The Brackenfield Murder

On the morning of Saturday, 9th May 1896 Lizzie Boot would have not known that later that day she would be brutally slain. Lizzie was the housekeeper to farmer Thomas Limb at Lindway Farm, near to Brackenfield. She had only recently started working for Mr Limb – previously his sister had been looking after him but she had passed away a short time before. Nineteen-year-old Lizzie was the daughter of Henry Boot and Emma Fox who were local farmers at Wessington. The Boot family was well-known locally as the family were also shop keepers.

Earlier that fateful day Thomas Limb left the farm to attend the Matlock Cattle Fair. He would then enjoy a pint at the *Three Horseshoes* on Matlock Green. His farmhands, William Bryan and Henry Towndrow, were working in the fields.

With Mr Limb away, the two farmhands having had their lunch and returned to their work in the fields Lizzie and her young niece, Beatrice Boot, went upstairs to a bedroom. There Lizzie was happily singing her favourite hymns and working on her Sunday clothes by adding ribbons to her hat ready for the following day's church service. Little did she realise that her end was close at hand and that all this attention to detail was unnecessary.

This idyllic day was about to end when Billy Pugh came calling ...



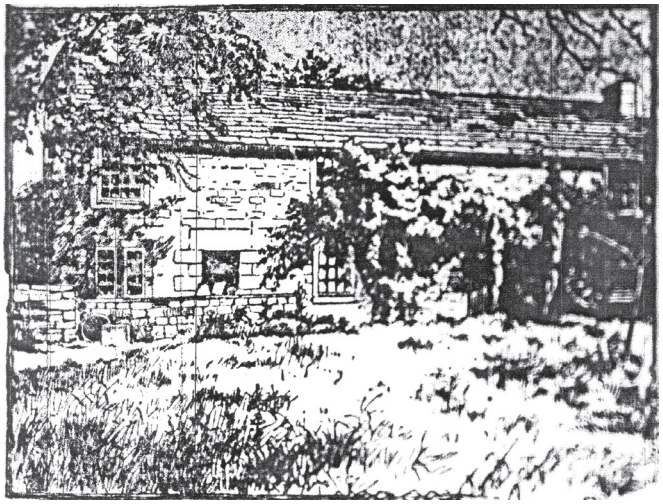
Lizzie Boot

William Pugh was the twenty-one year-old son of Benjamin Pugh and Ellen Fletcher. His father had died three years previous leaving his widow with six children. Billy, as he was known, was a miner, on sick leave, lodging with Luke and Hannah Wilson who lived nearby. Billy was courting Sarah Saunders – who was Hannah Wilson's sister. The Saunders family were also neighbours. As neighbours Billy knew Lizzie although they were not what might be called close friends.

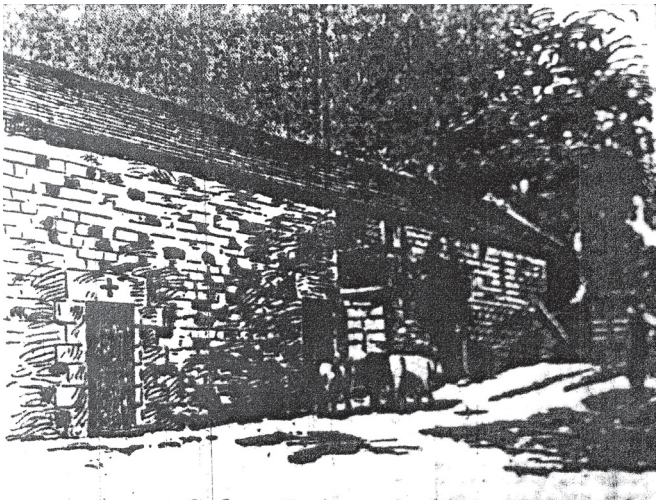
The newspapers described him as large in stature, of ruddy complexion, white eyebrows and moustache, untidy hair, shifty cat like eyes, wearing a black cap, jacket and vest with grey trousers.

Billy walked up the path to the farm and knocked on the door. Lizzie came downstairs and they had a brief conversation. This was observed by the niece, Beatrice, who was upstairs. Reports in the newspapers, based on what was later said in court, it seems that Billy wanted a "private conversation" with Lizzie. It was presumed that this conversation was about his alleged forthcoming marriage to Sarah Saunders at Whitsuntide which had been the subject of local gossip. Billy had heard that Lizzie had passed unfavourable comment about this. He believed that she had been making offensive remarks which reflected on his courtship and that he had been accused of acting immorally and dishonourably He had been heard to remark "*Let me catch Lizzie Boot, I'll give her Lizzie Boot.*" In fact, although Billy and Sarah were courting, no marriage had been arranged or was forthcoming.

Both Billy and Lizzie went across the yard and into the barn. Beatrice came downstairs and tried to follow her aunt but was made to return back to the house. Beatrice thought this instruction was unusual of her aunt.



Lindway Farm



The barn

Whilst they were in the barn Lizzie was brutally murdered with a bill-hook. At this time George Hitchcock, of Dew Dale Farm, Ashover, entered the farmyard with a load of hay and noticed Billy coming from the direction of the barn towards the farmhouse to where Beatrice was standing. On seeing Hitchcock he turned about and was walking away when Hitchcock asked the whereabouts of the farm men, Towndow and Bryan. Billy answered that they were working "round the corner".

Hitchcock went to look for them and saw that Towndrow was at the top of the field with horses but Bryan was nearby so he came to see what was wanted. Hichcock explained that the straw needed to be weighed. Bryan, along with Beatrice, fetched Troy weights in order to weigh the straw and then went to the barn for a fork.

Bryan and Beatrice came rushing out of the barn with Beatrice crying "*My auntie's dying. my auntie's dying*". Bryan called out to Hitchcock "*There's a pretty sight here, come and look*". Hitchcock went to the door looked inside and saw Lizzie lying in a pool a blood. He called for Townsend to come down and help. He then saw Mrs Saunders (the mother of Billy's girlfriend Sarah) and asked her to fetch another neighbour called Ann Greenhough. He then saw Billy coming round

from the back of Miss Greenhough's house, as if coming from his lodgings with the Wilsons, and called out to him "*There is a pretty mess up here, but I don't know what it is.*" Billy then went up the path toward the barn. Along with Miss Greenhough, Hitchcock went into the stack-yard, where the barn was, and saw Mrs Saunders sat by the roadside. He did not enter the barn but went to Mrs Bennett, (neighbour and landlady of the nearby "Plough Inn") , asking her to go to Matlock and tell Mr Limb the farmer to come home. Returning to the stack-yard he saw Billy with a bill-hook which was covered with blood, and noticed blood stains on his clothes. Billy said to him "This is what it was done with" and then returned to the barn.



George Hitchcock



William Bryan

Whilst Hichcock had gone to see the Bennett family Bryan was in the barn when Billy entered saying "*It is a bad job*." Bryan noticed a mark over his eye which had not been there in morning when they last met. Billy then bent down, stroked Lizzie's face and persuaded Bryan to help him move the body.

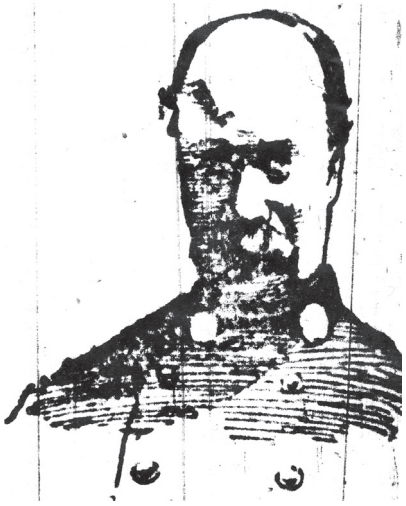
Billy left the barn and met Harry Towndrow who reported that Pugh looked very flurried, with blood on his hands and face. He also saw Billy wiping his hands with a blue handkerchief and that he said, "*The little girl says I've done it*". He also noticed scratches on his ears, a slight cut on his hand, a small piece of flesh and a bit of nail at the end of a thumb was missing and there was a wound about the size of a sixpence above his left eye.

The news of the murder quickly spread and two of Lizzie's brothers, Henry and John Boot, went to barn and saw their sister's body. Afterwards they went to Saunder's house where they found Billy smoking a pipe in the company of his girl friend Sarah Saunders. They asked him about the blood on his wrists to which he replied that it was result of him moving the body along with Bryan. The brothers did not believe him. John pedalled off to nearby South Wingfield to fetch Constable Wilson. They returned to the farm, John on his cycle and PC Wison on foot across the fields. Information was sent to Alfreton police station resulting in Superintendent Eyes and Sergeant Birley being dispatched to Lindway Farm.

Meanwhile constable Wilson was making enquiries in the area and suspected that Billy may have been involved in the crime. Fearing that Billy might "disappear" whilst he was investigating he came up with an inspired solution of ensuring this did not happen. He tasked the Boot brothers to keep a watch on Pugh!



PC Wilson



Sgt Birley



Sgt Thompson

Constable Wilson returned to Saunder's house and took Billy into custody. They then went by trap to Alfreton police station where William Pugh was charged with wilful murder. He replied "*I did not do it*." It was noted that although he had changed his shirt at some time after he had gone into the barn with Lizzie there was still blood on the wristband about the size of a "two shilling" piece. He accounted for this by saying he had cut himself whilst shaving.

Meanwhile Sergeant Thompson, of Higham, arranged for Lizzie's body to be removed and taken to her mother's cottage at the end of Lindway Lane – where it joins the Wessington to Oakerthorpe road. It was here where a post-mortem was carried out by Dr Walford of Stonebroom. He confirmed that Lizzie had been killed as the result of several blows to the neck with a bill-hook. He also reported that there had been no evidence of any other physical assault on Lizzie.

Obviously the District Coroner, Mr C G Busby , was informed and he arranged for an inquest to be held at the "Plough Inn" the following Monday, the 11th May. When the police brought Billy to the inquest there was a huge crowd assembled there hoping to catch a glimpse of the prisoner. The initial inquiry was adjourned until the following day, Tuesday, when the sensational evidence against William Pugh was given to the coroner's jury. Billy's mother and aunt (most likely Mary Patilla) were present at the inquest. Throughout the proceedings Billy was reported as bearing an air of indifference, paying little attention to the evidence against him.

On the first day, after the oath had been taken Coroner and jury visited the home of Lizzie's mother where they viewed the body. They took the five-minute walk to the barn where the murder had occurred. Nothing had been cleaned up and the sight upset a few of the jury. They then returned to the "Plough", sometimes referred to as the "Moorhouse".

One issue was how relatively little blood was found on Billy at is arrest given the severity of the attack on Lizzie. It was thought that his landlords, Luke and Hannah Wilson, might have some information about this as Billy had been to their house after being in barn. Initially they declared that they were not aware of anything but upon the threat of being arrested for withholding information they though better of their position and gave evidence. They stated

that on Saturday afternoon they found a striped shirt with blood stains in Pugh's bedroom. Mrs Wilson then washed the shirt but on Sunday morning decided to burn it. It was recorded that Mrs Wilson was the sister of Pugh's girl friend.

Mary Saunders, the mother of girlfriend Sarah, also gave evidence but this was contradictory and somewhat confused.

John Boot, one of Lizzie's brothers, a colliery lamp cleaner, said that on Saturday his niece Beatrice (brother Frederick's daughter) came rushing to his house at about a quarter to three, to tell him what had happened. He collected his brother Henry and they both went to the farm. He said that they saw their sister's body lying on the floor with a bloody bill-hook nearby. They then went to the Saunder's house to see Pug. He came to the door smoking, wearing no cap or jacket. They asked whether he had been to Mr Limb's yard, Firstly he replied "*no*'"and then yes, that he had come through the yard. He had a blue handkerchief with white spots which he used to wipe blood from a cut over his left eye. They noticed the blood on both wrists, as though he had washed his hands and the blood had run onto them. Pugh explained that the blood was the result of helping Bryan move Lizzie. They left and he went to fetch PC Wilson from South Wingfield.

Beatrice Emma Boot then gave evidence saying that she was just aged seven years old. She confirmed that Billy came to door and Lizzie answered before going into the barn. She did not hear what was said. Then she appeared a little frightened and unable to answer further questions.



Beatrice Boot

Further evidence was given by George Hitchcock, William Byard, Harry Towndrow Henry Boot and the pathologist Dr Walford. The enquiry was then adjourned until the next day, Tuesday.

PC John Wilson was first to give evidence, followed by Annie Eliza Greenhough who was a near neighbour to Mr Limb. She stated that on Saturday afternoon, just after one-thirty, she saw William Pugh hurrying from Lindway farm before turning up the lane to where he was lodging. A little later George Hitchcock came hurrying to house asking her to come with him to Limb's farm – which she did. She then described what she saw and did whilst at the barn

Thomas Limb confirmed that Lizzie Boot worked for him for over three years and was a good

reliable girl. He stated that to his knowledge she was not friendly with William Pugh and he had not seen them together and that he certainly would not employ Pugh on his farm.



Thomas Limb

Mary Saunders was called again to clarify her evidence given the previous day. It was made clear that she need not say anything which might incriminate her. Interestingly she always referred to her husband, John Saunders, as "the master".

After police sergeants Thomson and Birley gave evidence Luke and Hannah Wilson, Pugh's landlords, were questioned. They confirmed that they found Pugh's shirt with bloodstains, which looked as if an attempt had been made to wash them out. Billy told them it was the result of trying to move Lizzie's body and they believed him. They both then washed the shirt. However, some time later as rumours spread though the community became concerned and burnt the shirt. They were informed that it was very wise of them to own up to destroying this vital evidence.

The Coroner summed up the evidence and it was noted that Pugh went very pale. The jury consulted in private for about half an hour returning to announce Pugh was found guilty of wilful murder. It was then explained to Billy that he would have to attend a trial at the next Assizes on a capital charge. Afterwards Billy emotional embraced his mother, aunt and another female relative whilst protesting his innocence . Bursting into tears he said "*Heaven's my home mother; you'll see my face there*". She replied "*Aye, lad, we'll see you there*". Finally before being taken away Billy called out "*Don't bother one bit mother about me. I'll be alright*".

As Billy was led outside to the waiting police cab it was expected that the waiting crowds would be as vocally violent as the previous day. However, the verdict it seemed to have tempered the mood of the massed throng with many shaking his hand and wishing him good luck. He waved farewell with his manacled wrists and was driven away shouting that he would meet them all in heaven.



Outside the Plough awaiting the verdict

There was an unfortunate and painful scene as the cab passed the house of Lizzie's mother. The funeral was just about to start, and the road full of people. As soon as Pugh was seen cries of abuse, threats, and denunciation were screamed by scores of grieving women.

On the journey to Alfreton the cab passed scores of groups of people who had collected to see the accused. Most of these were colliers, who stood with arms folded. Pugh put his hand out of the window and saluted every group and received replies from many. The men seldom refused a friendly greeting but the women were for the most part extremely bitter. They yelled and hissed, and expressed the desire to get at him. Another crowd was waiting at the Alfreton lock-up.



Lizzie's mother, Emma Boot

The Alfreton "lock-up" at this time was the one built in 1844 on the Abraham Lincoln site not the historical House of Confinement which was built in the early 1920s and whose remains are still evident and protected



The 1920s Alfreton House of Confinement

Replaced in 1844, Pugh was not imprisoned in here

In mid May 1896 William Pugh was at the Assizes in Alfreton Court charged with the wilful murder of Elizabeth Boot. Much of the evidence given was the same at that presented at the inquest although more detail was printed in the newspapers of the time..

Before this court appearance, whilst in the Alfreton lock-up, he wrote to his girl friend Sarah Saunders – "*I am quite innocent. The money I have is back of the stackyard against the hedge in the field under a sod*." Now his motive for writing that was not very clear, as they did not find any money. Discussion was held as to the possible motive for the murder. There was no sexual assault so robbery was considered. Lizzie had recently sold a cow and had the sale money in a box. This would have been known to Pugh. The previous theory that Billy was enraged at hearing Lizzie had bad-mouthed him and his relationship with Sarah Saunders did not seem to appear in the various evidences.

Billy's landlord, Luke Wilson of Reservoir Farm, was given quite a grilling as his conduct was considered "quite mysterious". He confirmed that Billy usually worked at Shirland Pit but was off work though illness. He also admitted that he and his wife had first washed a bloodied shirt belonging to Billy before burning it.



Luke Wilson, landlord

Thomas Limb, for whom Lizzie worked, gave evidence in which he stated, amongst other things, that he had sold a cow for her and that she had £9 in her box.

It was also revealed that Dr Reginald Walford, who had conducted the post-mortem on Lizzie, had not been asked by the police to examine Pugh. If he had, then he might have been able to explain how the marks on the prisoner's face had been caused. Billy had said the scar was the result of falling against a wall.

Billy's girlfriend, Sara Saunders, on giving evidence said she had noticed blood on his hands , the scar on his face and the fact that he had changed his shirt between his morning and afternoon visits. She had asked Billy whether he had killed Lizzie to which he replied that he had not. She continued to say Billy had picked up her father's razor and in doing so cut his thumb. Then, somewhat strangely, said that her father shaved Pugh. Sarah also reported a conversation when Billy stated that he had saved £8 but she had not seen it.



William (Billy) Pugh

Letters written by Billy to Lizzie whist he was in gaol were read out in court –

Alfreton 11 May 1896
"Miss Saunders, Lindway Lane, Brackenfield, Alfreton.
To Miss Saunders of Lindway Lane,
*My dear, I write this letter to you to tell you that you (*unclear text*) best think of me while out of your sight. God bless you in every time and need. Don't bother yourself. We shall meet again in a better land. I should like to see you at the plough inn tomorrow.*
W.PUGH
Remember me to your mother and farther
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Derby May 14 1896
From W Pugh
HM Prison, Derby

May 14, 1896

My Dear, I write unto you this letter hoping to find you well and your father and mother this letter leaves me well at present. I hope you will not fret yourself about me for I am quite innocent of the crime which I am at Derby (for). Sarah, my Dear, I pray for you many a time a day I want you to pray for me.I feel sorry we have had to part but love God and we shall meet in Heaven sometime. I am prepared for to meet my farther in heaven now the money that I have is back in the stackyard again the hedge in the field under a sod and I want you to remember me to all the Wilsons.

My Dear you can rite to me when you like but it will be opened before I get it please rite to me as soon as you receive my letter I am anxious to no how you are getting on and I hope I shall see (you) at Alfreton on the 20 of May

Sarah Saunders your loving friend William Pugh

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

please rite to me as soon as you can

WILLIAM PUGH

HM Prison

Derby

18May 1896
Sarah Saunders, Lind Way Lane, Brackenfield, Derbyshire
From W Pugh
HM Prison Derby

May 18 1896

*My dear I rite unto you this letter hoping to find you in good health It leaves me very well at present but I am sorry I have no letter from you yet My Dear do not turn against me for I am innocent of the crime I have more love for you than ever I have had before and I want you to love me the same and pray for me If Gods truth wins the Day I shall come and see you at Lind Way Lane God bless you and your farther and mother remember me to all at Stonebroom and Morton give my best love to them all I hope you have found that money If you have you must get what you want with it and lend your mother some if she wants it but dont change those to notes till after the (*unclear text*) I think I shall win the Day If they will all speak the truth from the Heavenly farther*

My Dear Sarah rite me a letter and tell how you are all getting on at your house and tell me if you have found the money it is in a red handkerchief in the field of at the corner of the stackyard your kind and loving friend William Pugh Dear Sarah think of me

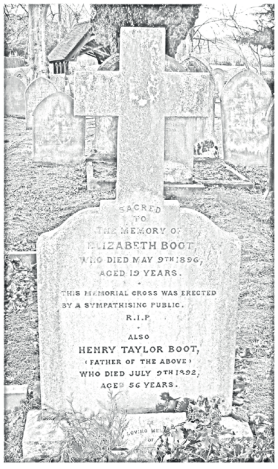
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Other witnesses gave more or less the same evidence as at the Coroners inquest although the questioning was more detailed and intense. Mr Oakes the magistrate then committed William Pugh to take his trial at the next Assizes Trial in Derby. His barrister, Mr Moore, reserved his defence. A large crowd had congregated outside the court on Alfreton High Street to see Pugh taken from the building to the railway station for transportation to Derby gaol.

Whilst waiting in Derby Gaol for his trial at the Assizes, Billy had time to realise the seriousness of his position. The easy flippant manner in which he treated the Coroner's inquiry had given place to a nervous dread and fear as to as to his final trial before a jury. Judging by the tone of his letters and remarks to the effect that he would meet his "mates" in Heaven, it is easy to conclude that although he still maintained his innocence he had very little idea of convincing the jury. He had written several letters to his mother couched in endearing terms, and begging her not to worry at the result as they will meet again hereafter. Up to now, however, he had said little about the crime except to reiterate the statement he made originally to the police, that he knew nothing whatsoever of Lizzie being "done to death." He was upset at what he termed his "young lady" turning against him and giving evidence, but this was unfair, as she was practically compelled to go into the witness box owing to the strong public opinion in the district., and upon the application of the police. The greatest interest was taken in the case throughout the district, and was generally the subject of conversation amongst the groups of villagers who gathered together during the evening.

Meanwhile, the interest taken by morbid sightseers at the scene of the murder seemed not to have lapsed. Thomas Limb was daily besieged with visitors anxious to see him, his house, and the now famous barn where the crime was enacted. It was estimated that nearly 3000 people had visited the scene since the inquest, over 1500 passing through the barn on the Sunday preceding Whitsuntide. Many put up at the neighbouring hostelries and farms, but on one day no less than fourteen brakes and traps were counted in the lane, having conveyed visitors from Alfreton and neighbouring towns. The top door of the barn and a brick in the wall one which was found blood and hair had been removed by the police for production at the trial, but the wooden floor at the place where the deceased was found lying was not removed until it was pulled up during Mr Limb's absence from home, by sight-seers; large numbers of whom had taken a small portion of the floor boards away with them as a memento.

A small charge was eventually made to view the barn in order to raise funds to procure a suitable tombstone to place over Lizzie's last resting place. Unfortunately this idea did not occur to Mr Limb until many hundreds of visitors had been to see his barn, but the sum of £11 was obtained. The vicar of Brackenfield and Mr Limb thus raised sufficient monies to have a stone cross erected over Lizzie's grave in Brackenfield churchyard.



When visited by his mother he asked after his friends, and took great interest in all that was occurring at Wessington and Brackenfield. He wrote a letter to a friend of his, Thomas Haslam, of Higham, who worked in the same pit with him. Thomas at one time was well known on the running tracks, and Billy remembering this, jocularly addressed him as "handicapper" He enquired in the letter after old fellow workmen.

Thos. Haslam
Handicapper
Shirland
near Alfreton
Derbyshire
From W Pugh
H M Prison Derby

May 27 1896

Dear friend I rite to you hopeing to find you in good health that it leaves me very well at present. I want you to remember me to Jack Horkins and Tom Davis M Calladine, Moses Rhodes Sam Blant Jack Hope Jack Bramley Joseph Topham W Keeton. Tell Tom Davis and Moses Rhodes its not a bad stall the coal gets pretty well we dont want any holing doing rite back and tell me how you are all getting on at pit God bless you all the Assizes is on the tenth of July then we shall no more than we do now. I should like to see you there because I think well of you Tommie and Tom Davis to God bless you all and your wives and your family your loving friend William Pugh

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; they rod and thy staff they comfort me.

A Collier chap black on the skin;
but whiter far he lies within;
This secret now the Collier doth know;
they think I am as black as hell but i am white as snow;
water will wash and cleanse the skin;
but oh tis blood must cleanse within;
that blood which ran on calvary's hill;
though but a collier twas shed for me.

rite back Tommie and tell me how they all are getting on your loving friend William Pugh
William Pugh, HM Prison, Derby
the letters are opened before I get then rite as soon as you can, and tell me how you are all getting on.

It is interesting to note the style of his letter-writing and how it reflected on his elementary schooling. This was to change dramatically later. The religious theme in his correspondence was to become stronger. This particularly noticeable in the many letters he wrote to his mother and

friends after being visited by a Methodist minister from Alfreton, Timothy Archer and the prison chaplain, Revd J B Watson. The following letter, dated 27 June and printed in the *Derbyshire Times*, shows how his writing style changed

> *HM Prison, Derby, June 27*
> *Oh! I wish the wicked wretch could be found out who did it. But he is no man or he will show himself. God will find him. He cannot hide from him and he will punish him wherever he is. May God find them wherever they are. I pray for them. Amen I shall be better when the trial is over. It will be a great ease to me and to us all. Oh! How I long for the day to come not as I fear. I am the same as the Good book says. He says the innocent shall laugh at the enemy. Thank God they can. That will be at the harvest when some other judge but the father who is waiting to save all he can. It is the father who says "let both grow together in the harvest and at the time of the harvest I will say unto the reapers gather ye together with the tares and bend them in bundles to burn them but the wheat gather it into my barn." – Matthew chap 13.3 verse, that the barn be our home where there is peace and happiness for ever. Bless the Lord dear mother. I send you a letter to be read out before my band of hope members on Thursday night if it is not against your wish. If you think it is not wise do not let it be read but if you think there is no harmony give it to cousin Harriet and tell her she must taking it and wait while it is read. I should like to join them once more but I shall have to fight the battle through, but I have one with me that will fight for me, one that can conquer all the enemies, thank God, but some of them cannot see it. Oh! I pray for them. I shall write again before Friday, write and tell me how you are all home. Fear God, all of which I know you will, and Joe as well; don't get much drink you know I am much against strong drink, but get a pint and then leave it. Take my advice do. I wish I'd taken yours my dear friend. Take mine, and we will stand the storm with the help of God. I shed many a tear when I think of what you told me, but I know it now. But I fear God. That is all our help. "I will both lay me down in peace and sleep for thou Lord only makes me dwell in safety." My dear brothers and sisters, stop with our dear mother. Be ruled with me, and I hope I shall join you again home but if not if you go to heaven I can say I will join you there but we must pray that God will let me come home once more. I have put all my troubles in his hands. I have finished this letter crying but don't fret dear mother.*

This was typical of the many letters he penned, most with long biblical quotations. It suggests that perhaps the ministers were behind his hand. It is difficult to believe that this elementary educated young man suddenly acquired such scriptural knowledge and improved spelling without influence. It is clear however that he seems to "found God" and gained comfort from that.

The Derbyshire Summer Assizes began on Saturday 4 July 1896 when William Pugh and twelve other prisoners stood trial. Pugh's trial began at 7.00am on the Monday morning. The prsecution was lead by Mr J H Etheringtom Smith and the defence by Mr H Y Stanger QC.

Partway through the evidence one of the jurors collapsed with a heart complaint and the trial had to be stopped. The judge ordered that a new jury be sworn in chosen "from a distance" because the murder had received so much attention locally. The trial began "de novo" (starting again). The newspapers locally, nationally and internationally reported the progress of the trial. In particular the local press gave the case enormous coverage. Throughout Pugh pleased his innocence. Typical of the reportage was this extract from the *Derbyshire Times* dated 8 August 1896

The scene in the Assizes Court during the two days that the murder was being investigated will not soon be forgotten. The Court was crowded and a large number awaited the verdict. As the crime was laid bare in all its cruelty, cowardliness, and brutality, the hearts of those present simply moved for the Derbyshire girl who so foully and horribly had been done to death. Beyond his poor mother and his aunt, it would not be an exaggeration to say Pugh had no friends, no-one who cared anything except that he should be found guilty and be executed. This is a rare occurrence - to find everybody unanimous to a man's guilt. But so it was. Only his mother believed him guiltless! And his aunt! It was a heartrending sight to see these poor women - poor without a doubt, but a common feeling feeling of affection for their own kith and kin - watching with blood-shot eyes and troubled faces everything that occurred, listening with a painful earnestness to the least word that was said, and hoping against hope, that their lad, no matter what his fault, would be saved the gallows. Truly a sickening picture! And always present! Never leaving the Court for a moment; bowing their heads occasionally and weeping tears more bitter than any before. Soon, however, his fate would be known! And there they sat, naturally the two most miserable being present. Seven o'clock arrived, and shortly afterwards the jury were sworn in the usual way, not to speak to anyone whilst they considered their verdict. They then retired to a private chamber, and the time was passed in a collection of coppers for Beatrice Boot, several shillings being obtained for the child. Time was speeding! Half and hour had arrived since the jury went out! And the judge, in his scarlet robe and wig, once again took his seat, everyone rising in obeisance until he had done so. There was a stretching of necks, and whispering and an anxious look on everyone's face, as the jury filed into their places. The mother of the prisoner was induced to leave the Court and sat in an adjoining corridor. The prisoner was placed in the box. And in the death-like silence, not the faintest rustle or sound being heard, except men and women breathing hard with excitement, the jury were asked they were agreed on their verdict. "We are" was the unanimous reply, and "Guilty" rang out in a clear tone from the foreman. It was a blow to Pugh. His head dropped, he flushed then turned terribly white. But further sign of emotion he showed not. He knew his doom, and this in itself was perhaps a relief after the anxiety of waiting and hoping. Justice Grantham put on the black "cap" or mortar board for the due act which cut Pugh off from this world forever. Everyone was beseeched to be silent, but this was an unnecessary request. The excitement to some had been too great, and they were weeping quietly. All were affected and non more so than the Judge himself as he passed the sentence that "You be taken hence to the place whence you came, and thence to the place of execution, and you be hanged by the neck until you be dead, and your body buried within the precincts of the gaol." There was not a sound, no one stirred, the youthful convict stood erect with one hand on the brass rail in front of him as the last words were uttered by his Lordship "May the Lord have mercy on your soul" An audible "Amen" was heard in several parts, and one of the most impressive scenes in the law courts was once again ended. His Lordship had previously said' "William Pugh, you have been found guilty of the crime of murder, after a most careful enquiry by the jury who have tried you,

and after a most able defence by the learned counsel who was instructed to defend you. I can find no fault with the verdict whatsoever, for it is the verdict, I am convinced, that anyone who has heard the evidence in this case could have found. The crime was diabolical in its nature, whether committed for the purpose of gratifying a murderous passion, or any other motive unknown to us. It is very sad indeed for me, or for anyone else in the position that I occupy, to have to pass sentence of death upon you, as young as you are, but the evidence is too conclusive, and now, the jury having done their duty, I have to do mine, which is pass the sentence of death upon you.

This was done in the usual formal way, and just as the prisoners was being led from the dock he asked the Governor of the Gaol, "Can I say anything?"

The Governor: My Lord, the prisoner wished to say something?

His Lordship: All right.

Pugh, with his left hand resting on the front of the dock, then made this statement: "Well, I wish to say this, my lord, before all, for I am brought up and sentenced to death; but, thank God, I am sentenced in innocent blood, and I say with a pure heart before you all. Nearly all the witnesses which have been against me, I must say, they think they do a treat, perhaps, to be against me as much as they have; but they will do a great treat to my soul. They will have to come in judgement again, which, thank God, I shall not have to come under this judgement in the better land. They will be judged for what I am judged to-day and yesterday. I shall not fear this; I shall die happy. I shall leave a widowed mother with four children, but I hope that God will help them through this land, and I am sure He will if they will pray to Him. I shall die happy, and I shall want to leave them happy. That is all I want to say. I shall die in innocent blood for the murder which I am sentenced to die for.

As Pugh descended the steps to the cells below he turned round to the public gallery, and having called out " Dinna tha' worry" to his relatives and "Good luck to all" disappeared from view. The trial had lasted, exclusive of adjournments, for nearly 16 hours.



Derby gaol

Whilst Billy was awaiting his fate in Derby gaol attempts were made to obtain an reprieve, and no-one could have done more than Mr Bendle Moore his solicitor, but the Home Secretary, declined to interfere with the sentence.

Whilst in his condemned cell Billy received some visitors. There was his mother, aunt, brothers and sisters– including five-year-old Edna. A faithful friend from Wessington, John Fern, also

visited. John Fern's brother Miles and sister Grace both married into the Patilla family – as did Sarah Saunders, Billy's girl friend.

On the Tuesday before his execution despite protesting his innocence throughout he finally broke down during his mother's final visit and confessed – he had hoped his plea of not being guilty might provide him a reprieve. She must have experienced some doubt as to believing his frequent prostrations of innocence given the weight of evidence against him. But, being his mother, she wanted to believe him. Although it was small comfort to her, it was satisfactory, inasmuch as she now knew from her son's own lips that he did the deed for which he had to pay the penalty of the law.

Pugh gave his full confession to the prison chaplain explaining that robbery was the true motive. He had wanted to take his girl friend Sarah to Alfreton fair as promised but had no money. He knew that Lizzie Boot had recently sold a cow and had money in her room. He used a pretence at get her into the barn where she was killed. Knowing that her young niece Beatrice was a witness to him being there he proceeded toward the farm house to kill her and then to take the money. This was foiled by the unexpected appearance of George Hitchcock.

This widely reported case drew large crowds to assemble outside the gaol. As reported in the *Derby Mercury*

> **Attracted by a curiosity more or less morbid many hundred of people, some days before the execution, assembled in Vernon Street to gaze for hours at the sombre walls of the gaol and at the ominous looking flag post erected on the battlement above the large black door. The Salvation Army, too, have added their quota to the throng, and, with voices pitched in their shrillest and highest key endeavoured to make their presence heard within the gaol. Whether they succeeded in attaining their object or not we cannot say, but their assiduous attentions each Sunday evening and, we believe on several week days into the bargain became a decided nuisance, The neighbourhood of the gaol and Vernon Street was on occasions quite like a fair,and this lead to certain of the inhabitants lodging complaints, with the result that last Sunday week the police informed the Salvationists that their presence constituted a nuisance, and they were forthwith "moved on". Irrepressible they, congregated close at hand on the Old Uttoxeter Road and there continued their noisy service with renewed vigour. On Wednesday, an hour before the time fixed for the execution, a small knot of spectators had gathered in the open area in front of the gaol. Gradually the crowd increased until, when the bell was heard to sound its doleful, dirge at a quarter to eight, the crowd had reached large proportions, and was being rapidly augmented by a continual influx of people from all directions. There was very little noise, however, the spectators, apparently influenced by the dismal and terrible nature of the tragedy which was about to be enacted; conversing in subdued voices and even in whispers. No doubt the rarity – the fortunate rarity – of such an event in Derby accounted to a great extent for the dimensions of the crowd. As the fatal hour approached the crowd became quieter and quieter; there were many anxious glances at watches; and everyone seemed to be counting the few seconds of life, which remained to the wretched man who was presumably at that moment attending to the final ministrations of the chaplain. A short time previously, a cab containing the Under-Sheriff (Mr. Grimwood Taylor) had driven up to the goal, and every neck had been craned to see the door open. With this exception, however, little had occurred to**

attract the attention of the crowd.

Gathering in the condemned cell with Pugh were Revd Wilson, the chaplain, Captain Elliot Farquharson, prison Governor and warder Fenwick (schoolmaster). Holy Sacrament was given and Pugh repeated his guilt. The sheriff's officer then appeared and demanded of the Governor, as proscribed, "the body of William Pugh for execution".

A new brick execution chamber had been built since the last execution. Previously the condemned prisoner had to walk past his newly dug grave, Pugh was spared this. As was the norm there were several witnesses to the actual execution, including members of the press. As a consequence the details of the execution were reported in minute detail. The prison Governor Captain Farquharson was reported as saying he did not want a repeat of a previous hanging by the hangman, James Billington, and his assistant William Wilkinson (also known as William Warbrick) that went hideously wrong. Everything on his watch had to be done absolutely correctly and without hitch. Billington was renown as being the fastest official hangman after perfecting his technique over many years. Previously on, the 9 June, he had been responsible for the country's last multiple hanging when three prisoners were to be hung at Newgate. Two of the men to be hung each blamed the other for the murder and had been very violent towards each other whilst at trial. Billington did not want an incident whilst going about his gruesome task. He glanced around for a quick check before operating the trap-door. However, he failed to notice his assistant Warbrick, was still pinioning one of the men's legs as he was hidden by a warder. Billington pushed the lever too soon and catapulted Warbrick head first through the trap-door. Only by having the presence of mind to hang onto one of the men saved him from a serious accident. The effect that this extra man's weight had on the prisoner being hung does not bear thinking about.



James Billington, the executioner

So, at 8.00am on 5 August 1896 William Pugh was hung for a murder he committed but three months earlier. Justice was certainly quicker then. The moment was reported in the *Derby Mercury.*

> **Presently the bells were heard to toll the hour, and every eye was fixed on the flag-post, but it was a little over two minutes past eight when the flag appeared above the stonework, and, fluttering in the breeze, denoted that the Brackenfield murderer had paid the penalty of his crime. At first there was a general "Oh!," but a profound stillness followed, and though a few were seen to raise their hats into the air, there was not the slightest demonstration and the crowd quietly dispersed.**

There has to be a postscript to this story. Like many family history tales passed down through the ages the stories become embellished and "improved" in the telling. One such embellishment

in this case is based on a conspiracy theory that Billy was innocent and took the blame for financial gain to benefit his family. On studying the actual court transcripts in the National Archives it seems without doubt that he was guilty plus the fact that he made a full confession. How did the conspiracy theory arise? There is certainly a family mystery.

Billy's mother Ellen Pugh (née Fletcher) was one of nine illegitimate daughters of Elizabeth Fletcher. The family were certainly not well-off and had a difficult upbringing. Ellen married Benjamin Pugh in 1874, and they had six children before Benjamin died in 1854 aged thirty-nine. So, Ellen was a poor widow bringing up six children alone when her eldest son and wage-earner was hung for murder. Things must have looked very black for her. However, she ended up coming into money from some unknown source. At the turn of the century she ended up owning most of Bedlam Yard and 'Heather House' opposite Wessington church where she was living in 1911. She also purchased property on Amber Row for her sons. Becoming ill with cancer she attended Harley Street for treatment. When she died in 1932 she left one the shortest wills on record. It simply said she left everything to her daughter Edna. The value of her estate was given as £162 10s 0d although this was possibly an understatement as she did not believe in banks. Another oddity is that Ellen ended up owning the grocery shop previously owned by Frederick Boot whose sister her son had murdered – that must have been a strange transaction.

To add to this twist of fate. Lizzie Boot's mother Emma (née Fox) was daughter of Ashover farmers. The Fox family certainly could not be called poor. She married Wessington farmer Henry Taylor Boot and they had eight children. Emma died in Chesterfield Workhouse in 1903.