

## The Farnley Murder

We finally moved into Oak Tree Cottage in the summer of '67. For Janice and I, this was our first home together. It had been a long time coming, but the wait had been worth it.

As *Sgt Pepper* played constantly on our box record player, we set about the renovations, peeling off wallpaper and lifting rotten floorboards. Progressing to the parlour that we hoped would become a cosy place come late autumn, with an open fireplace and two comfy winged-back chairs, we had to remove a rather stubborn rotten floorboard in the corner over by the front bay window. This floorboard proved a challenge and after extensively using a crowbar, finally the floorboard lifted to reveal a secret buried below.

There on a bed of straw lay a dusty corked bottle. Wiping the bottle, Janice discovered a note contained inside. The sealed cork had swollen and needed to be split carefully to release the air that assisted in maintaining the cork's tightening grip inside the bottleneck. There was a hiss when the trapped air inside the bottle was released. Janice handed the bottle to me.

I retrieved the note from inside the bottle and unrolled it to read the contents.

*February 1790. Farnley Estate*

*I, Lord Farnley of Loudwater, state that I murdered Helena Oxley; and as I go to my grave, I wish to state that John Sedgwick of this parish who hanged for the murder, was an innocent man. I seek the Lord's forgiveness for my sins at this my judgement hour, and repent.*

Janice, eyes wide and bringing her hand to her mouth, gasped. I looked at Janice with disbelief. Our landlord was James Farnley who lived in the manor house at the top of the hill.

'I think we need to speak with James and find out about his ancestor,' I said. 'I'll telephone the manor.'

James invited us up to the manor for afternoon tea. He was an elderly gent and full of old-fashioned ways that were best described as Edwardian. Tea was taken at 4 and not a minute was wasted in discussing the message in the bottle.

'There is some story I remember about the ghost of Helena Oxley,' said James. 'Apparently, she met a rather gruesome end in the basement corridor, a corridor then used by servants to fetch and carry from the kitchen to the dining hall. We filled it in years ago, but the odd noise is still heard in the dead of the night by the porter. The porter has also heard screaming, but he puts this down to his mind playing tricks. May I read the note?'

I handed the note, written on parchment, to James. He read the note carefully and then looked away.

'James, what do you make of this? It seems like a confession,' said Janice rather obviously.

'See that portrait above the fireplace over there? That's Lord Henry Farnley; the same person who has allegedly signed this note.

'But why would Henry leave his confession in a bottle in Oak Tree Cottage?'

In the painting, Lord Henry Farnley was portrayed in his state robes attending the Royal banquet held at Windsor Castle in 1789 celebrating George III's recovery from so-called madness. Farnley's profile was one of a proud statesman and his stature certainly commanded respect.

'There is a family myth, handed down, concerning my illustrious ancestor,' said James, adjusting his posture and straightening his waistcoat. 'Old Henry took a liking to a kitchen maid named Helena. Helena was betrothed to a farmer on the estate called John Sedgwick. John, sensing that Helena was being forced into an illicit liaison with his Lordship, decided to confront his nemesis one evening. Having been tipped off that John was on his way up to the manor, someone had grabbed his Lordship's sword off the gallery wall in readiness for a duel. Hiding behind a pillar in the corridor, the person waiting in the shadows heard Helena and John talking. Unknowingly, John had walked up some stairs. In the gloom, poor Helena was accidentally run through with the sword. Helena screamed out and fell onto the cold flagstones, the sword still in her torso. His Lordship entered the grand hall, having arrived home from a civic function, to be met by his footman and groom who said they had heard screaming coming from the basement corridor. John Sedgwick was found holding the dying Helena in his arms with sword in hand.'

John Sedgwick was found guilty by Watford Assizes and was hanged in the market square within a week. However, there was always a rumour that Old Henry knew more than he was letting on but threatened to sue anyone who uttered a false word.'

'And Oak Tree Cottage?'

'This was John Sedgwick's grace and favour cottage.'