

Village Echoes

Although the first policemen, the famous Bow Street Runners, were appointed in 1750, they initially operated in London only, meaning that villages such as Goudhurst had to rely on the locally appointed parish constables who were often part-time, unpaid and elected annually. In addition, many places also set up their own "Societies for Prosecuting Felons and other Offenders". Posters dated 1801 show that by that date the "Society for Prosecuting Thieves in the parish of Goudhurst" had 37 members. The minutes of the society, however, only exist from 28th November 1815 by which time it was more generally known as the "Goudhurst Prosecuting Society". The intention behind these societies was to encourage local people to report any perceived crime and thus aid the apprehension of offenders - something that today might be regarded as vigilantes.

To encourage this, anybody who discovered and apprehended criminals who had caused harm to a member of the Society was paid a financial reward and the offender sent to trial as normal. The reward money was raised by charging a subscription to all members of the Society, the amount paid being on a sliding scale, depending on social station, ranging from 15 shillings down to 5 shillings.

Posters were displayed around the village advertising the fact that the top reward of £20 would be paid on the conviction of a murderer, a robber or arsonist. For £10 you had to apprehend somebody who injured a member of the Society, stole their horse or cattle or who cut their hop bines. Rewards of £5, £3 and £1 were given for less serious crimes.

Thomas Miller, a member of the society, was the first to report an alleged crime when a lamb was found dead in a field occupied by John Elliot. One hundred posters were printed to publicise the alleged killing but it isn't known if anyone was convicted. Many people were caught and prosecuted, mostly for minor crimes such as stealing items like firewood, turnips, eggs, a cabbage or cherries. Various animals such as sheep, horses or geese were taken, but only a couple of more serious crimes were reported – a highway robbery and house-breaking.

Many of the meetings, held alternately at the Vine or Star & Crown (now Star & Eagle), involved appointing new members or slightly altering the articles of the Society. The last entry of all in the minutes of 1863, awarded £10 to Herbert Lambert for supplying information which led to the conviction of one Henry Quaif who had been convicted for "dastardly destruction of an orchard" belonging to William Burgess.

In 1839 the Rural Constabulary Act allowed counties to set up their own police force, but this was optional. With the eventual establishment of Kent's police force in 1857, officially paid constables were appointed for each village under a more regulated system for law and order, and the Goudhurst Prosecuting Society was no longer needed.

Local History Society