

ESSEX POLICE

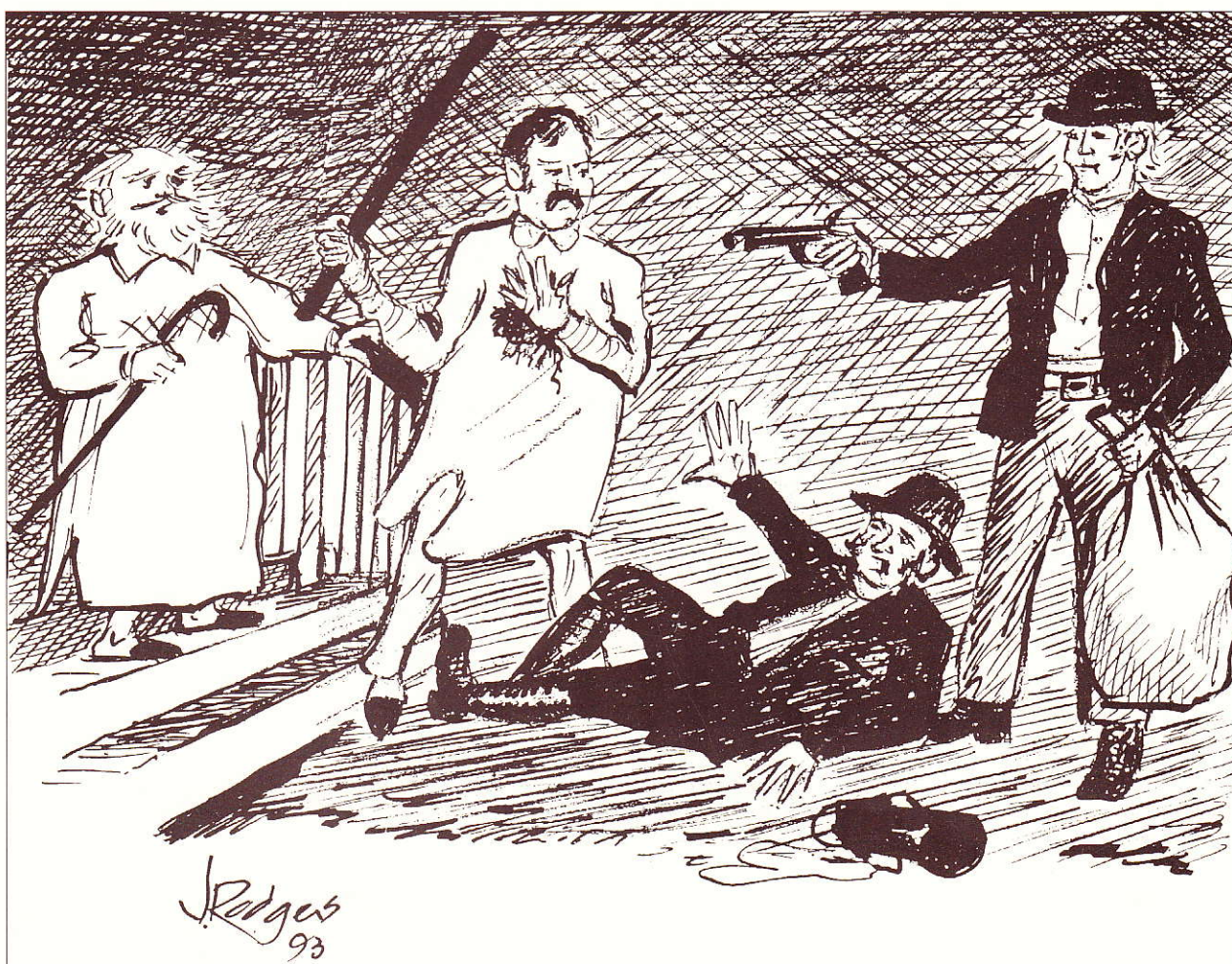


History Notebook

Number 2

“The Slaying of Parish Constable Trigg”

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“Now, Damn your heart, I’ll do for you!”

Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that the devil makes work for idle hands, so too apparently do defunct vicars. A planned photography session was cancelled due to atrocious December weather and one or the other guided my steps into the Essex Record Office. The lady on the desk took my order, then offered me a sermon to read whilst I waited. I have that sort of presence.

William Chaplin, a long dead priest, was belabouring the faithful of Bishop's Stortford, who must have been celebrating Napoleon's exile to Elba with undue vigour. His ardour was such that the sermon was printed; its message basically could be taken to say "Thou shall not go poaching, for it leadeth thee into the sin of housebreaking, and from thence 'tis but a step to MURDER. Witness the recent events at Berden." I quickly decided that it would be necessary to locate Berden and this was easy. The village lay on a back road between Newport and Bishops Stortford. I had promised an article for *Newport News*, and suddenly I felt an article coming on.

It took but a moment to locate the Berden parish register and I soon found the entry for Henry Trigg, aged 36, shoemaker, The Street, Berden, who died 25th March 1814. A star at the bottom of the page indicated a handwritten note dated 1899: "His headstone states that he was murdered." I beat a hasty path to the nearby library and swiftly ordered a copy of the *Chelmsford Chronicle* for 1814. This is the story that unfolded.

"A most atrocious murder was committed on the night of Friday last at Berden," began a report dated Friday 1st April 1814. From that and subsequent entries I noted an important fact; Henry Trigg was Parish Constable of Berden. Policemen as we understand them would not be patrolling Essex for another quarter of a century; at this time parishes would appoint one among themselves to be the officer. (In my own family were two such men, one at Haworth living next door to the Brontë family.) The job of a parish officer was not full time and Henry Trigg was also a shoemaker, his shop situated next to Berden Hall. He was in the habit of sleeping on the ground floor of his shop whilst above him slept his elderly parents.

To the village on the night of 25th March came two Stortford men. One had made a previous visit to buy a dog from a man named Chapman and had noticed an abundance of leather in Trigg's shop. He told his colleague, William Pratt, and they decided to relieve the shop of its stock. Pratt was described as "a well looking man, with fair hair and good complexion, about 5 feet 10 inches in height". Making his second visit was Thomas Turner, described as "considerably shorter, a squat figure with a rather disagreeable obliquity of vision in his left eye". They carried a dark lanthorn*.

In the hour before midnight Constable Trigg went up to his parents' room and said that he believed some thieves had got into his shop. His father then followed him down to the shop, where Trigg attacked the shorter thief with his staff. This man fell to the floor and Trigg beat him bloody, as his father exhorted him to "dress him well". The parent was then attacked by the taller man, who fired a gun. This missed the old man, but had the effect of causing the



THE LAST OF THE "CHARLEYS"

Triggs to draw back. The small, bloodied thief then got to his feet as the taller man fired a second shot. The weapon was believed to have been double barrellled. He had previously exclaimed "Now damn your heart, I will do for you." The shot passed directly through the young man's heart and he expired without a groan.

The intruders ran and the village was roused by the lamentations of the elderly couple, who had thus lost their sole means of support. Nothing more was heard of the desperados, despite the best effort of the villagers, who called in the Bow Street Runners, Vickery and Bishop. But the trail went cold. Left at the scene were a hat and a dark lanthorn. For almost a year the crime remained a mystery.

In the same newspaper, dated Friday 17th February 1815, a short notice told of the arrest at Bishop's Stortford, by the Runners, of Turner and Pratt. They had been detained after Bow Street "had a whisper" of a series of Hertfordshire robberies. The case had been remitted to the Lent Assize at Chelmsford.

* A LANTERN WHOSE LIGHT COULD BE COVERED.

The *Chronicle* for Friday 17th March 1815 contained the story of the trial. The early evidence by Mr and Mrs Trigg was graphic, couched in expressive terms. "He dropped like a bird," was how the mother described the death of her only son. Then came evidence of the arrest by "Stafford, the Runner in chief," which was followed by a description of his search of both men and their homes. This had yielded picklocks, pistols and dark lanthorn. Up to this time in the investigation the Berden outrage had not been put to them.

A hat dropped at the murder scene was clapped upon Turner's head and found to fit most snugly. He, very reasonably, suggested that this was hardly evidence of complicity in the murder. Both men had been sent to the County gaol at Hertford and placed in separate cells. The evidence continued "Being thus removed from the dreadful course of life which they had been accustomed to pursue, the remorse of their consciences compelled a full disclosure of their crimes." They did not dispute that they had made confessions and the prosecutor expressed a hope that "their fate would not be thrown away upon the common people of the county — poaching leads to stealing, stealing to housebreaking and housebreaking to murder."

Not only had Turner and Pratt confessed to their gaoler, they had repeated it to the Hertford magistrate. Their sole ploy was to blame each other for the actual shooting. It was apparently the law at that time that when persons were conjointly involved in an illegal enterprise, they were

responsible for its results. This same principle was to be applied to those charged with the murder of Essex's Constable Gutteridge in 1927 and to Derek Bentley in the 1960s. The 1815 Chelmsford jury convicted Pratt and Turner without hesitation.

"Mr. Justice Chambre then pronounced the awful sentence of the law upon the prisoners, in a most impressive and pathetic manner. The prisoners seemed very little affected by their situation."

By the time the readers of the *Chronicle* had digested this information the prisoners had in fact been four days dead. With two other convicted murderers from the same Assize they were taken to a riverside place, overlooked by a crowded bridge, for "a greater number of persons were spectators of this scene than has been observed for a length of time". All prisoners acknowledged their guilt, but neither Pratt nor Turner implicated any accomplice, though it was thought at the time that many others were involved in the many other crimes they had committed. All four were then hanged.

The extract ends "The bodies of Pratt and Turner were carried away by some professional gentlemen who reside in the neighbourhood where the murder was committed." I presume that this meant that they would be used for medical research.



On the following bright and cold December day I drove to the church of St Nicholas at Berden. In the frosty churchyard one grave stood out from the others. Though almost obliterated, the name "Henry Trigg" and "25th March 1814" were decipherable. I then found a man with local knowledge. He confirmed those details of the story that had been passed down by word of mouth, and added that at one time the names of Pratt and Turner could be seen at the foot of the stone. He is searching for the exact wording of the inscription.



HENRY TRIGG'S GRAVESTONE IN BERDEN CHURCHYARD

POSTSCRIPT

Before Queen Victoria's reign Essex was policed by a variety of Constables and watchmen appointed by local authorities or by the parish authorities. From the time of Charles II the watchmen took the name of "the Charleys". Newspapers of the time make it clear that they were often assaulted while they worked as "Peace Officers." They do not make it really clear if Henry had time to think of his parish duty before he set about defending his own property. His life was instinctively offered.

The County Constabulary was formed in 1840 and initially there was little spontaneous support for a new service [at that time force]. The public's help had to be earned. Victoria's 60 years saw an apparent increase in respect for property. It appears that trend is reversing and it is necessary at times to remind the public that not only police officers, but themselves, as the Special Constables, members of the Neighbourhood Watches or just plain good citizens often put themselves at risk in just doing what is right.

Citizens sometimes were, and sadly, still are, attacked in their own homes. In their natural desire to protect themselves and their property it is not unknown for the victim to go "over the top". For villains to get their just deserts is popular, but the public can wax indignant if we then enforce laws which have been drafted by parliament and honed by the legal system.

We want to be wholly on the side of a victim, and, given the chance and proper information, Essex's police officers will continue to quickly try to come to the aid of anyone who asks for it. So, before you "have a go", please give us a call. We really want to be able to help. It is what makes a job, "the job!"

The name of Henry Trigg will be forwarded to the secretary of the National Association of Special Constabulary Officers, an organisation which is researching the deaths on duty of non-regular policemen including Special Constables, War Reserve Constables, the Parish Constables and those who lost their lives whilst engaged in public duties before the formation of the regular police service. The investigation is to provide a National Book of Remembrance to be dedicated at Coventry Cathedral on Sunday 16th January 1993, as a mark of respect to these honoured public servants. I see no reason why Parish Constable Trigg of Berden in the County of Essex should not be added to their number.

Thanks are offered to "Newport News", the Vicar and Wardens of St. Nicholas Church, Berden, to Essex Record Office and Chelmsford Chronicle, to Jim Rodgers and Miss Juanita Robinson of the University of Ripon & York for their assistance.