

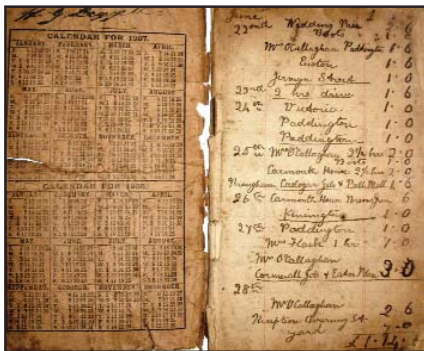


VILLAINS OF VICTORIAN LONDON

by Paul Brett

What is so magnetic to generations about the Villains of Victorian London? Endless films and theories about Jack the Ripper and now Sweeney Todd, sees this era of British History constantly being revised, discussed and theorised, but it never seems to be boring.

When I was a young lad, growing up in post-World War 1 Fulham, both my grandfathers were great storytellers. On my father's side, his dad was a Coachman who plied his trade driving his horse drawn coach around London. He would take on average, one pound and fourteen shillings per day, driving fares about all over the city. The only record I have is an old



black notebook he left, listing a record of these fares. His routes in the main, were from Fulham to the main Railway Stations of Victoria, fare was a shilling and Paddington, also a shilling. He had his regulars in a Mr.O'Callaghan, who paid him three shilling to take him first to Cornwall Gardens, then onto Eaton Mews and also a Mrs. Flak, also to Eaton Mews. His daily yard fees were seven shillings. He was never a rich man but between him and my grandmother, they raised nine children and lost another three in infancy. On my mothers side, her father was in Showbusiness. He was the clown half of the Comedy Duo, Bass & Allsop. They played all the Music Halls and even had a spell with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Circus, when it toured



Bass & Allsop



Buffalo Bill's Wild West Circus

the UK in the late 1800's early 1900's. Bill even stayed at my old house in Fulham and drew a picture of himself on one of the bedroom walls. Such modest working class houses are now worth huge sums in today's market, but in those days, it was very different.

Both my granddads loved to tell me all sorts of stories about growing up in Victorian London from their different perspectives, yet they would both relate many of the same stories about the 'bad boys' of London. Jack the Ripper to this day remains an unsolved case and despite all the theories, no conclusion has ever been agreed upon. Different however with Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber. Not the one to go to for a short back and sides else you would land up as part of Mrs. Lovett's luscious pies! Hal Prince, the legendary American Director staged Stephen Sondheim's musical version of this tale in New York in the 1980's. Now, the latest film offering starring Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham-Carter and a cast of top notch actors is taking the film world by storm. However, of all the tales I remember the most and the one that still lurks in the childhood shadows of my mind, was the bogeyman who became known as Spring Heeled Jack. Like Jack the Ripper, he was never caught but unlike the Ripper, he never killed his victims, just attacked and terrified them in the main.

The story of the leaping terror is indeed weird to say the least. All who saw him reported that



Spring Heeled Jack

his appearance was indeed 'terrifying'. They said he had sharp metallic, clawed hands and eyes that burned red with the fires of hell. His main party trick was to perform amazing leaps whilst breathing out blue and white flames from his mouth (not the old rear end lighter trick gentlemen!). This guy was serious in his work. The first sighting of Jack was said to be by a businessman who said he had seen a mysterious figure jump effortlessly over high cemetery railings, right into his path. He wasn't attacked by the figure, but he described him as tall and muscular, with large pointed ears and nose and glowing red eyes. Later, in October 1837, the first year of Queen Victoria's reign, a girl by the name of Mary Stevens reported that a strange figure leapt at her from a dark alley. He held her arms in a vice like grip, whilst planting kisses on her face. He ripped her clothes, touching her flesh with his talons. Mary said she screamed aloud and her attacker ran off into the night. The next day, the leaping lecher jumped in the way of a passing coach causing the driver to lose control, crash, and severely injure himself. Witnesses who saw the event, claimed that the figure escaped by jumping over a nine foot-high wall, emitting what sounded like high pitched laughter. What was plainly obvious is that Jack was not shy! On one occasion, he knocked on a door in Bow, in London's East End, posing as a Police Officer. The young eighteen year old girl who opened the door to him suffered a similar attack. Her clothes were torn and she reported the same metallic claws like hands, eyes of fire, and breath of blue flames. She was saved from any further attack by her family, who rushed from inside the house upon hearing her screams. Jack as usual, 'legged it' so to speak.

At the time, the Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Cowan, received several reports of these incidents, that seemed to be on the increase all over London. He was sceptical at first, but in the ensuing days and with the vast amount of letters he was receiving from the general public about Jack's antics, which he referred to as 'pantomime antics', he instructed the Police to mount a major search and offered rewards.

Many more incidents occurred that led to



Spring Heeled Jack becoming a celebrity of the moment. The Newspapers were full of his antics and he even made the Boys Own comics of the day The Penny Dreadfuls. Even plays

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were performed about him It seemed suddenly that Jack's London career waned and silence reigned for awhile, until a plethora of sighting came in from other parts of the Country. He was seen in Northamptonshire, East Anglia with reports of attacks on Mail Coaches. He was even sighted in the 1870's back in London with the News of the World carrying a report of the Peckham Ghost which resembled Jack in appearance. Sighting were again reported in Sheffield in 1873, then more reports, this time from Aldershot in 1877 where Jack leapt out at a group of soldiers. One of the soldiers even took a shot at him, but he just ran at him, spitting the blue flames from his mouth, which made the soldiers run from their posts in fright. Jack had jumped into legend and even as late as 1986 in South Herefordshire, a man of similar description was sighted by a travelling salesman, leaping in enormous, inhuman bounds and slapping the salesman's cheek only to disappear again. Even from the first sighting in 1837 to the last in 1986 would have put Jack's reign at 139 years which had to make him inhuman, or he had his doppel-gangers over the years.

Was Springheeled Jack a reality or just another wonderful myth that sprang from the foggy streets of Victorian London? One scene of crime report stated that deep marks were found in the ground where Jack was supposed to have sprang from. Could it be that the man himself had a little help from some ingenious contraption engineered in his shoes, that enabled the clawed lech to perform such jumps? Or should we just let the legend of the blue flamed, red eyed demon, engulf our imagination and continue to be sighted throughout time?

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