

CURIOUS AND SURPRISING VICTORIAN DERBYSHIRE

Glyn Jones

Derbyshire is a picturesque county – but it has a many a tale to tell. Locals and thousands of visitors often stroll past buildings and landmarks unaware that these were once the focus of intense drama and intrigue.

The nineteenth century transformed life in Derbyshire. The rapid growth in urban areas caused much distress as well as prosperity. Drinking led to violence which, in turn, often led to murder. Quaint settlements such as Beeley, Smalldale, Whatstandwell and Brackenfield were not immune.

Decisions made by Magistrates give some shocking insights into the plight of some women in Victorian society. There are tales of Napoleonic officers on parole in Chesterfield, a short-lived, but intense, local fascination with velocipedes and many other strange stories.

All social classes play their part. The grand Palmer-Morewood family in Alfreton provide a dramatic episode which, literally, assumes international proportions. Events at Wigwell Grange eventually involve the Home Secretary. However, a downtrodden 'Comicle Article' from the desperate 'Yards' area of Chesterfield paints a picture much closer to home. The Vicar of Crich plays a prominent role but, probably, wished that he did not.

Glyn Jones ranges over many of the most intriguing and sometimes disreputable aspects of Derbyshire's Victorian past to reveal an unexpected history – amusing, tragic, ironic and occasionally downright shocking!



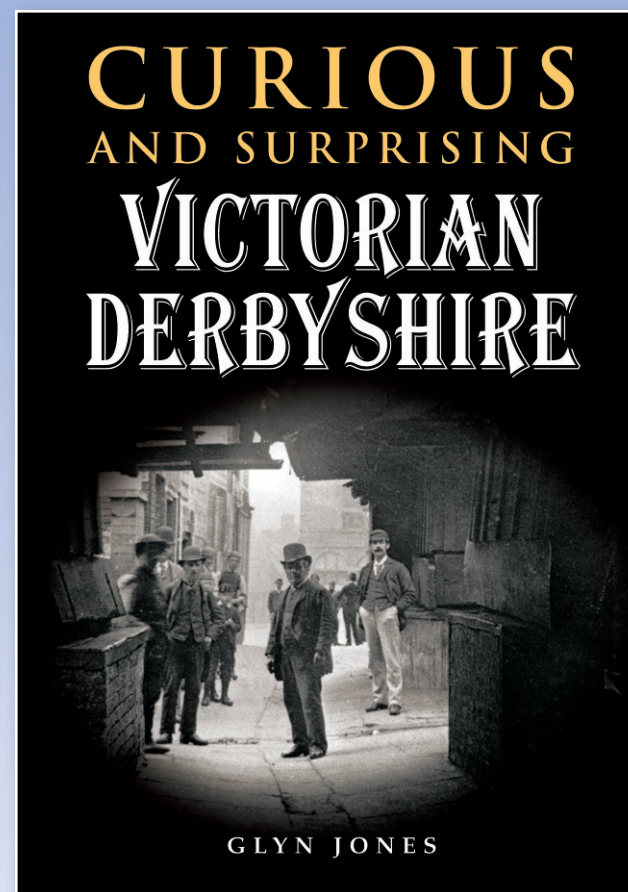
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Glyn Jones is a former Deputy Headteacher who taught History for thirty-four years in Alfreton. Since retirement he has been writing local history and nostalgia articles which have been published widely. He lives in Chesterfield with wife Lynn, and has a son Ross and a daughter Amy.

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LAMENTATION OF SAMUEL WRIGHT,
Who was Executed on Tuesday, January 12th, 1864, Horsemonger Lane Gaol, for the
murder of Eliza Green, on Sunday, 13th of December 1863.



Left: Midland Railway Station, Chesterfield.

Above: Samuel Wright contemplates George Victor Townley's better fate.

Right: The Crooked Spire – its bells were sometimes deemed inappropriate for horse racing.

Below left: Example of a double-page spread.

Below right: Royal Patronage in Chesterfield in 1902.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Froggatts Yard and the Dog Kennels

Nowadays, the Yards in Chesterfield is a pleasant gentrified area. Cafés and craft shops jostle for footfall that is channelled along narrow winding alleyways. The signage for "Falcon Yard", "Theatre Yard" and "Wards Yard" are reminders of a bygone age.

Life was hard in Victorian Chesterfield. The Yards were the centre of much crime, depravity and desperation. Two locations dominate the stories of the time – Froggatts Yard and the Dog Kennels.

Froggatts Yard used to run south from Low Pavement, at its head was once the Bird in Hand public house. The Bird in Hand was demolished to make space for the new Portland Hotel – as part of development that would include the Lancashire, Derby and East Coast Railway Station.

The area had a claim to notoriety as early as 1788. The infamous William Deacon Brodie sent John Tasker, the landlord of the Bird in Hand, two trunks full of silks for "storage". The silks had been stolen in Edinburgh by Brodie and his accomplice – the pair are believed to have been the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

By the nineteenth century Froggatts Yard, itself, was able to contribute a number of fascinating tales of criminal activity. Happenings at one small beerhouse in the 1860s give an insight.

The Travellers Rest was kept by Frederick Andrews. In 1868, Andrews was charged with violently assaulting his wife, Selina. Andrews had asked Selina for details of his expenditure. Selina provided the information but, for her trouble, was punched so hard that she suffered severe injuries to the "lower part of her body".

Frederick Andrews, in his defence, argued that he was usually a good husband but had hit his wife because she had insisted on following him as he went out. Andrews was sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour.

FROGGATTS YARD AND THE DOG KENNELS

Andrews' absence did little to raise standards of behaviour in that part of Froggatts Yard. A few weeks later the Travellers Rest was to become the focus of investigations into the death of Mary Ann Biggin.

The report of the squalid circumstances of Mary's final days was carried by the *Derbyshire Times*. Froggatts Yard is described as a "very low place" and the Travellers Rest was the lowest in a yard like that".

Mary Ann Biggin had once been the respectable wife of a grocer – Joseph Biggins. Sadly, following his death, she had fallen upon hard times and had taken up with some undesirable company.

Mary Ann found herself sharing a single room in the Travellers Rest with Frank "Ginger" Brown and four other people. Her situation was deemed to be shocking and revolting, the *Derbyshire Times* condemned "a state of things in a civilised country which was horrible to contemplate...that in a great town like this there should be people living together in a state of concubinage and sleeping in the same room."

Two weeks before Mary's death she was in Froggatts Yard in the company of "Ginger" Brown. He gave her a severe beating and she was "bleeding profusely". At the inquest, Selina Andrews, herself a victim of

Low Pavement, Chesterfield
Low Pavement – the desperate poverty of the Yards was shielded by this frontage.

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