

Prescription Poison

Who Killed Thomas Meakin?



The story of Thomas Meakin's eighteenth century murder is a well known legend of the Staffordshire Moorlands, yet there has never before been a full consideration of the circumstances surrounding his death, nor an inquiry into who may have killed him.

From a Hillside

Sat atop a gentle hillside in Rushton Spencer the church of St.Lawrence quietly looks down on world below it, mostly unnoticed and rarely noted upon by the drivers of the hundreds of cars that travel by on the A523 between Leek and Macclesfield every day of the year. For those that do take the time to give it a cursory glance, and then go on to enquire into its history, it's most notable feature will probably be found in the fact it has managed to retain its medieval timber framing within the seventeenth century sandstone exterior that guards it against the elements.

It should come as no surprise really that few outside the village of Rushton are aware of this little gem of a church, after all, this is the place referred to in historical record of 1673 as the *chapel in the wilderness*. Yet in truth, as with many of our oldest parish churches, St.Lawrence has bore witness to a wealth of local events across its lifetime that has left it with its fair share of curious tales to tell, the most curious of all surely being that of Thomas Meakin.

His tale is something of a fireside standard in the local area, the details feeling familiar to most with even a passing interest in such stories. A local boy moves away to the Staffordshire town of Stone in service of an apothecary, only to fall in love with his masters daughter, suddenly take ill and die. He's buried, but rumours of foul play lead to a shocking discovery. When he went into the ground, he was not dead. His body exhumed, he is subsequently returned for re-internment in his home town; memorialised for eternity by his east-facing headstone beneath the yew trees that reads "*As a man falleth before wicked men: so fell I.*"

Yes, that may be the story in a nutshell, but as with so many such local tales, it has been passed down to us without a great deal of inquiry. It is first and foremost a tale of sorrow, but the murderous intrigue and supernatural tilt connected with the detail of the piece leave plenty of a new areas to explore; not least of all the question of just who killed Thomas Meakin?

Born in Rushton Spencer around 1760 to Mary and Thomas Meaykin, the road ahead looked likely to play itself out much in the way that most local lives in rural spots such as Rushton did; although there were now new and exciting options available to a young man like Thomas.

Although country labour was the most common living on offer, there was now the chance of peddling buttons around the local area in a trade that had become increasingly popular in recent years thanks to the button production industry found in nearby

Macclesfield. There was a danger to that life though, as the reputations of those involved seemed somewhat tainted by the slightly more nefarious inclinations a pedlars life could attract. The emerging silk industry was worth considering too, with Charles Roe having built the first silk-throwing mill - again in Macclesfield - in 1743 following the expiry of a patent on the technology involved in the process.

Such changes in the surrounding area meant that the idea of moving to a new town for employment no longer held quite the sense of risk that it had in Meakin's parents youth. There were plenty of success stories out there, but there were still horror stories too, especially with the spectre of the poor house never too far away in the towns. Perhaps most importantly in his decision making process though was Meakin's natural aptitude for the maintenance of rural life. He was good with horses. He understood them and had something of a natural affinity. So when the opportunity arose to take the position of stable groom to a wealthy apothecary in the town Stone, just 16 miles to the south, Thomas and his family knew that it was his chance.

He could experience life in a town but he could do so on a path of his choosing, working in a trade that he loved.

Apothecary Life

Obtaining a position in service was considered an advantageous situation for young men and women in working class society during the 1700's. Whilst not quite the Downton Abbey model, the opportunity to forge something like a livelihood away from the constant hardships of a poorer rural life was not something to be sniffed at, and we can safely assume Meakin's parents would have been pleased at the opportunity their son had been given. It is here that we should consider that first part of the story. What exactly was the position obtained? And what exactly was an Apothecary? It has always struck me when reading about Meakin's story that there is quite a disconnect at this juncture.

A wealthy apothecary with his own stables does not hold hands well with the image of the dispensary chemist that Meakin's master is often connected with, and with good reason. Prior to the publication of the first official Medical Register in 1779, the medical nourishment of eighteenth century England was a patchwork of duty and care primarily overseen by a system of private enterprise that primarily catered for those who could afford it. The hospitals for the poor established in earlier days were still a going concern, but for both middle class and high society, a more personal process was preferred.

At the top of that tree sat surgeons & physicians, with apothecaries just below, offering a range of services primarily to the lower middle class and working population. A solid staple of their business was the creation and sale of their own medicines, manufactured on site and advertised through attractive store fronts, filled with colourful jars and attractive goods. They would supply surgeons and physicians too where they could, but these outlets were happy to help anybody that walked in off the street. Skilled chemists, you could perhaps view the eighteenth century apothecary as something of a continuation in the alchemist tradition and they would not be subject to regulation until the 1850's.

Alongside their role as dispensaries of medication, the apothecary would also be involved in the diagnosis and treatment of all manner of ill's amongst those that looked to them for advice and comfort. And of course, the apothecary was a person with ready access to all manner of potions that may be sold for more recreational adventures too. Aside from this somewhat ad-hoc nature of service to a broad range of clientele, apothecaries were on occasion fond of securing more contractually based work for their services, particularly in the realms of the poor house. A series of associated duties listed in the articles of the Trentham workhouse rule book of 1810 show well the level of importance and responsibility to which these duties could speak - for such institutions, the apothecary was the de-facto medical chief;

The Governor shall not play any person in the Wards without first carefully examined and washed...with the Apothecary being called upon requisite and if thought necessary, new clothes. The Matron to obey the Apothecaries written directions for the diet of the sick... the whole house be internally whitewashed once in every six months and the sickrooms as often as the Apothecary shall think necessary.

All in all, the high status afforded to the local apothecary during Meakin's time, particularly in the provinces, is hard to overstate. They were amongst the key figures within local society, and the financial rewards for their work were substantial; the study of apothecaric wills has become something of a past-time in itself on the internet in recent years. That the apothecary in Stone should have cause to advertise for a groom for his horses should be no surprise at all. Meakin's master was undoubtedly a man of

considerable financial means.

Set in Stone

At the census of 1801, taken just over twenty years after Thomas Meakin's brief spell in the town, the town of Stone is reported to have had a population of some 2843 souls; ten times that of Rushton Spencer. Now, the apothecary trade was a competitive and territorial business, and so in such a small community as Stone it would be likely that a single master apothecary was present serving both the local population and the more transient passing trade facilitated by the Trent & Mersey Canal.

Local industry was primarily focused on the beer brewing that has been present in the area since the Middle Ages, and one can easily imagine a young chap from Rushton seeing his new town as a virtual metropolis compared with rural life back home. Tending to the horses of his master, the new life that Thomas had hoped for steadily began to carve itself out before him. He was popular (according to legend in the town) and high spirited, all of which fits well for the character of someone making such a move from their home village and into the charge of a powerful local figure such as the apothecary; confidence & competence could open a lot of doors.

That said, one can't help but wonder how a lad in Rushton heard of the opening in Stone in the first place, little more why the apothecary would need to look so far for a suitable applicant. Having located a marriage record of a Mary Meakin and Philip Wright at St. Michael's in May 1742 and indeed a burial of one Alice Meakin in January 1757, I suggest that this opening was made all the more suitable for Thomas by the presence of relatives already in the town. It's just a hunch, but one that makes the whole affair seem much more likely to occur in the first place.

At this point we must defer to the well known legend of Meakin, for the next phase of his life passes by in the blink of an eye. Meakin is said to have grown close to the daughter of his master, an eventuality which is easy to picture. As an out-going, confident stranger from the far north of the county, it would make perfect sense for him to attract the attentions of the daughter of the house and particularly given his role as groom; riding being such a popular cultural pastime for those in such a position as the apothecary's daughter. The love affair wouldn't last long though, as suddenly, aged just 21, Thomas fell mysteriously ill and died.

Burial records for St. Michael's in Stone show his burial taking place on the 16th July 1781; a process that given the lack of recorded inquest, may well suggest the direct

involvement of the apothecary himself. Often, given the nature of their trade and skill set, the local apothecary would be the most senior official available upon the death of members of the lower classes. As a prominent and trusted community figure, it was a natural assumption that such a person was equipped with all the moral fibre and faculty to preside over such declarations and in all likelihood, it would have been the master who found Meakin's body. As such, there would appear to have been little need for any alternative authority to take charge of the matter. The case of the death of Thomas Meakin, as far as the town of Stone was concerned, was an open and shut case.

Animal Instincts

It was the events which followed across the twelve months after Meakin's death that add the real air of lore to his tale. Some versions of the tale say that it was the pony of Meakin's replacement groom, others that it was Meakin's own favourite pony from the stable yard, but either way, the convergence brings us to his graveside. The pony is reported to have taken to travelling into the churchyard of St. Michaels of its own accord, in order to kick away at the dirt of Meakin's grave.

By this time, the affair between Meakin and his masters daughter was well known in the town and questions as to how such a fit and healthy young man had simply dropped down dead were gathering in number. These suspicions, coupled with the uncanny actions of the pony, led to an inevitable act. At some point in the early summer of 1782 the decision was made. Meakin's coffin would be opened up for investigation.

A clue to why there is no formal record of investigation of this action is perhaps born between the lines of the succinct entry into the local parish record that followed. Meakin had turned over inside his coffin, scratch marks scored into the inside of the lid. He had not been dead at the time of burial, merely catatonic;

*Thomas Meakin of Stone was buried July 16th 1781 and
was removed thence and buried at Rushton Spencer July 17th,
1782.*

That's it; the total extent of the official record on such a strange and suspicious event. Yet there was little mystery locally as to how this had all come to pass. The apothecary was the sole source of potion and poison, the ability to induce a catatonic

state well within his repertoire. That said, I find it hard to imagine that a “live” burial was a genuine intention. Rather, determined that his daughter would not take up with a member of lower classes, I think it more likely he intended to outright kill Meakin by poison.

We’re probably a just a little too early for cyanide, with arsenic seemingly the most likely means. The odourless and tasteless properties of inorganic arsenic compounds such as arsenic trioxide made for an ideal poison in the latter eighteenth century, particularly given the fact that it would be 1835 before anything like a reliable test for arsenic poisoning was invented. As a recommended treatment for syphilis, Meakin’s master was bound to be quite the expert in its administration too. And so, much as with the elixir of death created by an apothecary in the Shakespeare play *Romeo and Juliet* that leads Romeo to believe Juliet is dead, so passed Thomas Meakin.

The issue of the pony at Meakin’s grave is a curious one. Horses in general have a long folkloric tradition of association with death, from drawing carriages to a plethora of associated forbidding and underworld motifs. I have wondered whether the presence of the pony in Meakin’s tale was a later addition or indeed a kind of false flag created locally to give a final push in the call for exhumation. That said, we don’t know if the grave re-opening was a sponsored act at all. The inclusion of reference to the event in the parish register of St.Micheals, as with the corresponding action taken in Rushton, suggest that the event did most defiantly take place, but by whom was it undertaken? The lack of fanfare and outrage in its wake strongly suggests direct local action, with the apothecary being far too powerful a figure to take down in the process.

So, Who Killed Thomas Meakin?

As noted earlier, it is entirely likely that there was just one master apothecary in the town at the time of Meakin’s death. If we think of the kind of apothecary with the means to pull off a murder as such that Meakin’s appear’s to be, the idea of a solitary suspect is perhaps even more convincing.

As we look for that suspect, it is interesting to note that Meakin attracts no mention at all in a local historical work created at the time. Rev. Stebbing Shaw was Staffordshire’s key historian of the period and was himself born in Stone. He was just two years junior to Meakin in age, being born in 1762, however his *History and Antiquities of Staffordshire* published in 1802 contains no trace of the story. To me this suggests the matter had been hushed-up sufficiently by the time Shaw compiled his work as at the time of the

event itself he was himself away in study at Queens College, Cambridge.

There is one figure however, that although from admittedly quite a distance, may well fit the bill as the suspect apothecary.

Reference is found within the William Salt Library of a Stone apothecary by the name of Dickenson in the year 1790. It didn't feel like much of a connection at first, but tethered to the likelihood of there being a single master apothecary at work in the town at the time, the find took a more meaningful turn when I found this curious mention in the Staffordshire Advertiser of 13th September 1800;

*Yesterday an inquest was taken at Stone before J
Dekenson, gent, on the body of John Robinson, a
boatman who was found in his cabin. Verdict - died
by visitation of god.*

Dickenson and *Dekenson* are likely to be one and the same, so much of written record being held at liberty of the literacy quirk of the scribe at hand. That *J Dekenson* is refereed to as "gent" suggests a man of means, since retired, and by virtue of his presence in position, a gent thought capable of oversight in the matter of medical inquiry; but one that is not addressed as a doctor.

Could it be the case that two such men of the same name, within the same town, ten years apart, with the same requisite level of medical knowledge is in-fact the very same person?

One would be forgiven for assuming it would be a lot easier to get away with the poisoning of someone in late eighteenth century Staffordshire if alongside having the ability to create and administer the poison itself, that same person was also in charge of both registering the death and overseeing any potential inquiries that came in the wake of the event. It could perhaps be called a perfect crime.

Whatever the detailed truth of Meakin's life and death, his story occupies that unique place between life and legend that is a prized rarity in local history.

Thomas Meakin existed. He lived and died. And we know the manner of that death to be extremely contentious. Thomas Meakin has become part-man, part-legend, but in honour of the there being no doubt as to his tragic death, perhaps our first thought should be for Thomas Meakin to rest in peace, back home, atop that gentle hill in Rushton Spencer.

Eli Lewis-Lycett 2021