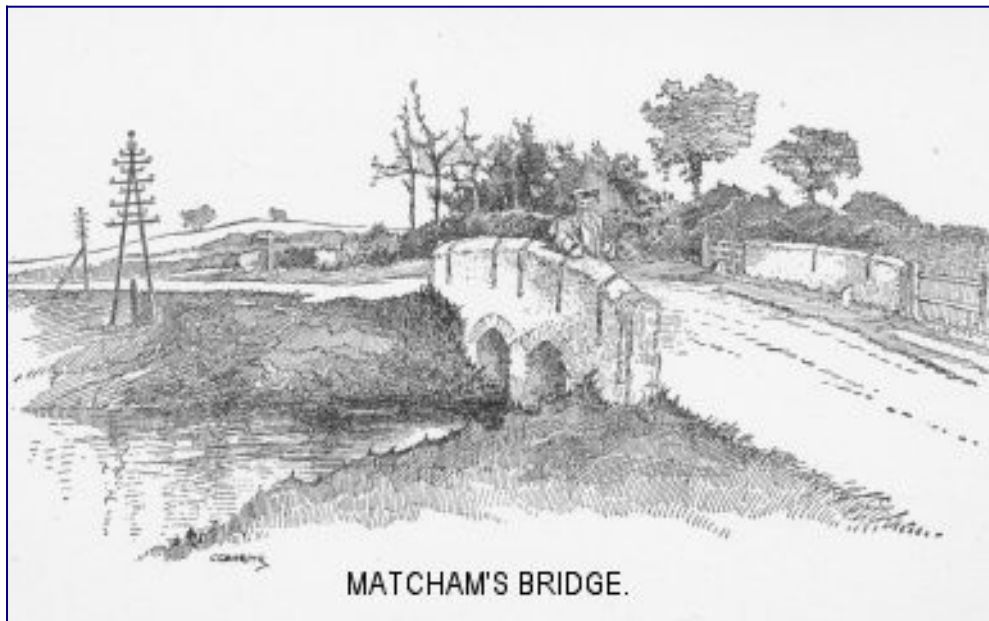


Something over a mile distant from Brampton cross-roads, and passing over two little bridges, we come to a third bridge, spanning one of the lazy rivulets that trickle aimlessly through the flats. It is just an old red-brick bridge, braced with iron and edged with timber; an innocent-looking, although dull and lonely spot, with the water trickling along in its deeply worn bed, and no sound save the occasional splash made by a frightened water-rat. Yet this is "Matcham's Bridge," and the scene of an infamous murder.



Matcham's Bridge, spanning the little river Wey, obtained its name from the murder of a drummer-boy here by Gervase (or Jarvis) Matcham, on the 19th of August 1780. The murder was a remarkable one, and is made additionally memorable by the after-career of the murderer, whose bloody deed and subsequent confession, six years later, form the subject of the *Dead Drummer*, one of Barham's *Ingoldsby Legends*.

Gervase Matcham, the son of a farmer living at Frodingham, in Yorkshire, had a varied and adventurous career. When in his twelfth year, he ran away from home and became a jockey. In the course of this employment he was sent to Russia in charge of some horses presented by the Duke of Northumberland to the Empress, and returning to London well supplied with money, dissipated it all in evil courses. He then shipped as a sailor on board the *Medway* man-of-war, but after a short experience of fighting, managed to desert. He had no sooner landed in England than he was seized by one of the prowling pressgangs that then scoured the seaports, and was shipped aboard the *Ariadne*, fitting out on an expedition to destroy the pirate, Paul Jones. Succeeding in an attempt to escape when off Yarmouth, he enlisted in the 13th Regiment of Foot, and deserting again, near Chatham, set out to tramp through London to York, visiting Huntingdon on the way. The 49th Regiment was then recruiting in the district, and Matcham promptly enlisted in it.

From Huntingdon, on the 19th of August 1780, he was sent to Major Reynolds at Diddington, to draw some subsistence-money, amounting to between £6 and £7. With him was a drummer-boy, Benjamin Jones, aged about sixteen years, the son of the recruiting sergeant. The boy having drawn the money, they returned along the high road, Matcham drinking on the way. Instead of turning off to Huntingdon, Matcham induced the boy to go on with him in the direction of

Alconbury, and picking a quarrel with him at the bridge, seized him and cut his throat, making off with the money. He then fled across country to the nearest seaport, and shipped again to sea. For six years he continued in the Navy and saw hard fighting under Rodney and Hood, being at last paid off H.M.S. *Sampson* at Plymouth, on June 15, 1786. From Plymouth he set out with a messmate—one John Shepherd—to walk along the Exeter Road to London. Near the “Woodyates Inn” they were overtaken one afternoon by a thunderstorm in which Matcham startled his shipmate by his abject terror of some unseen apparition. Eventually he confessed his crime to Shepherd, and begged his companion to hand him over to the nearest magistrate, so that Justice might be satisfied. He was accordingly committed at Salisbury, and, inquiries as to the truth of his confession having been made, he was brought to trial at Huntingdon, found guilty, and executed on the 2nd of August 1786, his body being afterwards hanged in chains on Alconbury Hill.

The summit of this convenient Golgotha is the place where the North Road and the Great North Road adjust their differences, and proceed by one route to the North. Not a very terrible hill, after all, despite the way in which it figures in the letters and diaries of old travellers; but nowadays a very lonely place, although it is the meeting-point of two main roads and that of a branch one. It was once different indeed, and the great “Wheatsheaf” inn and posting-house, which stood a hundred yards or so away from the junction, used commonly to send out thirty pairs of post-horses p. 122a day. This establishment was kept in its prime by John Warsop, who lived long enough to see his business ruined by railways. Let no one imagine the “Wheatsheaf” public-house, standing where the roads meet, to be the representative of that old posting-house. Face north, and you will see a private house of considerable size standing on the east side of the road, behind a hedge and lawn. Not a beautiful house; in fact, an ugly house of a dingy whitey-buff brick, the colour of pastry taken out of the oven before it is properly baked. Approaching nearer, it will be observed that this building is now divided into two private residences. This was once the “Wheatsheaf.” In the bygone days it possessed a semicircular approach from the road, and afforded all the year round, and round the clock of every day and night, a busy scene; with the postboys, whose next turn-out it was, sleeping with spur on heel, ready to mount and away at a minute’s notice, north, south, east, or west. Those times and manners are as absolutely vanished as though they never had existed, and even although there are yet living those who remember the old “Wheatsheaf” of their youthful days, perhaps not one wayfarer in a hundred has any idea of that once busy era on Alconbury Hill. How many of all those who pass this way have ever noticed that pathetic relic of the “Wheatsheaf’s” bygone prosperity, the old post from which its sign used to hang? It is still to be seen, by those who know where to look for it, facing the road, a venerable and decrepit relic, now thickly covered with ivy, and somewhat screened from the casual glance by the shrubs and trees growing close beside it.

Travellers coming south could have a choice of routes to London from Alconbury Hill, as the elaborate old milestone still standing at the parting of the ways indicates, showing sixty-four miles by way of Huntingdon, Royston, and Ware, and four miles longer by the way we have come. This monumental milestone, now somewhat dilapidated, railed round, p. 124and with some forlorn-looking wall-flowers growing inside the enclosure, is a striking object, situated at a peculiarly impressive spot, where the left-hand route by Huntingdon is seen going off on the level to a vanishing-point lost in the distant haze, rather than by any dip or curve of the road to right or left; the right-hand road diving down the hill to Alconbury Weston and Alconbury at its foot.

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