

The Dead Boy on the Heath



Appledore Local History Society

2023



Foreword

This story is reconstructed from contemporary newspaper reports, with additional information from genealogical databases and other internet resources. The story was told around the country, so there are often several reports of the same events. The local courts were not attended by reporters from all over the country, and it is apparent that some reports were drawn from other more substantial and often more accurate reports. The lesser reports sometimes contained simple and innocuous errors, but their authors were also less assiduous in distinguishing between what a person did or said, and what they were reported to have done or said. Generally, it's not hard to apply a credibility filter to these reports, but not everything can be nailed down as a hard fact - especially when a policeman has a particular goal in mind, or wants to make an impression on a judge or a jury.

The story involves several local people and a few familiar places, and we hear people speak, and we hear how they spoke. The story also shines a light into some of the darker corners of life in the nineteenth century, and we learn that Appledore (and other places like it) was in some ways quite backward.

The main location of the events no longer exists, although there may still be a memory of it, and it is evident on maps, and on the ground. Satellite images suggest the location of former buildings. Dig down a couple of feet and you could probably find some foundations. You might even find a few small remains of the dead boy on the heath.

Alan Tribe

Appledore, 2023

The Last Deep Snow

15th January 1867

His name was George, he was twelve years old, and he came from London, and that's all that was known about him. His body was partially eaten by rats when it was found at the back of the barn.

Samuel Martin was a travelling chimney-sweep. Travelling with him was Caroline Buckman, who had met him at Ticehurst, eight or nine months before. Caroline was "not exactly right", according to her mother. George had joined them when they were hop picking at a farm between Ticehurst and Wadhurst, and had been with them through the autumn and into winter. George didn't know his last name, and might have been an orphan. George went up chimneys, knocking down soot, and he was thin and pale, and he looked ill. It was January 1867, and sending boys up chimneys was illegal, and had been since 1840. The law was largely ignored in Kent and Sussex, and was no impediment to Samuel Martin as he travelled across the two counties.

On the afternoon of the day in question, Samuel Martin swept the chimney of Harriet Coleman, wife of Richard Coleman, an agricultural labourer. Richard and Harriet were a young couple, just over two years married, and they lived on the Heath.

George hadn't wanted to go up the chimney. Harriet said: "Martin was very cross to the boy. He swore at him and said if he did not go up the chimney he would beat him." George had said that the chimney was too small, and cried. Harriet didn't want him forced up the chimney, but Martin said he knew what chimneys were, and it was quite large enough. "It doesn't do to pity him, for I have to keep and clothe him, and he is obliged to work." Martin said that the reason George didn't want to go up the chimney was that his knees were sore. Harriet said the boy looked very ill.

The boy went up two chimneys, and the sweep and his boy left the house. Samuel Martin was to have been paid the next day, but didn't come.

Richard Job Bourne saw Samuel Martin and George in a field as he was walking to Woodchurch. Richard was about the same age as George, and he was the son of Frederick Bourne, an agricultural labourer. The Bourne family lived in the Poor Houses on the Heath:

"I live with my father. On January 15th I went to Woodchurch. I saw the prisoner, in the next field to the barn in Appledore parish, knock the boy down. I saw Martin and the boy up the road with a woman on the day before. There was snow on the ground; it was between three and four o'clock. I could see them plainly. I saw the man knock the boy down with his hands, and kick him and snatch him along after he got up. I saw the man and boy go over the fence into the next field, and I saw no more of them. I know it was the 15th January, because that day I went to Woodchurch. It was on Tuesday. I went to carry a rabbit to my aunt. The prisoner kicked the boy in the front part."

John Wraight and Henry Green were out shooting blackbirds, and saw the man and boy just after Richard Bourne. John Wraight was Appledore's miller and lived at Mill House on the Heath. Henry Green was a market gardener, or that was how he described himself at the time. At other times he was an agricultural labourer. Like Richard Bourne, he lived at the Poor Houses on the Heath.

Wraight and Green saw the boy being beaten in a field, from a distance of around 60 rods, and they heard screams. "What's that?" said Wraight. "Why, it's the sweep," said Green. "For God's sake let us go round; he will kill the boy." According to Wraight, "There were twenty blows struck at least, perhaps more. I could see the stick go up as the blows were being struck."