

CANTERBURY AND THE DUEL

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Canterbury has associations with several instances of duelling, covering the period 1600 to the 1850s. This note provides a summary of what we know of four of them.

We have reasonably firm data on duels between British protagonists as reported in *The Times* over the period 1785 to 1850¹. Numbers seem to have been particularly high during the build up to the Napoleonic wars (around 20 pa before 1800), but followed by around 10 pa until 1840 when the numbers fell sharply. Fewer than one a year were noted after 1845, and no serious cases after 1850.

1. Heydon v Mansel 1600

When our Victorian forefathers visited Canterbury Museum (as it was then called) they were able to see a striking exhibit that is no longer on show in the modern Beaney². Nicely presented in a large lined cigar box, it was the shrivelled left hand of Sir John Heydon (1588-1653). The long white nails and leathery remains of fingers and palm make it a particularly gruesome piece. Sir John lost his hand in a duel fought with a Sir Robert Mansel in January 1600. The aim was to settle a longstanding family quarrel over money³. An unusual feature was that Sir Robert's second was the nephew of Sir John. Each combatant had a rapier and dagger, and the engagement started with a dispute over the length of blade permitted. Connections with Canterbury are hard to find⁴ - the duel took place outside Norwich, and the hand is currently located at Norwich Castle Museum.



left hand of Sir John Heydon⁵

¹ see Stephen Banks' *A polite exchange of bullets : the duel and the English gentleman 1750-1849* (Boydell Press, 2010)

² see *Gentleman's Magazine* 1853 p. 481 'Heydon with one hand'

³ a short summary appears under 9th October in *The Norwich Book of Days* by Carol Twynch (History Press, 2012) - the citation here *Gentleman's Magazine* 1835 seems to be a misprint (see footnote above)

⁴ transcription of several documents which relate to the hand, and were presumably kept with it, was carried out by John Brent FSA of Canterbury, alderman, antiquary, publisher and curator of Canterbury Museum; donor of the hand is named as Dr Jarvis of Margate, who had received it (1822) indirectly from a Heydon family descendant

⁵ source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hand_of_John_Heydon.jpg

2. Rooke v Buckeridge 1695

Unlike the Heydon-Mansel case, the duel between Ensign Finch Rooke and Anthony Buckeridge in 1695⁶ had more local (Canterbury) connotations. Both were serving in the Canterbury garrison. The event took place near what is now Northolme Road⁷. Both died fighting with swords, and both were buried locally - Finch Rooke in St Paul's church and Anthony Buckeridge in St Alphege⁸. A commemorative (Caen) stone was set in a wall near the skirmish. This survived the restoration and rebuilding work on St Augustine's carried out by A J Beresford Hope in the 1840s but by the 1870s was 'much defaced'⁹. It no longer survives.



stone tablet set in wall of St Augustine's



St Paul's church
burial place of Finch Rooke



St Alphege church
burial place of Anthony Buckeridge

⁶ variously quoted as 1695 or 1696

⁷ see Gentleman's Magazine vol. 178 January 1845

⁸ burial places and further details appear in Joseph Meadow Cowper's *Registers of St Mary Magdelene Canterbury*, 1890, p iv to v; quoted in T F Thistleton-Dyer's *Old English Social Life as told by the Parish Registers* (Elliott Stock, 1898) p 181-2

⁹ mentioned in John Brent's *Canterbury in the Olden Time*, 1879, p 229

3. Crowther v Helsham 1829

I am grateful to Professor Clive Church for drawing my attention to this third Canterbury link to duelling. His detailed background note on this case can be read on the CHAS website or in the shorter paper version in the Lady Chapel of Thanington church (consult Internet for churchwarden contacts as the church is normally closed). His detective work started with the marble wall monument mentioning the demise of Lieutenant Joseph Crowther who 'fell' aged 37 in Boulogne on 1 April 1829. It transpires that this refers not to death in battle (there was none in Boulogne at this time) but to the result of a fatal duel.

In 1829 Lieutenant Crowther and Captain Helsham were both living in Boulogne¹⁰. The duel apparently had its origins in an incident six years earlier, when Crowther had been horsewhipped at Cheltenham over his attempted elopement with a young lady. When Crowther sought membership of the Society of Pigeon Shooters in Boulogne, Helsham was involved in his rejection, citing Crowther's earlier un-gentlemanly conduct. Crowther was fatally wounded in the ensuing duel. His body was returned to Thanington (we're not sure why) for burial¹¹.

More was to come. According to those who had witnessed the event, Crowther had fired first and missed. Helsham had then taken his time to aim, in an unhurried way, at Crowther's neck. He fired and hit his target, who fell and died 20 minutes later. Crowther's supporters saw this as unfair and distinctly un-gentlemanly conduct. The charge against Helsham at the Old Bailey in October 1830 was one of murder¹². The jury took only 20 minutes to find him *Not Guilty*.



Thanington church lych gate



memorial to Joseph Crowther

The memorial stone in Thanington St Nicholas church is not easy to read. A transcription follows:

To the memory of Lieut Joseph Crowther on His Majesty's 1st or Royal Regiment of Foot whose remains are deposited in the vault beneath. He fell at Boulogne on 1st April 1829 aged 37 years deeply lamented by his brothers by whom this monument was erected.

¹⁰ see Martyn Beardsley *A Matter of Honour : The Story of England's Last Fatal Duel* (Bookline and Thinker, 2011) p. 132 onwards

¹¹ see London Evening Standard 27 April and 9 September 1829; also Kentish Weekly Post 14 and 21 April 1829

¹² see Kentish Weekly Post 12 October 1830

4. Smythe v Romilly 1852

This fourth duelling case with Canterbury connections is often cited as the last English duel. It was fought between two serving Members of parliament (itself a rarity), both the elected MPs for Canterbury: George Smythe seventh Viscount Strangford (1818-1857) MP Canterbury 1841-52, and Colonel Frederick Romilly (1810-1887) MP Canterbury 1850-52¹³.

As seemed so often the case, the source of the dispute was vague¹⁴ - Colonel Romilly felt that remarks made by Mr Smythe in an election speech were offensive to him. The matter was settled by pistols in early morning in a field outside Weybridge. Both protagonists missed their targets, so both survived. Details in *The Times* account of the event left readers convinced that neither had intended to harm the other, and that the duel had been a farce. The four involved (Smythe, Romilly and their seconds) were clearly aware that (real) duels by this time were illegal. They therefore disguised their weapons to look like artists' sketchbooks, and, to avoid prying eyes of Weybridge inhabitants, hired a 'fly' to reach a suitable outlying country area. Sitting arrangements in the 'fly' raised problems as the combatants could hardly sit face to face when they were about to shoot at each other - Mr Smythe obliged by agreeing to sit with the driver outside the cab. Arriving at the Hatchford estate of Lord Ellesmere, they found a suitable secluded dell. Having set out the required distance of 12 paces, the two ineffectual shots were fired, the pistols returned to their artists' boxes, and the foursome retraced their steps for home.

An artist signing himself Christopher Cobalt wrote to *The Times* with an ironic account of his own problems. On an art trip with a friend, sat painting 12 paces apart, a policeman had taken them into custody in view of their warlike weapons: 'Our camp stool he mistook for pistol cases, our tubes of colours for charges of powder, and our port crayons for ramrods'.

The Canterbury voters got a chance to express their views on Messrs Romilly and Smythe at the Parliamentary elections of 1852¹⁵. Smythe withdrew part way through the election, but nevertheless received 7 votes; Romilly lost by a wide margin to other candidates. And the duelling age had come to a close.

¹³ see Martyn Beardsley *A matter of Honour : The Story of England's Last Fatal Duel* (Bookline and Thinker, 2011) p. 163 onwards

¹⁴ see *Liverpool Mercury* 25 May 1852

¹⁵ see *Kentish Gazette* 13 July 1852