

1791-92. The Murder of Thomas Briggs of Undley.

According to past records, and the story as passed down to present village folk, the year 1791 saw a terrible event at Undley.

A man named Roger Benstead owned cattle which strayed from his land, and these were impounded by Thomas Briggs. After the refusals first by Benstead to pay the fine and then by Briggs to release the cattle the matter reached a deadlock. On promise of a green suit as payment, a boy named Thomas Harper agreed to shoot Briggs. This eventually took place on July 29th, and the unfortunate Briggs was said to have crawled a considerable way before eventually dying in the village street.

The two terrified wrong-doers, although going into hiding at Undley Hall, were at last captured. After the trial, when the boy Harper was released, the man Benstead was hanged and gibbeted at Undley, not far from the scene of the crime.

The gravestone of Briggs still stands in Lakenheath Churchyard and he gibbet still stood for many years at Undley.

Lakenheath W.I. A History of Lakenheath 1951.

These extracts are taken from an old hard backed note book, kindly lent by Marie Laflin, which record the whole trial and it's aftermath.

The writers are unknown. They appear to have copied, from another source, perhaps an original newspaper.

The book was discovered by Marie's grandfather, George Pryke Gathercole, barber and antique dealer in the village in the 1930's in the drawer of a desk or bureau he had bought.

Richard Tent.
Were you one of the persons who went
to Bensteads house to make search?
Yes I am?
Where at Bensteads house did you
make any search?
We were four or five hours searching
before we found him.
Where did you find him?
In a false ceiling over the study.
Where you in the room where Benstead
was taken out of the hole?
Yes I was, and asked him for the boy, to
which he answered, Boy! Boy! what Boy!
I said the boy ~~also~~ did the murder!
he said he knew nothing about him,
but on going to search the boy came
out saying, Here am I.

Did you say anything to the boy?
No. But as we were going towards
Lakenheath, the boy ~~out~~ cried and
confessed the whole.

Were you present when the prisoner were examined?

Yes, I was at the Bell at Lakenheath when Harper was taken, there was a gentleman, who came into the room clapped Harper on the back, and said, you ought to speak against your old & your young master, to save yourself; Mr Willet was there, who set a great face at me [threatening me], & put his hand into his pocket, saying, My girl, I will give you twenty guineas if you will tell all you know about the business.

The barmaid Elizabeth Battley's evidence

awfull tribunal for the laws of God may go still further it now only remains for me to pass the usual sentence of the law that you be taken from hence to the place from whence you came and from thence to the place of execution the day after tomorrow there to be hanged by the neck untill you are dead and your body be delivered to the surgeons to be dissected and anatomized and may the Lord have mercy on your soul after condemnation his sentence was changed from being anatomized to hanging in chains which seemed at first to affect him more than any other circumstance he was very strongly urged to confess his guilt on the morning before his execution that he might receive the consolation of the ~~truly~~ holy communion but he persisted in his innocence and the sacrament was not administered he showed no signs of penitence whatever but apparently went to the place of execution unmoved by the great event that was about to ensue nor was he observed to change countenance till the rope was put about his neck and so far was he from wishing his execution to be delayed that he seemed to court its earlier execution much more dreading the resentment of the populace from whom he had received insult in going to and from the place of trial than the dreadful judgement of that future state before which all must appear to render an account of the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil. Having hung the usual time at the end of northgate Burg he was conveyed to Windy corner near Lakenheath and there suspended in chains on a gibbet within a quarter of a mile of his late residence

THE END.

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The sentence, execution and afterwards

Extract from the Norfolk Chronicle 7th April 1792.

"Whilst the gibbet was preparing for Benstead's body at Lakenheath common, a stripling, who had lived servant with him, was held up to public view with his back bare, and shockingly lacerated by a severe flogging he received from Benstead's son, it had afterwards been rubbed with salt and pork lard, many pieces of which were picked out of the wounds. This piteous spectacle worked up those present into such a pitch of phrenzy, that they could scarcely be restrained from cutting the flesh of the deceased; and had the son been to be found at the moment, it is thought he would have accompanied the father on the same gibbet."



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The Gibbet was used following the execution of Roger Benstead, the elder, was probably very similar to the one shown.

FREE PRESS & POST SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1942.

Local Milestones.

Extracts from our Files.

150 Years Ago—

April 11th, 1792.

Roger Benstead, the elder, who was sentenced to death at the Suffolk Assizes at Bury St. Edmund's for the wilful murder of Thomas Briggs, of Lakenheath, was, after being executed, conveyed to Undley-common, near Lakenheath, within a quarter-of-a-mile of his late dwelling, and there hung in chains. Many people have visited the gibbet and on one Sunday, no less than 2,000 persons were present in the course of the day.

This is the ending given in a hand written account by a former resident of the village in his reminiscences of village life in the mid-19th century.

Many years ago a man from ~~of~~
Lakenheath was at or near Winfarthing
in Norfolk, and he spoke of Lakenheath;
an old man in the corner of the room ~~and~~
looked up at him, but did not speak; he after-
wards found this man alone, and asked
him if he knew anything of Lakenheath
and he replied, that he was born there, and
had spent most of his life in the same spot;
the old man then asked him if he had heard
of the murder of Briggs, and if he knew that
it was not Benstead who shot him; he replied
that he knew the murder was committed
by a boy named Thos. Harper, as that
is recorded on the tombstone; the old man
again asked him if he knew what became
of the boy, and on his replying in the ne-
gative, the old man astonished him by
saying "I am Thomas Harper", and
added that he had passed through a
wretched life, and had often wished he
had been hanged with his master.