

EXTRACTS FROM ***FOUL DEEDS*** BY DEE GORDON

The date: Monday 13 February 1922. The location: The Victoria Restaurant, 19 Eastern Esplanade, Southend. The discovery: a man trying to murder a woman in an upstairs room.

The restaurant's proprietor, Albert Wittleton, gave a graphic account of the incident to a *Southend Standard* reporter soon afterwards. A respectable couple, George Pearce of south-east London and his wife, had booked a room a few days earlier. They had checked out after a few days, apparently on the best of terms, and had been seen walking along Marine Parade at 10am on that fateful Monday morning. Soon after, they reappeared at the Victoria unexpectedly, asking if they could use the empty room again 'for a few minutes'. Mr Wittleton was happy enough to agree.

His happiness did not last, however, because soon afterwards he heard a woman screaming, together with noises that sounded like furniture being thrown about and broken. Mr Wittleton rushed up the stairs, found the door to their room open, and saw the woman lying on her back on the floor with the man astride her, slashing at her with a razor. She was, naturally, struggling and screaming, and Mr Wittleton managed to pull the man off. George Pearce made no attempt to run away. In the meantime Wittleton had called for someone to get the police, and he then assisted the woman downstairs to find some help for her, she having been cut about the face, neck and arm, with part of an ear severed.

When PC Mallet arrived, Wittleton took him to the upstairs room where Pearce was lying on the bed, partly covered with clothing. Pearce then managed to say a few words to the police officer: 'It's all right, policeman. I have taken poison.' The room was pervaded with the smell of carbolic, and PC Mallett asked Wittleton to mix an emetic and send for Dr Lloyd. Although there was only a minimal delay before the doctor's arrival – only enough time to administer the emetic, but to no effect – there had been little hope and the man died soon afterwards.

On being asked for his opinion, Wittleton could not 'imagine what possessed' Pearce, only that he must have had some kind of 'sudden fit'. A small square bottle

which had contained poison was found in the room, which was at the top of several flights of narrow stairs. The missing ear-lobe was found in the room when it was searched by PC Gray. The reporter gained access to this room and described it as having a 'blood-spattered' wardrobe and bed with obvious signs of a struggle, a chair and towel rail having been broken.

The same evening, with her head and right hand bandaged, the woman was escorted by PC Gray from hospital to the police station in Alexandra Street. There she made a statement, giving her name as Alice Vincent from south-east London, and confirming that the dead man's name was George Pearce. He lived at a neighbouring address.

At the inquest a few days later at the Park Hotel, Dr Lloyd was the first to give evidence. Pearce was already unconscious when he arrived on the scene, and there was nothing to be done. The symptoms – the white, hard lips and gums – were of carbolic acid poisoning, borne out by the strong smell in the room. When shown the brown bottle, the witness felt that it had undoubtedly contained the poison....

... headlines reported the 'shocking discovery' of 'A Woman found in a pond with her head nearly half cut off'. She had been discovered around 5pm on Saturday 20 May [1893], her body lying face down in the water. A labourer, Alfred Hazell, made the discovery, and had been 'horrified' when he approached the body and turned it over to find that her throat was 'cut from ear to ear', with the head 'half-severed' from the trunk.

The villagers of Rochford appear to have been in a 'ferment of excitement' for the next few days before the inquest, trying to decide whether this was wilful murder or a case of a dramatic, and drastic, suicide. As a broken umbrella had been found nearby, and there were injuries to the back of her fingers, not to mention the severity

of the deadly wound, murder seemed the most popular bet – though advocates of suicide pointed out that a manic determination to commit suicide would make the brook the ideal choice, in that if the throat-slitting failed, drowning would make death ‘doubly sure’!