

The Murder of Samuel Stockton

Spending time wandering around graveyards might not be many people's idea of a worthwhile pastime. Yet curiosity and patience can sometimes reward those that persevere. Some headstones can reveal an interesting story, worthy of further research.

Such is the case in the graveyard surrounding the Church of St. Laurence in Surfleet. On the graveyard's south side is a headstone which reads:

"This stone is erected in memory of Mr Samuel Stockton late of Ashley in the Parish of Leigh and County of Lancaster who was most barbarously murdered near this place on the 8th Dec 1768 for which one Philip Hooton was tried and condemned in Lincoln assizes, and afterwards executed and hung in chains on the very place where the deed was committed."

Intrigued, I did a little research and in this article I present the story of Samuel Stockton's murder and the fate of the perpetrator, Philip Hooton.



SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In researching an article on the Civil Parish of Surfleet, I encountered a number of references to a murder having taken place there in the 1700s. Intrigued, I delved deeper and managed to find four key sources of information, which I've used as the basis for writing this synopsis. I am indebted to the writers of these pieces.

'The Surfleet Marsh Gibbet' by David Bealby

Local Historian Ruby Hunt's article on Surfleet.

A contemporary account of the trial and execution of Philip Hooton as appeared in the 21 March 1769 edition of the 'Manchester Mercury'.

An account of the murder that appeared 75 years later in the 25 August 1843 edition of the 'Lincolnshire Chronicle and General Advertiser'.

WHO'S WHO

The Murderer

Philip Hooton, aged about 50, is described as being a 'farmer and auctioneer and of gentlemanly exterior'. He was born at Sutton St. Edmunds in Lincolnshire and at maturity took on a farm at Lutton Gate, Gedney Hill in Lincolnshire. He was initially perceived to be of good character and built up a good reputation. In later years he became a salesman of cattle, etc, and his reputation started to slide. He fell into debt, and in September 1768 he had absconded on the pretext of going to visit friends on the Isle of Man.

Philip Hooton

The Victim

Samuel Stockton was a wealthy corduroy and corn trader. He was from a hamlet called Ashley near Leigh in Lancashire. He had a sister, Alice Burchell, who served as the mistress of his house.

Samuel Stockton

A FATEFUL ENCOUNTER

Hooton headed to the north west of England and by mid-October 1768 he was in Liverpool. On a market day there he was drinking in an inn and found himself in the company of men which included Samuel Stockton. The men were complaining about the price of corn, to which Hooton (who was travelling under the alias of a Mr. Richards and saying he was in Liverpool on business) piped up that the price of corn in his home county of Lincolnshire was much lower. This grabbed the interest of

Stockton, and the pair got talking. Hooton said he would be returning home to Lincolnshire shortly, and would call at Stockton's house at a later date when the corn was threshed out and ready for sale. Had Hooton conceived his murderous plot from the outset, or did it develop later? We can't be sure.

THE JOURNEY TO LINCOLNSHIRE

Monday 28 November 1768

Hooton arrives at Stockton's home at Ashley. Hooton had discerned that Stockton was a devout follower of the relatively new Methodist teachings. Presumably to further gain the trust of Stockton, Hooton passes himself off as a fellow Methodist. They said prayer together that night.

Tuesday 29 November 1768

Hooton and Stockton sang many psalms and hymns together. Hooton told Stockton that the corn would be ready by the time they arrived in Lincolnshire.

Stockton's sister Alice Burchell is sceptical of Hooton and tries to dissuade her brother from what she sees as his rash resolve to embark on his business venture. Stockton is undeterred and gathers together £800 in cash and bills (a huge sum of money in those days)

Wednesday 7 December 1768

Stockton and Hooton stop for a break at the Black Bull in Lincoln, having travelled for several days from Lancashire. They stay the night at the Hind Inn, Sleaford.



The Robin Hood Inn at Boston today

THE FATEFUL DAY - THURSDAY 8 DECEMBER 1768

Stockton and Hooton travel to Boston, stopping a while at the Robin Hood and Little John Inn. The suspicions of the landlord and an army corporal are raised over Hooton's whip, which had an overly heavy end and seemed 'calculated for mischief'.

Swineshead

Kirton

That afternoon at around 2.30pm Stockton and Hooton set off again - it is supposed to Hooton's home at Gedney Hill. They travel through Algakirk and Fosdyke, heading towards Surfleet.

Sutton

Algakirk

Fosdyke

Surfleet



It is while travelling in 'Surfleet Common' that Hooton bludgeons Stockton to death with his whip. Stockton's face is cut and bruised, and his skull fractured. Hooton takes the money and rides back to his home at Gedney Hill. He arrives at 5.30am the following morning.

THE APPREHENDING AND TRIAL OF PHILIP HOOTON

Friday 9 December 1768

Stockton's body is found. Some of his clothes and belongings are scattered about and his horse, still saddled, was grazing in the marshes. The body was taken to Surfleet Church. Murder was immediately suspected, and suspicion fell on Hooton, who had been seen riding with Stockton.

Date not certain

The village Constable and a neighbour, both armed with pistols, rode off to Lutton Gate at Gedney Hill, Hooton's known home address. Hooton was found hiding in a closet. He was secured and taken to Surfleet.

Once back in Surfleet (that same day, or the day after), Hooton, who strenuously pleaded his innocence, was subject to a practice called Cruentation. It likely took place in the church, as such 'ordeals' were often overseen or organised by clergymen.

Date not certain

Hooton is taken to the Magistrate in Spalding and after a 'long examination' he was committed to Lincoln Castle to stand trial at the Assizes.

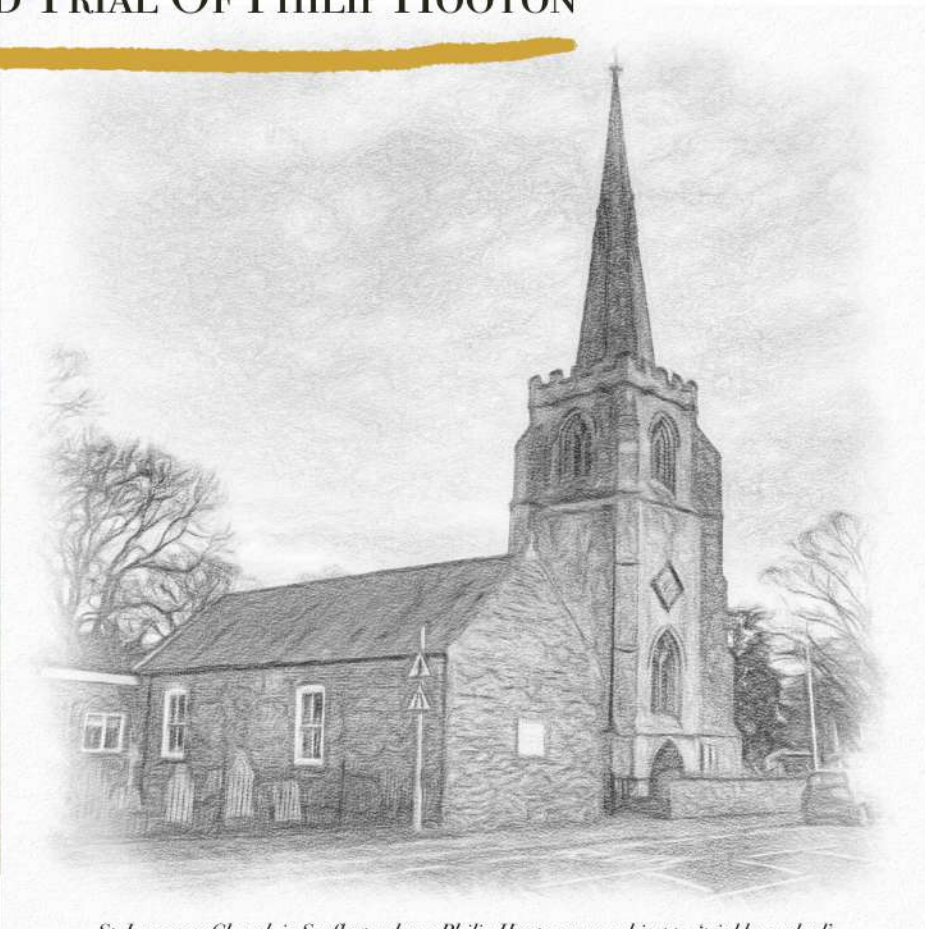
Hooton always pleaded his innocence, and so confident was he that he would be cleared that he even had his horse brought to Lincoln for him to ride home on.

Saturday 4 March 1769

After a five hour trial, followed by only 15 minutes of deliberation by the jury, Hooton is found guilty of murder and sentenced to death.

Monday 6 March 1769

Hooton is hanged at Lincoln, pleading his innocence to the last.



St. Laurence Church in Surfleet, where Philip Hooton was subject to 'trial by ordeal'.

Cruentation

There was a belief in medieval times, and still sometime in practice at the time of Stockton's murder, that the body of a victim would spontaneously bleed in the presence of their murderer.

The suspected murderer was brought before the corpse of the victim -- and was made to put his hands on it. If the wounds of the corpse then began to bleed or other unusual visual signs appeared, that would have been regarded as God's verdict, announcing that the suspect was guilty. Whereas cruentation alone rarely convicted a suspect; more often, the psychological impact of the test caused the suspect to confess. In Hooton's case, he did not confess.

Cruentation continued to be used well into the eighteenth century, and its outcome continued to be accepted as evidence by law courts

HOOTON'S GIBBET

After Hooton had hung for two hours, his body was taken down and conveyed by cart to Surfleet, where the body was hung in chains on a gibbet erected for the purpose. The gibbet was thirty feet high, and was erected on the river bank, near the scene of the murder.

*The scene of Stockton's murder - and Hooton's Gibbet - today.
Along the bank of the River Welland, half a mile east of Surfleet Sluice looking north east towards Fosdyke*

POSTSCRIPT

In 1843, a reporter in the 'Lincolnshire Chronicle and General Advertiser' gives an account of Samuel Stockton's murder 75 years previously. According to the reporter, the remnants of the gibbet had only fallen down five years earlier (i.e. 1838). This would mean the gibbet had been a local landmark for 70 years. As for the body, the reporter claims that the 'smaller bones of the extremities of this body as they fell to the ground were procured by parties frequenting the neighbouring pot houses and used for what are called tobacco stoppers!' (A pot House is a term used for an inn or tavern, and a tobacco stopper is a small implement used for pressing down tobacco in a pipe.).

Local historian Ruby Hunt, in an article she wrote about Surfleet, records that the gibbet irons and posts were once to be found at nearby Welland House Farm, home of the Bealby family.

Gibbeting

Gibbeting was a common law punishment, which a judge could impose in addition to execution. This practice was regularised in England by the Murder Act 1751, which empowered judges to impose this for murder. It was most often used for traitors, murderers, highwaymen, pirates, and sheep stealers and was intended to discourage others from committing similar offences. The structures were therefore often placed next to public highways (frequently at crossroads) and waterways.

The last gibbet I gotta in the U.K. took place in 1832 and the practice was formally repealed by statute in 1834.

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