

# VILLAINS OF VICTORIAN LONDON



## CHARLIE PEACE

by Paul Brett

*In February 1879...venue Armley Gaol in Leeds, a signature was written on a last will and testament. The writer left all he had to "my dear wife, Hannah". A sum total of around £550 was the figure estimated that the writer had bequeathed to his wife. .*

There are not many "Cat Burglars" in British history that achieve such fame and notoriety, but **Charles Fredrick Peace** arguably holds the number one slot for that dubious honour. Gained not for his robbery skills, but for his



murderous deeds that ran in juxtaposition with his lifestyle. 'Charlie' Peace certainly didn't live by the definition of his surname. He was born in Sheffield on May 14th 1832 in the North of England. His father was a humble tradesman, a shoemaker to be exact and Charlie, at the age of 12, was put to work as an apprentice at the local steel mill. Several years later, he suffered a terrible accident when a shard of searing hot steel entered his leg and he was hospitalised for nearly two years. In fact, this left the young Charlie a cripple all of his life. As you would imagine, Charlie found difficulty in getting work after such a terrible experience and this could have been the catalyst for his future "career". Petty crimes followed which led to many burglaries and he spent more time locked in prison that he did on the street. According to reports, Charlie was an intelligent planner who would spend time checking out his intended targets and always dressed in the attire of a gentleman. He even carried the tools of his trade in a violin case! Did anyone ever ask him to play them a tune I wonder? He was also reported to be a master of disguise, although a little under 5' 4", such disguises would have had to be more than convincing. Luckily for Charlie, there was no Crimewatch in those days! Police reports suggested he could contort his facial features so that even inmates in prison had difficulty recognizing him. Probably a bit far fetched if you happened to share the same cell. Can you imagine Toulouse Lautrec trying to change his appearance?...probably the beard would have given him away every time!

In 1875, Charlie adopted an alias, John Ward and moved his family to Darnall, just outside Sheffield. As fate would have it, he met a clergyman who knew him from his past. Cleverly, he told the Reverend Littlewood that he was a completely reformed character, he attended the church regularly and to all intents and purpose, the good Reverend was duped by Charlie's liquid tongue. Even though Charlie's teenage injury had left him a cripple, walking with a distinctive limp, he was extremely agile and his small stature assisted him in his burglaries, enabling him to slip between the smallest openings to gain entry to all manner of premises.

All good things eventually have an ending and his was absolutely nothing to do with his night games. Basically, he fancied a neighbour's wife who didn't fancy him. He threatened her and her husband with a gun, and a warrant for his arrest was issued. This seemed to be the start of his downfall. In 1876 he was stopped by a Constable, while attempting to rob a house on the outskirts of Manchester and Charlie shot and killed the Officer. Whether intentional or not, Charlie was getting more daring and reckless. Actually, someone else was arrested for this crime and convicted of it. Charlie, it is said, even attended his trial. As the lad in question was under the age of 18, he escaped the death penalty but received a life sentence instead.

Several days later and with the summons for threatening a lady and her husband with a firearm still active, Charlie visited them at their house. He again threatened the Dyson's and in the ensuing argument, he shot Mr. Dyson dead.



Now he'd really done it, he was truly a wanted man with a reward for his capture standing at £100. All sorts of escapades and evasions followed the shooting and eventually, Peace, still on the run, moved to London. It was there he was finally arrested. He had rented a house in East Terrace, Peckham with his mistress (whom he had picked up on his travels and who was posing as his wife) and drove a pony and trap around the streets of South East London by day while continuing to burgle houses during the hours of darkness. His arrest finally came when a Policeman, who was patrolling the streets of Blackheath, spotted low, flickering lights in the rooms of 2, St. John's Park around 2am. Upon investigation, the Officer, PC Edward Robinson, saw Peace jump out of an open window and he gave chase. Peace actually fired five shots at the pursuing Robinson, wounding him in the arm, but Robinson clung onto Peace and other Officers arrived to assist in the capture. Charlie was subdued and taken into custody. The Police actually knew Charlie as John Ward or John Thompson (another alias) and at first, had no idea they had caught Charlie Peace. But upon questioning 'Mrs. Thompson' Peace's mistress (the former Susan Grey), the Police discovered Charlie's true identity. Immediately, they took Charlie on a train journey back up North to face the charge of murder. It was on this train journey that Charlie, in another act of daring bravado, tried to escape by jumping off the speeding train. Unfortunately for him, his luck had run out and having injured himself during his escape, he was quickly recaptured and stood trial. It was held in Leeds and began on February 4th, 1879. The evidence against him was overwhelming and he was found guilty and sentenced to execution by hanging. He did however confess to the Reverend Littlewood during a prison visit that he had shot and killed the Police Officer at Whalley Range and in doing so, he obtained the release of the youth, William Harbon, who was serving a life sentence for murder, unjustly so, having been previously convicted of the crime.

On the 25th of February 1879 (they didn't hang around in those days!) Charles Fredrick Peace, the infamous Gentleman Burglar and murderer was executed by hanging. Whilst most of his crimes were committed outside of London, the ones he did commit in the Capital and his dramatic arrest, certainly include him as a Villain of Victorian London or Victorian England.