

The Murder of PC Couchman

By Derek Leach

"From the Joe Harman archive"

On 8 September 1844 Dover had a severe storm, but something else happened which was remembered for many a year - the murder of PC Samuel Couchman in Bridge Street at about 11.30pm when he and PC John Smith were trying to quell unrest that had been brewing all day.

Apparently there was a long-running feud between two families, the Clarks and the Beers, who lived in what was the village of Charlton. The Clarks lived in Paper Alley, replaced now by Pauls Place and Matthews Place off Bridge Street. James Clark, a chimney sweep aged 63, had five sons and three daughters. The boys followed the same trade and three of them, William, Thomas and John, moved to Canterbury. These three came to Dover apparently intent upon having a scrap with the Beers. Scuffles broke out between them during the afternoon. The Clarks went into the *Admiral Harvey* pub and one of them challenged Richard Beer to fight him for a sovereign, but said that he would kill him in four rounds! PC Pine, who lived in the street, made several attempts to disperse the crowd, but, when the mob reached a hundred, he sent his son to the Station House in Queen Street for assistance. After the arrival of extra police the crowd melted away.

At 9pm, however, there was trouble at the *Admiral Harvey* until the Clarks moved over to the *Three Colts* pub at the end of Paper Alley. The landlady soon asked the police to move them on. Old James Clark was the worse for wear and

very obstinate. Fortunately, PC Couchman at the start of his shift, expecting trouble, had asked PC Smith to stay within earshot on his Buckland beat. Smith answered Couchman's call for assistance and they met outside the *Royal Standard* in London Road near the toll gate where they put down their lanthorns (lanterns) ready for the fray. Smith tried to take old man Clark into custody, but was knocked to the ground by three men while Couchman was dealing with the others in the alley. Thomas Clark managed to get his father into his house and then emerged with a broomstick, striking Couchman a violent blow across the face, which knocked him to the ground. This stick was in fact a sweep's three foot cane with metal ends. Smith, showing great bravery, tackled Thomas with his staff and succeeded in disarming him. Somebody cried, 'Murder!' and the troublemakers ran off.

At the subsequent inquest the surgeon stated that death was caused by a violent blow to the head from a blunt instrument. The affray took place under a gaslight and so the assailants had been recognised. The coroner said that those who had aided and abetted the crime were equally guilty as he who had struck the blow, especially as they knew it was a policeman doing his duty. Old James Clark and his son Stephen were committed for trial at Maidstone Assizes and a reward of £20 was offered for the apprehension of the Clark brothers from Canterbury and a

William Smith. In late October William and John Clark were caught in a wood at Stockbury and brought back to Dover, but there was no sign of Thomas.

To everybody's surprise, Old James Clark and Stephen were acquitted, but the law caught up with Stephen in 1846 when he was sentenced to transportation for life for stealing a 40lb cheese from a baker's shop in Priory Street. He had his opportunity when Mrs Kennett, the baker's wife, had nipped over to the *Golden Lion* for her supper beer while her husband was drinking at the *Comet*! In 1853 Frederick Clark was sentenced to 20 years transportation after having been convicted of rape and robbery committed in 1848.

There is a twist to this tale. In 1853 a Ramsgate sweep named Bishop who had once known the elusive Thomas Clark, a fellow sweep, spotted him when drinking at the *Bell* at Ivychurch on Romney Marsh. The man was taken into custody and brought to Dover.



End of sweep's cane



Constable's uniform of that period

Although Bishop was convinced that the man was Thomas Clark, others could not identify him, including one of the Beers who had fought with him on that fatal day. Mr Portwine, who had known Thomas all his life, knew that he had tattoos on his arms, but this man was unmarked and was also too tall. The man claimed to have a brother in London and so the case was adjourned until the brother could appear. When he did so, he declared that the man was his twin brother, John Merritt. The likeness was obvious and a baptismal register entry convinced the magistrates. The prisoner was released.

There were no further sightings of Thomas Clark.

Poor Samuel Couchman was 43 years old and had served in the Dover police force for two years, one of the 12 constables, after 26 years in the Royal Marines. He left a widow and two children. The Mayor and Corporation attended the funeral at St. James' Church where Samuel was buried.