



THE WAY WE WERE

Knight's handy reminder that duelling could be dangerous

Way We Were



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WHAT follows is a summary of four cases of duelling that I happen to have stumbled upon in recent months. Each has a specific link with Canterbury...

Sir John Heydon and Sir Robert Mansel

In Victorian times, the shrivelled and mummified left hand of Sir John Heydon (1588-1653) was tastefully exhibited in a lined cigar box in Canterbury Museum (forerunner to The Beaney).

The long white nails and leathery remains of fingers and palm make it a particularly gruesome piece.

John lost his hand in a duel fought over money with a Sir Robert Mansel in January 1600.



SEVERED: The left hand of Sir John Heydon, cut off in the duel of 1600

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John lost his hand in a duel fought over money with a Sir Robert Mansel in January 1600. John was very young at the time – possibly just 12 years old.

The duel (fought with rapier and dagger) took place outside Norwich, but the hand was passed down (handed down if you prefer) through several generations of Heydons before ending up with a doctor Jarvis in Margate, who donated it to the Canterbury Museum in 1822. To see it today you will have to visit Norwich Castle Museum.

Finch Rooke and Anthony Buckeridge

My second example has more convincing Canterbury credentials.

In 1695, Finch Rooke and Anthony Buckeridge were both serving Army officers stationed at the Canterbury garrison. The subject of their quarrel is unclear but, as the Parish Register of St Mary Magdalen puts it, “they fought a duel in the North Homlbes and both dyed in the field”.

Each was killed by the other's sword. Rooke's body was brought for burial to St Paul's Church and Buckeridge's to St Alphege. A memorial stone was placed in the wall surrounding St Augustine's (now Northolme Road) but this no longer survives. A sad waste of two young lives.

Lieutenant Joseph Crowther and Captain George Helsham

For this third example, I am indebted to local academic Clive Church, who spotted an oddity in the memorial to Lieut Joseph Crowther in Thanington church.

The memorial mentions that Crowther “fell” aged 37 years in Boulogne on April 1, 1829, which needs some explaining as at that



REMEMBER: St Paul's Church, the burial place of Finch Rooke



HISTORIC: The stone tablet once set in the wall of St Augustine's

time there were no fighting engagements in that part of France.

Detective work by Clive has uncovered the fact that Crowther did not fall in battle but was killed in a duel, fought against a Captain George Helsham. Their dispute had Monty Python overtones – when Crowther applied to join the Boulogne pigeon shooting club, Helsham opposed him on the grounds that Crowther's past behaviour was not that of a gentleman.

Crowther was fatally wounded in the ensuing duel.

His body was returned to Thanington (we're not sure why) for burial.

More was to come. According to those who had witnessed the event, Crowther had fired first and missed. Helsham had then taken his time to aim, in an unhurried way, at Crowther's neck.

Crowther's supporters saw

this as unfair and distinctly ungentlemanly conduct. The charge against Helsham at the Old Bailey in October 1830 was one of murder. The jury took only 20 minutes to find him not guilty.

George Smythe and Frederick Romilly

My final example has been widely cited as the last duel in England.

It was fought between two serving members of Parliament (itself a rarity), both elected MPs for Canterbury: George Smythe and Colonel Frederick Romilly.

The source of the dispute was particularly vague – Colonel Romilly felt that remarks made by Mr Smythe in an election speech were offensive to him.

The matter was settled by pistols in early morning in a field outside Weybridge. Both protagonists missed their targets, so both survived.

Details in The Times' account of the event left readers convinced that the duel had been a farce. Canterbury voters got a chance to express their views on Messrs Romilly and Smythe at the parliamentary elections of 1852. Smythe withdrew part way through the contest, but nevertheless received seven votes; Romilly lost by a wide margin to other candidates.

The duelling age had truly come to a close.

■ For more details on these cases visit www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk.