

Sarah Duckett and the Copper Hole

A Victorian Ghost Story

John and Meg Bacon's invitation in the January Focus to local historians to respond concerning "Ghost Hole" lane coincided with an email enquiry to our Local History Group about Sarah Duckett and the Copper Hole. Here is the result so far from my own research.

The sensational story was sparked by a farmer named William Roberts who claimed in September 1881 to have seen Soudley woman, Sarah Duckett, who had mysteriously disappeared from the area some years earlier. It was alleged ¹ that he "saw her distinctly and recognised her, and was about to speak with her when she glided from him and disappeared down a place called 'the Copper Hole'". This hole at the crest of Hazler Road was a 40 feet deep shaft which had been sunk about thirty years earlier by men hoping to find copper, but their work proved fruitless and the hole was filled in and fenced off in about 1875. There were mostly speculative trials around Cardington² and other places in Shropshire for copper and the first dated lease was in operation in 1798 when local geologist Robert Townson wrote that copper ore was found 'but of no consequence'.

It appears that Roberts' claims sparked suspicion that she had been murdered and thrown into the copper hole which was about a mile from Church Stretton railway station, allegedly the last place where Sarah had been seen alive. Newspaper reports claimed that in May 1874, having recently returned from an 18 month trip to Australia, she made travel enquiries at the railway station and then walked away, having deposited two shabby pieces of luggage there.

As a result demands arose that the shaft should be excavated in a search for her body. Some reports say that Roberts saw the "ghost" twice and three other men also came forward to claim sightings of their own. Local subscriptions were raised to pay for the work and digging began, with Roberts in attendance. Many local people crowded in to watch, and ladies and gentlemen arrived in carriages: one report likened the scene on Sunday to "a highway to a country fair". The task proved difficult as the excavation repeatedly filled with water overnight and work took many days; but when the bottom of the shaft was reached no sign of Sarah's body was found.

This ghost story was picked up by many newspapers around Britain throughout October and November 1881 and on October 7th the correspondence columns of the Daily Telegraph carried a debate on "The truth about ghosts", referencing Sarah's story.

The fruitless excavation of the copper hole did not put an end to the story as a local tradesman then received a letter signed "One who Knows", apparently from London, asserting "You will fail to find the body of Sarah Duckett in the Copper Hole: look in the cellar of the Toll Barr, examine the part nearest the road, in the left-hand corner".

¹ County Advertiser and Herald 8.10.81

² Michael Shaw 'The Lead, Copper and Barytes Mines of Shropshire', with thanks to Heather Williams for this information.

It seems Sarah sometimes stayed at the Toll Bar, about 60 feet from the copper hole³ on the other side of the road, rather than stay with family members. By 1881 the building in question had been pulled down and the cellar filled in following the de-turnpiking of the Stretton to Much Wenlock road in 1875⁴.

This letter sparked fresh calls for another excavation with Roberts maintaining his original claims throughout but then another letter arrived, purporting to be from Sarah, claiming she was happily married and living in Martley, Worcestershire. However, the origin of this letter was cast into doubt by the Duckett family's clergyman, the Rev. Holland Sandford, asserting that she could not write.

The Rev. Sandford then played a decisive part in the mystery of Sarah's "disappearance" by contacting officials in Worcestershire and requesting a search of registers to see if any record of her could be found, as her relatives now believed she had died there in 1876. This resulted in a response that she had entered Martley workhouse in July 1874 because she was destitute, and she had died in the Infirmary in 1876.

In a lengthy letter to Eddowe's Shrewsbury Journal and Salopian Journal of 2nd November 1881 the Rev. Sandford, who was well acquainted with the Duckett family, describes approvingly Sarah's mother's strict work ethic and direct manner. His remarks about Sarah, however, are more critical. Following the death of her mother Sarah had received £70.00 from the sale of the family home to her brother-in-law, and announced she planned to go abroad. Two days before leaving for Liverpool, having deposited £30.00 in the Church Stretton Savings Bank, she insisted on giving him £25.00 from this which he reluctantly accepted and issued a receipt and terms of interest. A few days later, following her arrival in Liverpool, he received a letter asking for it back. As Sarah could not write he was suspicious and told her to collect it in person, which she did, but was "as ever mysterious about her own affairs; said she was going abroad but would assuredly write to me as soon as she was settled. She never did so". He also recounts how a relative going to visit her in Liverpool received "a rough welcome from Sarah who said she was well able to take care of herself and did not want anyone coming there worrying after her." The impression given is of someone erratic, secretive, demanding and abrasive, on bad terms with her relatives.

His letter asserts that Sarah definitely travelled to Australia and had returned on the Lord Warden steamer.

The Rev. Sandford also records that four Stretton people saw Sarah after leaving her boxes at the station, and William Marsh saw her at Longville-in-the-dale a few days later. Eddowe's coverage of this notes that Rev. Sandford "has incurred considerable expense and taken a great deal of trouble to elucidate the 'Church Stretton Ghost Mystery' and he deserves the thanks of the public for his exertions".

Although the Rev. Sandford's testimony appears to dismiss the stories of murder and ghostly apparitions, many questions remain unanswered:

³ Rutland Echo

⁴ "Church Stretton through the ages" by Tony Crowe and Barrie Raynor

- There is no indication of why she would make the onerous and costly journey to Australia only to return, according to Rev. Sandford's dates, after less than a year: even with the benefit of steam engines to supplement sails the voyage at this era could take more than 50 days.
- Furthermore, records show that whilst a Sarah Duckett did leave Australia on board the Lord Warden in February 1874, her age is given in the passenger lists as 28, not 44. The same passenger had arrived in Victoria, Australia from London on the Theophane in November 1873, thus staying there for only three months. Did Sarah lie about her age or, coincidentally, did a younger woman of the same name make these journeys? If so, did Sarah ever actually visit Australia?
- Newspaper reports suggest she had intermittent employment as a domestic servant, although the census returns of 1851, 61 and 71 describe her as a dressmaker. Why did someone with such a useful skill apparently become destitute and enter the workhouse in Worcestershire within a few months of "disappearing" from Church Stretton?
- Did Sarah use up all her £70.00 inheritance in the period after her removal to Liverpool, or did a sum of money remain in her Church Stretton bank account after her "disappearance", as claimed by newspaper reports?

Whatever the truth about these loose ends in Sarah's story, it is clear that Roberts' claims of seeing a ghost sparked great excitement and disturbance in the area, and this highlights the Victorian fascination with the supernatural.

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