

# Mary Lefley

## Murder, Mystery and My Family

**Brenda Lefley** from Leicester was asked if she would take part in the BBC programme Murder Mystery and My Family as they were considering the case of Mary Lefley who was hanged at Lincoln prison in 1884 for allegedly poisoning her husband William Lefley at Wrangle. They are analysing the evidence put to the trial jury at the time and considering any new evidence that has emerged since and whether there was a miscarriage of justice. Brenda contacted me through our Stickney History website and asked for any information about Mary's time in Stickney. When it emerged that I was a distant relation of Mary's mother (Sarah Gosling) I was asked if I would also take part in the programme.

Filming was originally planned for March but had to be re-scheduled for August. Unfortunately, the part of Leicester where Brenda lives was placed in lockdown and she couldn't come to Lincolnshire when required. It was decided to let me do the "journey" and we would involve Brenda with Zoom meetings at all times when possible. The film crew arrived from London on Thursday and interviewed me, as to my relationship to Mary and any back ground history about her time and life in Stickney. We also had a Zoom meeting with Brenda and learnt of her connection to William Lefley and her thoughts on the original verdict and whether it was murder or suicide or even if a third person was involved in the death.

The camera crew stopped the night at The Burton Inn and on Friday morning I met them at Wrangle and we went to the house where the death of William had occurred. It's a traditional Lincolnshire half-house with just two sash windows at the front and the kitchen door at the side directly into the garden. It was well maintained and unspoilt and was virtually original from the front elevation with a three-pot chimney and clay pan tile roof.

I was videoed walking down the narrow country lane, carefully studying a map, obviously looking for the house. As always as I quickly learned that nothing is a five-minute take and everything has to be done at least eight or nine times with the camera at different angles every time.

We later moved to film in the centre of the village by the Church and met with Jim Snee a social Historian from Lincolnshire Heritage who described what life would have been like in Wrangle in 1884. He explained what social problems could occur if a woman of Mary's age and prosperity was to live on her own in a small village

such as Wrangle. She would need hired men to help cultivate the eleven acres of land she owned and this could entice husbands away from their wives and create an opportunity for infidelity. There was also the other general belief of the time that the small holding would be more appropriate for a respectable married couple and their family rather than a widow.

A major problem with filming outside and especially in the centre of a village is the noise of passing vehicles. We had to pause recording many times and wait for a lull in the traffic before continuing and often repeating what we had previously done. Even the odd wood pigeon cooing in the trees and passing aircraft delayed the filming.

One other set back that could have caused a major delay to the whole schedule was when the main camera toppled off its tripod and dropped several feet onto the tarmac road. Surprisingly no crucial damaged was done to the camera or certainly nothing that a roll of duct tape couldn't fix.

On Friday afternoon we travelled to Lincoln to the court house in the Castle grounds and was met by Dr Sarah Holland of Nottingham University who lectures on 19<sup>th</sup> century rural & agricultural history and she described what mental health was like in the countryside.

Mental illness was not recognised in the countryside as it was a far better place to live than the Towns and Cities. Country folk did not suffer from it and it was not believed possible that a man of such religious beliefs as William would ever consider taking his own life. At the time poison was regarded as a woman's weapon and considering the slow and painful death that would occur no one would take it knowingly. The Jury would quickly dismiss this notion and the only simple explanation for his death must be murder committed by his wife.

On Saturday morning we met at the prison on Greetwell Road where Mary was held and eventually executed by James Berry. We were not allowed into the prison grounds, but did film from outside with the main gates as a focal point. I was met by Steven Wade an established writer from Leeds who once worked in the prison for many years as a recreation teacher to the inmates. He described what the conditions would have been like for Mary as she was held in the condemned cell with somebody with her at all times. While she was hoping for a reprieve from the Home Office she was visited by her mother and other family members and the prison cleric. A pardon never came and on her last night she received a glass of wine. The permanently built scaffolding and trap door known as the Hanging Shed was directly through a side door from the condemned cell from where The Hangman

and his assistant would enter at the final hour and within five or six minutes, she would be dead.

As we were filming next to a busy road in Lincoln much of the scenes had to be repeated several times as the sounds of large vehicles drowned out the conversations. Two other annoyances were mindless people shouting out car windows and drivers deliberately blowing their horns as they drove past the cameras. Two painters sanding the woodwork of the adjoining office were most obliging to stop work for a couple of hours and asked Bev what the filming was about and were most intrigued in the story

Two prison wardens appeared to be displeased at our presence and came out of the prison and walked in front of the cameras. One of them deliberately walked between me and Steven Wade while we were filming.

Mary was originally buried in the prison grounds with many other executed prisoners but when building work commenced in the 1990s all the bodies were removed, but the relevant authorities were most unhelpful in providing any more information into their final resting places.

Traditionally a bouquet of flowers is laid on the victim's grave but as this is unknown a quiet spot at the Arboretum in Lincoln was chosen for a symbolic gesture.

The dress code for the majority of the filming was to be smart casual with no logos, checks or stripes as these send the camera "Strobe", but a collar and tie with a jacket had to be worn when attending court.

It was originally planned that we would go to London to meet Jeremy and Sasha the Barristers to discuss the evidence put forward and again a week later to attend the court hearing when the Judge delivered his verdict. Instead, it was decided that any travelling on public transport should be avoided because of the Pandemic and both final scenes were recorded remotely at Stickney and Leicester on laptops using Zoom.

As one of the remote scenes was not completed on the first day, I had to wear the same clothes and use the same back ground for another meeting three days later.

It was hoped that it would be edited and scheduled for TV before Christmas but was finally shown on July 4th 2021. It is probably still available to watch on BBC iPlayer.

*Some background information about Mary & William Lefley*

*Mary Holmes was the daughter of George & Sarah Holmes (nee Gosling) and lived in Hall Lane. She was born on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1835 and baptised at the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Stickney. She probably attended the old mud & stud school room in the Village as it is believed that she could read & write. Mary was in service for the Soudan's of Grange Farm Pinfold Lane in 1850 and possibly even before she was fourteen years old.*

*William Lefley was working on Stennett's farm at Carrington when he met Mary through farming community, and they married in Stickney 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1852 and went to live at Wrangle*

*Mary was buried in the prison grounds and her remains moved to Canwick Road Cemetery Lincoln in 1987 with all the others executed. A simple head stone has since been erected in the cemetery in remembrance of her. William was buried in Wrangle Church yard yet his grave is unmarked.*

