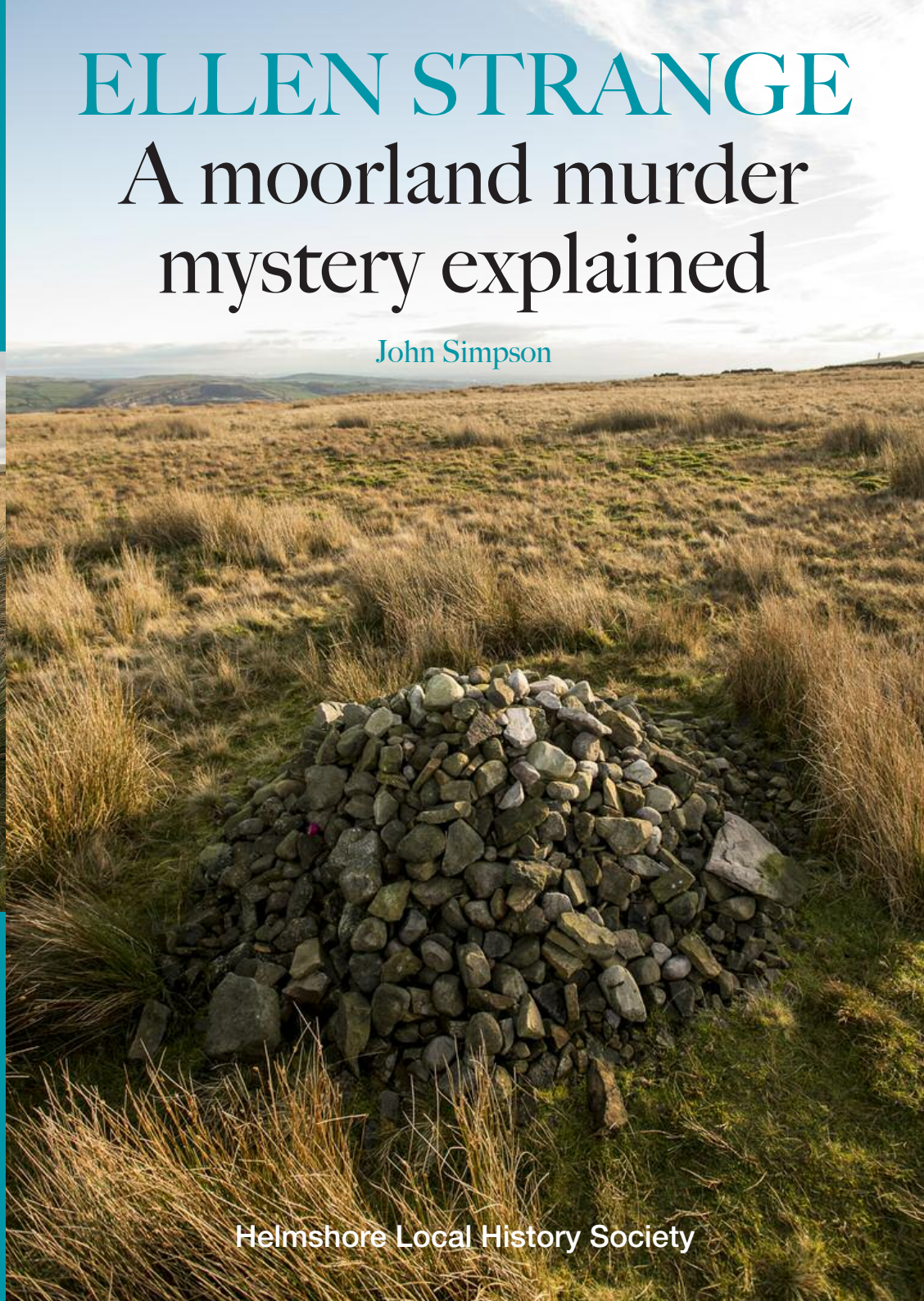
The ELLEN STRANGE Story

ELLEN STRANGE

A moorland murder mystery explained

John Simpson



Helmshore Local History Society

Helmshore Local History Society would like to thank Unite North West Region, Unite Bolton Branch and Bolton Trades Council for raising the funds to pay for this booklet as well as Doug Pouch at Unite for the layout of the work.

The original initiative to reprint the booklet came as a result of the Unite Rebel Road project that celebrates trade union and labour movement heroes that have been publicity recognised in one form or another such as a plaque, statue or building named after them.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE Society wishes to thank all who have helped in the search for the truth about Ellen Strange. We are particularly grateful for the assistance given by Professor J.H. Baker of Cambridge; Mr J. Broderick of Accrington; Mr. G.A. Foster of London; Mrs. R. Hirst of Haslingden; Mrs A.Morton of the Public Record Office (now the National Archives), London; Mr. A.G. Rose of Manchester; Mr J.Ward of Haslingden and Mr T.Woodcock of London.

We would also like to thank the following for their help in making possible the printing of the second edition of this booklet – Martin McMulkin and Jim Mowatt of Unite, Linda Charnock, Mark Harvey and Mark Metcalf.

First published 1989
Revised edition published 2015
ISBN 978-0-906881-24-8

GENERATIONS of Helmshore people have heard the story of Ellen Strange and taken the old road onto the moor above Robin Hood's Well to see the pile of stones, which is said to mark the spot where the young woman from Hawkshaw Lane was murdered. Details of the crime have long been forgotten, and local documents in which they would have been recorded have not survived. What follows explains and dates the Ellen Strange story exactly, and also shows how facts can be replaced by fiction and how a straightforward and simple tale can be transformed into a colourful but misleading legend.

The traditional story

Though the first edition of the six-inch Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1844 – 47 marks the cairn and calls it simply 'Ellen Strange', the first written account of the story did not appear for another thirty years or so. It took the form of a poem by John Fawcett Skelton in his book *Hawkshaw Lane and Other Poems* published in Manchester in 1872. Skelton was a native of Bolton and a member of the town council there. He was a man of private means and, as his obituary in the *Bolton Chronicle* puts it, of 'a literary and poetic turn'.[1] For a time in the 1870s he lived in Hawkshaw Lane. His poem recounts the Ellen Strange story thus:

'But ere we bid the "Hill" a fond farewell,
List, and I will a painful story tell,
While Love and Murder and Remorse exchange
Sad places in the tale of Ellen Strange:
A country maid whose heart was full of truth,
At "Ash-farm" passing guileless days of youth.
Spotless as winter's snow her woman's fame, -
Her daily actions free from worldly blame;
And, till the light of love shone in her eyes,
No blither lassie liv'd beneath the skies...
A man in form, but devil from the womb,
A fiend on this side, and beyond the tomb!
Such was the "packman" who, by Satan's aid,
Won the fair love of this misguided maid.
Though Ellen had been brought her love to own,
Ne'er had she met her lover all alone,
Her guardian angel bade her answer, "No",
When oft and o'er again he wish'd it so,
Feeling instinctively a kind of dread
Of some misfortune hanging o'er her head.
A manly friend mistrustful of the Scot,
Always saw Ellen to the trysting-spot,
Then kept aloof, yet watch'd the wooing pair, -
'Twas Ellen's wish, so all was right and fair.

[2] *Bolton Chronicle* 24th April 1897.

At length, through love's reproach or cruel threat
Alas! She came alone, – and so they met!
And so they met! But how shall I proceed?
My muse is loth to tell so dark a deed;
And so they met! in their embrace of blood,
And murder'd Ellen fac'd a frowning God!
The villain fled across the ghostly heath,
O'er "Flaxmoss", and the "Red Brook" stretch'd beneath,
And red and reeking truly was its wave
To him who hurried to a murderer's grave!
Yon, where the chisell'd pavement lengthy lies,
O'er which the woman-killer, panting, hies,
Tradition says (and seldom she's a liar),
At every step his foot struck 'venging fire!
No further will we track the man of blood,
But leave him to his conscience – and to God!
A heap of stones still marks the fatal spot,
To tempt aside the curious stranger's foot;
Not pick'd and carted there in careless loads
From off the heather and the mountain-roads,
But one by one by trembling fingers laid
Down to the memory of this hapless maid;
And to this present, wandering lovers, dear,
Still drop a stony tribute, and a tear.'

Skelton's references to 'the Scot' can be explained by the fact that the old North Country term for a pedlar or packman was 'a Scotchman.' Ash Farm, Ellen's supposed home, was in Hawkshaw Lane (its site is near a bungalow called Ashfield) and no doubt Skelton heard the story of the murder while living in the vicinity.

We shall never know how widespread the tale of Ellen Strange was be-fore the poem was written, but within a few years of its publication other, more detailed, accounts appeared. The *Bacup Times* for 21st August 1875 reported the Saturday excursion of the Bacup Literary Club and included a brief reference to the cairn and its story:

' ... The party proceeded in the direction of Stake Lane, passing on the way a cairn of stones which has a romantic history. It is related that this spot was formerly the scene of a murder, committed more than a century ago by a young man upon his sweetheart, a young woman by the name of Jane [sic] Strange, whom he decoyed to this solitary place ... He was apprehended at Haslingden and afterwards tried at Lancaster; and on being found guilty, he was sentenced to be hung and afterwards gibbeted on the very spot where the horrible crime was committed. It is said that the remains of the gibbet were to be seen there up to about 90 years ago.'

One of the excursionists was Henry Stephenson, local historian and headmaster of Haslingden church school. On 27th November, 1878 he noted another account of the story in his diary:

'Told by Wm. Warburton (Billy Guy) that a man was gibbeted near the Hare and Hounds on Town Green for the murder of his sweetheart. He was a native of Stonefold and she of Edgworth. They met at Haslingden Fair and were seen together at the Bull's Head and the "Stoop Ale House" (White Horse) and also in Deardengate, but she was not heard of any more. Her parents coming to look for her, went to Stonefold but he denied having seen her. They went to Bolton and obtained a blood-hound which being brought along the road from Haslingden to Edgworth by Flaxmoss and Stake Lane, scented her body beneath a pile of stones on the moor a little above Robin Hood's Well. The murderer confessed his guilt, was hanged, and then gibbeted near the Hare and Hounds and afterwards on Bull Hill where the body remained for some time. The post and chains have been seen by several persons now living. The place on the moor where her body was found is still called Ellen Strange's Grave.'

In a list of old Haslingden place names which Stephenson compiled he wrote under the heading 'Stoop House':

'The old name given to the White Horse on account of the two pillars in front. It was so known at the time when a woman named Ellen Strange, returning from Haslingden Fair with her sweetheart over the moors towards Edgworth, he murdered her and buried (her body) on the moor. Overcome with fear, the credulous say he made a compact with the Evil One to aid him. So he returned, and so rapid was his speed that 'his clogs struck fire every step he took as he came up Flaxmoss.' He was taken a prisoner at the "Stoop House" and being brought to justice he was at last obliged to confess his guilt. He was hanged at Lancaster and his body was gibbeted on Bull Hill. Ann Holden, now living at Flaxmoss, says she remembers seeing the post. The place where she was murdered is still known as Ellen Strange's grave, and is so marked on the Ordnance map. It can yet be found, because the spot is marked by a pile of stones to which people passing used to add one more.'

These various accounts combine to form the story of Ellen Strange. Since the late 19th century it has been retold many times in local newspapers, pamphlets and magazines and in 1986 it reached a national readership in *Secret Britain* published by the A.A. This version of the tale repeated an

error which had previously appeared elsewhere. 'The White Horse' (Stoop Ale House) was not the pub of that name in Helmshore, but was a much older pub in the Top o' th' Town area of Haslingden. It was demolished in the 1930s. A photograph in the pamphlet *The Tragedy of Ellen Strange* purporting to show 'the old White Horse alehouse at which the murderer was arrested' is actually Old Rocks farm on Alden Road on the site now occupied by 'Alden Lea.'. The mix up over the two public houses is, in fact, only one of several ways in which the whole business has been dogged by confusion. For example, one Sunday afternoon in the years before the First World War a party of schoolboys from Helmshore visited the cairn and moved the whole thing some distance across the moor.

The White Horse (Stoop Alehouse), Haslingden

In the summer of 1978, a ceremony took place at the site as part of Rossendale Carnival Day. At dusk on 24th June, a group of people gathered on the moor to watch a re-enactment of the murder. The cairn was sur-rounded by poles bearing white cloths painted with words such as 'Grave', 'Devil' 'Snow' 'Blood' and 'Tears'. There were also two giant figures of Ellen and her murderer and a newly-erected stone column carved with a representation of the victim. The stone was intended as a permanent memorial to the events which had taken place on the same spot. Within a few years, however, it was adding to the general confusion by being mistaken for an ancient way-stone bearing a carving of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child.[2]

One of the organisers of the event was quoted in local newspapers as saying that it was intended as 'a sort of exorcism of the horror of the story', but added that it would 'not be anything grotesque.[3] Nevertheless, it brought criticism from some villagers and councillors and prompted members of Helmshore Local History Society to look again at the story. The resulting quest was to last on and off for ten years.

The search for the truth

THE most difficult problem facing the searchers in 1978 was that nobody knew when the murder had taken place. Richard Hawkin and Patrick Stephens, two local historians writing in the 1920s, suggested 1735 as the year in which Ellen Strange was murdered. They based their calculations on the fact that people living in the 1870s said that they could remember a gibbet post standing. They suggested that these people had seen the post in their youth in the early 19th century and that if it had been made of oak it could have been standing for some considerable time before that.[4]

Another suggested date for the murder was 1784 and it was while searching local parish registers around this date that the first real discovery was made. The burial registers for Holcombe parish church contain the following entry:

1781 Widdow Strange from Ash, March 4

This at least confirmed that the Strange family were living at Ash farm in the 18th century and there was a real possibility that Widow Strange was the murdered woman's mother.

A further possible clue came in the form of an entry in the baptismal register of the Presbyterian Chapel, Dundee Lane, Holcombe. On 11th April 1728 the christening took place of a girl whose name is given as Ellen Strange Royland from Rakefoot. The word 'Royland' has been added to the entry, although in the same hand. No explanation has been found for the child apparently having two surnames, unless it was meant to indicate that she was illegitimate. If this was the murdered girl, however, it seemed reasonable to assume that the crime had taken place in the late 1740s or 1750s.

[2] Howard May 'Jumbles to Holcombe, via Helmshore', *Lancashire Life,* (August 1985), 43.
[3] *Haslingden Borough News* 28th April 1978; *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* 20th April 1978.
[4] Ann Holden who, according to Henry Stephenson, could remember seeing the remains of the post appears at Flaxmoss in the 1881 census and was born in about 1818.

Using this as a starting point, several volunteers tackled the records of the Palatinate of Lancaster for those decades. They were, of course, seeking a woman called Strange, but no one of that name figured in any document. As a County Palatine, Lancashire had its own judicial system which produced its own set of records. They include assize rolls, depositions, indictments and the so-called 'minute books', which are of the nature of an index to the business conducted at each session of the assizes. The depositions and indictments for the 1740s and 1750s contained no references to the case, nor did the minute books which were, in fact, checked for the whole of the 18th century. This was discouraging. Was the story simply a folk tale after all? Had the events happened much earlier that we thought? These questions remained unanswered until the autumn of 1988 when it became possible to make a systematic search of the records of all coroners' inquests held in Lancashire in the 18th century. Among these dusty parchments lay the answer to the mystery.

The true story

ON 28th January 1761 a group of fourteen 'good and lawful men' from the townships of Tottington Higher End, Tottington Lower End, Walmersley and Haslingden were summoned to Stake, a farm perched on the edge of Holcombe Moor not far from what was then the road to Holcombe. Also present was Simon Dearden, coroner and attorney-at-law from Rochdale. Their task was to hold an inquest on the body of a woman who had been murdered two days previously not far away on the moor. With the inquest completed, the body was carried down and buried in the churchyard at Holcombe. The woman's name was Ellen Broadley. The inquest jury declared that her husband, John, 'not having God before his Eyes but being moved by the instigation of the Devil' had assaulted his wife 'at the first hour in the night' on 26th January. They went on to say that he 'violently, feloniously, voluntarily and of His Malice forethought Struck, kicked, Strangled and squeesed, Sufficated and Mortally wounded' his wife and that she had 'instantly dyed' from her wounds.[5]

The ruins of Stake Farm, where the inquest was held in January 1761

[5] The National Archives. PL26/291, County Palatine of Lancaster, Coroners' Inquisitions.

John Broadley was a labourer from Clayton-le-Moors. He and his wife had probably been married for at least ten years at the time of her murder. Among the records of the Quarter Sessions now in the Lancashire Archives there is a document dated 18th September 1751 which ordered the removal of John Broadley and Ellen, his wife, from Clayton-le-Moors to Huncoat, the place of their last legal settlement. This was done so that, as paupers, they would not become a charge on the township of Clayton. Whether or not this order was effective, John had certainly moved back to Clayton by the beginning of 1761. Following the murder and the discovery of the body, he was arrested and taken to Lancaster castle to await trial at the Lent assizes 1761.

Broadley was indicted for the murder of his wife by Lawrence Elton, one of the constables for the township of Tottington Higher End. Of course, there are no eye-witness accounts of the trail, but the procedures were so standardised that we can get a good idea of the scene in the court-room. First of all, the accused was called to the bar and addressed by the clerk: 'John Broadley, hold up thy hand.' The clerk then read out the indictment and asked 'How sayest thou, John Broadley, art thou guilty of this felony as it is laid in this indictment whereof thou standest indicted or not guilty?' 'Not guilty', came the reply.' Culprit, how wilt thou by tried?' said the clerk. 'By God and the country', Broadley replied.

At this point, the prisoner would have had any irons or shackles he was wearing removed for the remainder of the trial and the jury was sworn in. Most of the twelve men who were present for the Broadley case were from villages around Preston, the two exceptions coming from near Ormskirk and Darwen. After they had taken the oath, the actual trial could begin.
The prosecution of the case may have been in the hands of Fletcher Norton who was King's Attorney and Serjeant-at-Law for the County Palatine of Lancaster and whose name appears in the records of the trial. He was known by the nickname of 'Sir Bullface Doublefees' and it was said of him that 'he has great knowledge and excellent judgement, but his patience is not equal to the other qualities.'[6]

Several witnesses were called to give evidence against Broadley. They were Lawrence Elton, the Tottington Higher End constable; Roger Welsh from Tottington Lower End; John Rothwell from Holcombe Head (a farm only a short distance across the fields from Ash farm); Roger Booth, a doctor from Tottington who had perhaps examined the body; Mary, wife of Joshua Smith; and Alice, wife of Henry Ellison, a Haslingden innkeeper. These witnesses took the oath and gave their evidence in open court. It was not the practice to write down such evidence and we will never know what they said. All that we can be sure of is that their evidence was insufficient to convict Broadley. Given the time and place of the murder, there were probably no eye-witnesses, a fact which may have influenced the jury in returning a verdict of not guilty. On his acquittal, Broadley was made to kneel and the judge pronounced him discharged.

[6] Cokayne, G.E. and others, *The Complete Peerage,* vol VI (1926), p.84.

Acquittals for murder because of a lack of evidence were fairly common, and a similar case had happened in Rossendale fourteen years earlier. In June, 1747, Thomas Howorth of Wolfenden attacked his wife, Sarah. She lived for a few days after the assault, but eventually died from her wounds. Howorth fled, but was apprehended and brought to trial. Like John Broadley, however, he was acquitted. After his trial, John Broadley disappears into history, but he probably outlived his wife by only a few years: a John Broadley of Clayton-le-Moors was buried at Church Kirk on Christmas Eve 1768.[7]

Folk tale and history

THE traditional account of the murder of 'Ellen Strange' and what actually happened are so dissimilar that it is at first difficult to understand how the two stories fit together. Can they be reconciled? It seems reasonably certain that Ellen Strange lived at Ash farm with her parents in the first half of the 18th century. In some way she met and married John Broadley. An exhaustive search of local parish registers has failed to produce a record of this marriage, but there are gaps in the documents. In addition, since the couple were married before the passing of Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act in 1753, they could have been married in a Presbyterian Meeting House. The marriage registers for Dundee Lane chapel and the Presbyterian chapel in Silver Street, Bury, have not survived, if they ever existed.

As a married couple, John and Ellen Broadley were poor. Indeed the inquest jury declared that Broadley 'had not nor yet hath any Goods or Chattells, Lands or Tenements.' They appear to have lived an itinerant life perhaps moving around to look for work, and may even have lived briefly in Stonefold. (There were certainly Broadleys in Baxenden in the 1750s and in Stonefold itself in the 1820s). This would account for the 'fact' in the traditional story that 'Billy' came from Stonefold.

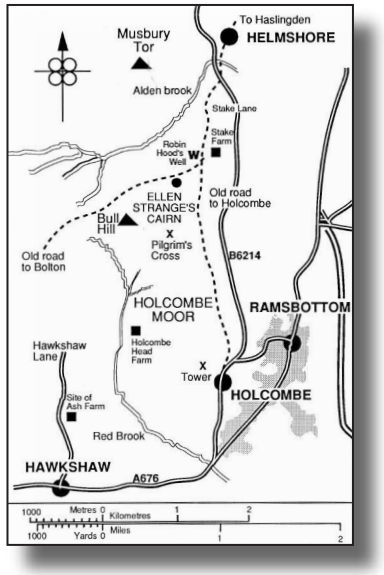
In January, 1761, Ellen was murdered on Holcombe Moor. When Hawkin and Stephens investigated the case in the 1920s, they were told that Ellen was murdered at Stake farm. This is clearly a faint memory of the fact that the inquest was held there. John Broadley was tried for the murder of his wife, but was found not guilty. As we have seen, one of the witnesses was Alice, wife of Henry Ellison, innkeeper. It has not proved possible to discover exactly which public house in Haslingden was kept by Henry, but there is a strong possibility that it was either the Bull's Head or the White Horse where, according to tradition, Ellen was last seen alive.

The inquest jury noted that the murder was committed 'at the first hour of the night', an expression meaning the period immediately after midnight, not the first hour of darkness. Had the couple been seen earlier in Haslingden, possibly quarrelling? Perhaps Ellen left the town on her own to make her way to her parents' farm at Hawkshaw? The moon was near to full in late January 1761 and the night must have been reasonably clear for anyone to set out across the desolate moor. Was she overtaken by her husband, who may have been the worse for drink? The precise time of the murder prompts another train of thought: that Broadley raised the alarm. If he was the killer, we can imagine the choice he faced on Holcombe Moor. He could try to escape and bring suspicion on himself or he could claim that he discovered his wife's lifeless body. This was a story which could not be disproved and it may well have saved Broadley from the gallows.

At the site of the murder, Ellen's family or local people raised a pile of stones to her memory. It is possible they first marked the spot with a stake, which was much later thought to be the remains of a gibbet. The practice of adding another stone to the cairn whenever it was visited ensured that the crime and its victim were not forgotten.

But why 'Ellen Strange's grave' rather than 'Ellen Broadley's grave'? To local people, who had perhaps known Ellen since childhood, she would have been Ellen Strange to the end of her days in spite of having been married for more than ten years. And so the name Ellen Strange rather than Ellen Broadley has come down to us.

This, then, is the true story of Ellen Strange. There was no young girl murdered by her sweetheart, but instead a married woman apparently beaten to death by her husband. Though the public records have given us the main features of the story, many details are unlikely ever to be found. Ellen Strange's grave guards some of its secrets still.



[7] Marie Ball, who has written a history of the Broadley family, suggests that this is the burial of John Broadley's father, also called John. She goes on to say that the son returned to Clayton-le-Moors, set up in business as a grocer, married for a second time and lived until 1813.

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