THE YORKSHIRE WITCH

THE LIFE & TRIAL OF MARY BATEMAN

SUMMER STREVENS

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At the risk of opening these acknowledgements after the fashion of a scant bibliography, I would firstly like to express my particular indebtedness to the anonymous author (whom I have tentatively identified in the last chapter of this book) who first undertook to set down the only contemporary account of Mary Bateman's life and exploits, shortly after her execution, now over two hundred years ago. Understandably, I have drawn heavily from the volubly titled *The Extraordinary life and character of Mary Bateman The Yorkshire Witch traced from the earliest thefts of her infancy through a most awful course of crimes and murders till her execution at the castle of York, on the 20th March, 1809* – though this must be considered as something of a sensationalised and indeed unsubstantiated account in parts. Necessarily circumnavigating the moralising tone so typical of the age, the book nevertheless proved an invaluable source, as did William Knipe's *Criminal Chronology of York Castle*, the full title of which is as tumescent as the former publication, and though censorious in damningly equivalent measure, nonetheless provided many valuable insights in the research of this book.

In addition, though largely borrowing from *The Extraordinary Life*, the second volume of *The Criminal Recorder: or, Biographical sketches of Notorious Public Characters*, again anonymously written in 1815 by a 'Student of the Inner Temple' provided some further pertinent particulars, as did the colourful, albeit brief, account of Mary's life and crimes as reported by *The Newgate Calendar*, (the hugely popular

monthly bulletin, yet a supposedly moralising publication that gave vivid accounts of notorious criminals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which did not disappoint in the report of Mary's case, the culmination of the opening line running thus, that: 'she richly deserved that fate which eventually befell her'.

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Introduction

On the morning of 20 March 1809, a Monday, the usual day designated for the execution of murderers, the woman who had earned herself the title of 'The Yorkshire Witch' was executed upon York's New Drop gallows, hanged before a crowd variously estimated at between five and twenty thousand people. Among the multitude who came to see Mary Bateman die were some who had travelled all the way from her home town of Leeds, many of them on foot, and doubtless many of them the victims of her hoaxes and extortions.

I first came across Mary while researching another book on the criminal history of York. Though not a witch in the traditional sense, Mary Bateman was what we would term today a consummate con-artist – a charlatan of the first order, a compulsive liar, confidence trickster, thief and fraudster, who, through her 'artifice and deleterious skill', deceived many victims by instilling in them the belief that she had supernatural powers. According to contemporary accounts, Mary was charismatic and ostensibly charming and above all extremely adept at identifying the psychological weaknesses of the gullible. Easily gaining the simple trust placed in the her by the desperate and poor who populated the growing industrial metropolis of Leeds at the turn of the nineteenth century, she was a supreme exponent of the art of exploiting their fears and ancient folk memory of witchcraft to rob them of all their worldly goods. Mary however, did much more than cause misery and penury, adding murder to the list of her diabolical deeds.

Along with the theft of money and goods, Mary increasingly turned to fortune-telling as her main source of income – it was said that through exposure to gypsies in her early life, she had learnt many of their arts – and embellished her prophesies with the wisdom she sought from a Mrs Moore whom Mary always consulted on behalf of her clients. Incidentally, the lady was pure invention on Mary's part, but this didn't stop her from taking payment on Mrs Moore's behalf. While the mystical and mythical Mrs Moore, whose supernatural powers apparently stemmed from her being the seventh child of a seventh child, proved a profitable invention, Mary was also to employ the services of the equally fictitious Miss Blythe. Adept at seeing into the future and an exponent in the removal of evil spells and the provision of magical cures, of course, through the agency of Mary, Miss Blythe charged exorbitantly for her expertise.

While Mary Bateman was tried and convicted on a single murder charge, we can say with a measure of certainty that she killed at least three others, and in all probability was responsible for many more deaths that escaped detection. The labelling of Mary Bateman as a serial killer, the term and concept first coined by German criminologist Ernst Gennat in 1930, certainly fits with the definition – someone who murders more than three victims, one at a time in a relatively short interval. Gennat was Director of the Berlin Criminal Police in the early Nazi years. His work on notorious murderers Fritz Haarmann and Peter Kurten led to the *serienmorder* phrase, although both men's crimes had a sexual element totally missing from Mary's. Research has shown that the predominant impetus for serial killers is based on psychological gratification. Motives including thrill, attention seeking and financial gain, the latter of which certainly drove Mary. She resorted to theft and fraud on an impressive scale, later escalating to the elimination of her victims, a necessary and expedient measure against their discovery and exposure of the ruthless pact into which

they had entered with the Yorkshire Witch. The hypothesis that Mary suffered from a psychological condition which drove her criminal behaviour is discussed in the last chapter of this book.

Murder aside, Mary's most audacious and far reaching deception centred on a phenomenon that became known as 'The Prophet Hen of Leeds', a doomsday scam engineered to play on the fears of those persuaded to believe that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ was imminent. While there have been countless examples of people who have proclaimed that the return of Jesus Christ is at hand (most recently, in October 2014 the image of Christ appearing on a slice of wholemeal toast in Manchester was hailed as such a sign), possibly there has never been a stranger messenger than the chicken that laid eggs on which the phrase 'Crist is coming' was indelibly written. As news of this miracle spread, many people became convinced that the End Days were looming – and paid hard cash to see Mary's miracle hen. Until, that is, a curious local doctor discovered that Mary herself was responsible for literally 'hatching a hoax', but not before she had managed to turn a healthy profit. The reputation of Joanna Southcott, whose flourishing following by those spiritually devoted to her ideals was also adversely affected by Mary's exploitative association with the self-proclaimed prophetess.

It is a testament to Mary's contemporary notoriety that the book published in 1811, two years after her execution, and detailing her life and crimes ran to a twelfth edition. As the inordinately lengthy title suggests *The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman, the Yorkshire Witch; Traced from the Earliest thefts of Her Infancy, Through a Most Awful Course of Crimes and Murders, Till Her Execution at the New Drop, Near the Castle of York, on Monday the Twentieth Of March, 1809*, the book detailed how her 'knavish and vicious disposition' began to show at the tender age of five, and developed into the many frauds, deceptions and ultimately murder which marked her later life

as that of a career criminal. Yet, through remarkable luck and cunning, Mary managed to evade the grasp of the authorities for over twenty years, during which time she ruined many lives, as well as taking them, lacing her charms and cures with arsenic.

Amongst those who fell victim to Mary's malign ministrations were the Misses Kitchin, two Quaker sisters who kept a draper's shop in Leeds and who fell for Mary's ingratiating ways. In the space of ten days, both sisters died mysteriously, along with their mother, after taking medicines prescribed by Mary, all three ending up in a shared grave. And as a practising abortionist, Mary must invariably have been responsible for any number of unrecorded fatalities of those young women who sought her assistance in terminating an unwanted pregnancy. However, it was for the murder of Rebecca Perigo for which Mary was tried, convicted and hanged. At the time of her arrest, Mary was poised to poison again, and may very well have succeeded had it not been for the timely account in a Leeds newspaper, exposing and alerting her next potential victims to the danger they were in.

While Mary Bateman's status as a 'witch' gave cause to sensationalise her death, over two hundred years after her execution, the macabre display of her (partial) skeleton still proved a great draw for visitors to the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds. The bones were on long-term loan from Leeds University Anatomy Department where Mary's body was dissected. Some would say that this barbaric treatment of her corpse was an apt punishment for her crimes. Described by the Museum as one of their iconic exhibits, the continuous display of Mary's skeleton since the Thackray first opened in 1997 until the recent decision to remove her remains in July 2015 was, and still is, a bone of contention – literally you might say – with regards to the ethical and moral position of her remains still being denied Christian burial.

Despite the notoriety attached to the name of the Yorkshire Witch and the continuing controversy surrounding her post-mortem fate,

Mary Bateman remains something of an ethereal character. After two centuries, it is difficult to be accurate about her motivation. In some ways she is a shadow, blurred still further by the passage of time. The fact that Mary's crimes are catalogued in various sensational accounts of infamous villainesses proves the public's fascination, still as potent today as in her own time. It is all the more extraordinary then that this is the first biography exclusively dedicated to Mary Bateman since the aforementioned anonymously written and heavily moralising account which appeared in print two years after her execution on York's gallows.

Certainly, in the words of *The Extraordinary Life,* her character was evil enough to 'Damn her name to everlasting fame'. This book in no way seeks to vindicate the actions of a convicted murderess, but we must weigh the moralising strictures and harsh sentiment that were the hallmarks of her time, and look at her upbringing, background and the social milieu in which she existed. In turn we must examine the effects of a burgeoning industrial revolution on her and everyone else's environment. That way a more complete picture of Mary will emerge, engendering an appreciation that people in the past were not just 'good' or 'bad', but motivated by personal and societal complexities and conflicts, just as we are today.

Author's note: In view of the overly lengthy title of the '*The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman, the Yorkshire Witch; Traced from the Earliest thefts of Her Infancy, Through a Most Awful Course of Crimes and Murders, Till Her Execution at the New Drop, Near the Castle of York, on Monday the Twentieth Of March, 1809',* henceforth where referred to throughout the text, the title of this publication will be abbreviated to *The Extraordinary Life*.

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Chapter 1

'A knavish and vicious disposition'

When Mary Bateman was born, she was of so little importance that the date of her birth went unrecorded. When it came to her final moments on the gallows however, thousands of spectators witnessed her execution upon York's 'New Drop' on the morning of Monday 20 March 1809, some of whom, packed shoulder to shoulder in the crowd, were convinced to the very end that the Yorkshire Witch would save herself from death at the last moment by employing her supernatural powers to vanish into thin air as the noose tightened. Needless to say, she didn't.

Mary was forty-one at the time of her execution, and while her exact birth date is not known, the parish records of St Columba, Topcliffe, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, show her as being baptised on 15 January 1768. English parish registers as a general rule recorded baptisms rather than births, so we can assume that she was born late in 1767 or early 1768, as the average age at baptism increased from one week old in the middle of the seventeenth century to one month by the middle of the nineteenth century. The church itself, with its fourteenth century interior fittings, was extensively rebuilt in the 1880s. Born Mary Harker in Asenby, a town in the parish of Topcliffe on the south bank of the River Swale, a few miles south of the larger market town of Thirsk, she was the third of six children born to Benjamin Harker and his wife Ann, née Dunning. Benjamin and Ann had married at Brompton by Northallerton on 10 July 1754, before moving to Asenby, a little less than fifteen miles away, to take up small scale farming.

Asenby today remains a small village with less than 300 inhabitants, with the majority of the surrounding land still given over to farming. However, when the Harkers took up residence, every cottage and farmstead would have been entirely familiar and every face known; any stranger passing through would have caused a stir, the odd pedlar, or a sailor making his way home from sea across country exciting comment.

The decade of Mary's birth was a momentous one. In London, the new king, George III, came under increasing attack from the satirist John Wilkes at the same time that trouble was brewing in the thirteen British colonies in America. At home, the economic and social upheaval we now call the Industrial Revolution was beginning to gain momentum of its own. The Harkers were the last generation to live off the land – their children were city dwellers.

The couple's first child and Mary's eldest sister, Jane, was born at Brompton and baptised there in the parish church of St Thomas, where her parents had been married, on 7 August 1755. The church we see today is much altered from the one they knew. It was still a chapel of ease to All Saints' Northallerton at the time but was heavily rebuilt in 1867. Her subsequent siblings were all born at Asenby: Ann, named for her mother was baptised 28 April 1765; then after the birth of Mary came Elizabeth, baptised on 17 September 1770; Benjamin, named for his father, was baptised on 12 June 1773 and the youngest, John, whose birth date was recorded as 7 September 1778, was baptised on 11 October that year.

Mary's parents were noted as always having 'maintained a reputable character', a familial attribute clearly not passed down to their daughter, as from an early age Mary was said to have displayed 'a knavish and vicious disposition'. At the age of five, it was reported that 'she stole a pair of morocco [fine leather] shoes, and secreted them for some months in her father's barn.' Later she brought them out and pretended she had found them; an inquiry proved that this was only one of those instances

of lying which so strongly marked her future life. Whether the accounts of her early nefarious nature are to be believed, or whether at this tender age Mary could be forgiven for merely being a mischievous little girl, she did in her early years mix with the gypsies who habitually descended annually in great numbers for the Topley Fair – a sheep and horse fair that had been held at Topcliffe on 17–19 July since medieval times, and a traditional rendezvous for gypsies and horse-dealers from far and wide. The 'Egyptians' as the Elizabethans called them a century and a half earlier were the 'Moon Men', a dangerous mob of vagabonds who were by law to be driven out of parishes. They had come to be accepted by Mary's time, but no one quite trusted them.

Today the small village of Topcliffe is a quiet place, though still larger and busier than neighbouring Asenby, and it is hard to imagine that this ancient settlement was once an important town, staging one of the largest annual fairs in the north of England. The charter which allowed this fair, and a weekly market, was granted by Edward III in 1327. Some vestiges of Topcliffe's market square can still be seen, traces of where the stalls would have been pitched still apparent in the now narrow cordon of cobbles surrounding the Market Cross. While the sale of livestock was the primary concern, the first of the three successive days of the Fair was allotted for the sale of sheep and the second for horses. The third day was Lady Fair Day, for which the fair was renowned,when the lads would take their sweethearts around the trinket stalls. A kaleidoscope of sights and sounds, the fair attracted entertainers such as rope dancers, tumblers, acrobats, with the addition of food stalls, fortune tellers, freak shows, and musicians playing hurdy-gurdys and fiddles. Of course the ubiquitous pickpockets and prostitutes would have been there as well.

Though the Topley Fairs ceased in the late 1960s, they must have been similar affairs to the long standing but still extant Appleby Horse Fair held in Cumbria each June. Attracting ten to fifteen thousand