

# *A Murder in a Meadow*

by Melanie Winterbotham

On Wednesday the 30 July 1823 itinerant labourers John Arters of Oakshade (Oxshott) in Surrey with brothers William and George Aldridge of Monks Risborough<sup>1</sup>, were mowing a small field adjoining the George Inn. John Arters and William Aldridge mowed as a team, with George on his own. Arters had only known the brothers a fortnight and they had not quarrelled in that time. The work had been interrupted by a heavy shower of rain, and the men had gone off for a drink before resuming at 7.00 in the evening.

It would appear that they were being paid a piece rate and had not completed the field. George Aldridge became very irritated and turned on his brother: "Blast your eyes, you told master I could not mow no more than an old woman, and you know that I can mow your legs off." William replied "You cannot mow, nor keep up in company." George then shouted that he could mow his legs off and "if you don't get out of my way, I'll cut your scythe to pieces." He took a swipe at William, but missed and sank his scythe into a tree; he then hit William's scythe twice; William then dropped his scythe, and a third swipe cut right into his side. William lifted his smock frock to show a large bleeding wound and managed to walk to the house; George started chopping at the grass, and then sank his scythe into a tree.

There were witnesses to this awful event. William Johnson, servant to Mrs Wilshin was working in his mistress's garden at the Old House<sup>2</sup> which adjoined the field and had run up to the quickset hedge when he heard a quarrel. He had heard George Aldridge whetting his scythe and swear to William that he could mow much better than he could; he could never mow; that he could mow his legs up. He cut at his brother's scythe and the scythes made 'a great rattling together'; the third man called on them to stop or there would be an accident. William Martin of Ruislip had been in his garden opposite the field, about 100 yards away; he heard the commotion and saw the attack.

Charles Martin, farmer,<sup>3</sup> was passing by the fence of the orchard, and heard an argument, but only caught the words of George Aldridge "Don't I always keep up with you?" before he threatened to chop his brother's legs off; William had held up his scythe in defence. Martin called to George Barker of Ruislip, overseer of the Grand Junction Canal Company,<sup>4</sup> who was coming out of the back of the house, that murder had been committed. Barker hastened over and found George in a state of derangement, cutting at the grass. When Barker told him he was likely to have caused the death of his brother, William replied "Damn you, I'll serve you the same". Barker calmed him down, reassuring him that it might not be that bad, and persuaded him to come to the house. Barker called on the assistance of Richard March who was in the house, and who took the scythe from George.

The constable was called, and took George into custody. Mr Barlow Slade, assistant to Mr James, surgeon of Uxbridge, was there within the hour, but he found William in a bad way, with most of his intestines hanging out, and with a wound stretching from his spine on the left side to his abdomen. Mr Slade carefully replaced the intestines and sewed the wound, but infection set in and William died in the early hours of Friday morning.

An inquest was held at The George Inn. Thomas Stirling was the coroner. A jury at Uxbridge gave a verdict of wilful murder, and a warrant was issued for George Aldridge's commitment to Newgate Jail. The case then went to the Old Bailey on the 10 September, where the verdict was Manslaughter. George was imprisoned for only six months.

From his stay in Newgate, we know a bit about George.<sup>5</sup> He was 5' 7" tall, of fresh complexion, with light brown hair and grey eyes, and 'stoutish'. How his family coped with the fratricide is hard to imagine, but George did return to Monks Risborough where he married Mary Terry in 1824, and died in 1878. He remained a labourer and Mary was described in censuses as a washerwoman and a lace maker.

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- <sup>1</sup> Monks Risborough is written in the St Martin's burial register as William's parish, and George was baptised there, aged 3, in 1801.
- <sup>2</sup> Grace, widow of Jason Wilshin (1759-1819) had retired from Manor Farm to the Old House in Bury Street. Her son Daniel continued to run Manor Farm.
- <sup>3</sup> Probably of Southcote Farm, which he was known to have been leasing in 1803 (Eileen M Bowlt, *The Goodliest Place in Middlesex*, Hillingdon 1989), and where his widow Mary resided in 1841. William Martin is probably his son, who is running the farm in 1841, having presumably taken it over at Charles's death in 1829.
- <sup>4</sup> George Barker looked after the Canal Company's reservoir, now Ruislip Lido.
- <sup>5</sup> HO77: Home Office: *Newgate Prison calendar 1782-1853*.

## Sources

*Morning Chronicle* - Wednesday 06 August 1823

*Morning Post* - Wednesday 06 August 1823

*Morning Advertiser* - Saturday 13 September 1823

*Staffordshire Advertiser* - Saturday 20 September 1823

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We also prepare exhibitions from time to time at Manor Farm House, for which we need material, and would be grateful then for assistance with preparation.

Eileen Bowlt and other researchers will provide support and guidance, and you can assist with a group project or carry out your own research.

If you would like to have a go, or just see what is involved, please contact

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