

Crime

The district surrounding Mortimer was a wild and lawless area in the eighteenth century. The population of the village particularly those living in West End, were said to be "*profane and atrocious, even to a proverb.*"

In July 1788 Henrietta Oliver was sentenced to three months' imprisonment in a solitary cell for stealing a quantity of lead from Mrs Eaton of Mortimer. In February 1786 Solomon Arlett, with two members of his family, was sent to Reading Gaol for stealing barley and a grindstone from Mrs Pottinger of Mortimer. The following year, he was condemned to death for stealing a bay mare belonging to John Arlet of Ufton, but he was later reprieved and transported for seven years. Horse stealing and other crimes were prevalent, and the means of catching criminals was so inefficient that it was unlikely they would be caught, although when they were, punishment was usually severe.

In February 1787 two youths from Padworth, Abraham Tull aged 19, and William Hawkins aged 17, robbed and killed an old labourer from Mortimer, William Billamore. They struck him with a loaded stick, stole his watch and chain, then panicked and ran away to Maidenhead, where they were apprehended. At their trial, no concession was made to their youth; they were condemned to be hung in irons, and a gibbet was put up at Ufton. Their execution turned into a public holiday and vast crowds attended. The bodies hung there for many years afterwards, until old Madam Brocas ordered their removal. The part of Ufton Common where the gallows was erected came to be known as Gibbet Piece. The irons in which they were hung are now in Reading Museum.

A particularly horrible murder was committed in Heathlands Coppice at Stone Hill, Mortimer West End in 1830. The victim, an eight year old orphan, Charlotte Billimore, was last seen alive as she returned from school to the house at Little Heath where she lived in the care of Mrs Ford. Thomas Miles was suspected. He had disappeared from the village, but was arrested at Mattingley. He had been at Mrs Ford's house on the morning of the murder and "*sharpened a knife before he went away*". Mrs Ford said, however, that she had no reason to suspect him, and as there was no evidence against him he was discharged. Mr Wall, the Mortimer surgeon, believed that the murderer was used to slaughtering animals, and Robert Byles, "*a very eccentric character though a clever surgeon*" was suspected, but he was given an alibi by two witnesses. Gypsies had been at Mortimer Fair two days before but there was no proof of their involvement.

Six months later Thomas Miles confessed. He said he met the child in the evening returning from school and "*a sudden thought to murder came into his mind*". He was said to be "*a sort of half idiot*" and was detained during His Majesty's pleasure.

The village was also occasionally affected by natural disasters: on 23 June 1765 a particularly violent hailstorm hit Mortimer, Silchester and Kingsclere, causing damage estimated at over £1000. Donations to help with the repairs were received from people throughout the country as far as Berwick-on-Tweed, Flint, Radnor and Denbigh.

MURDER.

100 POUNDS

REWARD.

Whereas a most horrid Murder was committed, about the hour of Five o'Clock.

On Monday Afternoon, the 8th Inst.

On the Body of CHARLOTTE BILLIMORE, an Orphan Child, 8 years of age, returning from School, whose Body was found in a Wood, within the Parish of Mortimer West End, Hants, with the Head scalped, the Skull taken off in pieces, and the Brains extracted and scattered on the ground; the Body opened, the Intestines taken out, the right Foot cut off, the right Thigh, the left Arm, and the left Leg broken.

Whoever will give information of the Offender or Offenders, so that he or they may be brought to conviction, shall, on such conviction, receive the above Reward.—£20 to be paid upon application to the Parish Officers of Mortimer West End, and £40 upon application to the Rev. H. C. ORD, Vicar of Mortimer, Berks.

N.B. The Secretary of State has promised a Free Pardon to any Person concerned, giving information, except the actual Perpetrator of the Crime.

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