

Bow Street and Epsom¹

In 1195 Richard I appointed knights to preserve the "King's Peace" in unruly areas - these knights were known as Keepers of the Peace. The title Justices of the Peace (JP) comes from the reign of Edward III when an Act in 1361 led to the appointment, in every English county, of "good and lawful men" to "guard the Peace". These JPs had a duty to meet at least four times a year and these meetings were the basis of modern day 'Quarter Sessions'. For many centuries JPs not only carried out judicial work they also carried out many administrative duties, such as overseeing the Poor Laws and building roads, until these tasks were taken over by civil administrative systems.

Although the Justices (of the Peace) had the responsibility for maintaining order and the investigation of crime, and had done so since the creation of the office, by the 19th century the actual policing in the Epsom area was carried out by Parish Constables, or Headboroughs, appointed by the justices. During the early part of the 19th century, some of the local roads were also patrolled by members of the Horse Patrols, part of the organization of the Bow Street Runners.

These wore a double breasted coat with gilt buttons, a leather stock, white gloves, black leather tall hat, top boots and a scarlet waistcoat, hence the nickname "Robin Redbreasts". They were armed with a pistol, heavy sabre, and truncheon and carried handcuffs. There were four divisions: the second division covered Epsom. There were a number of Horse Patrol stations; among them were Merton, Sutton, Wimbledon and Ewell. From records in the National Archives, it appears there were at least four men, patrolling part of the area adjacent to Epsom. They were: W. Wright covering Merton to Mitcham and Sutton, G. Drake, Merton to the Ewell Turnpike and W. Richardson Cheam to Merton Gate. They were paid 3/- (15p) a day. Sometimes the men were employed on what was termed "Special Service" to police fairs, races etc. For such duty, they received an extra days pay.

The following instructions governing their duties are among others contained in an order book of 1827 now in the National Archives:

- iv.** When passing persons in carriages the Patrol are to call out in a good and distinct tone "Bow Street Patrol".
- ix.** They are to live with their family in the house provided keeping it clean and decent and not to have pigs or other animals which feed on corn they are not to be absent from their homes for more than two miles without permission.
- x.** Every Patrol when from home is to appear in uniform. Any omission from this order will be deemed as shewing (sic) that he is ashamed of the situation, which he holds and consequently unfit to be retained.

The proposed extension of the Metropolitan Police boundaries was not met with universal acclaim, if a petition from the Churchwardens and Overseers of the parish of Christchurch a Surrey parish, is to be believed. Particularly as the cost of the "New Police" was double that of the previous Night Constable and Watchmen. The Justices of the Copthorne and Effingham Hundred, under whose jurisdiction Epsom came,

¹ <http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/PoliceEpsom.html>

express quite a different view. In a questionnaire for the Home Office in the 1830s, answering a question on failure to bring offenders to justice, the magistrates cited a recent failure by a Constable to apprehend two offenders due to his fear of physical injury. He is quoted as saying "If I had my head broke who is to indemnify me?" They go on to comment unfavourably about the practice of the Parochial Constables hiring substitutes and how ineffective these were. Their final comments are generally supportive of a paid and efficient force, but only if the costs were moderate.

With the extension of the Metropolitan Police district in 1839, Epsom formed part of V or Wandsworth Division. A police document in the Office for National Statistics shows in V Division, there were six PCs living in a private house in Epsom. A Mounted Sergeant supervised Morden, North Cheam, Maiden, Ewell and Epsom. He must have spent most of his time in the saddle! It is also noted that magistrates would hear charges in their private houses. Although the document is undated, it presumably refers to a period earlier than 1852 when the police station in Epsom was built in Ashley Rd. Another document also undated shows there was a police station or police office in Epsom where charges were taken and six constables were residing in a Section House.



The Epsom Police Station in Ashley Road

Home Office approval was granted for the erection of a police station in Epsom at a cost of £917, 3s, 7d (£ 917.375). This was occupied in 1853 initially by one sergeant and 11 PCs. The census return of 1861 shows a sergeant, his wife and 4 unmarried constables residing there. The others were presumably absent on the census night.

In 1919 the police station was badly damaged during a riot by Canadian soldiers and in July 1944 a German V1 Flying Bomb hit it. In November of that year a temporary station was set up at Worple Lodge Ashley Road until February 1946. The next police station at Church St became operational in 1963 and was sold in 2013 by the Surrey Police who took over policing the north of the county from the Metropolitan Police in 2000.



**Epsom Police Station, Church Street, Epsom
Photographed by L.R. James, March 1966**

This article was researched and written by Mr Trefor Jones © 2009

**Riotous Epsom:
"Murderous Assault on a Policeman"
Section-house attacked
8 May 1841**

"Outrage at Epsom", 21 August 1841

As evidenced by a brief reference on this website to 'Drunk and Disorderly', brawling in the town under the influence of alcohol has a long history. Accounts of what happened in 1676 vary; in one version Captain Down(e)s fell upon the Earl of Rochester's drawn sword and in another the victim was impaled on a watchman's pike. The Epsom Riot in 1919 during which Station Sergeant Green was killed has, however, been well documented.

A lesser riot and attack upon the police and their station-house took place in 1841.

As reported by John Toland in 1711, Epsom had an old weather-boarded watch-house by the pond in the High Street: used as a lock-up in the early 19th century and mentioned as 'the Cage' in Horrid Murder and Highway Robbery, it survived until 1847.

An article on Policing Epsom explains: - "With the extension of the Metropolitan Police district in 1839, Epsom formed part of V or Wandsworth Division. A police document in the Office for National Statistics shows in V Division, there were six PCs living in a private house in Epsom. A Mounted Sergeant supervised Morden, North Cheam, Malden, Ewell and Epsom. He must have spent most of his time in the saddle! It is also noted that magistrates would hear charges in their private houses. Although the document is undated, it presumably refers to a period earlier than 1852 when the police station in Epsom was built in Ashley Rd. Another document also undated shows there was a police station or police office in Epsom where charges were taken and six constables were residing in a Section House."

On Saturday 8 May 1841, just before midnight, PC 269V Joseph Russell was on patrol in the High Street when he heard a disturbance at the King's Head inn. On investigation, Charles Fincher was found kicking at the taproom door. On being told that he could get no more beer, Fincher, a labourer, became abusive, tore the officer's rolled cape from the back of his coat and used it to hit PC Russell in the face. A violent struggle ensued and a number of people emerged from the taproom to become involved in the fracas.



Epsom's first major building, the Kings Head dominated the High Street until it was pulled down for shopping in 1957.

A drunken George Gardom intervened, shouting: - "You shall not take that man to the station. I'm a gentleman and I'll bail him... You, you and you. Come on ten of you and assist me to get this man away." A number of men then assaulted the constable with sticks and their fists.

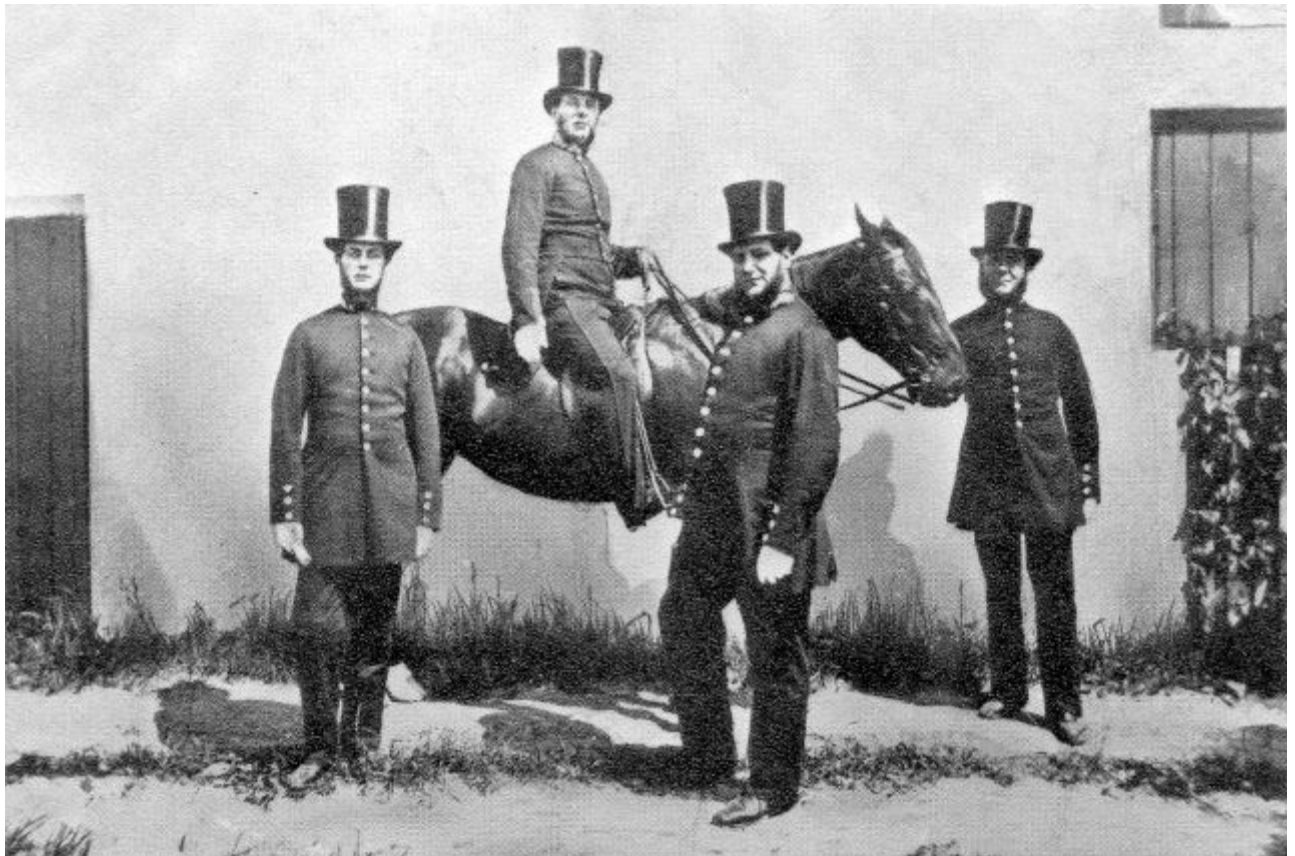
PC Russell drew his truncheon to defend himself and kept hold of Fincher until a colleague, PC Price arrived to assist him.

When giving evidence to the Magistrates, Baron de Teissier and Mr Goss, about the event PC Russell declared that George Edes, James Phipps and John Ratcliffe (the latter two, recruits to 89th Regiment of Foot) had subsequently belaboured him with heavy sticks. "I was knocked down. Ede knelt upon my back, struck me and attempted to kick me in the ribs but kicked my lanthorn. I got up and struck him with my staff very violently, as I thought he intended to do me some serious hurt."

The original police station was situated in the High Street at the eastern end on the south side. As explained in 'The Court House' "From an article in one of the local papers in 1935, it appears that when number 45 High Street, now the ASK restaurant, was being vacated the remains of what appeared to be two cells were discovered. Although the some alterations had been made to the doors, the door bolts were still attached. Each door contained small trap about 6"x8" presumably to allow food to be given to the prisoner." At the time of the 1851 Census a Sergeant, his family, with 6 constables and a lodger, occupied these premises.

The two Police constables escorted their prisoner towards the section-house but only got as far as the (Spread) Eagle tap before Gardom again incited the mob.

George Gardom seized Phipps' stick, struck constable Russell down, and beat him about the head. The officer's leather top hat, then part of police uniform rather than a helmet, was '*cut to pieces*'.



Epsom Police c.1860

Image courtesy of Surrey Libraries and is held in the Epsom & Ewell Local And Family History Centre Collection (Links open in new windows)

Eventually the constables managed to struggle back into the station house with their prisoner and closed some gates behind them. A hail of stones were hurled after the group and the mob burst open the gates threatening to storm the building. Alerted by all the noise, other officers rushed out to assist their colleagues, beat off the attack and apprehend, additionally, Gardom, Edes, Phipps and Ratcliffe.

Although powerfully built, PC Russell had been badly injured and remained dangerously ill when examined by the surgeon-in-chief to the Metropolitan Police and Arthur O'Brien Jones, surgeon to V Division, some days later.

The charges brought were:

- Edes - Assaulting and wounding Joseph Russell, PC 269 V, with intent to do him grievous bodily harm;
- Phipps and Ratcliffe - Attempting to rescue a prisoner;
- Gardom - Assaulting and resisting the police in the execution of their duty;
- Fincher - Being drunk and disorderly and assaulting the police.

Initially, Gardom and Edes had been bailed for £100 and two sureties of £50 each. At a further hearing, however, the Magistrates remanded all the accused to Kingston gaol to await trial. Gardom's father appealed to the bench, explaining that George was his only son and being sent to prison would break his parents' hearts. His offer to stand bail to the extent of many thousands of pounds for security to ensure his son's appearance was declined.

The outcome of trial at Guildford assize is revealed by the Criminal Registers published on the Ancestry UK website. George Gardom, George Edes, James Phipps and John Ratcliffe were all tried at the Assizes on 29 June 1841. Gardom got 12 months' imprisonment and the others 9 months each. Charles Fincher was not mentioned.

This narrative begs a question: Who was the rabble-rouser, George Gardom? He is described as "Upholsterer, High Street the son of a most respectable tradesman" and appears to have been the grandson of Barnabas Gardom of Ebbisham House, Epsom, Auctioneer, Carpenter, Broker and Retail Shopkeeper. Barnabas' widow was in business as Martha Gardom and Sons adjacent to the retail premises of John Bailey in the complex of buildings near the junction of High Street and South Street - once the New Tavern, otherwise the Long Room, Assembly or Ball Room, also known as Waterloo House [1843 Tithe Plots 501& 502 - James and George Gardom]. George's christening took place at St Martin's parish church on 8 August 1817, born 14 May 1817 son of George Gardom (senior), Upholsterer, and his wife, Sarah, of Epsom. It seems that both George Gardoms died in 1849 - the father, aged 67, buried 9 May and son, only 33, on 20 July in St Martin's churchyard. Mary, relict of the younger George, may be found in the 1851 Census enumerated in South Street as a Needle Woman with six dependent children.

A similar incident was reported in *The Morning Post* on Wednesday 25 August 1841. The previous Saturday, 21 August 1841, at ten minutes to midnight, five men left the Bull's Head*, Ewell, "drunk and noisy", before travelling to Epsom. In the town centre, they were encountered by Police Constables 219V Butcher and 217V Duncan Stewart who remonstrated with them. Charles Robinson from Putney flourished a reaping hook [indicating that the men could have been itinerant harvesters] over PC Butcher swearing he would cut off the officer's head. Disarmed by Butcher, Robinson was given into the custody of PC Stewart. George Morrett, of Brentford, then struck Constable Butcher over the head with a heavy stick before kicking him and breaking one of the officer's ribs. A man called Jarrett went to the assistance of the felled constable and both assailants were escorted towards the police station. On their way to the station house PC Butcher collapsed in the street resulting in him being carried home. Examined by the divisional surgeon, Mr Jones, his injuries were declared to be of a most serious character. On Monday, 23 August 1841, the men appeared before local magistrates, Baron de Tessier & Captain Gough [Henry Gosse, Lord of the Manor of Chessington?]: after a surgeon's certificate had been produced testifying that PC Butcher remained in imminent danger the prisoners were remanded until Friday 3 September 1841. Details of their trial have not been traced.

Brian Bouchard © 2011

With contributions from Linda Jackson

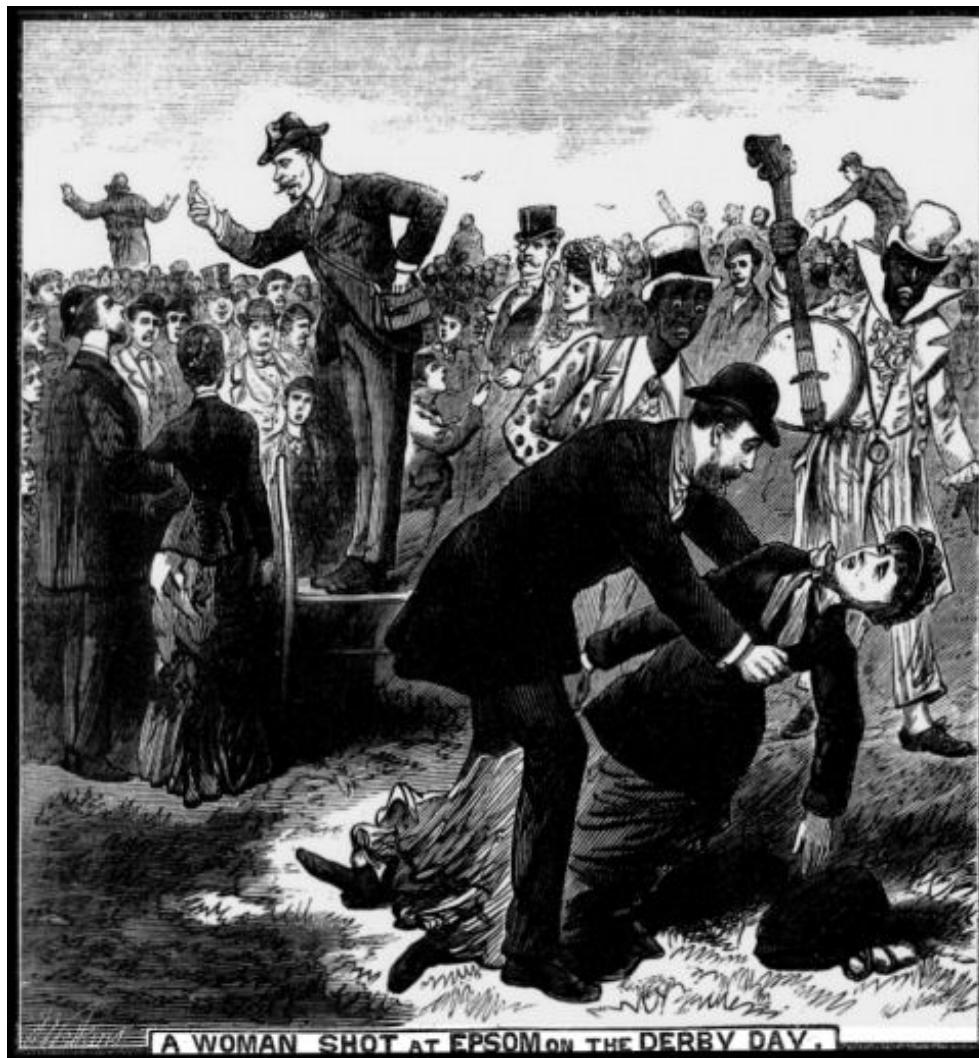
Gun Crime²

1883 June: A Woman Shot at Epsom on Derby Day

On Thursday, at Epsom Petty Sessions, before Mr Trotter and other magistrates, John Talbot Ashenhurst, described as a coach-painter, of the **Surrey Yeoman Public House, Dorking**, was charged with causing grievous bodily harm to Elizabeth Borer, the wife of a warehouseman, residing at **Caterham Valley**, near Croydon, on the racecourse on Derby Day.

Police-constable Patrick Storer, 22 R Reserve, deposed that at half-past five on the previous afternoon he was on duty on Epsom Downs, and received information that a woman had been shot. The prisoner was pointed out to him as the party that had fired the revolver. Witness went up to him and saw the revolver (produced) in his right-hand pocket, and having taken it out he conducted the prisoner to where the injured woman lay. He saw some blood on the ground, and Police-sergeant 42 E came and took charge of the woman, while witness took the prisoner to the station. Witness told him he would be charged with causing grievous bodily harm to the woman, and he said it was accidental. He afterwards said he was firing at some bottles near a rifle gallery, and that he had brought the revolver with him for that purpose.

² The Illustrated Police News, 02 June 1883



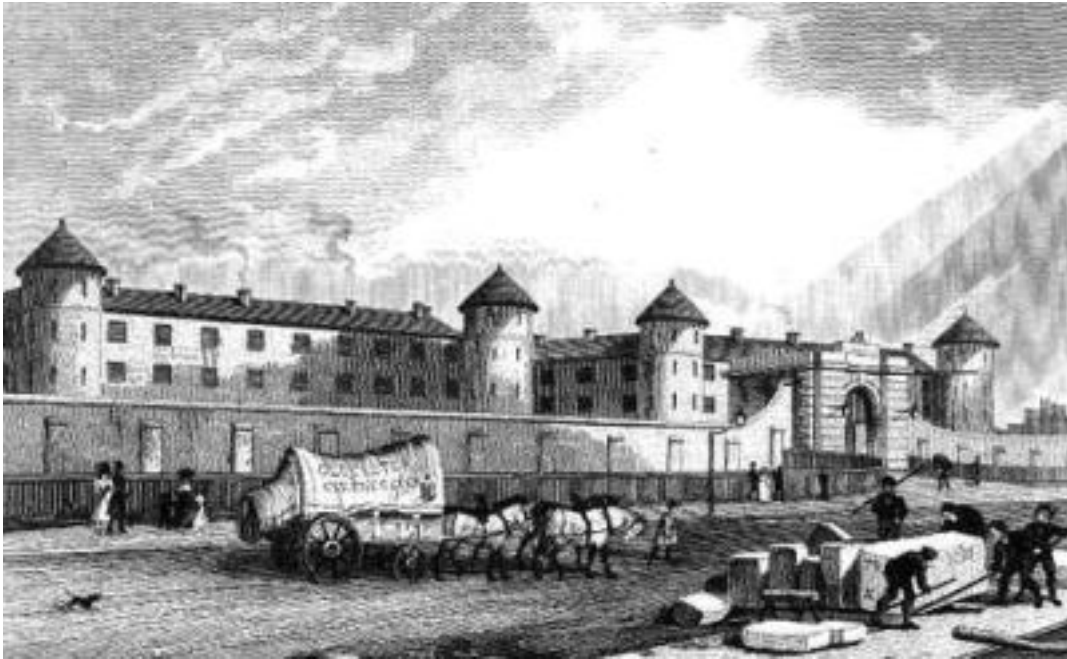
It was close to a rifle gallery where it occurred. There were five cartridge-cases in the revolver, and they had all been recently discharged. By the prisoner: When he first took him into custody he was near a drinking-booth, and appeared to be getting some brandy for the woman.

Police-sergeant Michael Crawford, 42 E, deposed that he was attracted to the spot by a crowd. He found the woman had been shot in the thigh. Pointing to the prisoner, the woman said, "That is the man who shot me, for why I don't know. I never saw him before." The Chairman: Did she say he deliberately shot her? Witness: No; she said, "I felt I was shot, and saw the revolver in his hand smoking." With the assistance of some females, witness tried to stop the bleeding with some handkerchiefs, and afterwards conveyed her to the Epsom Infirmary, where she was seen by Dr Coltait, who, after a consultation with the police-surgeon, said the woman had received a very dangerous wound in the left thigh, near the femoral artery. He added it was a case, which should be taken to hospital forthwith.

Witness then hired two horses, and with the Union ambulance he took her during the night to Guy's Hospital, arriving there at four o'clock that morning. She was at once admitted. Witness saw Dr Stokes, the house surgeon, and he said the woman was in great danger and the limb would very likely be operated upon in the course of the next

day. The bullet had not been extracted. At the next hearing evidence would be adduced to show that the prisoner fired wantonly in the crowd, and the friends of the injured woman would tell the Bench that he fired at the galley or bottles from the crowd. By the Magistrate: Prisoner appeared perfectly sober, but very strange. The prisoner was remanded. It was ascertained that he had eighteen ball-cartridges in his possession when taken into custody.

BANK ROBBERY



**Millbank Penitentiary where prisoners were sent prior to transportation.
Drawn by Tho. H. Shepherd and Engraved by J. Tingle. c. 1829**

ROBBERY At The WEST SURREY BANK³

APPREHENSION Of TWO Of The BURGLARS

Epsom, Friday November 1850: The inhabitants of this little town were thrown into a state of alarm and excitement this morning by the discovery that a burglary, attended with circumstances of great daring} had been perpetrated during the preceding night on the premises of tile West Surrey Bank, nearly opposite the Clock-house, and in the centre of the High-street of Epsom.

The alarm occasioned by the announcement was in some degree allayed when it became known that the thieves, or at least a portion of them, had been captured with

³ The Morning Chronicle, Saturday, 2 November 1850

all the booty they obtained in their possession; and that Sergeant Kennedy, the active police superintendent of this district, had them safe in his custody.

The facts collected with the burglary may be briefly told as follows: The West Surrey Bank, which belongs to Messrs. Mangles Brothers, and has its head office at Guildford, has a branch in this town. The office consists of two rooms on the ground floor of the house occupied by Mr. R. Moore, carrying on business as a fellmonger. The house is detached on one side, Mr. Moore's yard, enclosed in lofty gates, running between his own residence and that of Mr. Holland who lives next door. The apartments occupied as the bank are a front office and one small room behind, which latter is lighted by a window looking into Mr Moore's yard. The burglars fixed upon this window as their point of entrance, in effecting which, they adopted very similar means to the **Frimley robbers**.

The window alluded to was an ordinary sash, strengthened inside by three iron bars. The thieves first cut away and removed the sash, which they deposited very carefully in an outhouse in Mr. Moore's yard, and then observing the fastening of one of the bar, they forced it inwards, and bending it up, obtained sufficient room to admit a man's body. Having thus secured an entrance, they struck a light, and commenced ransacking the place. Whilst they were thus engaged, Mr. Holland (Mr. Moore's next door neighbour), who sleeps in a room overlooking the yard, had occasion to get out of bed. On going to the window, he at once observed a light in the little back office, belonging to the bank, and as it was now about two o'clock, he felt satisfied that all was not right. Mr. Holland spoke to his wife on the subject on returning to bed, and, with the natural curiosity of a lady, Mrs Holland got up to peep. She soon discovered what she thought were the figures of two men; and, summoning Mr. Holland to make a second observation, they both clearly saw two individuals in the little back office of the bank, busily engaged in ransacking the place, one of them holding a lighted candle in his hand, and the other armed with a chisel or screwdriver, forcing cupboards and drawers open.

Mr. Holland's first impulse was to open the window of his bedroom and give an alarm, and with that view he threw up the sash and called out, as loud as he could, "Is that you, Mr. Moore?" The burglars heard him call, and instantly decamped, having first put out their light. Mr Holland hastened to put on his clothes, and in a very few minutes was on his way to the police station. Almost immediately upon leaving his own door he encountered a man in the High Street, whom he addressed, without obtaining any reply. This man walked off in another direction, and Mr. Holland proceeded to give an alarm to the police. He had scarcely arrived at the station when two prisoners were brought in by the officers of the local police, and charged on suspicion of having stolen property in their possession.

Mr. Holland having communicated to Sergeant Kennedy what he had seen, that officer ordered the prisoners to be put back while he himself proceeded to ascertain the state of affairs at the bank. On arriving there he found the house had been entered as above described, and on making an examination it was discovered that the thieves, after ransacking; all the cupboards and drawers in the bank, had entered Mr. Moore's private apartments, and, after regaling themselves on bread and beef and wine, had stolen several articles there from.

Happily the plunder obtained was altogether very small. The iron safe in the back office of the bank resisted all the efforts of the rascals to break it open, although considerably injured by the rough usage it had received. The point of a jemmy, used in attempting to force it, was found sticking in between the doors, and Sergeant Kennedy subsequently discovered the corresponding portion of the instrument on one of the prisoners. A cupboard in this room was broken open, and a bottle of wine taken out; and from a desk, which was also forced several blank cheques were abstracted. The front office was entered by cutting away the bolts of the door communicating between the rooms, and from here 12s. 6d in silver money was taken out of one of the tills. Happily Mr. Everingham, the manager of the bank, had taken all the other cash, in accordance with the usual custom to his private residence on the previous evening. The door leading from the front office of the bank to Mr. Moore's private apartments was forced, and in all the lower rooms the robbers committed great havoc, breaking open drawers, and strewing their contents about the doors. The only articles missed, however, were a great coat and some silver spoons.

Mr. Kennedy having completed his search, returned to the police station accompanied by Mr. Moore. On the prisoners being called forward, Mr. Moore at once identified his coat on the back of one of them, and in the pockets being searched, the silver spoons stolen from Mr. Moore's kitchen were discovered. The broken "jemmy" and the blank cheques were found upon the other prisoner, and all doubt as to their participation in the robbery being removed, they were at once put back into the cells. One of the prisoners gave his name as George Roberts, and described himself as a gunsmith but refuses to give his address. The other man calls himself Charles Dowe, and says he is a labourer. Both state that they are last from Guildford.

The circumstances which led to their apprehension are these: Police-constable 307 V was on duty at the London end of Epsom, about half-past two o'clock this morning, when, observing two suspicious-looking strangers hurrying out of the town, he challenged them. Failing to obtain any satisfactory reply, he sprang upon them, and seizing both men by the collar, held them until he obtained the assistance of two brother officers, and thus secured his prisoners.

Both the fellows were brought up before the local magistrates this morning and underwent a private examination. The Baron de Tessier and Mr. Henry Gosse were upon the bench and Mr. William Everest, the clerk to the magistrates was in attendance. The evidence of the police-officers having been taken Mrs Moore (in the absence of her husband) was called to identify some of the articles stolen. This having been done most satisfactorily both the prisoners were remanded until Monday next, when it is expected the evidence against them will be complete.

Among the articles left behind by the prisoners is a razor firmly fixed into a wooden handle, leaving a strong suspicion that, had they met with any resistance in the house murder would have happened. Great credit is due to Sergeant Kennedy and the force under his command for their admirable conduct in the apprehension of the thieves.

Roberts appears to be about 32 years of age, and 5ft. 6in. in height. He is respectably dressed, and his linen is marked "F.S." Dowe is about 18 years of age, and 5ft. 4in. in height. He is very swarthy, and has a mole upon his left cheek. Both prisoners were conveyed to Kingston this evening.

The Burglary At The West Surrey Bank⁴

Epsom, Monday: The two men, George Roberts and Charles Dowe, charged with breaking into the West Surrey Branch Bank, in this town, Oh the night of Thursday last, were brought up for re-examination this morning, before the bench of magistrates, sitting at Clueless's, Coffee-house, in High-street.

The Baron de Tessier, chairman of the bench, presided; Mr. Henry Gosse and Mr. E. H. Northey were also present.

The evidence having been taken proving the circumstances detailed in The Morning Chronicle of Saturday.

The prisoners, having been duly cautioned by the chairman, were asked if they wished to say anything to the charge made against them.

Roberts said: Yes, sir, I do. I was in Guildford on the 31st of October, and while all my way to Epsom, or, more properly speaking, to London, I met my fellow prisoner. We came on together, and on our way through this town we sees a parcel tied up in a handkerchief. We took it up and carried it behind the engine-house, where we opened it. I thought it might have been a child. When we see what it contained, Dowe put on the coat and put some things in his pockets, I put some in mine, and as the things was found so I found 'em in the parcel

The Chairman: Is that your statement? - Roberts: Yes. The coolness with which the prisoner made this extraordinary explanation excited some risibility in the court.

The prisoner Dowe had nothing to say.

The Chairman then told the prisoners that they stood severally committed for trial for the crime of burglary; and warrants having been placed in the hands of the proper officers, the accused were removed in custody.

The Morning Chronicle, Monday, 31 March 1851

ASSIZE INTELLIGENCE

Home Circuit-Kingston, March 29 1851 Civil Side: The Lord Chief Justice has been engaged during the last two days in trying common jury cases, and the list has been gone through with such celerity, owing to, the absence in many cases of anything like a defence, and in others to the causes being entirely undefended that there are very few common jury cases remaining to be disposed of. The special juries will be taken in their own order on Monday morning.

⁴ The Morning Chronicle, Tuesday, 5 November 1850

CROWN SIDE

[Before Mr. Baron Parke.]

George Roberts, 32, and Charles Dowe, 18, were indicted for a burglary in the dwelling-house of Resta Moore, and stealing three Silver spoons, a pair of gold spectacles, a coat, and other articles, his property.

Mr. Garth conducted the prosecution.

It appeared from the statement of the learned counsel for the prosecution, and the evidence that was adduced in support of it, that the prosecutor occupies a house at Epsom, a portion of which, on the ground floor, was let as a branch or the West Surrey Bank. The robbery in question was committed on the night of the 31st of October, and it was evidently the intention of the prisoners to have plundered the bank from whence they, no doubt, expected to have obtained a large booty. The house was all locked up as usual on the night previous to the robbery, and about two o'clock on the following morning a person named Holland, who lived next door to the bank, was awoken by a light shining into his window and, upon looking out he saw two men, whom he clearly identified as the prisoners, in the act of examining the drawers in the back office of the bank. He afterwards saw a third person, and, upon his giving an alarm, the light was extinguished and the prisoners and their companions attempted to make off. The two prisoners were, however, stopped by the police close to the spot, and upon their being searched several articles that had been stolen from the bank were found in their possession, and also a chisel, the size of which corresponded with marks that appeared upon the iron chest of the bank, and also upon some other places of deposit, which the prisoners had succeeded in forcing open.

Dowe said nothing in his defence, and Roberts said that he met Dowe by accident near the town of Guildford, and that as they were walking along he saw him pick up a bundle, which contained all the articles that were found in their possession.

The jury, without any hesitation, returned a verdict of guilty against both prisoners.

Mr Baron Parke said, in passing sentence, that the **crime of burglary had been so much on the increase** that it was absolutely necessary it should be put down by severe punishment. If any evidence had been adduced to show that the prisoners had been convicted of any other offence, he should certainly have sentenced them for life, and as it was they must expect to pass the greater, if not the whole, of the remainder of their existence, in a state of slavery, He then sentenced the prisoners to be transported for 20 years.

Both the courts rose to-day at three o'clock, and they were adjourned to ten o'clock on Monday morning.

Highway Robbery



Daring Highway Robbery at Epsom by Masked Men.

DARING HIGHWAY ROBBERY AT EPSOM BY MASKED MEN.⁵

THE VICTIM WAS WARNED BY AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

1897: January: Late on Monday week, as Mr William George Ayres, a builder, of Epsom, was going to the house of Mr. Macdonald, of the Mill Nursery, a house in a lonely road on the outskirts of the town, he was set upon by four masked men, two of whom struck him over the head with heavy clubs, knocking him senseless. He was wheeling his bicycle at the time, as he had no oil for his lamp. His assailants flung the machine over the hedge into a field, and afterwards rifled Ayres' pockets of everything they contained, getting away with over £45 in cash and his watch among other things. Mr Ayres' head was very much cut and bruised and his clothes torn. It was more than an hour after the assault that he was found lying stiff and senseless in the roadway. Mr Wallis Macdonald stumbled over something as he was leaving his house, and was alarmed to find that it was the body of Mr Ayres, who was apparently dead. With difficulty he dragged Mr Ayres into the house, and, seeing how serious his injuries were, Dr Daniels was sent for.

For some time it was feared that the unfortunate man would die. Eventually, however, he became partially conscious, but he was unable to speak until the next day, when he told the story of the assault. He said he was aware of no one's presence in the road until he received several crashing blows on the head. He turned round to defend himself and saw two masked men, and behind them two more, but before he could say a word they all attacked him at once, and he fell unconscious. Mr Ayres stated that he had not the slightest idea who the men were. They appeared rough looking, and were dressed in labourer's clothes. Their faces were well disguised.

⁵ The Illustrated Police News, 16 January 1897

A reported had an interview with Mr Macdonald, with whom Mr Ayres lived, on Tuesday, and was furnished with further particulars of the outrage. It appears that Mr Ayres has been engaged for the last week or so in some building operations on a plot of land on the outskirts of Epsom, and that, after he finished his work in the evening, he either rode to Mill Nursery or walked home. A considerable number of men were engaged in the building work referred to, and it is stated that of late there have been several "rows" among them, and they have exhibited no small amount of feeling with regard to certain police court cases that are pending. For some reason or other not known Mr Ayres has been somewhat unpopular with them.

On the morning of the outrage Mr Ayres was at work, as usual, in one of the partly completed houses on the new building ground, when a slip of paper was pushed in under the door. At first he took no notice of it, and it was not until he was on the way out that he picked it up, out of curiosity. It was a square sheet of rather dirty paper, and on it were printed, in roughly-formed letters, the following words: "William Ayres - There is a trap set for you; mind you do not fall into it."

No signature of any kind was attached to this curious communication, and Mr Ayres crumpled it up and put it in his pocket, looking at it in the light of a joke. He did not even mention it until Tuesday, when he gave an account of the assault to the police. As soon as the unfortunate man was discovered the police were communicated with, and all night they were scouring the neighbourhood in search of Mr Ayres' assailants. They found signs of a struggle in the road, and traced some footmarks to the roadside. Over the hedge they found the bicycle, in a battered condition, and further on footmarks corresponding with those on the road were discovered leading across a ploughed field. As the end of the field, however, they disappeared, and there was no clue as to which direction the men had taken. The Scotland Yard authorities were at once communicated with, and throughout the day detectives were at work in the neighbourhood, no discovery has been made.

On Tuesday a reporter was informed that though Mr Ayres had somewhat improved he still lay in a very precarious condition. None of his friends were allowed to see him, the doctor stating that nothing but absolute quiet could save him.