

Part of the Rector's sermon, 4 December 2011

The flowers in church today have been provided from the USA by David Wages, who wanted to mark the 200th anniversary this week of the **Ratcliff Highway murders** - one of the more gruesome bits of our local history. On 8 December 1811, just across the road, near the Old Rose pub, Timothy Marr, his wife Celia, their young son Timothy and their shop boy James Gowan were murdered in their home; and twelve days later three more murders followed. This produced a major panic; in this area, theft was a common crime in those days, but murder was not, and those that happened were on the streets. All of a sudden, people didn't feel safe in their own homes, and the local and national press had a field-day. The Marrs were buried in our churchyard. From time to time people come looking for the headstone, but it has long since gone - though we do have the wording of the inscription: it begins *Stop, mortal, stop as you pass by / and view the grave wherein doth lie / a father, mother and a son / whose earthly course was shortly run.*



[full text on our website at <<http://www.stgite.org.uk/media/ratcliffhighway.html>>]

More gruesome still, John Williams, the man accused of killing them took his own life in prison the night before he came to trial. (It probably wasn't him at all - they didn't have a proper police force in those days, and it was all based on hearsay evidence.) The Home Secretary ordered that he should be given a suicide's burial, with his body dragged through the streets on a cart and dumped in a shallow grave at a crossroads, with a stake through the heart. This was at the junction of Cannon Street Road and Cable Street - where his skeleton was discovered some years later when they dug up the road to lay a gas main. (A law was passed in 1823 forbidding this barbaric practice, though it provided that suicides should be buried at night, and with no funeral service read.) [more details on our website at <<http://www.stgite.org.uk/media/cablestreet.html#marr>>]

Much has been written about the Ratcliff Highway murders - not least by Baroness P.D. James, who a couple of years ago was interviewed in the panelled room at church for a tv programme about The Highway. Only last week a reconstruction of the burial of John Williams featured in the opening sequences of Tony Robinson's new series on Channel 4. It managed to be sensationalist and jokey at the same time, and the programme contains inaccuracies about Christian teaching; but it is a reminder that the events of December 1811 remain in the public eye.

The Litany, which I say every Friday at morning prayer, includes the petitions

*From sins of body and mind; from the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil, Good Lord deliver us;
From famine and disaster, from violence, murder and dying unprepared, Good Lord, deliver us.*

These are very much the traditional Advent themes of which we were reminded last week: heaven and hell, death and judgement. We're grateful to our American friend for helping us to mark this anniversary, and as we remember the Marr family let's pause and pray for all those who in own day are victims of murder and violence; all who are driven in despair to suicide; and all who are the victims of miscarriages of justice

*In all times of sorrow, in all times of joy; in the hour of death, and at the day of judgement,
Good Lord, deliver us.*