

The 'Ladywell' Murder – A True and Exceeding Cold Case, Most Foul and Horrid

Cast your minds back. A long way back to be fair, but likely still possible for several of those yet dwelling amongst us. 'Tis the Year of Our Lord 1238. 'Tis Pilton in the County of Devon, not a stone's throw from the priory there. 'Tis murder, wherein is much matter for speculation and conjecture, yea, even now. 'Tis *EastEnders*, only better, before ever anyone conceived of the East End...

An unknown woman was found killed at Pilton, outside the cemetery towards the spring. It is not known who killed her. Later the sheriff testified that she came from Plympton, so inquire more fully there. Later the Plympton jurors come and testify that one Henry le Ambleur – they do not know where he comes from – was sleeping with Eva, the wife of Ralph de Chows, and took her with him, together with a son of Eva's, and they firmly believe that Eva was the woman found killed there, and they say this because the woman found killed was found in the same clothes that Eva used to wear. And they do not suspect anyone besides Henry of her death.

(Taken from *Crown Pleas of the Devon Eyre of 1238* in Devon and Cornwall Records Society, vol. 28, p 57 no. 317, ed. Henry Summerson, 1985)

Exactly where the cemetery lay then, we know not. More likely, though, 'twas to the east, or even to the south of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary since at least some conventual buildings then lay to the north. Likewise, whence the spring sprang over 700 years distant in the mists of time, we know not. Even so, matters come to a point in the vicinity of what we now call 'Ladywell'.

Was it Eva who met her brutal and untimely end hard upon the House of God and, indeed, a house of Benedictine monks? Why was she in Pilton, so far from home? In Plympton also lay a priory, home to Augustinian Canons. 'Twas, i'faith, the second richest religious house in Devon after Tavistoke. But where a priory is to be found, so may visitors and strangers count upon a measure of hospitality – bed and board – in the priory's guest hall. Perchance that goes a way to explain Eva's presence in Pilton with her son and her lover. Maybe the boy was Henry's own son. Happen a new life beckoned for the three of them.

Yet something went terribly wrong.

Did Ralph know of his wife's adultery? Did he daily beat her, and she in desperation at last take refuge in the safer arms of another man offering her deliverance? Was she wooed away on a whim from a hard-toiling husband by some travelling ne'er-do-well full of charm? Was this crime the final scene played out from a love triangle? Was Ralph afire with jealousy, or did he care not a whit? Did he secretly pursue them

in their flight, waiting his moment to exact mortal revenge on feckless Eva? Was it a contract paid by Ralph to do away with her at a safe remove (sorry, EastEnders again)? Did Eva and Henry, maybe penniless and torn by guilt, old loyalties or regret, merely fall out and quarrel violently? Or, since the jurors seem to identify Eva but by the clothes she used to wear, did some other visiting soul or pilgrim meet their end, either by means fair or foul, whereupon, by exchanging apparel, Eva and Henry could walk away, free as air, into some bright new future?

Of Henry and the boy, we hear nothing more. Was Henry le Ambleur a murderer or a scapegoat? Was he ever apprehended and, if so, was justice applied, judiciously or otherwise? Or was there but an accidental death, well exploited?

Of all this we know no more and cannot possibly comment. Unless, of course, you know differently....

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