

THE UNHAPPY LOVE LIFE OF JOSEPH CROWTHER

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I had thought I had finished with poor Joseph Crowther when I wrote what I had learned recently in this magazine and in the Thanington Papers of the Canterbury History and Archaeology Society website. But, such are the wonders of internet interconnectedness, I was contacted by someone who had read the on line piece and recognized the story of Crowther's elopement in 1823, the affair which set in motion the chain of events which led to his death being recorded on the wall of the Lady Chapel.

The story was that the lady in question was called Sarah Kent, aged 19, the only child of a well to do couple from St James in central London. They were taking the waters in Cheltenham. She must have been pretty (and probably rich) as she was courted by three young men, Crowther, Henry Isaac Nield (a 25 year old student lawyer whose family had houses in Weybridge and Kensington), and a young Welshman, William Williams Junior (from whose family the story emerged).

Crowther seems to have persuaded the young lady that he was the one for her so that they eloped for Gretna Green. When the fair Sarah failed to return home after a dance the alarm was raised and young Nield set off in pursuit. At first he went in a post chaise but then borrowed a horse from a friendly gentleman along the route. When this foundered under him, he waited for a four horse carriage which he had passed en-route and which had news of the elopers. Egged on by Nield the coachman got to an inn, north of Cheltenham, possibly around Worcester, where they were staying prior to taking a new post chaise.

Nield apparently bounded up the stairs and when Crowther came out knocked him down. A fearful row then ensued but there is no report of Crowther having been horsewhipped so his talk of an assault was justified. But if he was one of three young men courting Sarah Kent it seems unlikely that he did not know who his assailant was, especially given what happened after. Perhaps he invented this to buy himself time when challenged in Boulogne.

What happened after, in fact, was that the Kents arrived and completed the rescue of their daughter. And so struck were they by what young Nield had done that they offered him, as a reward, Sarah's hand together with £500 a year and a monopoly of the family's legal business. Sarah, who must have been a malleable young woman, apparently went along with this as she was married to Nield in St Pancras church in August 1823 and went to live in Haverstock Hill where she gave birth to 12 children between 1824 and 1847.

Crowther's threats to shoot her if she did this came to nothing as he was hauled before a magistrate, whether in Cheltenham or London we do not know, and bound over to keep the peace. Shortly afterwards his debts, incurred in part by organizing the elopement perhaps, drove him to remove himself to Boulogne. And there he never apparently married which

suggests that his feelings for Sarah could have been genuine and not just those of an adventurer.

Thus far the new letter seems reliable though we have nothing to compare it with. However, the picture it gives of the run up to the duel does not sound right. It makes him out to have been a much more active actor than other sources, horsewhipping Helsham and firing first because he was so keen on the duel. The hesitations and complications of the final days escape the aged letter writer. Nonetheless, the extraordinary goings on in the English Marches explain why they came to be known to a Kilkenny militia man.

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