

MIDSUMMER MURDER

At around 8.15 on the evening of Thursday 24 August 1876, Emma Rolfe and Annie Pepper left their lodgings at 15 Crispin Street, off East Road, heading for the Garrick Inn at the intersection of Jesus Lane and King Street. The two women stopped half an hour over a pint of ale before going their own ways. Annie Pepper went to stand by the Four Lamps at the beginning of Newmarket Road, whilst her younger companion, still not yet 16, headed off to Maid's Causeway. Sometime after 9 o'clock Pepper met up with Rolfe again, at the gate onto Midsummer Common. Rolfe was talking to a young man, near the drinking fountain by the railings on Butt Green, the southern part of the Common. Robert Browning, a tailor, 25 years old, steadfastly refused to buy them beer. Rolfe nudged Pepper with her foot to ask him again, and Browning eventually said that he would stand a pint when he got back. But he said that he didn't want two women – Rolfe was enough for him. Annie Pepper then left them together, watching them duck beneath the railings and walk onto the Common. Rolfe said that she wouldn't be gone long.

Only a few minutes later, in a noticeably agitated state, Browning walked into the Garrick Inn and drank a glass of ale. Leaving the pub, he set off in the direction of his home on Bradmore Street, but almost immediately ran into Police Constable Joseph Wheel, who had come to investigate a shriek he had heard from the Common. Browning promptly told Wheel that he had murdered a woman, and led the constable to where Emma Rolfe lay dead, 30 or more yards from the railings, in the middle of Butt Green. Rolfe's throat had been cut, her head nearly severed from her body. Browning handed over the razor that he had used to kill the girl, and showed the policeman his bloodstained hands. Assisted by Thomas Southall, a commercial traveller lodging at the Garrick, PC Wheel took Browning to the police station on St Andrew's Street on suspicion of murder.

Emma Rolfe's body was taken to the Fort St George Inn, where the coroner's inquest was held the next day. Emma's father, a hawker living at 12 Leader's Row off Staffordshire Street, confirmed her identity. James Rolfe noted that his daughter had left the family home a fortnight since to live at Mrs Phillips' lodging house, 15 Crispin Street, a well-known brothel. The coroner, Henry Gotobed, took statements from Annie Pepper, Joseph Wheel, Thomas Southall, the landlady of the Garrick Inn, and others, whilst the borough surgeon contributed his judgement that the fatal wound had been made whilst the victim was lying down. Scores of people saw Rolfe's body after it had been taken back to Leader's Row,

and 2000 people were present when she was interred at Mill Road cemetery. The Reverend Edward Leeke read the service, and away from the grave took the opportunity to address the crowd, about the need to turn quickly from a wrong life.

After the funeral, all attention transferred to Robert Browning. The inquest at the Fort St George had returned a verdict of wilful murder, and Browning was committed for trial at the Norwich Assizes on 29 November. As fatalistic as he had been on the night of the murder, at his trial Browning made no attempt to defend himself, and it was left to others to make the plea for clemency on grounds of insanity. Browning was a tailor by trade, working for a Frederick Scriven at Covent Garden off Mill Road, but he had had a former life as a soldier in the Ninth Regiment. PC Wheel, who coincidentally lived in the same street, revealed that Browning had been recently discharged with a bad character. Borough surgeon James Hough confirmed too that he was suffering from the clap: Hough saw the prisoner from the end of August, and had been treating him for chronic gonorrhoea. A lodger at Browning's house added that he had long been depressed: Browning had been out on the night of Monday 21st after the Midsummer Fair and was apparently disappointed in seeing a young woman, wanting indeed to drown himself. Browning's mother noted, alternatively, that he had been gloomy ever since his time in the army and the contraction of his disease.

Browning's motives for murder remained unclear. On the night of the killing he had told Joseph Wheel that after he had treated her to a glass of ale, Rolfe had robbed him of a shilling. At the coroner's inquest, however, a witness noted that Browning had told him that he didn't know why he had done it; Browning mentioned only that he had been sitting eating his supper at home with his mother, and came out with a shilling in his pocket, thinking that he would go out onto the Common to seek a woman. Browning had left his workplace at Covent Garden with his brother, but parted company with him at around 8.30 pm at the end of their street, in order to go home. He did not stay long, however, eating little, and apparently in a disturbed mood. Ignoring his mother's request to stay in, Browning slipped a cut-throat razor in his overcoat and proceeded to a pub in Fair Street, and then on to the Four Lamps where he met up with Emma Rolfe. After giving himself up, Browning told Thomas Southall: 'I've just killed the girl – I've cut her throat. Take me away from her I don't want to see her. I don't know whatever tempted me to do it. I don't know what my poor mother will say. I've done it and I am very sorry. I didn't give the poor girl much time to repent or reflect, I can't say which.'

The jury at Norwich took just three minutes to reject Browning's plea of insanity and to find him guilty of murder, though they recommended clemency on account of his youth. Justice Lush held but little hope that Browning's life would be spared, however, and the Home Secretary would later confirm that there were no reasons for commuting the sentence. Before his execution, Browning made a last confession, but added little of substance. He said that 'he had promised one of the girls a shilling but that when he got on the Common he did not know what to do, as he had not got a shilling, so he killed her'. But he also added that Rolfe died because he wanted to take revenge on the woman from whom he thought that he caught the clap: he went out of the house 'intending to kill the girl I went to Royston with, and who gave me the disease'; instead, he killed Emma Rolfe, 'feeling at the moment that I must take away the life of some one'.

Robert Browning was hanged in the early morning of 15 December 1876, in the Borough Gaol on Parker's Piece, the first privately held execution in the county.

No doubt many murders are as random, many motives as opaque. But the deaths and short lives of Emma Rolfe and Robert Browning may still tell us something about what life was like in Victorian Cambridge for the poor and the unprivileged.

First, of course, this is a very local history. Save for Robert Browning's army experiences, and those of the commercial traveller Thomas Southall, the geographies of these lives and deaths could be contained in a circle with a radius of a few hundred metres. Emma Rolfe was born in New Street, and left her home in Leader's Row for Mrs Phillips' brothel only a few short streets away; Robert Browning even lived on the same street as the constable who took him into custody. These events took place, moreover, not in Cambridge as such, but rather in the eastern district – once a separate community – of Barnwell. Now the name of an Emmanuel hostel, Barnwell long ago meant the unrespectable working-class suburbs kept distinct from the privileged world of the colleges and the city proper. As the city expanded to the east in the later nineteenth century, speculative builders threw up a new grid of streets and alleys, leaving the area formerly separating Barnwell and Cambridge to be commemorated only in bucolic street names. In this context, Emmanuel College occupied a liminal position, facing the city, whilst the police station and the university's private prison on St Andrew's Street faced Barnwell and the east.

Crime and squalor, moral and physical, were said to be rife in Barnwell. This was a district with an unfeasible number of alehouses and beer shops and it was home, according to the *Cambridge Chronicle* in 1853, to a 'long degraded and misled populace'. The same account named Barnwell as the 'focus of villainy' in Cambridge. Worse still, it was the focus of Cambridge's sex trade, with the city's brothels being disproportionately concentrated in the streets and alleys joining Newmarket Road with East Road. In the nineteenth century one or two hundred women might be part of the prostitution economy at any one time, to varying degrees of professionalism. For women like Emma Rolfe and Annie Pepper public spaces like Midsummer Common were, by night, ready and convenient spaces for sexual transactions. For the cost of a shilling, men like Robert Browning could purchase the favours of a woman – or even two.

Earlier in the century, one critic had even commented that Barnwell was a place 'set apart and dedicated to sin', 'swarming' with prostitutes. Set apart, he went on to add, by the University authorities. By attempting to regulate sex work in the city informally, the University arguably connived at the sexual misconduct of those undergraduates who consorted with prostitute women. The University certainly knew of these women, and the houses they lived in, but preferred to keep them at a distance from the colleges, whilst arresting streetwalkers who dared to ply their trade in respectable thoroughfares. It was not hard, therefore, to portray the University in a negative light. The sermon at Emma Rolfe's funeral was read by Edward Leeke, incumbent of St Andrew the Less, Fellow of Trinity College, and one of the sponsors of the Female Refuge for penitent women on Newmarket Road, in the heart of the brothel district. But given that the colleges could be represented as complicit in the ruination of working-class women, Leeke's call for the speedy rejection of sin may not have gone down well with the crowd at Rolfe's graveside.

Prostitution was in fact a kind of open secret, deplored but managed, hidden but also highly visible. Journalists ensured that the weekly police court columns brought the names of women like Annie Pepper to the reading public: Pepper was named as a prosti-tute, for instance, and reported as drunk and incapable at Newnham six months before Rolfe's death. And the 'Shocking Murder in Cambridge' kept the business of prostitution before the public eye for many weeks. All of this added to the reputation of Barnwell and fed the moralising tendencies of the day. In too many ambiguous ways to count, women like Emma Rolfe were truly 'public women'.

What was less remarked on was Emma Rolfe's age. Three months short of 16, she was unusual, but not that unusual, in walking the streets. Something like one in ten women apprehended by the University authorities in the nineteenth century was 16 or under. Though we know that women – girls – all over the world are drawn into the sex trade at an appallingly young age, Emma Rolfe's short career should still shock us more than it did her contemporaries. And whilst it has become rather fashionable, in response to the long-standing interpretation of prostitute women as unwitting victims of fate, sin or exploitation, to emphasise the agency of female sex workers or 'working girls', we should not hesitate to count Emma Rolfe amongst the roll call of victims. To see Emma Rolfe as a 'working girl', as a professional sex worker, certainly feels anachronistic and misleading. Without falling into the empty moralism of the past, we need to recognise, through the short life and brutal death of Emma Rolfe, that prostitution, then and now, is just about the most dangerous form of women's employment there is.

Most of this landscape is long gone, obliterated by the Grafton Centre and the redevelopment of its environs. But if you ever go to Mill Road Cemetery, you can find Rolfe's grave about half way between the central circle and the Norfolk Street entrance. Rest in peace, Emma Rolfe.

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