

The Case of Henry Pelican

1899



Swansea 1899 Baptist Court Henry Pelican

A sovereign was the price of immorality.

You see, as far as I am concerned, a robustly defined customer complaints procedure can prevent any number of problems from festering and getting out of hand. If you need to be convinced then perhaps you might like to consider the story of Henry Pelican.

What I find so fascinating about this story, what the *Western Mail* was so eager to describe as a *squalid murder at Swansea*, is the window it opens upon a kind of life in the nineteenth century. The paper claims (though not entirely accurately) that every murder in Swansea had occurred within a radius of a few hundred yards of the address, the "*murder circle*. Nonetheless it was in one of the least favoured parts of the town. It occurred in Baptist Court,

one of the narrowest and dirtiest alleys in Swansea, a shocking and gruesome tragedy amongst the lowest type of life.

Baptist Court emerged into High Street a few doors above the Bird in Hand Hotel and the grubby cottage in which the

murder took place, overlooked the North Dock and, according to the *Cambrian* newspaper, *ought to belong to a vanished order of the world.*

It was at the time next to the Mutoscope exhibition. These were coin operated *What the Butler Saw* peep show machines. I don't suppose even the most hardened of butlers would have enjoyed what took place that night.

It happened in the early hours, between 1.00 and 2.00 am, on Friday 9 June 1899.

A German seaman, Henry Pelican, went with Ellen Wathan (or Sullivan) for an essentially simple and uncomplicated transaction at Number 1 Baptist Court. The house was kept by William Kingdom and Margaret Tobin, known to the police as *Sawdust*. Now Sawdust was in prison awaiting trial and, as a consequence, Billy had decided that Ellen was the woman he wanted to share his life with, for a while any way.

Henry gave Ellen a sovereign, in anticipation of personal services and, like canny consumers everywhere, he waited for his change.

Ellen however seemed to suggest that there were no introductory offers currently available that might have involved the return of loose coins.

Not good news. There a row and Ellen fled upstairs, seeking the protection of William Kingdom. Henry chased after her and, she claimed, stabbed her in the abdomen. When William

came to her assistance Henry stabbed him twice in the heart, driving the knife in up to the hilt, killing him. He fell downstairs.

Ellen smashed the windows in an attempt to call for help. Her screams attracted the attentions of PC Hawkins, who found Pelican ready to defend himself. He did however surrender himself to the policeman, saying that he had acted in self-defence. They had grabbed him by the neck, so *that the darkness came before his eyes*. There was a small square table, a couple of chairs and a low bed. The table was laid with bread and pickles, suggesting perhaps a jolly midnight feast. Except in this case there was a considerable amount of blood involved.

**TERRIBLE
MURDER AT SWANSEA.**

LABOURER KILLED AND HIS
PARAMOUR WOUNDED.

STATEMENT BY THE ASSAILANT.

Shortly after we went to press last Friday morning—and as we briefly announced in a second edition—a terrible murder was committed in Baptist-court, High-street. The victim was a dock labourer named Wm. Kingdom, who lived with a woman of ill-fame, Margaret Tobin, bearing the sobriquet “Shawdust,” at No. 1, Baptist-court. The antagonist was a Prussian seaman, Henry Pelican, who has traded for some years to and from South Wales ports, where, amongst a class of acquaintances, he appears to be held in some degree of estimation as a quiet, respectable, and generally-sober individual. There is another victim of Friday’s tragedy, a woman by the name of Ellen Waltham, *alias* Sullivan, with whom the fracas which ended so fatally commenced. She, too, was stabbed with the same knife that killed her paramour, and she now lies at the Swansea Hospital in a critical, but not hopeless, condition.

As the nauseating details of the tragedy were unfolded it became evident that it was the outcome of the vice and the sordid conditions of society which arise only too naturally in such a vicinity as that of Baptist-court. It is one of the little blind alleys that

The press enjoyed the whole thing very much, reflecting upon a sordid story of vice and poverty. Ellen's initial suggestion that the two men were rivals for her affections and had fought for her love was quickly dismissed. There was *no sentiment of any kind in the matter*. Those who lived at 1 Baptist Court were *extremely bad characters*. When Sawdust had been imprisoned, William had brought Ellen in as an alternative. Ellen was generally on the prowl, *picking up strange seaman*. She met Henry on Thursday night whilst drinking on Wind Street and then *decoyed him* to High Street.

What can I tell you about Henry Pelican? He was about 30 years old and *was not at all bad looking*. But this comment is from a Cardiff newspaper so their standards are not like those of anywhere else. He was *quiet and inoffensive, a well-behaved Prussian*. Praise indeed. In fact he appeared *more English than German*, which must have been a source of some comfort amongst all the difficulties in which he found himself.

There were no traces of brutality or bloodthirstiness in his features.

He was working on the ship *Ravensheugh* and was regarded as *decent* and a *willing worker*, though perhaps *a little weak in the head*. In fact, when his ship had been docked in Cardiff, *The Western Mail* was eager to point out that he had drunk nothing else other than ginger beer. But he had all too quickly adopted regrettable Swansea habits.

Pelican had arrived two days earlier from Antwerp and started out that Thursday night drinking with his friend Harry, but they had had a fight in the bar of the Coliseum and had been thrown out. This is when he fell in with Ellen just before midnight and suddenly found himself in Baptist Court.

The house was a miserable tenement with one room downstairs and one upstairs and by the time Henry Pelican had finished, the stairs were covered in blood, for he had with him *a keen and formidable seaman's knife*.

The neighbours had quite liked Sawdust but found Ellen a bit cheap, to be frank. Kingdom was a muscular dock labourer aged 43 but they described him as poor Billy, for they knew he was out of his depth with Ellen.



Her arrival as his paramour had not been greeted with enthusiasm by the neighbours. Ellen had met Billy a week before on the High Street and moved in with him. According to Ellen, he wanted to keep her. After all, he told her that he worked hard and had plenty of money. And to be fair she said they had been together years before when she had been in service at The Nag's Head. In the course of their first week together she repeatedly brought men to the house, evidently with Billy's consent.

The National Seaman's and Fireman's Union arranged Henry's defence and in court Ellen's character was skewered and assassinated. She didn't have a chance. She had appeared before the magistrates on a number of occasions. She had recently been charged with *pummelling a sailor in the street*. And Henry had asked for change? She was allegedly 28 and claimed to have been married for 7 years to a man named Wathan who was currently in the asylum in Gloucester. In fact Ellen had been an inmate too. She had been originally admitted at the age of 9. Her mother commented that *she had always had trouble with her head*.

The precise details of the events at the house will never be known. Ellen said that Billy went out to buy whisky for Henry and that there had been an argument about change. But she also acknowledged that the argument became most heated when they were sitting side by side on the bed. She was asked in court *Were you getting your living by immorality?*

She denied it of course, but no one believed her, especially when she admitted that *a sovereign was the price of immorality*. Her claim that Billy didn't know what we going on was unconvincing. He usually slept downstairs but on this occasion he went upstairs. When he died he was fully clothed and was even wearing his boots. Perhaps he hadn't expected to be upstairs for too long.

Henry Pelican claimed that he had acted to defend himself, that they were attacking him, that he had no alternative. *If they are going to stretch my neck for these two bastards, well I am satisfied.*

But he had no reason to worry. Ellen's past and her profession meant that she had no credibility.

Ellen had been convicted on a previous 27 occasions for assault, drunkenness and prostitution. She had spent time in prison (for robbery and also for wounding) as well as the asylum. Now, she claimed, this incident would be a warning to her, that *I'll be different after this. This will be a warning.* But no one was inclined to believe her.

The jury withdrew for about 30 minutes to consider their verdict.

Henry Pelican was acquitted. On 5 August 1899 he set sail once again, thanking as he left the Union for the support they had given him.

This story appears in my book *Swansea Murders*, and I do have copies available on my website for just £11.99, which includes delivery to anywhere in the UK.

The book has always been an extremely popular title. It examines 25 different murders or manslaughters within Swansea, the earliest described happened in 1730. The book ends with the disturbing story of the still-unsolved murder of Muriel Drinkwater in June 1946.

Of course, you can contact me my website if you need more details.

www.geoffbrookes.co.uk

Here is a brief video introduction to the book.