laden carrying a small suitcase and a large brown paper parcel. Mary and her young daughter knocked at a lodging house, Number 3, Row 104 and is greeted by Mrs Rudrum, the lady of the house. She takes the best room for a week and introduced herself as Mrs Hood, from York. Each night, Mary would put her young child to bed and leave for evening, the child being in the care of Mrs Rudrum. On the first night, Mary Bennett did not return until gone midnight. Mr Rudrum stepped out to look for her and witnessed her in accompaniment with another man. Mrs Rudrum gave warnings to Mary of the “prowlers who haunted the Yarmouth seafront after dark”. The following day was spent on Great Yarmouth’s glorious golden sands where Mary and her daughter Ruby had a photograph. A photograph that was to become more famous than any photo before it and for many years after.

During her stay, a letter arrived for Mary with a Woolwich postmark and was described to be written in a masculine hand. When she opened the letter, she appeared unaffected by it, quoting one of its phrases, “meet me under the big clock at 9. Be sure to put the baby to bed before you come.” She remarked she supposed the big clock meant the Town Hall. The letter set the meeting date for the Saturday evening. Alice Rudrum, the daughter of the boarding house owners, spoke to Mary Bennett under the big clock at around 9pm on the fateful Saturday evening. This was the last positive identification of Mary Bennett.

On the morning of Sunday 22nd September 1900, 14 year old John Norton came across what he assumed to be a bundle of old clothes on the beach. As he investigated further, he was shocked to discover the scratched, bruised and beaten body of a woman. The female corpse, lying on her back with her legs flexed open and hands buried into the sand, gave suggestion to a dark and violent crime. The boy, wanting to confirm she was indeed deceased, noticed she had been strangled by bootlace, much of which was buried in the furrow it had caused for itself.

PC Manship, the officer who arrived at the scene of the crime, failed to take notes as he was a not a highly literate man and was keen to get the body moved before the beach became crowded. However, it was noticed that the sand a few yards away was trampled, suggesting the victim attempted to escape but her assailant caught up to her, dragging her back to place she was subsequently killed. On approaching the body, Manship examined the bootlace that had strangled the victim and recognised both a granny-knot and reef-knot had been used to secure it around her neck. It was not a new bootlace and an additional reef-knot had been used to repair the lace on a previous occasion. The police surgeon ruled out suicide and concluded cause of death to be strangulation with a ligature.

The following day, a full autopsy was carried out with the District Medical Officer. Upon examining the clothes, he discovered a laundry mark of the figures **599** written with a thick marker. Mr Rudrum had reported his lodger missing after failing to return home and identified her body at the coroner’s office without hesitation, “Mrs Hood from York”. Investigations back at the lodging residence and interviews with the Rudrums gave further links to the **599** laundry mark and the discovery of the beachside photograph. Mrs Rudrum told the investigating Inspector that Mary had a number of rings and a silver pocket watch that hung on a long gold chain, all of which she was wearing on the evening she went out.

The coroner adjourned the case and allowed for her body to buried. Marys coffin was marked ‘Unknown’ with Mrs Hood written in parentheses. Mrs Rudrum and Alice were the only mourners at her burial. Mary was buried in Great Yarmouth’s North Cemetery, her grave marked by a coffin shaped headstone.

It was not for several weeks later that the constabulary’s Chief Constable called in Scotland Yard after the investigation failed to yield any answers. It is from here the story gains momentum. Inspector Alfred Leach of CID began his investigation. The only clue of note was the **599** laundry mark. This led investigators back to a laundry shop in London and it is from here the police were able to officially identify the deceased. Police shared the beach photograph with the owner of the laundry shop who unequivocally identified the woman as his customer and neighbour, as Mary Jane Bennett, who had been away since September. The investigation had been focused on establishing links to Mrs Hood when in fact the woman was that of Mary Bennett. With the information of her name, police were able to track down Herbert John Bennett, her estranged husband. Police built a circumstantial case against Herbert Bennett based on the testimonies of aquantices and colleagues. His shady and deceitful manner made him prime suspect in the Inspectors eyes.

On November 6th, several weeks after the brutal strangulation of Mary Jane Bennett, Herbert John Bennett was arrested on suspicion of her murder. In response, Bennett protested his innocence and acted in sheer bewilderment. A search revealed that Bennett had; keys to his current residence, a letter from Alice and a few coins. In his lodgings, the police found a bundle of letters from Alice, two imitation pearl necklaces’, a receipt from the Crown and Anchor Hotel and most importantly a gold chain and piece of jewellery similar to the silver watch and chain that had been described by the Rudrums and was missing from the body and the boarding house.

It was discovered he had removed clothes and jewellery items belonging to his late wife from her home and had passed them on to his now fiancé Alice, who had been led to believe Herbert was a bachelor. Alice visited Bennett at Woolwich police station and it his here she learns of Bennett having a wife and a young child.

Bennett was transported back to Great Yarmouth where he appeared before the Magistrates court and he again protested his innocence. The case was adjourned until later and in this time, police gathered evidence to fit the crime. A waiter from the Crown and Anchor claimed a man fitting Bennetts description stayed at the hotel on the August Bank holiday weekend, a trip both Bennett and Alice are claimed to have taken together, and the same man stayed again on the nights of September 15th and September 22nd. On this final evening, hotel staff claimed he arrived just before midnight appearing breathless and flustered, as though he had been running.

Bennett reattended the Magistrates Court on November 16th, this time accompanied by a solicitor. Comments note how calm and collected he appeared in both his court appearances. Most of the evidence presented to the Magistrates was to be presented again, at a later date, in a trial at the Old Bailey.

The trial occurred in London on February 26th 1901 where the jury took just 35 minutes to agree on a verdict of guilty. The Clerk of Arraigns asked Bennett if he had anything to say as to why the court should give him judgement to die, the young man replied, “I say I am not guilty, sir!”. He was then committed to the custody of the Sheriff of Norfolk for his execution which would happened on March 21st 1901.

So…what are your thoughts and questions? Has the right man been rightfully found guilty and executed? Let’s explore this further…

If Bennett wasn’t guilty, why did he not give an account of his whereabouts on the weekend of the murder? Sir Edward Marshall Hall, Bennetts solicitor, argued that Woolwich Arsenal shift records show that Herbert Bennett was at work on the day of his wife’s murder with a witness claiming to have spoken to Bennett in Lee Green in London well after the last train from London to Great Yarmouth would have steamed out. Does this suggest he was engaged in something as equally as incriminating over that weekend?

The prosecution would have you to believe Bennett persuaded his wife to take a holiday under an assumed identity, with his purpose being to get rid of his wife in a way that would not alert his mistress to his previous marriage. If this was the case, why Hood? Why would he encourage her to travel to Great Yarmouth, a place where the couple had previously holidayed and Bennett had too visited with Alice Meadows? And in support of this, why encourage Mary to stay at the Rudrums, a place he had recently corresponded with prior to his travels to the area with Alice? Does this all not sound like sloppiness, not the actions of the man who wants to dispatch of his wife in order to avoid any suspicion and cause difficulties for the new life he is forging and convincing others of?

On her body, Mary still had her wedding ring plus 2 rings on her left hand and 2 more rings on her right hand. What was missing from her persons was her satchel in which allegedly held the letter from Woolwich and a silver pocket watch with the gold chain. If this had been a random crime, would the assailant not have taken all jewellery? Does the missing satchel hold claim to support the murder was indeed carried out by that of her husband, Herbert Bennett? If so, why did Bennett take the watch and chain which he knew to be such an inexpensive item of jewellery? Why not take her rings as well which are more likely to have yielded a great return if sold? And most importantly, why would he keep the item after the murder…what value did it have? The satchel which was missing from the body was never recovered from Herbert Bennett, if it was him indeed that had killed Mary.

The defence argued that Mary had 2 watches, similar in appearance and the one found in Bennetts possession was in fact, slightly different in design. Marys father was asked to identify the watch and chain as the one he had given to her 12 years earlier. During the second magistrates appearance he claimed it was not that one, when asked this again in the trial at the Old Bailey, Mr Clarke stated definitively that it was indeed the watch he had presented to her. This piece of evidence seemingly underpinned the entire case against Mr Bennett yet so many questions arise about it.

To me, this murder does not seem to be premeditated. Would your weapon of choice have been a bootlace? If it was, would you not have bought a new one? Surely the use of a self-repaired bootlace, or in fact a bootlace at all, points more to an act of the moment.

Who was the man that Mary was seen kissing on her first night in Great Yarmouth? Was this the same man she met at 9pm under the big clock on her final night? The Rudrums also reported that Mary had talked of an infatuated brother in law, with whom she may or may not have been having relations. Medical evidence showed signs of attempted intercourse…could any of these men have been involved but not investigated? Inspector Leach of Scotland Yard wanted to make a quick arrest and with little evidence against Bennett at that point it was a risky gamble. If Bennett was to be prosecuted it would be beneficial to the Inspector’s career but if it turned out to be a false arrest it would have been career ending. All he had to go on was hearsay and speculation around Bennett’s character. But if it was not Bennett, then who?

Thinking about the prosecution’s argument that Bennett wanted to rid himself of his wife to make way for his new life with Alice raises more questions for me. We cannot forget that Bennett was also a father. Did he have no parental concern for his daughter’s welfare from this point on? If he had planned to kill his wife in the hope, he would get away with it, what were his plans for Ruby? Could he just move on without a further thought?

Another note of suspicion to me rests with the Rudrum’s, the owners of the lodging house where Mary stayed and prominent figures in our tale. Following the death of her mother, Ruby initially stayed in the care of the Rudrum’s and in recompense for this, the household received a constant trickle of money from well-wishes and sympathisers. The Rudrum’s told all they could of their lodger, with their daughter telling the inquest of Mary’s “conversations with an unknown man” and the letter she received with a Woolwich postmark. However, there are no other records of this letter and the postman serving Row 104 had no recollection of such letter being delivered. The Rudrum’s, and their lodging house became synonymous in the papers, it wouldn’t be too far fetched to think that they could have diluted the truth or played with events in order to keep this lucrative role?

The newspapers themselves created their own judge, jury and executioner in the way they portrayed this crime, almost sentencing Bennett as guilty before any trial had begun. The openly sought out witnesses, paying them for their stories before they could be heard in court. To me this casts doubt over the impartiality of those involved in deciding the fate of Bennett and the validity of those as witnesses. For instance, a member of staff from the Crown and Anchor hotel attended a police line up in which Bennett was present. This “witness” had previously seen sketches and impressions of Bennett in the newspapers prior to this and identified him as ‘the accused’ rather than, the ‘man who had stayed at the hotel that night’. Surely someone identifying such a person would have used a more natural utterance than that of ‘the accused’? It should also be noted that the information of a man arriving in this manner just before midnight was only offered once an arrest had been made….a case of finding evidence to fit the accused than providing clear evidence maybe?

By now, you may have already made your decision about the fate of Herbert J Bennet. But there is one more twist in our story that may prove his innocence once and for all. Sunday 14th of July, 1912 and another body was discovered on the beach at Great Yarmouth. 11 years after the murder of Mary Bennet.

Dora May Gray, an eighteen-year-old of slight build with fair hair was found murdered with a lace tied in a reef-knot around her throat. She was found lying on her back with her legs slightly parted. The similarities between the two murders were notable. Was this the actions of a copy killer? Or was the culprit of this heinous crime the true boot lace killer?

I can be superstitious at times and would classify myself as agnostic – I don’t believe in one particular religion, but do believe in a higher power. Regardless of your own beliefs I would ask you to remain open minded about one more fact left out of tale of the death of Mary Bennet.

On a cold and blustery morning on March 21st, Herbert J Bennet’s life was to come to end. He had been found guilty of killing his wife Mary and was due to be hanged. Crowds gathered around the gaol as street sellers continued about their daily business - selling jacket potatoes, roasting chestnuts and taking photographs. Bennet’s last meal consisted of tea and bread which he was unable to eat. His journey to the gallows involved being carried by his executioners. Somehow, he managed to summon up enough strength to stand to have his legs tied and rope secured before the trap door gave way and his life ended. Observers reported that his body twitched for minutes after it had fallen, although, his death certificate stated the cause of death was ‘dislocation of the vertebrae by hanging pursuant to due execution of the law’. A black flag was hoisted above the prison to mark the enactment of the death penalty and to show justice was served. Several moments after the flag reached the top of the pole, a brisk wind blew and the flag and pole snapped and toppled down the gaol roof. Legend says that this was a sign from a higher power that an innocent man had lost his life and the true boot lace killer was still free.