

Family & Social History group

Meeting Report – December 2024

'Murder Most Foul'

We welcomed Margaret Hinde and Margaret Joscelyne to the meeting, they being members of Walking Group 4 (amongst many other things). Allan Jones is coordinator of WG4 and had extended an invitation to his group members as it was on one of their walks that the inspiration for today's presentation arose.

To continue... Allan Jones presented another of his well-researched and erudite stories, this one featuring the unfortunate 18 year old, Arthur Barnard, under gamekeeper at Peover Hall. His father was the gamekeeper. Arthur died 36 hours after being shot, apprehending poachers on the estate, following the hearing of a gunshot in the still of a moonlit night in the late 19th century. The research begins when Allan, walking through the graveyard at St Leonard's churchyard, noticed an elaborate gravestone which carried details of the demise of young Arthur. Allan took us through the events of the early hours of Monday 13th January 1873 and the details of what happened over the following days, gleaned from newspaper reports.

The following tour of the processes of law and order in 1873 was fascinating. The speed of the arrests of three poachers, the immediate setting up of the Police Court, the way an Inquest was carried out at two days' notice, the referral to Magistrates Court and the trial for wilful murder at Chester Crown Court just three months later.

We showed our genuine appreciation of Allan's excellent presentation. His trawling through contemporary newspapers and trial reports of the time was particularly impressive. There followed a discussion on aspects of what he had unearthed:

- The importance of a 'Dying Declaration' by the murder victim (not taken off the Statute Book until 2005!!).
- The sentence of five years penal servitude for 'Poaching at Night'.
- The number of crimes that carried the death sentence in 1873 – over 200! – mainly for the protection of property, almost on a par with murder.
- The nature of gamekeeping, as a reflection of the way that the (growing numbers of the) wealthier members of society chose to spend their leisure time. The number of gamekeepers doubled in the period 1840-1890, reflecting the way in which hunting, shooting and fishing was adopted by those who had the means to indulge in these expensive 'sports'.
- The mobility of good gamekeepers, in very high demand, indicated how far they would take their families for betterment. The Barnards themselves had originated in Norfolk, and each census they were at a different address, in a different county. After the 'murder' of their son, they moved on again.
- Domestic servants at Peover Hall originated from a considerable geographic range: Shropshire, Norfolk, Yorkshire, Kent...clearly their social mobility was very limited, but they sure travelled.