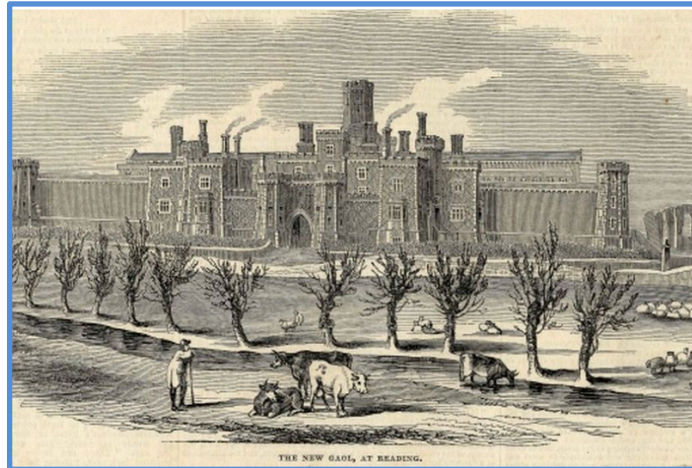


John Carter - The Watchfield Horror

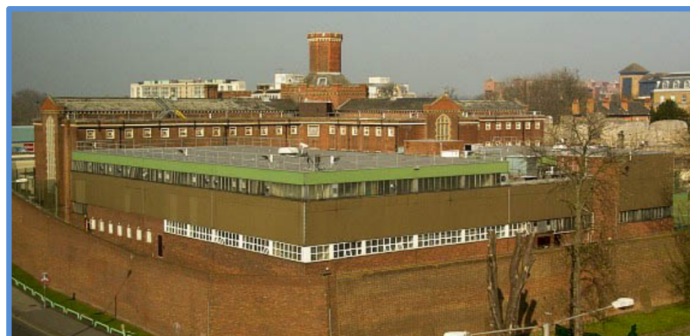
By John Clements

John Carter of Watchfield died at 08.00 on Tuesday 5th December 1893 at Reading Gaol. He was aided and abetted by James Billington, a barber and the chief executioner for England and Wales who had travelled down from Lancashire on the Monday the night before. Billington spent the night at the prison presumably to introduce himself to the prisoner and to measure him up for the hangman's noose.



Reading Gaol opened in 1844. Photo courtesy of Berkshire Live

Carter was the third person to be executed inside Reading Gaol after the end of public executions. The first were two brothers convicted of murdering two Policemen in 1877. In all 13 prisoners were hanged in Reading Gaol, the last in 1913. Most of the victims were guilty of domestic murders. The executions took place in a shed in the exercise area where the prisoners had their photos taken when they arrived at the prison. It contained a pit seven foot deep in the floor for the lethal drop which enabled the neck of the victim to be snapped causing instant death. It was said of Carter's execution that his death was instant.



A modern view of Reading Gaol closed in 2013. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

John Carter was found guilty of the murder of his third wife on 17th November 1893 by the unanimous decision of the jury who did not leave the jury box to come to their decision.

John Carter's grandfather was a very devout Primitive Methodist who was wounded in the siege of Bayonne in the Peninsular War serving under the leadership of Wellington. He was bayoneted in the leg and on his discharge worked on his brother's farm in Watchfield. He was a completely different character from his grandson. John Carter was a simple man with a violent temper and was known to have problems with authority. He was known to beat his wives and children and at one time deserted his family who ended up in the Workhouse. He was found guilty by the Magistrates and was sentenced to a month's hard labour. This was not his only brush with the Law.

He had six children with his first wife, Elizabeth Ann. She fainted when in the last stages of pregnancy and fell down the stone stairs and hit her head dying instantly. At the inquest her daughter, Annie, said she was with her mother when she fell. Carter had already left for work. The daughter left her mother to get help from a neighbour and on her return she found her mother's body laid out at the bottom of the stairs by another neighbour. The inquest found death by accidentally falling down stairs. If the witnesses at the inquest are to be believed, it is difficult to accuse Carter of being implicated though his subsequent history makes one suspicious.



Sketch from the book by David Disbury

His third wife, Rhoda, was probably murdered on the night of Thursday 20th July. She was seen by her cousin out walking on the Thursday with Carter and they appeared to be on very good terms. Thomas, Carter's son with his first wife, aged nine, recorded that he had seen his stepmother at 20.00 before he went to bed. He shared a room with his half-brother, Nelson aged five. He was later woken by a banging sound in the next bedroom and heard Rhoda shout out, "Lord have mercy on us". This was later followed by a bumping sound down the stairs. He was too frightened to get out of bed. When he got up at 04.00 his father told him to get the cows in and not to go to the washhouse, which he had locked. When he returned from school he asked where Rhoda was and was told she had gone to Eastleach to look after her pregnant sister.

On Friday Carter told his son to get more coal, although there was enough coal in the washhouse to have a fire. Later that day the neighbour who lived opposite noticed that there was smoke billowing from the washhouse. It was vile smelling. She called round and saw a wooden tub in front of the fireplace surrounded by burning wood and coal. She spoke to Carter who pushed her away closing the door. He also fetched several pails of waters, a very unusual thing for him to do. He was also visited by his brother-in-law who burnt his hand on the washhouse door, before going with him into the washhouse. He commented that it was very hot and the building could catch fire. Carter claimed that fire was to boil water so that he could shave.



A photo from 1905 showing the cottage where John Carter murdered his wife Rhoda. Photo courtesy of Paul Williams

On the Saturday there were considerable rumours as to what had happened to Rhoda. The local policeman, Charles Sparkes, decided to speak to Carter who told him that his wife had gone to Eastleach to stay with her sister and he expected her to return within the week. He had been to Eastleach to find her. During Monday Sparkes met Mrs

Titcombe, Carter's mother-in-law, at Carter's house and the following day he went to Eastleach and he found that Carter had not been there. When he confronted Carter with this evidence, Carter admitted this was a lie and in fact he had gone over to the brewery at Kingsdown and then into Swindon. Sparkes arrested him and took him to Faringdon. Also on the Tuesday Carter met his brother who asked him what was going on. Carter said that he had killed his wife with a single blow.

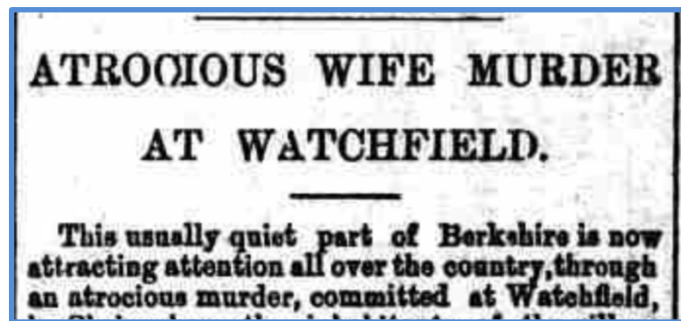
The next day, Sparkes and Sergeant Benning went to the cottage where Sparkes found a water tub and wheelbarrow. Underneath these he found soft earth which he removed to find the body doubled up and stuffed into the shallow grave. He noticed marks on the throat as if the deceased had been grasped there by a man's finger and thumb. There was a deep wound across the face and the limbs appeared as if they had been scorched. Burnt buttons and remnants of clothing were found in the washhouse. Subsequently a blood-stained shirt and blanket were found in the house.



A sketch from the book by David Disbury

Dr Spackman the Faringdon doctor examined the body. He found it very discoloured especially round the head, face and right side of the body. There were marks on the neck caused before death being from thumb and fingers. He suspected death was from strangulation. The face was bruised and the whole body smelt of fire. The skin was loose and peeled off in large pieces partly due to scalding the body. The hair on the head was almost off and the features almost indistinguishable. The jury at the inquest met on the Thursday and viewed the remains, an almost naked corpse blackened and scarred. A verdict of wilful murder was made and the case referred to the Faringdon

magistrate with the prisoner being remanded to Reading Goal. Outside the Inquest Carter was met by a very hostile crowd made up by relatives of his wives and other villagers.



Headline from Faringdon Advertiser Sat 29
July 1893

The following Thursday Carter was bought from Reading to Faringdon. There was a huge crowd present to jeer but he was smuggled into the court and avoided them. As many as could crowded into the court. The evidence of the inquest was repeated. Again the verdict was wilful murder and he was committed for trial on the Capital charge to be heard at the next Assizes.



Artist sketch from book by David Disbury, of
Carter at Reading Station being taken to the Gaol

His case was heard on the 17th November and the evidence was repeated. Carter's defence was that the charge should be manslaughter not murder as his wife had attacked him with a razor and he had hit her in self- defence. The jury did not accept this. It is difficult to know the exact motive behind the killing but in June he had rowed with his wife at a dance and told her that she could dance with women but not with another man. There was a man named Wheatley who lived in Eastleach there and it was reported that Rhoda told Carter that she had married the wrong man. Carter may have thought that the reason Rhoda wanted to go to Eastleach was to see Wheatley, not her sister.



Sketch from the book by David Disbury

The day before the hanging, Carter confessed to the Prison Chaplain that he had also murdered his second wife, Elizabeth Ann, and gave accurate directions where he had buried her so that she could have a Christian burial. The following day Col Blandy, Chief Constable for Berkshire, accompanied by two policemen and a labourer went to Broadlease Farm and started digging near a hayrick. After two hours they found the body. It was buried close to where Carter was living at that time.



Broadleaze Farm where John Carter's second wife Elizabeth, was found. Photo Neil B. Maw

The Coroner, Mr Jotcham, who had presided over the inquests of Carter's other wives opened the Inquest. He said the aim of the Inquest was to identify the skeleton and possibly determine the cause of death.

Dr Spackman said that it was the skeleton of a young woman, every bone was perfect apart from the nose having been fractured. There were remnants of clothing.



Uncovering the body of Elizabeth at Broadleaze Farm Sketch from the book by David Disbury

Carter's daughter, Annie, gave evidence that she had been told by her father that he had killed her step-mother and had been given her wedding ring. He told his daughter that she must never tell anyone but that he had told her other sisters. She had discussed this with one of her sisters.

Martha, another sister remembers that on the evening Elizabeth disappeared her father came home about five thirty and saw her father give his wife his wages. She told him that it was not enough, pushed it across the table and said she would not have it. They had words. Martha was woken an hour later by the rattle of chairs. In the morning her father asked if she knew where her mother was and then he said had she had run away. Three months later she spoke to her father about the incident asking if what her sister Clara had told her was true. He admitted that he had killed his wife by hitting her on the head. He told her never to tell anyone and her fear kept her silent. She admitted that Carter hit the children when angry and treated his wife badly. She was asked if what she said was true or as a consequence of her father hitting her and she replied it was all true. She also identified the parts of dress as what her stepmother was wearing when she last saw her.

A neighbour said that Carter treated her very badly. One evening she heard a shriek and tables and chairs fall over. This was not an uncommon problem but was worse than usual. She never saw the wife again.

The inquest concluded that the body was that of Elizabeth Carter and that she had been murdered by her husband. A wax model of Carter was made and put in the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussauds where it remained until a fire in 1925 melted it.



Police mug-shot of John Carter – a cruel and violent man

We know a little of the six surviving children. By the time of the trial both Annie and Clara were married about 16 years old. The third daughter, Martha aged 15 was in service in Lower Wanborough. After the trial the three young orphans (Thomas, William, Nelson) were put into the workhouse. They were rescued by Clara who arranged for them to be put in the care of Fegan's Homes who arranged for them to have "a better life" in Canada. Thomas and William left in 1895 aged 10 and 11 with Nelson following five years later when he was 10. They were indentured as farm labourers to pay for the cost of the fare to Canada. Clara's life was a very unhappy one. She married Henry Breakspeare, ten years her elder, described as violent, simple minded and arrogant. He hanged himself after five years of marriage. Her son was killed in France in July 1915. Thomas described as hard working and gentlemanly, married and settled round Toronto. William also went to Ontario where he was described as only doing fair. He married and moved West. Nelson had a "Hard temper bad habits and not doing well. He was killed at Ypres in a gas attack. I am indebted to Angela Money, Thomas's great granddaughter, for this information.

One would hope that such barbarous and uncivilised behaviour would be a thing of the past. In those days women were still considered chattels and inferior to men. Versions of that particularly repugnant ditty

*"A woman, a spaniel, a walnut tree,
The more you beat them, the better the better they be"*

was sung all over Europe and beyond. Police tended to steer well clear of "Domestics" into the later part of the 20th Century.

According to the Home Office two women a week are killed by their partner and thirty men each year by their partners. There are also thirty children killed. Violence in the home accounts for 16% of violent crime and four hundred suicides annually. It is stated that domestic violence will affect 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men which I find horrifying statistics.

Post Script: In the weeks of the Lockdown in the UK in March/April 2020, caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic, there was a marked increase in domestic violence. An article in the British Medical Journal said that of particular concern was people with mental problems. Those caring for children are at an increased risk of child abuse. This is particularly during the first year of life continuing until the age of 17. Even normally balanced people get very stressed with a baby who cries continually despite being fed, watered and changed.