

Palmer, the Rugeley Poisoner

Historians welcomed Gill Sykes from Colton Historians, with her colleague Sonya, who came to give a talk on “Palmer, the Poisoner of Rugeley”. The Kings Bromley Historians had previously visited the Staffordshire Collections store in Stafford, where they had seen the death mask of William Palmer and a prescription for strychnine in his handwriting, so were very interested in the story.

Gill and Sonya introduced the talk by saying that they would provide the prosecution and defence in this case, and they would welcome the views of the audience at the end as to whether Palmer was guilty or innocent. It was a very high-profile case, covered by the national newspapers at the time, so much so that after the trial Rugeley wanted to change the name of the town as local people did not wish to be associated with the story.

William Palmer was born in 1824 in Rugeley, attended the local grammar school, got married in Abbots Bromley and trained as a doctor. However, he certainly had his flaws, being a heavy drinker, gambler and in debt. Gill and Sonya went through the details of the death of his friend John Cook in 1855, and the subsequent autopsy and inquest, followed by the trial of Palmer on the grounds that he had poisoned his friend with strychnine. In Palmer's defence, Sonya pointed out that the post-mortem had been carried out badly, there was enormous influence from the newspapers who had declared him guilty from the start and the medical evidence did not confirm the presence of strychnine in the body. On the prosecution side, Gill mentioned a number of factors including a suspiciously large number of deaths in family and friends linked to William Palmer. Palmer was found guilty at the Old Bailey of the murder by poisoning of John Cook and hanged in June 1856, in front of 30,000 spectators in Stafford town centre.

Historically, many interesting changes have taken place since and in some cases due to this trial: the media is now not allowed to mention anything which may prejudice a trial, the scientific evidence is much more rigorous and thorough, and an Act of Parliament (Palmer's Law) ensured that trials could be moved away from the locality to enable a fair trial.

Kings Bromley Historians did find William Palmer guilty (but a couple thought that a verdict of ‘not proven guilty’ should apply). Interestingly, William Palmer (who in those days was not allowed to give evidence) said after the trial “I did not kill Cook by strychnine” which could be interpreted in different ways.