

Forum Report for Historic Environment October 2023

At our September meeting we thoroughly enjoyed a talk with a difference from our member Jon Price who transported us back to the world of Pateley Bridge, Yorkshire, in the early to mid 19th century.

Jon's focus was on a pair of local brothers, Elisha, a hat-maker born in 1807 and John Sinkler born in 1811, a clock-maker by trade. As they grew up, both turned their talents to poaching for which they were convicted but failed to pay their fines. Jon gave us an insight into the workings of the law at that time: in 1831 Elisha had already spent time on remand in Ripon jail but was found not guilty and released. Apparently unconcerned by this warning he and John continued their poaching and badly beat an assistant gamekeeper who tried to arrest them when he caught them in the act. As a result four police officers based in Ripon were sent to Pateley Bridge to arrest Elisha, the prime mover in the assault. Despite meeting strong resistance the officers eventually restrained Elisha and started to remove him before John and a friend intervened, seriously harming the two senior officers and freeing Elisha. A reward was offered and Elisha was later arrested, tried and condemned to death. This was commuted to transportation for life after an appeal from many local dignitaries (Elisha seems to have suffered from mental problems possibly resulting from mercury poisoning which was common among hatters).

Following a chequered career during ten years in Australia Elisha absconded and by 1842 had somehow returned to Pateley Bridge! Meanwhile brother John was still living there despite there being a hefty reward on his head. Rather than keeping a low profile, the two continued their criminal and violent ways, again injuring an officer sent to arrest them. Six months later Elisha was again arrested, receiving a good beating. Found guilty of returning from transportation he was again transported, this time to Norfolk Island. In 1844 he was joined there by brother John, at long last brought to justice. In 1853 John was released for good behaviour and returned home, followed by Elisha three years later. Back in Pateley Bridge they again resumed their lives of crime, were arrested but got away with it yet again! Elisha died in 1874 aged 67, while John lived on as a local legend until he died aged 87.

Many thanks to Jon for his fascinating tale, well-supported by contemporary reports and illustrations. Jon brought to life the social norms and contradictions in this small corner of 19th century Yorkshire exemplified by these brothers who led charmed lives while the law seemed unable to restrain them.

Tim Meacham