



# MURDER & MAYHEM IN NORTH LONDON



GEOFFREY HOWSE

MURDER & MAYHEM  
IN NORTH LONDON

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# **Murder & Mayhem in North London**

**GEOFFREY HOWSE**



This book is dedicated to my good friend  
**BRENDAN E McNALLY**

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# Introduction

**I**n this book I have attempted to give the reader an insight into a broad cross-section of crimes committed in the area we know generally as North London but which also includes north-east and north-west London. I have included a variety of murders, some of them internationally famous cases, others, not so well known, some even obscure, but all serve to illustrate the wide variety of methods that man will use to do away with his fellow man. The earliest case I have included was one of the most sensational of the seventeenth century. The most up-to-date case I have included shocked the sensibilities of the North London public as recent as 2005. In my efforts to bring these cases to the printed page I have delved through countless books, documents, newspapers and manuscripts, in an attempt to provide a clear and concise account. I apologise unreservedly for any errors or omissions.



## CHAPTER 1

# Murder & Mayhem North London Style 1678–1909

## Murder of a Magistrate, Primrose Hill, 1678

Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey was the victim of a murder shrouded in mystery and often described as the greatest unsolved crime of the seventeenth century. His death was veiled by intrigue and deceit and it is marked by a false confession that resulted in the execution of three innocent men for a crime they neither committed nor played any part in. Born into an ancient Kentish family, on 23 December 1621, he was educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. In 1640, he entered Gray's Inn, at the Inns of Court. He abandoned his legal career and became a wood-monger and coal merchant, and became considerably wealthy. By the late 1660s he was spending some of his time in politics and was becoming well known as a justice of the peace. As a result of the assistance he gave through his business enterprises during the plague, he was held in high regard. Similarly, his reaction following the Great Fire of London in 1666, during which he suffered personal injury while helping others, made him a notable figure at court, and he was rewarded for his services with a knighthood.

Godfrey's death appears to have come about as a result of his involvement, in his capacity as a magistrate, in the swearing of documents concerning the conspiracy known to history as the 'Popish Plot'; which was later proven to be completely false and was in fact the invention of

*Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey.*  
Author's collection



Dr Titus Oates, clergyman, and Dr Israel Tonge, Presbyterian minister and scientist. Just as the details of the plot were being openly discussed, the killing of the highly regarded Protestant magistrate Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey caused panic on the streets of London.

Witnesses reported having last seen Godfrey on 12 October 1678. On the evening of Thursday 17 October, his body was found in a drainage ditch on Greenberry Hill (now known as Barrow Hill), one of the slopes at the southern edge of Primrose Hill. Sir Edmund was lying face down, impaled on a sword. The hilt was beneath the body and the blade pointed upwards. He had also been strangled and beaten about the body. In December 1678, Catholic silversmith, Miles Prance, then detained for conspiracy, confessed under torture to complicity in Godfrey's murder. His evidence was corroborated by the informer, William Bedloe. Three men were named in the plot – Robert Green, Henry Berry and Lawrence Hill. They were arrested and convicted on the flimsiest circumstantial evidence and hanged. Prance's confession was afterwards declared false and he pleaded guilty to perjury. Was it simply coincidence that the surnames of the three executed men spelled out the exact spot where Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey's body was found, Greenberry Hill?

### **Murder in Millfield Lane, Highgate, 1814**

A violent murder took place on 4 October 1814, at Millfield Farm, a cottage situated in Millfield Lane, then a narrow thoroughfare, pretty much as it is today, which runs along part of the eastern edge of Hampstead Heath, adjacent to Highgate Ponds. The body of Elizabeth Buchanan (also known as Mrs Dobbins), a washer-woman, was found in the kitchen. She lived with her common-law husband, named Dobbins, who worked as a turncock for the Hampstead Water Company. Mrs Dobbins had been savagely beaten about the head with a poker, which had been left nearby covered with blood and bent with the force of the blows. At about the same time the body was discovered, a vagrant named Thomas Sharpe, had been apprehended as he retreated furtively towards Highgate Hill carrying two bundles of washing, stolen from Millfield Farm and he had been seen in the vicinity by several witnesses. The implausible story he told about buying the bundles from gypsies was not believed. At his trial, Lord Ellenborough,



*Millfield Cottage, formerly Millfield Farm, Millfield Lane, Highgate, where Elizabeth Buchanan was murdered. The Author*

having passed the death sentence, concluded with the words: ‘... and may the Lord have mercy on your soul’. Sharpe replied: ‘May the curse of God attend you day and night, both in this world and the next.’

### **Johan Steinberg, multi-murderer and self-killer, Clerkenwell, 1834**

John Steinberg, a German, was a forty-five-year-old whipmaker. He lived with Ellen Lefevre, aged twenty-five, a lady later described as his mistress, and their four children aged between six years and eight months, at 17 Southampton Street, now renamed Calshot Street, a turning off the Pentonville Road. On 8 September 1834 Steinberg murdered Ellen and their children by cutting all their throats from ear to ear. He then fell upon the knife, without leaving any explanation or clues as to his motives. Ellen and the children were buried by public subscription in the churchyard of the parish church of St James, Clerkenwell. Steinberg was buried in the Pauper’s Burial Ground, Ray Street. In lieu of the old custom of driving a stake through the body, Steinberg’s skull was broken with an iron mallet.

### **Policeman murdered, Hornsey Wood, 1842**

In 1842, Hornsey Wood covered what is now the park itself, in the part of the capital known as Finsbury Park. A hostelry known as the *Hornsey Wood Tavern* once stood close to the site of the present-day boating pond. Near this pub, on 5 May 1842, Thomas Cooper, a twenty-two-year-old bricklayer-turned-thief, was surprised by a policeman, Charles Moss, while he was engaged in some felonious act. Without hesitation Cooper shot and wounded Moss. The sound of gunfire attracted the attention of another policeman called Mallet, and a baker called Mott, who was walking in the woods nearby.

Mallet and Mott gave chase as Cooper headed off in the direction of Highbury. Meanwhile, another baker, named Howard, was driving his post-chaise down Hornsey Road. He saw Cooper being chased and raced after him. Cooper headed for Highbury Barn. As another policeman, Timothy Daly, closed in on Cooper near Highbury Cottage, the latter jumped over a hedge into a short cul-de-sac called Black Ditch. This area was bounded by a paling fence which hemmed Cooper in long enough for Daly and Howard to catch up. Cooper, who was carrying two large horse pistols, fired both of them. One hit its target and Daly died instantly, but Hudson was unscathed and, with the help of two gardeners, was able to overcome Cooper and hold him. Cooper was tried at the Old Bailey, found guilty of murder and hanged outside Newgate on 4 July 1842.

### **Two Amorous Young Bucks, Primrose Hill, 1845**

At around 7.00pm on 23 February 1845, Police Constable John Baldock, on patrol near the bridle path that ran through the fields between Primrose Hill and Belsize Park, was alerted by a baker, Edward Hilton, to cries of 'murder'. When he arrived at the scene (at today's junction of Belsize Park Gardens, England's Lane, Eton Avenue and Primrose Hill), accompanied by Sergeant Thomas Fletcher, in the dark they found the bloody and battered body of a well-dressed man. Whilst the sergeant went to get assistance, Constable Baldock stayed with the corpse.

A cloaked man, later identified as Thomas Hocker, approached the constable and uttered the words, 'Hallo, policeman, what have you got there.' He offered the constable brandy, which he refused,

but Hocker persuaded him to take a shilling to get a glass of brandy later. At no time did he indicate that he knew the victim, although it would become clear that in fact he knew him very well. Shortly after William Satterthwaite, a Hampstead shoemaker, appeared, Hocker left the scene. Dr Perry examined the body. His report stated:

Death is attributed to concussion of the brain, the consequence of the external violence. I should image the wounds were inflicted by a heavy instrument, such as a stick . . .



*Thomas Hocker.* Author's collection

The man appeared to have been robbed, because the only item found on him was a letter written in blue ink addressed to J Cooper. The letter began: 'Dear James' and in it the writer requested a meeting at their usual place; she also informed him that she was pregnant. It was signed Caroline. A coroner's inquest was held at the *Yorkshire Grey* in Hampstead, by which time the victim had been identified as James De La Rue. A verdict of wilful murder was recorded. Twenty-seven-year-old James De La Rue, a music teacher, lived in well appointed lodgings, at 55 Whittlebury Street. The road no longer exists but in 1845 it led into Euston Square from Drummond Street, which straddles Hampstead Road. He earned his money principally giving piano lessons. James De La Rue was buried in St John's churchyard, Hampstead, on 28 February. Thomas Hocker, aged twenty-two, was a close friend of De La Rue. He lived at 11 Victoria Place, situated near the western edge of Regent's Park, sharing a room with his brother, James. Although he considered his musical talents to be worthy of more, he scraped a living by giving the occasional violin lesson.

These friends were a pair of amorous aspiring gentlemen, dapper dressers, who had a penchant for collecting pornography in the form of prints. Using various aliases, they had developed acquaintances with numerous women, mostly servant girls and those who, although not exactly prostitutes, had loose morals. They often indulged in orgies. Neither had any intention of cementing any of their relationships by marriage, hence the use of

false names in their liaisons. During the police investigation that followed, De La Rue's friendship with Hocker emerged. Following the funeral, Hocker's apparent indifference to his best friend's death, threw suspicion his way. Both Thomas and James Hocker were questioned and, as matters unfolded, James Hocker was able to give information about the letter found in De La Rue's greatcoat pocket. The letter, written in a supposedly girlish hand, had in fact been written by Thomas Hocker in one of his numerous false hands. The unusual blue ink was traced to his room, and this evidence, together with the discovery of De La Rue's watch and a pair of blood-soaked trousers, proved sufficient to convict him of his friend's murder.

Hocker was tried at the Old Bailey, on 11 April, before Mr Justice Coleman, in a trial lasting less than ten hours. The jury found him guilty after just ten minutes deliberation. He protested his innocence to the end, blaming a person he would not name. He was hanged at Newgate, before a crowd of 10,000, on 28 April 1845, by William Calcraft.

### **Dreadful Tragedy at Lower Edmonton, 1866**

On Boxing Day, Wednesday 26 December 1866, a dreadful tragedy took place at Lower Edmonton. For some years, a coachman, William Gudgeon and his wife Ann, a hard-working woman, had occupied a six-roomed house opposite the Great Eastern Railway Station. They had five children, the eldest of them aged fourteen. On Christmas Day 1866, Ann Gudgeon had complained to her husband that she was feeling unwell and she went to bed at 7.00pm. That night, at eleven o'clock, she got up and went downstairs and joined her husband and children. They remained up for an hour and then the whole family retired to bed. Mr and Mrs Gudgeon slept in a bed in the top front room of the house and in a corner of the same room was a bed made up for three of the children. As Ann Gudgeon was going to bed she looked very wild, and she said to her husband:

The light of the candle stares in my eyes. Put it out.

William Gudgeon did as his wife requested and then fell asleep. At that time the Gudgeons' youngest child, a six-month-old baby girl named Elizabeth, was lying fast asleep in her father's bed.

At two o'clock on Boxing Day morning, ten-year-old Selina Gudgeon was woken by some warm liquid being spattered over her face. When she opened her eyes she was confronted by her mother kneeling upon the dead body of her little brother, Timothy George, who had been lying asleep alongside of his sister Sarah Ann. Little Timothy's throat had been cut in the most fearful manner and blood was gushing from the wound. Ann Gudgeon looked very excited and she was brandishing an open razor, covered with blood, in her left hand. When she saw she had woken Selina she leaned over towards her daughter and caught hold of her. Selina screamed, then a fearful struggle ensued. In an attempt to protect herself Selina caught hold of the bedclothes and held them to her throat. She cried out:

Oh mother why do you not put the razor down? You have killed Timothy and now you want to murder us.

Selina managed to wriggle out of bed and ran to the doorway, and rushed down the stairs followed by her mother, who continued to hold the open razor in her hand. On reaching the bottom of the stairs the girl ran into the lower front room. Her mother rushed past her and ran to the fireplace. Selina felt around in the dark until she felt a matchbox which was lying on the table. She struck a light and was horrified to see her mother in the dim light the match produced, cutting her throat. Blood gushed from the wound Ann Gudgeon had inflicted on herself and, as the match went out in the darkness, Selina Gudgeon heard her mother fall to the ground.

Selina ran upstairs and into her father's room, which was much lighter as light flooded in through the window from a street lamp outside. William Gudgeon was in a sound sleep and by his side lay the dead body of the baby, with her throat cut from ear to ear. Selina woke her father and told him what had occurred. William Gudgeon quickly dressed and ran out of the house to fetch a neighbour, Mrs Robinson, the wife of a railway employee. Meanwhile, Selina went to another room and woke her brother, Thomas and sent him off to the police station. Police Sergeant Howlett accompanied the boy back to the scene of the tragedy. When Sergeant Howlett entered the parlour he found the dead body of Ann Gudgeon lying near the fireplace. Her head rested on the fender and there was an open, black-handled razor, lying on her breast.

Dr O'Brien, of Church Street, Edmonton was called to the scene. He said the woman's wound was self-inflicted and must



*Ann Gudgeon, having cut her little son's throat, turns her attention to her daughter.*  
*Illustrated Police News*

have caused almost instantaneous death. The police and the doctor then went upstairs to examine the bodies of the two children. Timothy Gudgeon was lying in a pool of blood. Dr O'Brien expressed the opinion that death must have been instantaneous. The baby had been killed in a similar manner.

On Saturday 29 December, the coroner for the Duchy of Lancaster, Mr J W Payne, opened the inquiry at the *Cross Keys Inn*, Lower Edmonton, in connection to the murder of Timothy Gudgeon and Elizabeth Gudgeon by their mother, Ann Gudgeon, who afterwards committed suicide. After hearing the evidence the jury returned a verdict that Timothy Gudgeon and Elizabeth Gudgeon had been wilfully murdered by Ann Gudgeon, and that

Ann Gudgeon committed suicide by cutting her throat while in a state of unsound mind.

### **Eleanor Pearcey, Kentish Town, 1890**

Mrs Pearcey, as this particular murderess preferred to be known, was in fact not married, nor was her surname Pearcey. Her real name was Mary Eleanor Wheeler, but after she went to live with a man named Pearcey in Camden Town, at the age of sixteen, she assumed his name and the title of his wife. Pearcey left her but she retained his surname until the day she died. By the beginning of 1890, twenty-four-year-old Eleanor Pearcey was emotionally unstable, depressed and lonely. She had few relatives, just an elderly mother and an older sister. She was a kept woman, her ground floor apartment consisting of three rooms in a house at 2 Priory Street (now Ivor Street), situated on the border of Kentish Town with Camden Town, being paid for by her admirer, Charles Chrichton, of Gravesend, in Kent, who visited her once a week. Another admirer, a furniture remover called Frank Hogg, she was particularly fond of and would place a light in her window to let him know when she was free. Hogg was not as emotionally attached to Mrs Pearcey as she was to him. He used to see other women. One of them, a thirty-one-year-old spinster named Phoebe, who was known to Eleanor Pearcey, became pregnant. This hapless lothario was virtually forced into marriage by Phoebe's family and in due course Phoebe Hogg was delivered of a baby girl, also called Phoebe.

The marriage was not a happy one and Frank used to pour out his woes to Eleanor Pearcey, who became jealous of his wife, which developed into deep hatred. The Hogg's lived in rooms, at 141 Prince of Wales Road, Kentish Town. On Thursday 23 October, Mrs Hogg received a note from Mrs Pearcey inviting her to tea, an invitation that was declined due to prior commitments. When another note arrived the next day Mrs Hogg accepted. She left her home at about 3.30pm, pushing little Phoebe in her bassinet. Mrs Pearcey's neighbours heard 'banging and hammering', some said they heard screams, coming from the Pearcey household at about 4.00pm. Phoebe Hogg had been killed in Mrs Pearcey's kitchen with a poker and more than one knife. She had clearly put up a struggle as both her arms were bruised and, as was later discovered, so were Mrs Pearcey's. Mrs Hogg's throat had been so

savagely cut that her neck had been all but severed. That evening Mrs Pearcey put Mrs Hogg's body into the bassinet on top of the baby and covered it with an antimacassar. Little Phoebe had either already been suffocated or was smothered by the weight of her mother's body. Mrs Pearcey pushed the bassinet for six miles. Her first port of call was Crossfield Road near Swiss Cottage. There she unloaded Mrs Hogg, leaving her body in a partly-built house. She took a long walk up the Finchley Road to Cock and Hoop Field, where she dumped the baby's body and continued to push the empty bassinet until it collapsed outside 34 Hamilton Terrace, near Maida Vale, where she left it.

The bodies were discovered over the following two days. It was not long before the finger of suspicion was wagging at Mrs Pearcey. When the police visited her at Priory Street she ascribed the bloodstains in the kitchen to killing mice and calmly sat at the piano humming a tune. Eleanor Pearcey was charged with the murders of Mrs Phoebe Hogg and her baby. She was tried at the Old Bailey on 1 December. The trial lasted for four days. Found guilty, she was resentful that Frank Hogg had offered her no support. She couldn't grasp that in killing his baby daughter, his feelings for her had changed. She was hanged at Newgate on 23 December 1890, by executioner James Berry. As she was being led to the scaffold, Mrs Pearcey said to the chaplain, Mr Duffield: 'The sentence is just, but the evidence was false.'

### **The Masset Woman, Dalston Junction, 1899**

There have been murders, particularly those perpetrated at the hands of a woman, where the feminine attributes of the so-called gentle sex, have worked favourably for the accused in a court of law, sometimes despite their obvious guilt, resulting in their acquittal. However, there are some crimes considered to be so abhorrent that, irrespective of the obvious attractions of the female concerned, the public can find not a grain of sympathy for the accused. One such murderess was Louise (or Louisa) Josephine Masset.

By 1899, when this murder occurred, Stoke Newington, an attractive and once isolated village had become another casualty in the rapidly growing expansion of suburban London. In-filled housing and early, mid and late Victorian villas covered its former agricultural land, even replacing some of the ancient buildings that

once graced its streets. Thirty-six-year-old Louise Masset, the daughter of a French man and an English woman, lived in one such villa, at 29 Bethune Road. She was an attractive woman of genteel disposition, who earned her living as either a governess or piano teacher. She was unmarried and boarded at her sister's house.

An affair she had had in France had resulted in a child, a boy named Manfred Louis, who was in 1899 aged four. The boy's father's name was never divulged. Louise lodged Manfred with a foster-mother, Miss Helen Gentle, who lived in Clyde Road, Tottenham. Miss Gentle had looked after Manfred from being a few weeks old and Louise used to pay her for her son's upkeep; and she would take Manfred home to Stoke Newington, as and when her whims dictated. In Stoke Newington, Louise began having an affair with a French student, nineteen-year-old, Eudore Lucas. As the affair turned into a more meaningful relationship Louise came to realise that little Manfred was becoming an encumbrance. Her love life was being affected by his presence, Eudore's enthusiasm was waning and if she was to retain his affections, Manfred could no longer be part of her life. Louise decided on a plan of action and was quick to bring it to fruition.

Louise told Miss Gentle that Manfred's father was going to take over his upbringing in France and arranged to collect both him and his clothes, which had been placed in a parcel, on the morning of 27 October. The last reported sighting of Louise Masset and her son was at London Bridge station, at midday, where witnesses described the little boy as showing signs of distress. Later that same day, at 6.30pm, a dreadful discovery was made in the ladies' lavatory on Platform 3 at Dalston Junction station. Manfred's battered and naked body was found wrapped in a black shawl. A bloodstained stone lay nearby. The boy had been hit with the stone and strangled.

When reports of the dead child appeared in the newspapers, Miss Gentle, suspecting the worst, reported her suspicions to police. Having been taken to see the child's body, she was able to identify him as her former charge Manfred Masset. Under questioning, Louise said she had handed the boy over to two ladies on London Bridge. The ladies, she added, were starting an orphanage in Chelsea. She said she had given them £12 for her son's upkeep. She had then caught a train to Brighton where she had spent the weekend in company with her lover. However, Louise had not