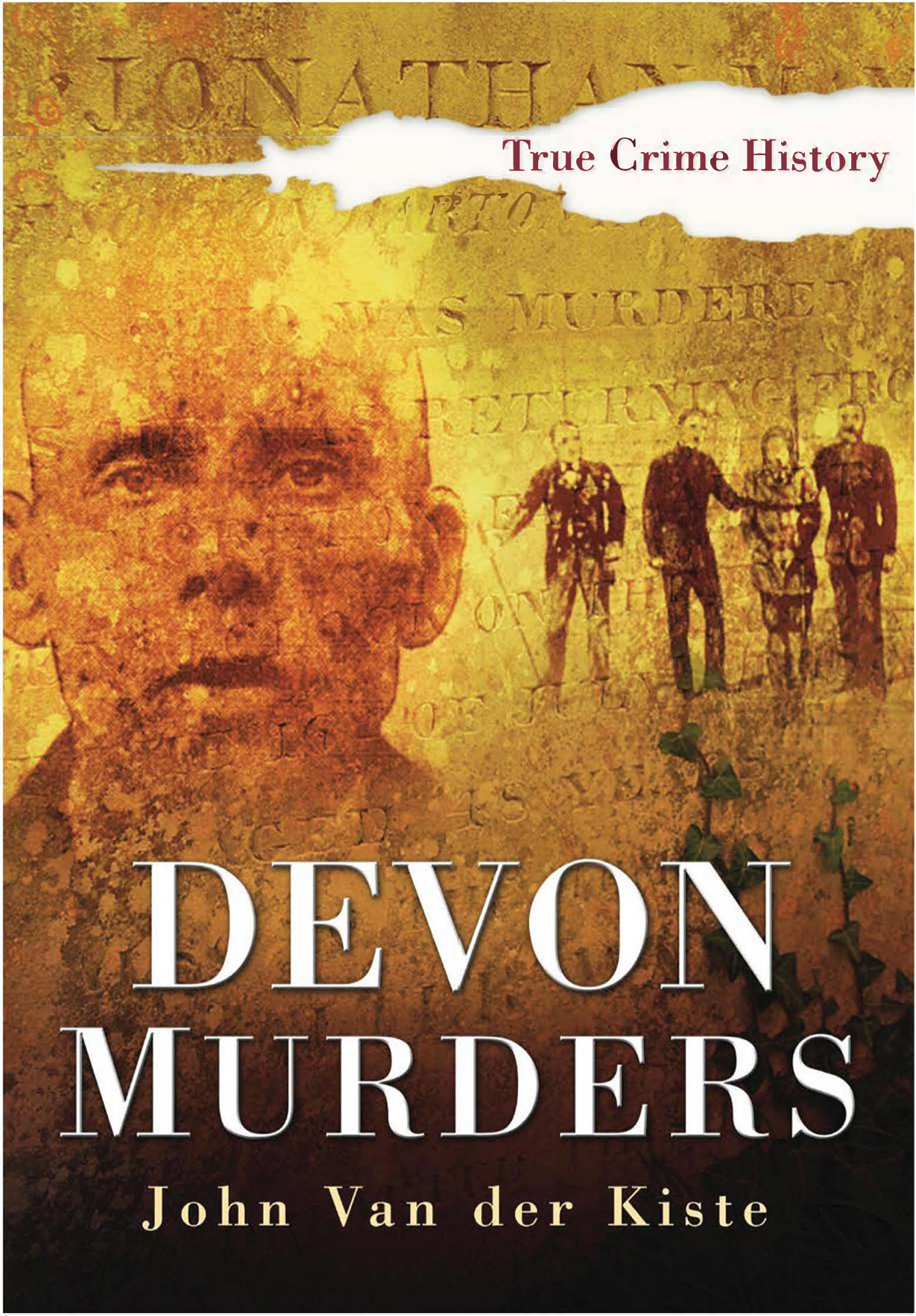
True Crime History



DEVON MURDERS

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THE KILLING OF A MOTHER-TO-BE

East Worlington, 1823

In the summer of 1823 twenty-year-old farm labourer John Radford from East Worlington was told by his girlfriend, Sarah Down, that he was going to become a father in a few months' time. Radford was illegitimate himself and had never had much money to spare. From the age of seven he had been apprenticed to a local farmer, Robert Westacott, who was one of the parish overseers of the poor. That he was going to be responsible for another mouth to feed was the last news Radford wanted to hear. However, he and Sarah decided they would get married. As she had only been expecting for about six weeks, they had plenty of time.

On the evening of Friday 11 July 1823, Radford and his friend Samuel Melhuish were enjoying a drink of cider at the house of Mrs Cole at Moor End. Sarah and her sister Mary joined them later that

evening and had a drink with the men. Mary went home on her own, and the others left together about a quarter of an hour later. Melhuish said goodnight to them outside the house, and left them in apparently cheerful mood.

Sarah failed to return home either that night or on Saturday. By the evening her family were becoming increasingly worried about her. As she had last been seen in Radford's company, her younger brother, John, and brother-in-law, Richard Hodge, went to his house at about 1 a.m. on Sunday. The front door was answered by Radford, who was trembling and noticeably ill at ease. He had difficulty in speaking properly, but claimed he had left Sarah at Gatton Gate on Friday night, and that was the last he saw of her. Hodge told him that he was under suspicion, and he had the choice of being taken straight to the constable at Witheridge, or coming to help them search for Sarah.

Hodge did not know the area very well, so he asked Radford to show the way. They went to the Town Moor Brakes and a lake by the river. As they walked, Hodge and Down asked Radford if he knew that Sarah was expecting his child. At first he said he did not, but when they persisted, he admitted that on the Friday night she had asked him if he was aware of the rumours about her pregnancy, which he dismissed as nonsense.

As they reached the river, Radford was recognised by William Edworthy, who said that he had just found Sarah's body. At this Radford became speechless, then burst into tears. He watched as the body was recovered from the water, denying through his tears that they had ever argued. He then admitted that he was responsible for

her death, and that he had never thought of taking her life until the minute he did it. As her body was laid on the ground, he said that she had put her apron string around her neck herself in order to keep the rain off her shoulders, lest anyone should accuse him of trying to strangle her. There was a cut on her face, but he denied having struck her. A post-mortem was conducted by Mr Thomas Cross, a surgeon from Thorverton, who said that she had died from drowning and was six to eight weeks with child.

The case was disposed of relatively quickly. Radford was remanded in custody that day, Sunday 13 July. Constable Henry Burgess asked Radford if he had hurt the girl, and Radford admitted that they had been together on the Friday night. When Burgess told Radford he was sure he was 'guilty of what you are here for', Radford threw up his hands, denying that he had ever thought of committing the crime until the moment it happened: 'I was very drunk, or I should never have done it.' They had sheltered from the rain in the linhay (an open-sided agricultural building) for half an hour, he said, and then he told Sarah she ought to go home, but she was afraid to, as she and her sister would be sure to have an argument about her staying out too late. She wanted to wait a little longer until her sister was likely to be asleep. To kill time, they walked together along the riverbank. When asked whether he had thrown her in the river, and if so, whether she put up a struggle or not, Radford did not answer, merely repeating that he was drunk at the time.

The case came to trial at Exeter Assizes on 16 July. Radford was charged with having assaulted Sarah Down and deliberately causing

her death by drowning. He pleaded not guilty, in a firm voice, and with what was seen as an air of indifference. His counsel, Mr Fisher, objected that not enough time had been allowed for him to prepare for the trial. He also thought that the indictment was flawed in two aspects, namely that it was apparent that Sarah had not died merely by drowning, but that the blow to her head had contributed to her death; and that it was not stated exactly where she had died. The judge, Mr Justice Best, left the court to confer with his colleague, Mr Justice Burrough, returning to inform Mr Fisher that both objections were without foundation.

The main witnesses were Constable Burgess, who repeated everything Radford had told him since being taken into custody, and Melhuish, who confirmed that he and Radford had both drunk a quart of cider at Mrs Cole's house.

It took the jury only two minutes to deliver a verdict of guilty. In his final summing up, Burrough told Radford:

> If any case of murder can be capable of aggravation, yours is that case; for it appears, from what passed early in the evening, that you led her to suppose you would make her your wife – one cannot doubt you were the father of her child; and thus, by one wicked act, you deprived one human being of existence whom you ought to have protected, and prevented another from coming into life with a similar claim upon you.

When visited by the chaplain after his return to gaol, he confessed that he had planned to kill his sweetheart about seven or eight days before carrying the plan into effect. The opportunity presented itself as they were walking beside the river, and when they passed the deepest point, he deliberately gave her a sudden push. Without waiting to ascertain whether she was dead or not, he then went home. Now, he seemed fully penitent for what he had done.

He was sent to the gallows on 28 July. As he walked out to the staircase, he told the crowds that he was 'very happy', and then said the Lord's Prayer before the noose was placed round his neck.