

THE INTRIGUING STORY OF MATILDA HACKER (1811-1878)

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Summary

The advent of full text searchable versions of local newspapers has made it possible to carry out research in a way that was unthinkable even a few years ago. In preparing a brief biography of Walter Cozens (1858-1928), founder of CHAS, I found several useful references to articles in the local press. One of these described how Walter had been a key witness in a murder trial held at the Old Bailey in July 1879. Although the murder and trial took place in London, the unfortunate victim, Matilda Hacker, had spent most of her life in Canterbury. The trial reports teach us little about Walter Cozens, but the background details on the Hacker family seemed worth recording - hence this note.

THE INTRIGUING STORY OF MATILDA HACKER (1811-1878)

Matilda Hacker was baptised in 1811 in Mary Magdalen church, Canterbury, daughter of John Hacker a stone engraver and Mary his wife. She grew up in Canterbury with a younger sister, Amelia, and three brothers. John Hacker was a successful stone mason¹. He has been claimed as the first local stone engraver to have a signed memorial placed in the cathedral - the stone now lies on the floor of the south walk of the cathedral cloisters, in memory of Rev William Gregory². Gregory was one of the Canterbury 'Six Preachers'.



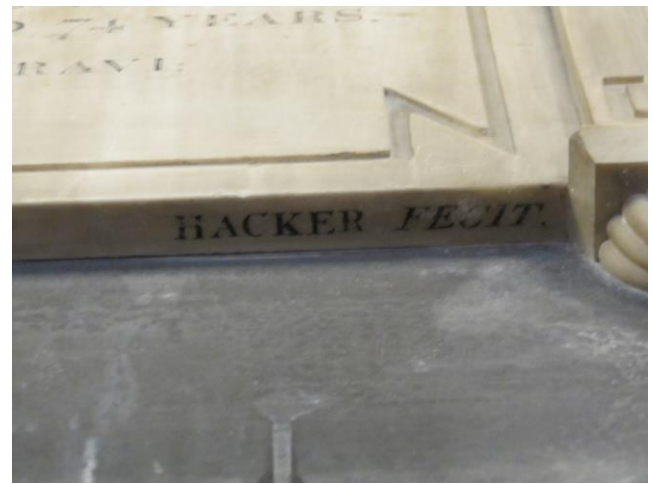
Memorial by John Hacker (AM for Artium Magister indicates Master of Arts)

¹ John advertised for workmen see Kentish Gazette 19 July 1808

² Arch. Cant. LXII (1949) p.70, Rupert Gunnis *Signed Monuments in Kentish Churches*; also Ingram Hill, Derek, *The Six Preachers of Canterbury Cathedral* (1982); also Collinson, Patrick et al (1995) *A History of Canterbury Cathedral* (OUP)



Hacker memorial to Robert Stains
Holy Cross died 1806



Hacker memorial to William Stain
Holy Cross died 1827

The Gregory stone is disappointing in that there is no sign of a Hacker signature. However, two other Canterbury memorial stones (both in Holy Cross church and to members of the Stains family) show that John Hacker carved his 'Hacker fecit' (ie Hacker made it) on the lower edge of these stones. In addition, the fact that Ingram Hill refers to a coat of arms on this memorial suggests that the stone has been reduced in some way.

John Hacker was active in the established church. Whilst churchwarden of St George the Martyr he was responsible for organising and funding the erection of a parish clock, added to the church tower in early 1837. On completion, the total expenditure exceeded contributions by £50, and the *Kentish Gazette*³ commented "we feel satisfied the public will not suffer Mr H to be the loser of this sum". John prospered and acquired several local properties, including at least four in the row then known as Blackfriars North - now simply Blackfriars⁴.



St George's clock

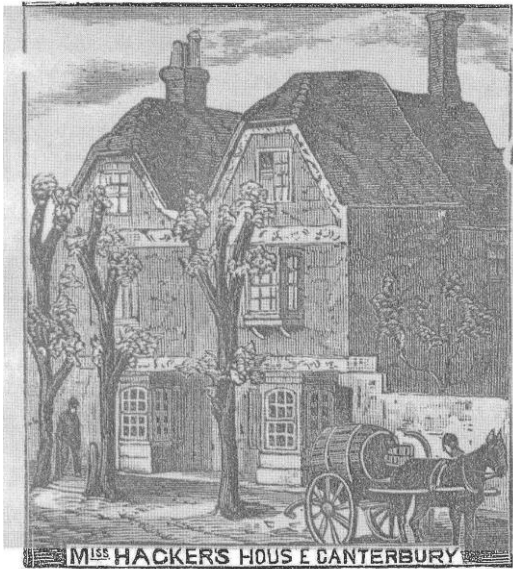


Blackfriars properties

³ Kentish Gazette 17 January 1837

⁴ these properties were then known as Blackfriars North - for Hacker advertisements of houses to let see Kentish Chronicle 4 February 1865; 1 April 1865; 19 August 1865; and 5 October 1867

In the 1850s the family moved to a large timber framed property in Wincheap, and named it Wincheap House. It has changed remarkably little in the past 130 years (see below)⁵.



Wincheap House 1870s



Wincheap House today (Jalsha Indian Restaurant)

An early sign of odd family behaviour came with the 1861 census return for Wincheap House. The entry for the 78 year old father is normal - John is shown as *Proprietor of homes*. But names for Amelia and Matilda are both missing, with the enumerator's annotation "The daughters slept in the house on the Sunday night April 7th but the father refused to return their names or where they are gone". Matilda's age was entered as 30 years when in fact she was 50; Amelia was entered as 25 when she was 47. In this way the elderly father apparently connived in his daughters' odd wish for anonymity and youth.

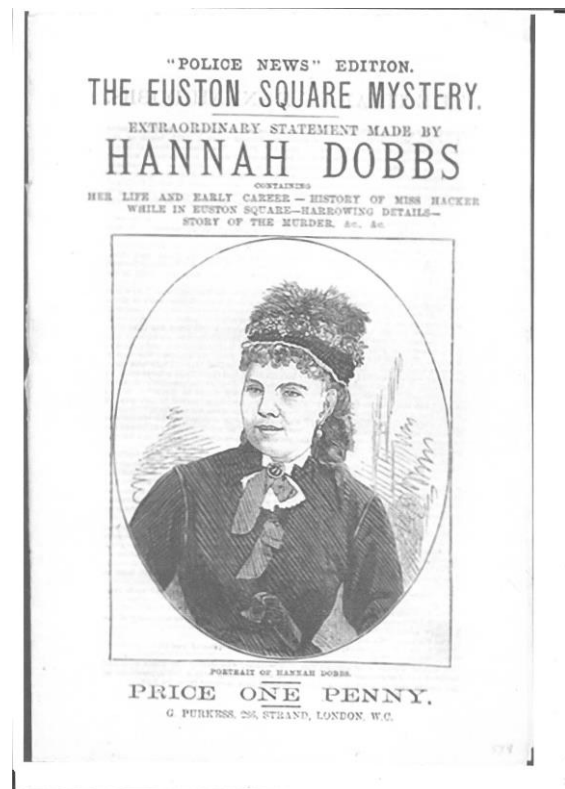
Neither daughter married, and as they aged their behaviour became increasingly strange. Financed by their father's generosity, they wore identical silk dresses, lace shawls, gaudy sashes with large buckles and a brooch with bright coloured stones. To top this off, each sported a felt hat with feather - all regarded as more fitting for teenage girls than women in their fifties. Often seen strolling together during the summer season along the front in Margate and Ramsgate, bystanders referred to them as the Canterbury Belles⁶.

⁵ line drawing from Illustrated Police News 2 June 1879; modern image April 2013

⁶ Illustrated Police News 2 June 1879



Canterbury belles



Accused of the murder
Hannah Dobbs

Mild eccentricity developed into something more bizarre when Matilda refused on principal to pay the rates on properties she controlled. Police and courts were involved and Matilda spent a short period in Westgate prison before her jewellery was seized to settle the debt. Undaunted, Matilda then refused to pay for the installation of mains water supply when water from the nearby River Stour was declared unfit for consumption. To avoid paying, she left home and stayed in Brighton and later London under assumed names. John died in 1863, leaving the income from his several properties to be shared equally between his two daughters during their life times. When Amelia died in 1873 the entire rental income went to Matilda for the remainder of her life. With this she financed her continuing bizarre life style of not paying rate demands and then avoiding police by moving from one rented accommodation to another adopting false names. For collection of her Canterbury rents she relied on a local builder, Walter Cozens⁷. He supervised the properties and sent cheques on to Matilda, using Post Offices and varying names. By 1879 she lived as Miss Huish at 4 Euston Square, where affections of the German owner Mr Bastendorff were being transferred from Mrs Bastendorff to the servant girl Hannah Dobbs.

What brought these details to light was the discovery in May 1879 of a decomposed corpse in the coal cellar of 4 Euston Terrace. A rope was coiled around the remains of the victim's neck, the legs detached and the hands cut off. Police investigations over several months showed that the remains

⁷ founder of Canterbury Archaeological Society, later to become CHAS

were almost certainly those of Matilda, and that she had died in the autumn of 1878⁸. Walter Cozens gave valuable evidence on when Matilda had last picked up her correspondence and cheques. A strong finger of suspicion pointed towards Hannah Dobbs, the servant, as she had pawned items belonging to Matilda. The case was heard at the Old Bailey in June 1879⁹, but Hannah was found not guilty¹⁰.

During the trial her German boss had refused to accept that any relationship existed between him and Hannah. Within days of the verdict, Hannah took her revenge, publishing a steamy exposé of lust at 4 Euston Square¹¹. Her German lover was prosecuted for perjury and sentenced to 12 months' hard labour. The foreign press took an interest in the lurid aspects of the case, and details were paraded in the New York Times. Inhabitants of Euston Square were by now fed up with the continuing association of their address with stories of murder and lust and secured a renaming of the residential southern side of the Square to Endsleigh Gardens. Finally, in 1880, just as the dust was settling on the aftermath of the trials, the courts were called upon to sort out claims on John Hacker's will. This stipulated that, with the demise of both daughters, the property would be sold, and the proceeds distributed amongst surviving sons or their offspring. One son, Edmund Dennis Hacker, had married in Canterbury, had a family, and then disappeared. When his children claimed their share under John Hacker's will, the judge in the Chancery Court had to disentangle a series of uncertainties: when did Matilda die? was Edmund dead or alive? if dead, did he die before or after Matilda? He found in favour of Edmund's children¹².

⁸ Manchester Evening News 26 May 1879

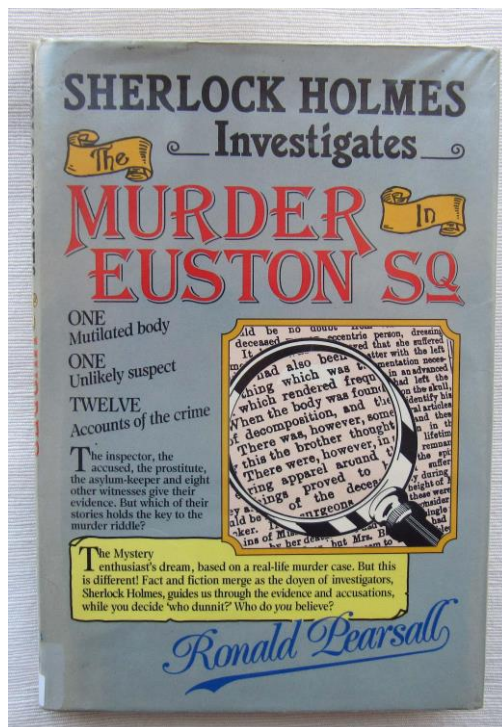
⁹ a full transcript of the trial proceedings - all 25 pages - is available on line at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>

¹⁰ Times 6 June 1879

¹¹ Nottingham Evening Post 9 May 1879

¹² Whitstable Times 1 May 1880

Interest in the case still surfaces from time to time. The barrister Montagu Williams prosecuted in the Bastendorff perjury case, and included a chapter on Matilda and Hannah in his two volume autobiography (1890)¹³. The Welsh mystic and writer Edward Machen retold it in his book of essays *Dreads and Drolls* (1926)¹⁴ and more recently the semi-fictional version Sherlock Holmes investigates the murder in Euston Square (1989)¹⁵ has appeared. If nothing else, the case has cast interesting light on the life of one local eccentric¹⁶.



interest in the Euston Square murders lingers on

¹³ Williams, Montagu (1890) *Leaves of a life*

¹⁴ Machen, Arthur (1926) *Dreads and Drolls*

¹⁵ Pearsall, Ronald (1989) *Sherlock Holmes investigates the murder in Euston Square* (David & Charles)

¹⁶ two of Matilda's co-lateral descendants went on to achieve some success in London as artists - her brother Edward Hacker (1812-1905) who gave evidence at the trial, as a line engraver of sporting prints; and his son Arthur Hacker (1858-1919) who painted religious subjects