

Burke and Hare

We find ourselves in 'Auld Reekie', Scottish for 'Old Smokey' as Edinburgh used to be known. The nickname was coined when smoke from open coal and peat fires hung over the city in a foul smog.

In the early hours of a bleak night in January 1828, a grisly scene is unfolding in an upstairs room of a lodging house in Tanners Close owned by William Hare. On the bed is an intoxicated lodger, Joseph, a miller by trade. Hare has his hand clasped tightly over Joseph's mouth and nose whilst his friend William Burke is laying across his upper torso to restrict Joseph's movements and breathing. This became their distinctive murder modus operandi. It would have been practically undetectable until the era of modern forensics. The evil pair's victims were usually Hare's lodgers or people who had been invited in for a night of drinking. Joseph's killing was the first of at least sixteen murders they committed.

In the early nineteenth century Edinburgh was a leading European centre of anatomical study. At the time, the law allowed the dissection of bodies in cases where the individual had died in prison or committed suicide. But providing a legal supply of bodies for dissection proved difficult. Supply couldn't keep up with demand and Edinburgh saw a sharp increase in grave robbing.

Burke and Hare took this practice a step further, by killing their victims rather than waiting until they died of natural causes. They then sold the cadavers to Dr Knox and his medical students for the sum of £10, equivalent to close to £1,000 in today's money.

Their final victim, Margaret Docherty, was killed on 31st October 1828 and before Burke and Hare could deliver the body to Dr Knox it was discovered by two other lodgers, hidden in straw with blood and saliva on the face.

The trial was a major cause célèbre and a rhyme circulated around the Edinburgh streets.

Up the close and doon the stair

But and ben wi' Burke and Hare

Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief

Knox the boy that buys the beef

A new word 'burking' was coined meaning to smother a victim or commit an anatomy murder.

Burke was hanged in front of a crowd estimated at 25,000. Hare was given immunity from prosecution for turning king's evidence. On February 1st 1829 Burke's corpse was publicly dissected by Professor Monro. During the procedure, Monro dipped his quill pen in Burke's blood and wrote, "This is written with the blood of Wm Burke. It was taken from his head."

There are a few other macabre facts.

Burke's death mask and a book said to be bound with his tanned skin can be seen at Surgeons Hall Museum.

Hare shot his own horse at the peak of their murdering spree. The pair had murdered two lodgers on the same day and the tea chest they normally used to transport the bodies was too small. They transferred the corpses to a herring barrel and loaded it onto a cart. Hare's horse refused to pull the heavy load further than Grassmarket and a porter had to be called to help transport the makeshift hearse. After returning home Hare shot the horse dead.

Madame Tussaud was present at Burke and Hare's trial. Within a fortnight of his execution she had a wax model of Burke on display in Liverpool.

David Paterson, Knox's assistant, contacted Sir Walter Scott to ask the novelist if he would be interested in writing an account of the murders, but he declined, despite his long-standing interest in the events. Scott later wrote extremely uncharitably:

There has been a great discovery of Oeconomicks, namely, that a wretch who is not worth a farthing while alive, becomes a valuable article when knockd on the head & carried to an anatomist; and acting on this principle, have cleared the streets of some of those miserable offcasts of society, whom nobody missed because nobody wished to see them again.