

TROOPER FREDERICK HENDERSON
(Triple murder at Swansea)

by
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(C)



Trooper Frederick Henderson

On October 11, 1922 a triple murder occurred at Swansea, Tasmania's east coast. One of those who was murdered was that of Police Trooper Henderson. The Tasmanian daily, The Mercury, reported Oct 11, 1922:

“Edward Duncombe, a well known Swansea identity was found shot this morning under suspicious circumstances. It is clear that he has been murdered.

“Duncombe's hut had been ransacked and robbery was evidently the motive of the crime.

“The victim was stone deaf and had a wooden leg and followed the occupation of market gardener. He was diligent and sober and was well known at Swansea as “Old Deafy”.

“The particulars of the case in possession of the police are very meagre. Yesterday morning Supt Browne received a telephone message from Inspector Hutton of Sorell, to the effect that a communication had that day been received from Trooper Burke of Swansea, that Duncombe had been found dead in his hut with shotgun wounds in the back of his head and that the hut had been ransacked, but nothing further than this was stated.

“The Supt said that Trooper Burke had been instructed not to interfere with the body and last evening he had dispatched Sgt Linegar of the Fingerprint Department to investigate. Accompanying him are Chief Detective Inspector Oakes and Inspector

Hutton. The police will commence their investigations early this morning and further particulars are expected to come to hand during the day."

The drama had just begun. What followed were another two murders, including that of Trooper Frederick Henderson.

The remote village of Swansea on Tasmania's east coast was in a reign of terror. Armed citizens patrolled the streets and police were called from Hobart and the surrounding towns and municipalities. Swansea was a typical town in that everyone knew each other and everyone's business. Memories and even the repercussion of the triple event linger today. The result was that the convicted murderer, a local, was hanged for his deeds. He had used a borrowed weapon lent to him by Carpenter's request by Swansea farmer, George Percival Cook. Carpenter said he wanted to go rabbiting.

Unbelievably it took 57 years before a plaque was placed to the slain trooper's memory and even then, in 1979, there was controversy whether it should be erected and if so, where. In 2005 it lays virtually forgotten on a hill just outside the village, called 'Duncombe's Lookout'. It's a small plaque, an inscription of few words and difficult to find. It has been placed at road level and now is virtually covered by brush. Relatives of those involved more than 80 years ago still live in the district. In the year 2010 (October 10th) a new plaque was relocated to the front of the Museum, a much more prominent position within the township.



1979 Plaque

One of the main resentments of the Henderson family in the late 1970s when the idea of a plaque was first mooted, was that the Police Department had neglected Henderson's poor widowed wife and family financially, so why start eulogising him now?

In a letter concerning the affair, the then Police Commissioner, M.J. Robinson said, "Indeed descendants of Trooper Henderson refuse to have anything to do with the occasion because of what they regard as the lack of support for Trooper's Henderson's widow who died two years ago."

Mrs Henderson, Alice, is buried with her husband at Cornelian Bay, near Hobart. Her husband, until the mid 70s, was buried in an unmarked grave. Pathetically, in 1973 she wrote to the Police Department, "If police could arrange a headstone to be placed on my late husband's grave, I would be grateful." In the end it happened.

On the 11th October 2022 a small memorial service at the grave site which had been repaired, a plaque to Henderson was unveiled.



Headstone and plaque 2022. Reg Watson photo

It is frequently reported that Henderson was the only Tasmanian constable killed in the execution of his duty, but this is not the case. On January 9, 1915 Trooper Henry Harris was struck on his head with a beer bottle when attempting to arrest a disorderly person in front of a hotel at Port Cygnet. The scene was ugly as a mob gathered. Trooper Harris died the following day. Thomas Leahy and James Leahy were sentenced to ten years for the offence.



Harris plaque Police Academy grounds, Rokeby

Trooper Henderson was married to Alice Maud. They had six children, Maud being pregnant with the sixth at his death. Frederick was born on May 15th 1885 in County Antrim, Ireland, and appointed constable in Hobart June 24th, 1913 and was posted to Ellendale. He was known as 'Old Jock'. At the time of Duncombe's death Henderson was stationed at Spring Bay, which is also on the east coast, but further south of Swansea after serving at Copping. Spring Bay may be better known as Triabunna.

The Duncombe family arrived to Van Diemen's Land (previously name of Tasmania) in 1858 and members later settled on the east coast of Tasmania. The first victim of the triple tragedy, Edward Duncombe came out from England much later. Knowing there were relatives in the area, he took up a 10 acre block in Cathcart Street, Swansea. Edward, a bachelor, lived alone. He kept to himself, but left a diary, which of course gives nothing on his eventual demise. Earlier when clearing his block he had an accident and his leg had to be amputated. It was the local doctor, Lion Druitt who performed the operation. This is interesting as it is the same doctor mentioned in the accompanying article on Tasmania's connection to Jack the Ripper. It is believed he was deaf from childhood and was somewhat short-sighted. He worked his small market garden and orchard. About once a week he went into the township to sell his produce. Locals understood that he kept his money in his small three-room hut. His life was somewhat lonely and isolated, but generally he was well liked by the community. He was about 55 years old. His nearest neighbours were the Skeggs and Balcombe about 300 yards away. He was rarely visited by anyone.

Duncombe was also related to the Graham family. Seven year old Zilla* Iris Graham, was regularly sent by her family to his hut to provide him with supplies, such as bread and cheese. On the 10th October 1922, Zilla called upon Duncombe. On entering his hut she found the gruesome body of Duncombe, slumped over the table. It was later found that his hut had been ransacked. He had been twice shot in the back of the head. Actually he had been murdered on the 7th. The young girl ran back to her farmer father, George Tom Graham, who immediately informed the local police. Zilla's experience lived with her for many years after.



'Deafy' Duncombe and his grave, Swansea

Trooper Bourke*(1) ⁱ was placed as guard to Duncombe's hut, with his body remaining inside, lying in a doubled-up position in front of the fire-place and near a table. The deceased had evidently been sitting on a chair in front of the fire-place when he was shot at close range and canting slightly to the left, slipped off the chair.

Word was sent down to Hobart and by 5:30pm a police party left the capital to travel to Swansea. Inspector Hutton and Sgt Linegar, who was happened to be in Hobart accompanied Inspector Oakes. Linegar was with the New South Wales Fingerprint Department. At this time, it was not known that a second murder had taken place in the small community.

At 7:40 am on the morning of the 10th, Thomas Filbee Carpenter (39) left his home with his 'dinner' (lunch), a bottle of tea and pet collie dog, to attend to his job as bark stripper. Thomas was a popular local sportsman and was married. By 7pm he had not come home. A search party was organised which included his brother, William John, and at 10:30pm at the top end of Sawpit Valley on a Mr Shaw's property, they found Thomas shot in the back of the head near a wattle tree which he had been stripping. His collie was shot as well.

By the time of the discovery of the second murder, the police party had not long entered the town of Spring Bay. It had taken three and a half hours from Hobart and road conditions were poor owing to a severe gale. The party decided to stay at Spring Bay and travel on to Swansea early the following morning. At 2am that morning, Trooper Henderson who had gone to Swansea returned to Spring Bay. He heard that the police were coming from Hobart, but when they did not arrive, he wondered whether they had met with an accident. Three Swansea residents, Mr Arnol (snr), Mr Arnol (jnr) and Mr Tait accompanied Henderson. On the morning of the 11th they continued their journey to

Swansea. One of the main reasons Henderson sought out Inspector Oakes was to inform him of the second murder.

Suspicion in the village fell upon George Carpenter, who was cousin to one of the victims, Thomas. Residents by this time were thoroughly aroused and during the day, men on horses with guns across their shoulders were frequently to be seen about the streets. Flags were flown at half-mast. A warrant was issued for his arrest.

George William Carpenter was 27 years old at the time; about 11 stone in weight, of sturdy build and brown hair. His father, Samuel had a number of convictions to his name spending some time in the old Campbell Street, Hobart Gaol. He died of natural causes 17 May 1907 at Swansea. George lived at Swansea, but was looked upon with caution by residents, although considered to be a good bushman. It was also judged that there was something dangerously wrong with him. By all accounts, George had 'mother' problems. Her name was Mary Jane nee Edwards (sometimes White) *(3). It is claimed that she was very domineering of him and that he in turn, often stated that he did not like his mother and was not happy in sharing his home with her. It is suggested she had strong influence over him. A story (without confirmation) is that at one time he took her out to the bush, leaving her there saying that he would return, which he never did. Another resident found her and took her back home. I add this bit of information to eneadavour to build up some type of character picture of George. Little has been left behind in the way of material to understand his personality. The author has the feeling that he was rejected by his own community, dominated by his mother, not too bright and would easily succumb to impulses and suggestive influences. His tongue, as testified by later police reports, was free with profanity. That he had not left his home at the age of 27 years and make a go of it independently of his mother, can suggest various things.

On the night of 10th, after the murder of Carpenter, George called at the Swansea Hotel to purchase some ale and cigarettes. Then he was not seen again. The following day, police reinforcements arrived from surrounding towns of Avoca, St Mary's, St Helens, and New Norfolk, besides citizens being sworn in as special constables. Ten constables were despatched from Hobart.

The Police party from Hobart, headed by Inspector Oakes reached Swansea early the morning of the 11th, having now known of the second murder. Trooper Henderson was with them. Search parties were scouring the countryside for the person of George Carpenter. Meantime Trooper Bourke was still guarding the very cold body of Duncombe the first one murdered. Bourke had to be relieved. Henderson, with Oakes, travelled to Duncombe's hut. Oakes decided to leave Henderson at the hut, wanting to move himself the scene of the second crime, that of Thomas Carpenter. Trooper Bourke had already left the hut unattended and had returned to Swansea. Oakes asked of Henderson, "Are you set; have you your revolver?" Henderson replied, "I have three shells in my pouch, the Inspector has my revolver. I will be all right." Oakes was not aware Henderson was not armed and he himself returned to Swansea to continue the search for Carpenter. Henderson did not have a liking for firearms. On return, he saw Trooper Bourke and told him to keep a sharp lookout for the suspect.

Oakes together with Mr J. Johns acting as a guide went to find Thomas Carpenter's body. There he found 12 gauge shot wads and by the right side of the body, a small tomahawk and other possessions of the victim. Turning the deceased over, brain matter poured from the skull. Further from the body he found 12 gauge cartridges. The

contents of his lunch bag had been emptied, as had his bottle of tea. He then arranged a cart to remove the body of Thomas Carpenter to the garage of Swansea Hotel. The garage of the hotel would receive the three bodies.

Two armed men, about this time, heard two gun shots coming from the vicinity of Duncombe's hut. They went in that direction and reaching the gateway to the hut they found the body of Trooper Henderson inside the gate. One of the young men hurried back to report the crime to Inspector Oakes. It was about 10 am. Oakes went to the scene of the new crime, after recruiting the services of Doctor George Musgrave Parker, resident of Swansea. Henderson's body was still warm and was he was found lying with his back against a stone wall, leaning slightly forward. Bloodstains were found 9 or 10 feet away and it appeared that the body had been dragged. He had a bullet wound to his side and there were signs of a prolonged struggle. His handcuffs were lying beside him.

Murder number three.

The news reached the town like a thunderbolt, but Carpenter still had not been found.

The Examiner Newspaper, the northern Tasmanian daily, was to head its report: *"Murder most foul stalks the district of Swansea – murder most foul stalked the district of Swansea, creating horror and dread! As a result, three men are dead, including Trooper Henderson of Triabunna."*

October 12 saw intensified searches for the culprit. One search party, with Constables, Smith, Dodd, Marshall and Boon besides, the two John brothers and Mr Lewis and Arnol, surrounded a suspected hut, known as 'Tom's Hut', on the property of Mr L. John, situated seven miles from Swansea.



The Hut

Constable B.J. Boon shouted, "Come out and surrender". Carpenter was in there all right; as a response he put the muzzle of his gun out of the hut. Constable Dodd said, "Throw out your guns or I will shoot." Several shots were then fired at the hut with Carpenter returning the fire. Constable Dodd was injured when a ricochete bullet hit his arm. Then Carpenter screamed, "I am wounded," after which he left the confines of the hut. The ordeal was over. Carpenter was wounded in the right wrist and at the left elbow and was in a serious condition.

The hut was searched, but nothing was found except for Carpenter's 12-bore double-barrelled breech loader. Both barrels were loaded, the hammers at full cock.

The men then took Carpenter back to Swansea with jeering crowds lining the streets. He was taken to the doctor's residence where his wounds were dressed. He was then transferred to the Hobart Hospital, accompanied by Dr Parker. Carpenter at the time of being treated and given food in Hobart denied to Inspector Oakes having murdered Duncombe and his cousin Carpenter, but did admit to the accidental killing of Trooper Henderson.

To Carpenter, Oakes commented: "It is a pity this has happened."

"What?" Carpenter replied.

"Old Duncombe has been murdered, your cousin, Thomas Carpenter has been murdered also Trooper Henderson."

"I did not shoot him. I know nothing about it whatever

He said of the latter event: "I came down to Duncombe's place in the morning; I saw a man there (Henderson); he asked for my gun, I said I want it for myself. I do not know who you are; I said, a bloke could he had for that. I did not know whether he was a policeman or not. The man grabbed my gun by the barrels, there was a scrimmage, the gun went off somehow, there was a big scrimmage there; the shot went into his belly I believe. I then went away out in the bush."

Eventually Carpenter's shattered arm was amputated. As Carpenter is the only witness to the event, it is hard to say exactly what took place.

Mid November saw the official inquest on Duncombe and Thomas Carpenter at the Brisbane Street Criminal Court before the Coroner, Mr E.W. Turner. The affair attracted great interest amongst the public. The accused, George Carpenter appeared in the dock. The Mercury stated: "*George Carpenter as a result of being wounded his right arm, as far as the elbow, has been amputated, otherwise he looks in the best of health. He was accommodated with a seat in front of the dock and displayed little concern in the proceedings throughout the day. He has since his arrest, been clean shaven and was very neatly dressed, wearing a tweed suit, a silk shirt and a blue tie* (November 17, 1922).

Carpenter was arrested for the murder of his cousin and the trial began 8th December 1922 before Justice Crisp with Mr A. Richardson defending on the premises that the evidence was too casual. No motive was established. Richardson said that Carpenter was at work at the time of the first murder and that "there is a tendency of the Crown to exaggerate the facts and to draw unjustifiable conclusions against the accused. Must be proved by evidence beyond all doubt."



The wounded Carpenter under hospital custody

“The prisoner was a poor man with no friends. That the prisoner did the shootings was not proved.”

The prosecution replied, “The accused was guilty. They (the jury) should do their duty to their country.”

Certainly some of the evidence presented was circumstantial. Pieces of bacon found under Carpenter’s bed-tick were judged to be from the same bacon found at the site of Duncombe’s body. Professor Flynnne of the University of Tasmania had inspected the bacon on the request of the Police. Professor Flynnne, as a matter of interest, was father to Tasmanian-born movie star Errol Flynnne. Footmarks leading to Duncombe’s hut were made in three plaster casts. After Carpenter was arrested Inspector Oakes said he had no doubt whatever that one of them was made by Carpenter’s left boot, having inspected his boots. Also Detective Gibbens and Constable Smith and Mr Herbert Jones recognised the footprints of the accused near the body of Thomas Carpenter. The accused, they said, wore hob-nailed boots, with toe and heels plates, the same prints found at the scene of the crime.

Carpenter’s gun was inspected by Charles Dobbie, gun and ammunition expert, who said he was satisfied that the cartridges found and the pellets are similar to Carpenter’s weapon.

Witnesses were called for the prosecution, including The John brothers, Herbert Stanley and Leslie Arthur.

The jury had visited the scene of the crimes. They retired to consider their verdict at 5:35pm. They returned at 6:50pm with the verdict of guilty. He was sentenced to death.

The Clerk of the Court asked the prisoner if he had anything to say, “No sir” came the reply in a strong voice. Newspaper accounts state that he received the sentence unmoved. He was found guilty of the murder of T.G. Carpenter. The Solicitor-General said to His Honor, “as he has been found guilty and sentenced for the murder of Thomas Filbee Carpenter, I do not propose to proceed with either of the two other charges.”

His Honor approved.

At 8 o’clock, 27th December 1922, George Carpenter went to the scaffold in silence. The Gaol Chaplain, Rev H.B. Atkinson of Trinity Church, North Hobart, had frequently visited him. On the morning of his execution Carpenter partook of breakfast, after receiving the last sacraments. He then made a statement to the Chaplain, which was never revealed, even though the press asked him of its contents. An executioner came from Melbourne to do the chore. No religious words were said on the scaffold, no confession was emitted from Carpenter’s mouth; reports state that all was quiet. Death was instantaneous, with Carpenter’s neck being broken.

The southern newspaper, “The World” stated: “*According to a statement by the Sheriff (Mr Hector Ross) yesterday, George Carpenter who was executed at the Hobart Gaol on Wednesday for the murder of his cousin at Swansea recently made an admission to Chief Detective Oakes that he had shot his cousin after a quarrel and that the shooting of Trooper Henderson was accidental.*” (Dec 29, 1922).

Following the death of her husband, Mrs Henderson and her children moved to Hobart where they took up residence at 163 Bathurst Street. There were six children, the oldest seven years old.

An annual sum of 75 pounds was paid to the widow, a further 20-pound per child annually until they reached the age of 18 years. Unfortunately the money was never indexed and in 1973 it was equivalent to \$13 per month. One of their sons was to serve as a policeman on the mainland.

Alice Henderson died 13th January 1975, aged 83 years. Although it is recorded that husband Frederick was born in 1885, his tombstone states that he was aged 40 when died (1922) thereby his birth date would have been 1882.



The Henderson's grave prior to 2022, Cornelian Bay. Reg Watson photo

AFTER THOUGHT

It would appear that the evidence, which convicted George Carpenter, was circumstantial. There was no doubt in the local community George Carpenter was the murderer. There were no other suspects, but no motive was ever established and there were no witnesses to any of the crimes. Carpenter admitted to the killing of Henderson, but refused to admit to the killing of Duncombe and Carpenter. The question I have trouble in dealing with, is why would he return to the scene of the crime, if he had murdered Duncombe, when he knew the body would have been found and that the site would have been guarded? It has been said that he was unsuccessful in finding the loot the first time around and returned to have another search. Would he have been that stupid? If he readily admitted to the shooting of Henderson, why refuse admitting to the murder of Duncombe and his cousin, Thomas Carpenter? It is true a newspaper reported said he made a confession to Inspector Oakes, but this confession is not confirmed. The conditions in which he stated he shot Henderson appear to be feasible. If he had all intentions of killing Henderson why did he just walk up to him? Would it not have been better if he shot him while Henderson was unawares?

In anycase the Jury believed he was guilty and the Court sentenced him to the supreme punishment.

George Carpenter was the second last person to be hanged in Tasmania. The last was Frederick Thompson on the 14th February in 1946.*(2)

*In other later reports on the case, Zilla's name is spelt Zella. In the Official Police Records, including that of her own testimony, it is spelt Zilla. I have spelt her name Zilla.

*(1) Newspapers reports spell his name *Burke*, whereas the Official Police Records show *Bourke*. I have chosen the latter.

travelled to Swansea viewing the various geographical spots and am indebted to the Glamorgan Spring Bay Historical Society, in particular Ray Lewis and Maureen Ferris. Leading Midlands historian, the late Geoff Duncombe, who is distantly related to the first victim, 'Deafy' Duncombe, was very helpful in supplying material. Thanks also to the Office at the Cornelian Bay Cemetery.



Small memorial to Henderson, Police Academy grounds, Rokeby. A similar one is situated at the National Police Memorial, Burley Griffin Lake, Canberra.
