

Historian uncovers a real-life Dickensian tale of prostitution and suspected murder

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Research by a legal historian at the University of Warwick has uncovered a real-life 19th century couple whose tragic tale could have been taken straight out of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.

While researching the extent of cohabitation in the [19th century](#), Professor Rebecca Probert came across the story of a couple whose fate almost mirrors that of the Dickens' character Bill Sykes and his prostitute girlfriend Nancy.

According to a detailed 1850 survey of the inhabitants of Neithrop, Banbury, Susan Owen and William 'Badger' Willson were living together. One local history stated that she was a prostitute and he was 'a debased specimen of immorality who subsisted for years on the wages of her infamy, and in 1858 was convicted of murdering her'.

Professor Probert said: "This immediately evoked for me the characters of Bill Sykes and Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. Another mid-Victorian couple who lived together without any question of being married, and whose relationship ended in a brutal murder."

However, when Professor Probert began to investigate the story of Susan Owen and 'Badger' Willson, she found that all was not as it appeared.

She said: "When I did a bit more digging I found that the story was not entirely as this survey had suggested. Susan Owen did meet her death in 1858 after an evening in one of local beer houses. Whether her death

was caused directly by Willson is rather murky. A lot of witnesses say they were leaving the pub together and she was heard to fall over several times in the courtyard. Whether she fell because she was pushed or was so drunk she couldn't stand up, doesn't appear.

“The jury was not convinced it was murder and Wilson was acquitted. He never married, two years later we find him living as a boarder and then twenty years later we find him a pauper in the workhouse.”

Professor Probert has been researching the extent of unmarried couples living together in Victorian London. She looked at Neithrop in Banbury because it had been claimed co-habitation was common there and because of the quality of the information available.

She said: “I looked at Neithrop because there is a lot of information, there were two surveys carried out in the 1850s that supplement the census material from 1851. Some historical sources claimed that 5 out of 8 houses in one street were occupied by co-habiting couples. My investigations have found this was not the case.’

‘There was a general assumption that the ‘poor, criminal and irreligious’ chose to live together rather than enter into marriage. That there were a large number of these communities in Neithrop, but nothing to suggest that co-habitation was rife there. In fact it was extremely rare in Victorian Britain. But there were certainly parallels between some communities in Neithrop and the less salubrious parts of London that Dickens describes so powerfully in novels such as Oliver Twist.”

More information: Professor Probert's paper, ‘A Banbury Story: Cohabitation and Marriage Among the Victorian Poor in Notorious Neithrop’ is available at papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1986019

Provided by University of Warwick

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