

## The Epileptic Delivery Man

### 1891

*The Birmingham Daily Mail, commenting on the Brighton murder, says it 'is one of the most revolting and brutal that has come to light for some time. It is one of those crimes upon children which are the disgrace of the century.'*

*(The Argus, 14 December 1891)*

In 1988, a fascinating book entitled *Back Street Brighton* was published. It was a compilation of photographs and memories of Brighton in the Thirties, and formed a sequel to *Backyard Brighton* – which had, incidentally, featured William Street.

Of special interest in the present case are the recollections in the former volume by one Louisa Tincknell of her home in Kemp Town:

*I lived in Bedford Buildings for the first eighteen years of my life. We moved out in 1932 and our house was demolished. It had been a happy little house and we had a very pretty garden; we often had people walk by to admire the gardens. Large blocks of flats have been built on the site since.*

*They were very nice little double-fronted, country-style, large cottages; two up, two down. There were only nineteen houses in the street: eight on the north side, plus the stable yard that had belonged to the Stag Inn when it was a coach house, and 11 on the south side. They were spaced well apart; one side facing to the pavement, the other side each facing the other with gardens between.*

On Friday, 11 December 1891, *The Argus* also left us a description:

*Bedford-buildings opens off Upper Bedford-street, about half way up on the right hand side. You enter it by an arch of masonry, over which the name of the place is displayed. There is only a paved footway running through it, some of the houses having walled gardens to them. The front door of No. 8 opens right on the footpath, the house having no garden.*

The sad reason for the reporter's visit was that, through one of the vilest crimes in Brighton's history, tragedy had descended on No 8, occupied by the Jeal family.



*Bedford Buildings looking west, 22 March 1912, showing the alleyway access to the properties and the walls around their gardens. Chris Horlock collection*



*The access to Bedford Buildings through the Stag Inn, March 1912. Chris Horlock collection*

A frenzied assault the previous night, committed not far away, had taken 5-year-old Edith away from them. An elder sister, whose married name was Cook, had come over from her nearby home at 4 Montague Street to comfort her parents and the rest of the large family. Because of the terrible events of the last twenty-four hours, Mrs Jeal was utterly grief-stricken and had been unconscious the whole afternoon through hysterical fits. Edward Jeal, her husband, had had no sleep the night before, having been out with a police constable searching for Edith. He worked as a milk carrier for the St James's Dairy (where one of the sons also assisted with the work of the business) and had gone straight on to work that morning without even the chance to change his clothes.

*Bedford Buildings looking east, with the gardens displaying an unkempt appearance. Chris Horlock collection*





Edith had been next in age to the youngest, a little boy of two-and-half. Another brother, Bertram, had accompanied her on her last errand. He was a bright, intelligent lad of nine but was too young to understand what had happened to his little sister. In fact he seemed 'quite merry' to the visiting reporter, who added 'It is as well that it is so.'

What had happened?

Bertie explained:

*At about 8 o'clock I was sent by my father on an errand. My sister Edith Jeal went with me. We bought a bundle of wood and some chestnuts and then went to Trengrove's at the corner of Manchester Row. I went into the shop leaving my sister outside. She had a bundle of wood and the chestnuts in my cap. I was about three minutes in the shop and when I came out she was gone.*

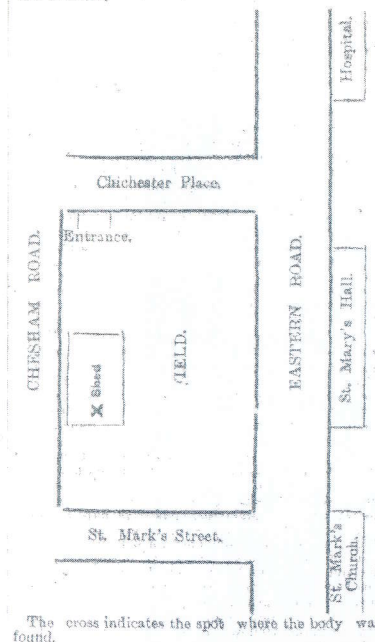
Edith had got the wood from Clark's fish shop, a few doors away from their home. Trengrove's the grocer's, stood on the east side of Upper Bedford Street, 60 or 70 yards away from where they lived.

When the boy got home, his mother asked him where his sister was. He replied that he did not know. He supposed she had gone home without him. Mrs Jeal was not unduly worried at first, imagining that Edith had fallen in with some of her school companions and was playing in the street. After a while, her husband went in search of the child for about half-an-hour and then at 9 o'clock anxiously went to report the disappearance at Freshfield Road Police Station (a stone's throw away from Bedford Buildings). Both parents and their neighbours scoured the neighbourhood – in vain. The night was bitterly cold, yet the child's mother, though not at all a strong woman, stayed out searching for hours.

At noon the following day, little Edith's body was found, horribly mutilated. It lay in a large barn-like storage shed located behind houses in a field between Eastern Road and Chesham Road, Kemp Town.

*From The Argus of 12 December 1891. Sketches of any kind were extremely rare in newspapers at that time. The Argus*

A PLAN OF THE SPOT.  
The following is a sketch plan of the scene of the murder.



The cross indicates the spot where the body was found.

The discovery was made quite accidentally by Corporation workman Edward Villiers, who was working on trees in nearby Rock Street. He alerted his mate, William Stanford, who chanced to see the carriage of a local surgeon, Mr Frederick Humphry, not far off. The doctor later recalled:

*On Friday December 11th I was in Chesham-road about 12.45. I found a man talking to my coachman and at his request I accompanied him to a shed in a field behind the houses on the north side of Chesham-road. The entrance to the shed is on the east side. On entering the shed I saw the child lying dead, its head near to the east wall on the north side of the door. I looked at the child and examined it superficially. The body was lying with the feet towards the south-west, the left leg drawn up and the right leg extended. The child was on its back. The lower part of the body was bare, the clothes being thrown up on to the chest. I noticed the hair was matted with blood, the face very much swollen, livid, bruised and scratched. I looked at the neck because the child looked as if it had been strangled. I looked for a ligature round the neck but found none. The lower part of the body was very much injured, bruised and lacerated. I turned the body over and found the left thigh was bruised and scratched, and a quantity of blood underneath on the ground, and not on which the child lay. The child's clothes were smothered with blood. The child's drawers were lying about yard from the body of the child on the left-hand side between the body and the door. They were saturated with blood. The child's straw hat was lying very near the head. The floor of the building was covered with mould or some loose dry earth. I am of the opinion that the child died from asphyxia. I should say the child had been dead between 12 and 18 hours when I saw it. Rigor mortis had set in both in the legs and arms. The shed was so dark I could not make a minute examination.*

The Argus recorded on Saturday, 12 December:

*A crime of unspeakable atrocity was brought to light in Brighton yesterday – a crime even more indescribably horrible in its circumstances than any of the Whitechapel murders. In the case of the murders in East End of London almost the whole of the facts could be made public; but in the case of this lawless and terrible revelation of lust in the East End of Brighton there are facts so horrible that they can never be placed before the general public in the columns of a newspaper.*

Elsewhere in that issue, the writer imagined the lonely scene of the murder the night before:



*Where the poor child was left in her blood, the rain could be blown in upon her so long as it continued; but the rain ceased in the early hours of the morning, and the silent stars and the white moonlight shone down on that dark shed in which a crime of such unutterable horror had been committed.*

The day that paper appeared, the inquest on the body of the child was opened at 5 o'clock at Freshfield Road Police Station by the Deputy Borough Coroner, A Freeman Gell. The jury having been sworn, they proceeded to view the body which was lying in the mortuary attached to the station. The remains of the little one lay out on a large slab in the centre of the building covered by a blanket. The uncovered corpse was a sad sight. The child's dark brown hair lay carelessly over her pretty face and her throat bore marks of terrible violence. Most of the bruises were on the right side of the face and extended from the forehead to the mouth.

Edward Jeal was the first witness and had the painful duty of formally identifying the body as that of his daughter. He also detailed the circumstances of the child and her brother being sent out to make purchases.

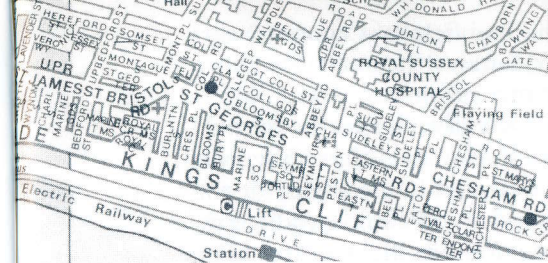
PC Herbert Pelling also testified, while detailed medical evidence was provided by Dr Douglas M Ross. Of the many injuries the child had received, he believed only one was inflicted after death, indicated by a discoloration of the abdomen and apparently caused by a blunt instrument. She had (to use the language of the time) been violated. In later testimony, he revealed that on the external organs of generation he had found a severe laceration extending from the upper part, while Mr Humphry would testify at the trial that 'The lower part of the body was much injured, especially the private parts.'

The inquest was adjourned until Saturday, 19 December, when the whole case was considered in greater detail.

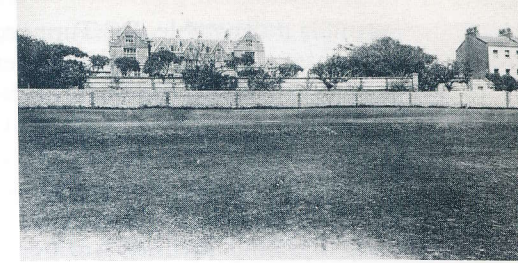
Yet even on the morning the initial inquest was held, a suspect had faced the charge of wilful murder at Brighton Police Court. His name was George Henry Wood. He was 29 years of age and lived with his father at 11 Rock Street, the eastward continuation of Chesham Road. His home was only a couple of hundred yards from the field.

For the last eighteen months he had been employed as a van man in the Goods Department at Brighton Railway Station, which involved making deliveries of parcels and other consignments to various addresses. On account of a number of connected, suspicious sightings and actions at the time of the murder and after it, he had attracted the attention of the police.

It was particularly unfortunate for Wood that one witness was



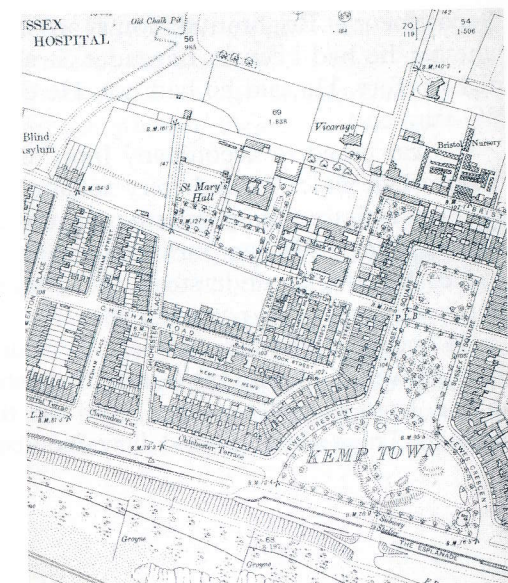
*Contemporary map showing part of the Kemp Town area. Upper Bedford Street and Freshfield Road both about Eastern Road on the left side of the map.*  
Estate Publications/Ordnance Survey



*View of St Mary's Hall School, Eastern Road, from the South Field where Edith Jeal met her end. The St Mary's Place development now covers the site.*  
Chris Horlock collection



*Chesham Road looking west. The field stood behind the houses on the right, and the barn/shed in the vicinity of the back garden walls of the row of low-roofed dwellings.*  
Author's collection



*Extract from the 1898 1:2500 map showing relevant locations. The structure shown in the South Field [rectangular feature between Chichester Place and Chesham Road] is intriguing, but the barn/shed had long been demolished by this date.*  
Brighton History Centre



actually a constable, PC Tuppen, who had first met him ten years earlier and could positively identify him as the man seen in a drunken state on the night of the crime.

Wood was taken into custody by Detective Inspector Samuel Jupp at 8 o'clock in the evening of the day the body was discovered. When apprehended, he declared he had been at the Circus in North Road on Thursday night, yet could produce no corroborating witness. An identity parade was held in the large room at the back of the Police Court, to which several children who had been accosted were taken and asked if they could point out from the twelve men gathered there the one who had spoken to them. In almost every instance the children singled out Wood.

At the Brighton police court hearing on 12 December, Wood was charged with wilfully murdering Edith Jeal. Evidence was heard from Edward Villiers, William Stanford, Edward Jeal, PC Pelling and Detective Inspector Jupp.

Edward Jeal spoke about the events of the terrible night and how, at 1.40 the following afternoon, his son had come and told him he was wanted at Freshfield Road Police Station. There he saw the body of his child.

PC Herbert Pelling told how he had been on duty at midday the day before in Sussex Square and had been approached by Edward Villiers, whom he accompanied to the field. This was used for football and cricket by the boys of nearby Arlington House School, under a lease agreement with St Mary's Hall School, Eastern Road. There he saw Edith Jeal's body, whose life was pronounced extinct by the doctor. From Freshfield Road Police Station, Pelling then ordered an ambulance, into which he placed the body, Bertram's cloth peaked cap found at the crime scene, the firewood and Edith's drawers.

Detective Inspector Jupp reported going to the Goods Department at Brighton Station at around eight and asking Wood whether he had been in Lavender Street at about 8 o'clock the night before. He said he had not. He even claimed not to know PC Tuppen.

He was asked to accompany Jupp to the Police Office at the Town Hall, which he did 'very solemnly and quietly.' On being charged with outraging and murdering Edith Jeal, he very faintly replied, 'No, sir.' When put into the cells, he appeared somewhat dazed. Asked if he understood the charge, Wood said 'Yes, but I don't remember one particle about it.'

He was ordered to undress. Considerable marks of blood staining were found on his trouser flap, which was very damp as if it had been partially washed, and on the outside of his cord trousers. These were blue and dirty. Bloodstains were also found on

his flannel under-shirt and cotton over-shirt, with indications of washing. A slight blood mark was found on his woollen drawers. On 14 December, the Chief Constable, James Terry, forwarded the clothes worn by Wood on the night of the murder to Guy's Hospital for analysis by Dr Stevenson, the Home Office analyst. A thorough search of Wood's house was also carried out.

The Winter Assizes were due to be held the following Wednesday, but there was no way the case would be ready by then. Despite the defence's protests, the prisoner would simply have to be detained for some months. Meanwhile, Wood was to make two more appearances at Brighton Police Court.

What do we know of this reprehensible character and his family? Some of the facts are surprising.

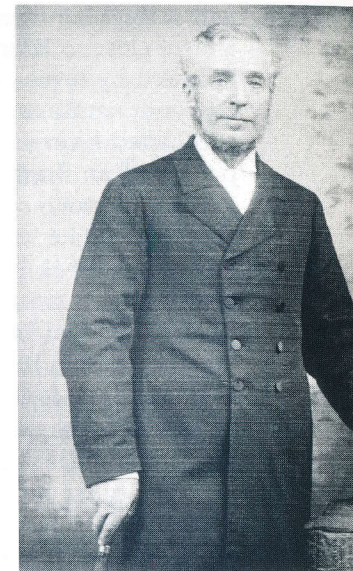
The eldest of eight children, his appearance was, according to *The Argus*, such that:

*... one would suppose him to be physically a somewhat strong man; with his florid complexion, fair moustache, blue-grey eyes, and rather frank and straightforward expression of countenance, he is far from being an ill-looking man.*

Yet the reporter at his trial described him as:

*... somewhat under medium height, with an extraordinarily weak, characterless face, low forehead, flat cranium, his head appearing curiously small in proportion to his rather broad shoulders. His appearance suggests a certain physical smartness but very little intelligence.*

As a child he had been frail. He had his first epileptic fit at the age of two (his epilepsy would acquire some importance during later proceedings). When he was three, he fell ill. The doctor, according to Mr Wood Snr, said 'they would never rear him', on account of the compression on the brain he was suffering from. He was emaciated and vague during childhood but got better when he was eight or nine. He had several jobs as an errand boy and later went to sea but was discharged on account of malformation of the chest



*James Terry was Chief Constable of Brighton from 1881 to 1894. He joined the force in 1843 and on retirement had served for over 50 years. The townspeople raised a subscription for him totalling £600 and purchased Hoathly Villa in Florence Road, Preston, for him.*  
ESRO, Ref. SPA 10/5/6



and scabies contracted on the ship. After that he tried working on a farm close to Brighton and then went into the country. This was followed by seven years in Canada. On his return, he took up his current employment with the local railway company and conducted himself well (although a record of some instances of petty theft in Brighton would later emerge).

He was now engaged, to a young lady who 'bears a high character'. The couple were originally to have been married during the week beginning 14 December, but the wedding had been postponed until the following Easter.

The only real insight we have into his mind after the murder was left to us in the form of a letter written a few days afterwards to his parents. It was as near to a written confession as one might hope for. It was read out by a court official both at the adjourned magistrates' hearing on 22 December (during which Wood once or twice burst into tears) and at his trial the following spring, when he again cried. Extracts are reproduced here in all their repetitiveness, illiteracy and inconsistency:

*From your Loving Loving son George.*

*My dear Father and Loving Mother and my dear darling Lizie. It is with deep sympathy and the love of God which I feel deep depths of my Heart this morning that I write to you this morning, this is all through breaking the pledge which you all thought I was keeping ...*

*I had never broken the pledge till last thursday week since I joined it. I drive the horses alright on thursday without any accident whatever. I remember driving in the station gates alright on thursday night but I do not remember anything more after I got inside of the gates. I can't remember anything that happened after was through the Beastly drink. I must have been helplessly drunk. I am very sorry very sorry to have to say such a thing. It as fairly broke me up. I prayed to the Lord Jesus this morning and he as give me courage to write you this morning this crime as been brought to my feet but as God is my keeper and my helper I do honestly say that I do not remember or cant bring my bring myself to remember anything whatever about it or can I bring myself to believe it was done by your son George I don't know I am sure what my Dear Love Lizie will think of me after two long years of courtship and to think that we were going to be married at Easter ...*

*My poor Lizzie I don't know what will become of her if anything should happen to me tell her not to cease writing to you for I am sure this will drive her to her sister's in Canada but if I am not to see her no more tell her she must come down to see me ...*

*It would not be so bad if I knew what I had done but I have not the least recollection of anything occurring after tea time on Thursday.*

*This as nearly drove me out of my mind last night I thought it was my last for I saw the golden city and the gates open ...*

*I needed your advice scores of times but I never heeded it God grant that this may make us all Love the lord Jesus Christ more and more than we have ever done before ... I needed him last week but I need him more but this morning I found a true friend in him ...*

*Look after Lizie don't go back on her keep her from going abroad if possible I should like to see her very much indeed it would cheer me up greatly if I could and now I must say good bye and God bless you and may his face shine upon you and may he always be near you when help is most needed give my kind love to all and kiss them all for me and especially to Dar Lizie give my kind love to her and kiss her for me God grant that she may always walk the path of Ritchousness for his name sake Amen and ask her to pray for me and remain your ever Dear Son George*

Wood's parents were people of the highest respectability and irreproachable character. For nearly a quarter of a century his father had occupied a prominent position at Belgrave Street Congregational Church and was one of its Elders at the time of his son's arrest. Sunday after Sunday, for many years, he might be seen conducting strangers to vacant seats. Mr W J Smith, of North Street, who for 30 years had gratuitously undertaken ministerial duties at the Church, had known him throughout that time and spoke of him as one of the best fathers and among the most truly Christian and self-sacrificing men he had ever known. For over 20 years, without a break, Mr Wood Snr, a hard-working shoemaker, saved £1/10- (£1.50) for the Sussex Home Missionary Society, besides contributing to other religious and philanthropic agencies. Mrs Wood, for her part, was equally highly spoken of by those who know her. She regularly attended Belgrave Street Church and took an active interest in its affairs. Mr Smith thought her a good woman and a good mother.

Wood Jnr followed the family tradition and was even at church on the Sunday before the murder. Evidently he was much liked among his relatives and friends, who were utterly astounded at the dreadful charge brought against him. Everyone who knew him gave him an excellent character, and those who worked with him regarded him as a straightforward and companionable man. *The Argus* was anxious he should not be condemned in advance:

*His parents seem incapable of entertaining for a moment the idea that he can be guilty. If Wood is proved to be guilty and is proved also to be sane then nobody can possibly sympathise with him. Meanwhile he has not been tried and is entitled to be regarded as an innocent man.*



But none of this carried much weight with the people of Brighton. Following the brief proceedings of his second appearance in the Police Court on 15 December, there was a remarkably hostile demonstration by the waiting crowd, as *The Argus* duly reported:

*... contrary to the usual custom, the prisoner was not removed to Lewes Gaol quickly after the rising of the Court. Many of the crowd wearied of waiting but it was generally believed that Wood would be taken to Lewes during the day, and in the afternoon a large and increasing crowd gathered outside the entrance to the police station, on the western side of the Town Hall. No prison van, however, made its appearance. The police had decided upon a strategic movement and as soon as dusk closed in, the van was quietly taken into East Street and stationed in the square opposite Beal's.*

*At a favourable moment, Wood, escorted by two stalwart constables and accompanied by the Chief Constable, Fire Superintendent Lacroix, Inspector Parker and several other officers, was hastily run up the steps leading from the Sanitary Office, on the eastern side of the Town Hall. But a crowd has many eyes, and hardly had the prisoner appeared in Bartholomews before a signal was given and the crowd came down from the western side of the Town Hall in a perfect avalanche. East-street at the time was crowded, the pavement being thronged and the road laden with vehicular traffic. Under such conditions it was impossible for the police to make much headway and the crowd had time to close around the unhappy man and his guard.*

*Wood seemed in a state of mortal agony. The crowd near the man 'booed' and hissed him, while the main body in the rear set up a running fire of execration and abuse. Such cries as a 'You villain,' 'You hound,' 'Let's get at you' were heard, and oaths and curses were freely intermingled, the voices of women being as loud as any. The police flanked the man to prevent a rush being made, and the constables hurried forward, the prisoner seeming even more anxious to cover the distance than they were. On turning the corner off the square, Wood began to run, mounted the steps of the prison van without assistance and was lost to view in the twinkling of an eye. The crowd surged around the vehicle, and kept up a long yell. The horse, a powerful animal, became frightened at the demonstration, and began to back. This only excited the crowd the more, and they closed round shouting 'Over with it!', 'Turn it over!' 'Let's have him!'. The police managed to make a headway for the animal, which broke into a trot when the whip was applied, and started on its way to Lewes Gaol amid a continued chorus of execrations.*

The following day the people of Brighton, in much larger numbers, gave expression to feelings of an entirely different kind. The occasion was Edith Jeal's funeral.

In the morning, a vast but very orderly crowd, made up of the poorest people in one of the poorest parts of the town, gathered in Upper Bedford Street, the starting-point of the procession. The assembly waited patiently until the tiny polished oak coffin was brought out, covered in wreaths. All the women sobbed bitterly at the pathetic scene, a spectacle made still more heartrending when the distraught mother, leaning on her husband's arm, passed down Bedford Buildings to the mourning coach.

It took some time to arrange the numerous wreaths that had been sent. The little coffin was placed on an open conveyance drawn by a pair of horses and the floral tributes were placed on and around it. These came from strangers as well as friends, and included one from 'Edith's little school friends and teachers', a magnificent wreath from 'Sympathisers of the Market, Brighton' and others from the poor flower girls of Brighton.

The mourners, 21 in all, then took their places in four single-horse mourning coaches. The mother and father with two of their elder children occupied the first coach, the others being provided for in the remaining three.

It was just after twelve when the procession moved off, followed by the vast majority of the crowd. It passed down Upper Bedford Street into St James's Street. People were standing on the pavement along that busy thoroughfare, waiting to see the cortège pass. As in Upper Bedford Street, many of the shops had their shutters up. At the bottom of the street, on the Old Steine, was another large crowd. It was the same from that point until the Extra-Mural Cemetery was reached. While many of the people followed, others congregated at such spots as the fountain near St Peter's Church, the Level Police Station and at the bottom of Elm Grove.

There were crowds on both sides of Lewes Road, among them many children from neighbouring schools. It was a quarter to one when the slow cortège gradually approached the cemetery gates. Hundreds of the spectators filed in and wended their way up the long pathway between the tombs to the spot where the little body was to be laid.

*The Argus* reported:

*... the air was hushed to silence and eyes that had been dry began to moisten with tears. The women wept, the men bowed their heads in reverence and the children clung to the gowns of their parents or huddled together in groups awe-struck and half in fear. The hard*



*harsh monotone of the tolling bell has perhaps never before been echoed in so many human hearts. Every member of that vast varying crowd seemed affected, the sight conjuring up in appalling vividness the awful circumstances surrounding the little one's death.*

The scene in the chapel was pitiful. Only the relatives and their near friends were admitted, the surging crowd being kept back by the police. The Reverend W T McCormick (Vicar of St Matthew's) conducted the service, assisted by his curate, the Reverend H H Bishopp, who read the lesson. During the service, the bereaved mother's sobs could repeatedly be heard and the weeping faces of the children were distressing to witness. A large space around the grave was roped off and the crowd was kept back by a body of police under the charge of Inspector Parker and Fire Superintendent Lacroix. Near to the open grave a number of beautiful wreaths had been laid in readiness to be transferred onto the mound.

The remainder of the service at the grave was impressively read by the Reverend McCormick who, at the close, gave a short impromptu address. He would like, he said, to say a few words but he scarcely felt fit to do so under the circumstances. They had met there, a great body of mourners – mourning the loss of one God had taken to Himself. He had said 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven'. He recommended them to do as the Apostles did when they lost their dear companion, go to Jesus Christ in their distress.

Many persons lingered behind after the mourners had left to look into the grave, and it was a long time before the sacred spot was left solely to the care of the gravedigger. The funeral arrangements had all been very capably handled by F J Reading of High Street.

Events moved rapidly forward. Three days after the burial, the adjourned/resumed inquest was held at Brighton Town Hall and three days after that, at the same place, the adjourned magistrates' hearing. Wood's final appearance at the Police Court was on 30 December 1891, when he was charged on remand with wilful murder.

Not until early April 1892 would the callous killer again be in the public eye, this time on the occasion of his trial at the Spring Assizes in Lewes.

The proceedings took place at County Hall on 7 April before Mr Justice Mathew. S H Day and W W Grantham appeared for the prosecution and C F Gill for the prisoner.

Wood appeared in the dock wearing a black coat, a stand-up collar with points turned down and a black tie. He appeared quite self-possessed and calm and in reply to the charge firmly answered 'Not



*St Matthew's Church was erected in 1881–83 and stood at the corner of Sutherland Road and College Terrace. It was demolished in 1967 and the parish was merged with St Mark's. St Matthew's Court now stands on its site. Author's collection*

Guilty'. He then took a seat in the centre of the dock as counsel for the prosecution rose to commence his opening statement.

Day outlined the crime and the case against Wood and summarised the testimony of the witnesses he would call. The evidence he produced could not be direct evidence, but circumstantial evidence. Apart from identification by a chain of people, there was the fact that Wood borrowed money from a fellow-employee in the Goods Department, Martin Marchant, to take a bath – doubtless to remove traces of his guilt. Then there was the point that Wood knew of the murder, and where it had been committed, scarcely before any reference to it had appeared in the newspapers. He had commented on it to goods carman, John Scrase. There was the physical evidence of bloodstains on the prisoner's clothing, then his patent lie of having been at the circus and his denial of knowing and seeing an old acquaintance, PC Tuppen.

The sightings formed a chain in which not a link seemed to be missing. After leaving the goods yard, Wood was first seen by a



witness named Eliza Dunk in Sydney Street, not far from the station. He was then sighted in Edward Street by 11-year-old Fanny Pimm. Wood whistled to her, asked where she lived, and asked her to go with him. She refused. A little further along Edward Street, he was seen by 7-year-old Alice West, who was too young to be examined (her head did not quite reach the top of the witness box). Wood then exchanged a goodnight greeting with PC Tuppen at the bottom of Lavender Street.

Key testimony was provided by one Rose Leggatt. Wood, the worse for drink, fell up against her on the corner of Montague Street and Upper Bedford Street. She actually witnessed the moment of abduction:

*I saw the man dressed in railway uniform. The man in the dock is the same. When I saw him he was putting his hand towards a little child outside Trengrove's shop, and I saw the child follow the prisoner to the middle of Somerset-street.*

In Somerset Street, Wood was sighted by a woman named Alice Guy, still going in the direction of the murder scene:

*I saw a man on the opposite side of the road carrying a child, which was crying. I could not say the age of the child, but it seemed a large child. She had on a hat like the one produced. I called out to the man 'Don't hurt that poor little thing.' He turned round. He was under a lamp at the time he turned. I could see his face distinctly. He went towards the east and I followed him to the corner of Somerset-street. When he got to Egremont-place, he crossed the road, turned to the right and went towards the Hospital. Prisoner is the man I saw that night.*

Mrs Guy became hysterical on leaving the box and had to be assisted out of court.

At the top of Chesham Street, Henry Spicer, a printer, who was walking westward along Eastern Road, saw a man carrying a child and passed him at just about ten minutes to nine. The man, who was 'very tipsy', was going eastward and was about 150 yards from the field. His face was hidden in the child's clothes.

The task of Gill for the defence was well-nigh impossible, especially after Day made Wood Snr admit that his son had been convicted for horse stealing in Canada. Yet he valiantly did what he could on the prisoner's behalf. He warned the jury to be careful in dealing with evidence which was circumstantial, and pointed to the sheer violence of the crime as tending to show it had been committed by a someone insane. He appealed to the jury to take this view in the interests of common humanity. He

also drew attention to the good character given to the prisoner and to the part played by drink in his downfall. Drink combined with his long-standing epilepsy would be liable to result in epileptic seizures. Gill called medical evidence as to his condition, not in a bid for him to be set free but so that 'he should be confined with others who had committed offences while insane and live a life of seclusion.'

Dr C E Saunders, Medical Superintendent of the Sussex County Lunatic Asylum, said he had had special experience in insanity. He had made epilepsy a study and currently had at least 100 patients. He had been instructed by the Treasury to see the prisoner and had done so twice. He was then perfectly rational. That was not inconsistent with his being an epileptic. Saunders was examined at length as to the effects epilepsy had on patients and he pointed out that drink or lust would be likely to bring on an attack. Perennial insanity was shown by statistics to take place most usually in middle life. Epilepsy and insanity were closely allied.

Dr Sheppard, another lunacy specialist, had also visited the prisoner. He said that epileptics leading a dissolute life were sometimes inclined to acts of violence and epileptics should be very cautious as to their mode of living.

Judge Mathew, in his lengthy summing-up, gave short shrift to any notion of irresponsibility on the part of the accused. As to Wood's apparent amnesia about the crime, he pointed to his claiming to have been at the circus rather than saying he had no recollection of the evening before. He also felt that it was 'idle to talk of uncontrollable impulse' and that epilepsy could not

*This view along Chesham Road shows Rock Street, its eastward extension, in the distance. Wood lived at No 11, on the left-hand side near the end of the street. The property has survived. Author's collection*





account for unconsciousness of action ('Was he unconscious when carrying the child through the street?'). Nor was the atrocity of crime any defence, for 'atrocious crimes are committed by people who know perfectly well what they are doing.'

The jury, after an absence of eight minutes, returned a verdict of Guilty and Wood was sentenced to death. He was removed from the dock in a state of near-collapse.

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To add to the frustration of the defence, certain items of evidence were deemed inadmissible during the trial since they were not made on oath. These were the reports into Wood's mental state by Dr Saunders and Dr Sheppard, each expert producing one each, and letters from the Manitoba Penitentiary – now Stony Mountain Institution – referring to Wood's health and conduct during his detention in that place. It was a maximum-security institution, administered by a strict regime, located 15 miles north of Winnipeg. On 23 August 1886, at Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, Wood had been sentenced to serve three years and 10 months in Stony Mountain for stealing. He was discharged on 4 November 1889, returning direct to England through his father assisting in his passage home.

Saunders reported there was at present no evidence of mental derangement but abundant evidence to prove that Wood had repeated attacks of epilepsy while in Canada. He went so far as to state:

*Granting the fact that the man is epileptic, his irresponsibility for the deed he committed may be strongly affirmed.*

His disregard of the consequences of his crime was revealed by the entire absence of any apparent attempt to conceal the body of the child. Saunders observed that rape was not a common crime among epileptics but it still found a place in the statistics and he concurred with another expert in concluding that epileptics could not be held responsible for any act of violence perpetrated during their unconscious automatism, which they had no power to control, nor capacity to judge.

Dr Sheppard's report ran broadly along the same lines.

In drawing up their reports, both doctors made use of letters from Canada. There were six of these, all written between 12 February and 17 February 1892. From them, it emerged that Wood spent no less than 49 days in hospital and was convalescing and unfit for duty (i.e. hard labour) for a further 84 on account



*The Manitoba Penitentiary, now Stony Mountain Institution, near Winnipeg, where Wood served nearly four years for stealing. Correctional Service, Canada*

of his condition; that he was well behaved and received all the remission of time it was possible for him to obtain; and that he was a communicant of the Church of England. A jailer, William Moss, did point out that prior to his August 1886 sentence, Wood had previously served time on two occasions, once for seven days and once for three months. On his behalf, however, he stated 'I consider him a character not responsible for any of his actions.'

Written support for Wood's reprieve was expressed in a petition to the Crown and in letters from one correspondent in particular to the *Sussex Daily News*.

The petition was got up by relatives and friends of the condemned man, especially his father. It prayed the Home Secretary to advise the Queen to commute the capital sentence to one of detention in a criminal lunatic asylum during Her Majesty's pleasure. Sent with it were the letters from Canada, the reports by Drs Saunders and Sheppard and a verbatim report of the trial. Despite the several hundred signatories including nearly twenty leading medical practitioners and many clergymen and solicitors in Brighton and district, the Home Secretary rejected the petition.

The *Sussex Daily News* was the medium for a writer styling himself 'Humanitas' to plead Wood's cause. He had signed the petition and wanted to make a stand against 'the brutalising lust for a fellow-creature's blood.' He argued that as not one man in probably ten million, or many more, had ever had the slightest desire to murder and mutilate children, a deterrent could scarcely be required; that the evidence of the highest available authorities on mental disease was distinctly in favour of the irresponsibility of the accused; and that the slaughter of a fellow-mortal in cold blood was anti-Christian (despite the clergy reading the Burial Office over his living body).

'Humanitas' had violent critics, especially 'Sanitas', who accused him of sentimentality. Both were rounded on by 'Justice',



who declined to join in the former's hysterical scream for what the writer contended would be a gross miscarriage of justice. 'Humanitas' later complained of the personal animosity against himself from various correspondents. 'Barrister' wondered why Wood's workmates did not support him if they believed him to be a confirmed epileptic. 'G.E.' wrote that the question whether epilepsy was a disease which rendered a person irresponsible for his actions was purely and solely a medical question and ought to be left to medical men to decide:

*We do not consult lawyers on medical matters any more than we consult medical men on questions of law.*

A 'Worthing Mother' wrote expressing surprise at the people of Brighton signing a petition in favour of the commutation of the death sentence. The verdict was, she says, right and just, and if ever a man deserved hanging, Wood did. Her sentiments, and those of the majority of the population, were echoed by 'Fairplay', who found fault with the medical men showing what he termed 'ill-advised sympathy and theoretical excuses for the monster Wood.' He added:

*It seems hard to understand the sickly sentimentality for this monster from a body of men who are not as a rule given to sentiment. I trust that some of the medical men in Brighton, possessing manhood and humanity, will come forward and protest against this unhappy wretch escaping the penalty of his crime.*

The law duly took its course.

On the eve of his execution, Wood was visited by his father and two sisters. He bore up very well during the interview but their final parting was very painful. Shortly after they left he was seized with an epileptic fit, during which he foamed at the mouth and had to be held down. Later in the evening, Mr Wilkinson, Congregational Minister of Lewes, came and found him very shaky and no longer calm. Wood took the minister's hand and pleaded with him not to leave him but to be with him to the end. Mr Wilkinson consented.

Asked if he had anything to acknowledge, Wood replied in heartbroken tones:

*I'm sorry for what I did. I wish my sincere sorrow to be conveyed to the parents of the child for the great wrong I have done; but I have no recollection whatever about it.*

He also dictated three messages for the minister to pass to the press for publication. The first was to the parents of the child praying for their forgiveness, the second was to his fellow-workmen at the railway who had conveyed their support and the third was to his defence team, to Mr W J Smith (the Minister of Belgrave Street Chapel) and to Mr Wilkinson, thanking them all for their kindness and the efforts they had made on his behalf. He also wrote a long letter to his parents the next morning.

He passed a fairly good night, but ate and drank little from the coffee, bread, butter and egg supplied for his breakfast. He was calm and prayerful at first, although he became nervous and depressed as the gallows loomed. Again he appealed to the minister to be with him to the end, and just before Billington, the executioner, entered the cell he went on his knees in earnest prayer, a prayer in which he again, and for the last time, stated that God knew he did not recollect anything about the crime for which he was about to die.

The small group comprising the prisoner, governor, surgeon, executioner and others entered the cell and without a moment's hesitation Billington pinioned Wood at the elbows. The procession moved off and when the burial service was read, the mournful toll of the chapel bell could be heard.

Wood appeared to walk firmly and with head erect, until the awful moment when he saw the scaffold. This had been put up at the south-east corner of the prison precincts, close to where the road from Brighton to Chailey turned off. His face became deathly pale and he seemed to turn an appealing glance at three reporters stationed on the green sward a short distance away. Yet he never faltered and went straight on to meet his fate. He did not flinch and seemed firm to the last. Billington went about his work swiftly and in a businesslike manner. Death was, without any doubt, instantaneous. There was no swaying of the rope, nor could the slightest movement be discerned down in the pit. The white cap had slipped on one side and it could be seen that Wood's eyes were closed, and the face somewhat distorted, while on the right side there was a slight abrasion. The signal that the execution had been carried out was passed from one warder to another until it reached the man stationed over the main entrance, who immediately hoisted the black flag as evidence to those outside that justice had been served.

On the day George Henry Wood was hanged, the air was heavy with the scents and sounds of springtime. In the bright sunshine, the gardens and paths of Bedford Buildings no doubt resounded to the shouts of playing children – children who might, from time to time, affectionately remember the games and laughter they once enjoyed with their little companion, Edith Jeal.