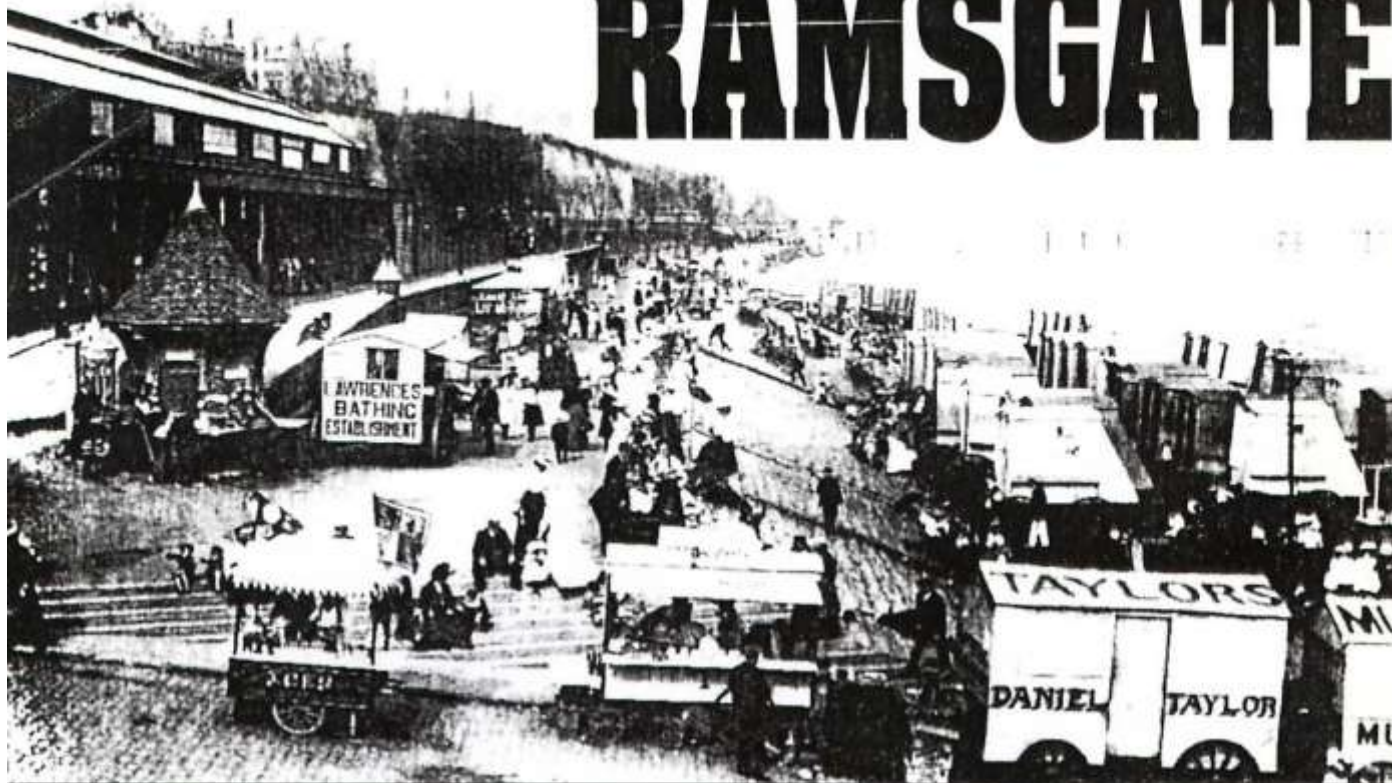


The Murder of William Henson – February 1903
(as published in True Crime Magazine)

KENTISH MURDERS & MYSTERIES RAMSGATE



FOOTBALLER MURDERED BY MISTAKE



THE SIGHT before the policeman's astonished eyes was spectacular. A whole house in Ramsgate's Flora Road had been all but demolished. Hearing the blast just after midnight, PC Barrow at first thought it was a maroon being fired to summon the town's lifeboat men. Then, realising that the sound had come from a different direction, he arrived in Flora Road a few minutes later to be met by a dazed William Arthur Wells, a lodger at the house which was now little more than a ruin.

Suspecting a gas explosion, the policeman clambered through the rubble. In what had been the kitchen of 14 Flora Road the beam of his bull's eye oil lamp fell on 58-year-old Samuel Henson

sitting on the floor, covered with dust and debris. Henson's wife Jane lay nearby, her legs trapped under a settee.

It was when the constable dragged Henson out of the kitchen into what was left of the hall that he became suspicious. Henson's throat was gashed, and although the rest of him was coated with dust, his neck wound was clean. So had it been inflicted

*Case recalled for
TC by A. W. Moss*

Ramsgate Sands in 1905, and in the background the Promenade Pier. Above, innocent victim William Henson

after the explosion?

The constable's suspicion intensified when his colleague Sergeant Creedy arrived and saw Henson trying to open his throat wound still wider. Restrained from doing himself further injury, Henson was placed in an ambulance with his wife and taken to Ramsgate Hospital. In the darkness and confusion, the officers didn't notice that Mrs. Henson also had a throat

wound in addition to cuts on her arms and chest and a head injury.

The doctor who examined her at the hospital attributed her scalp wound to falling debris. But her other cuts, he suspected, had been caused by a knife.

Meanwhile a search of the house had revealed another victim. In the scullery officers found the remains of the Hensons' 20-year-old son

William. His injuries indicated that he had been the victim nearest the source of the explosion.

When Samuel Henson was told in hospital that his son was dead but his wife had survived, he replied: "I'm very sorry for my poor boy — I never meant it for him. It's a pity she hasn't gone ... if she'd stayed at home this wouldn't have happened."

He was later to make a second suicide attempt, dashing his head against the wall of his cell at the police station. By then the police had pieced together the tragic murder-by-mistake story. Instead of avenging himself on his wife, Henson had killed his son.

A foreman ganger, he was no stranger to the police. They had already been aware of trouble in his family. He had even told officers what he would do.

For a man with the shortest of tempers, his nickname

"Happy" must have been a sick joke. He'd made Christmas 1902 so miserable for those around him that his wife, son and lodger had all moved out from their Avenue Road home and found other

The mysterious object wrapped in a hankie had been tonnite, a combination of gun cotton and cordite ...

accommodation.

Jane Henson's 25-year marriage had brought her little but torment. It was had enough at Christmas when her husband told her off for buying too many hats — eight, as it happened — and reprimanded her for going into a pub by herself. The last straw was Henson's accusation that she was having sex with the lodger.

It was this that finally

prompted Henson's wife, son and lodger to move to the Ramsgate home of Richard King, his wife and eight children, at 51 Plains of Waterloo.

Henson soon discovered where they'd gone. He went to King's home, threatening to kill him and Jane, and King went to the police. On hearing King's complaint, Sergeant Creedy posted a constable outside the frightened man's home throughout that night.

The following day Henson turned up drunk at the police station, ranting about his wife, the lodger and King and their alleged goings-on. He was told to sober up, and if he insisted on complaining, to take his grudge to the magistrates' clerk.

It was then that Henson issued his warning. "I'll not go to the bloody magistrate!" he exploded. "I'll finish the job myself and blow them all to bloody hell!"

He then went to Derby to seek work, while his wife sought advice on getting a divorce. Shortly afterwards Jane Henson received a letter from her husband in Derby, begging her forgiveness and asking her to take him back. She replied informing him she had applied for a separation.

On February 24th, 1903, Henson arrived back in Ramsgate to find that his family and their lodger had moved again. They were now living at 14 Flora Road, which young William Henson had rented — he was not badly off as a bricklayer and he was also well known in the town as a footballer with Ramsgate FC.

Samuel went to the house in Flora Road, but no one was there, so he called at two pubs, James Sanders, the landlord at the first one — the Brown Jug, on Ramsgate's outskirts at Dumpton — recalled him coming in carrying something oblong, wrapped in a blue and white spotted handkerchief, which he put on a windowsill. He had three pints of beer before he left.

Six o'clock that evening found him back in Flora Road, William was now at home, and the two had a cup of tea. The package noticed earlier by the pub landlord had now been placed in an old carpet bag, along with Henson's slippers. Jane Henson was out lending a hand at an old folks' party. Half an hour passed and she still hadn't returned, so Samuel and his son went out to another pub, the father taking his carpet bag with him. When William asked what was in it Samuel told him, "Just a few things of mine."

After a while William went home, leaving his father in the

bar. It was around 10 p.m. when Samuel returned to the house, where William had no been joined by his mother and Wells, the lodger.

Wells was later to tell the police that within moments of Samuel's arrival he was having another row with his wife. Wishing to stay out of it, the lodger went to bed. From his back room upstairs he heard the couple's voices raised in anger. "Henson asked his wife if he could come back to live with her," Wells recalled, "but she and William her son said very emphatically, 'No, you can't, we have both had enough.' I then heard Henson reply, 'That's it, then.'"

What followed was described at Samuel Henson trial which began at Maidstone Assizes on Monday, July 13th, 1903, before the Hon. Sir Charles Darling. Henson was charged with killing his son and the attempted murder of his wife.

Jane Henson was the principal witness. "My husband was sitting down in the kitchen with a carpet bag by his side," she told the court. "I could see something dark-coloured in the bag, which he said was his slippers. It was difficult to see by the gas mantle."

"When we started arguing my husband called me a liar and accused me of being unfaithful. It was then that m

William grabbed the bag and headed for the back garden. He got as far as the scullery when it went off in his hands, killing him instantly

son William, poor boy, told him to go and leave me in peace. You see, we had been arguing for some time and my husband was ranting and shouting all the time."

She said Henson replied, "That's it, then!" and rose to his feet, lighting a cigar and deliberately dropping the still burning match into his open bag.

"I realised at once that something awful was about to happen and I screamed, 'Oh, Will, come!'" Mrs. Henson continued.

Hearing the urgency in her voice, the lodger upstairs thought — probably correctly — that she was calling him. He jumped out of bed, and in doing so saved his life.

In the kitchen William grabbed the bag and ran into

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EXHIBIT A

Turn to page 51 for details on how to get MMF 28

Contemporary photographs of the aftermath of the explosion



William Henson
Ramsgate Town (1900)