

ILL-FATED POLLY BUTTON

(Account by Jonathan Moss, taken from "In & Around Haunted Nuneaton" © 2011)

Nuneaton's legendary 'passionate' murder. Polly Button, (real name, Mary green) lived alone in a house with her five children, all of whom were from different fathers, here in a small yard behind this pub, The Wheatsheaf, in what is now the pub's car park. Times were hard, most of the town at that time was dependent on employment connected to the textile industry, so it's not hard to see where her nickname would have come from.

*'John Danks, he played his pranks
on poor old Polly button.
He took a knife, to please his wife,
And chopped her up like mutton!'*

Unfortunately for Polly, five children made working virtually impossible. She was to become completely dependent on the income that came in via the different orders for payment on her illegitimate children, issued by the Overseers for the poor.

Worse was to come, she became involved with a married man by the name of John Danks and again it wasn't long before she had her sixth child, by the sixth father. Again the help of the Overseers was sought and John Danks was requested to pay for his responsibility. Terrified that his wife would find out, John never paid a penny towards his child. Polly, some would say, mockingly named the child 'Jane' which just happened to be the same name as John's wife. The ill-fated pair's affair was far from over at this point, they regularly quarrelled in public, mainly over money, the promises John made were never forthcoming.

Polly's seventh child, her second with John Danks, was soon to enter the world and the threat of the Overseers was now a huge possibility. If Polly was to mention the non-payment for Jane (child six), Danks would be looking at arrest and most probably transportation, this was now his reality check. He couldn't let things go any further.

It was at 7.30pm on February 18th 1832 that John Danks called on Polly Button to take a walk with him. Locking her brood in the house she headed out towards 'Burbage Fields', now where you'll find St Mary's Road, Aston Road and Jodrell Street. Her eldest child Elizabeth, now 18, was outside talking in the alley and saw her mother leave with Danks. Elizabeth was unaware that on that winter's evening she was never to see her mother alive again.

They walked to Astley's Barn, which stood a quarter of a mile across Burbage Fields, a place they both knew well as they'd met there many times previously. Danks pleaded his case of destitution to her, up until the point anger took over and he struck her firmly in the face, later to be documented as above her left eye, 'around the temple area'. She fell to the floor, and as she tried to regain her footing he produced a knife, grabbed her by her long black hair, yanked her head back and proceeded to cut her throat. Polly realised John's intention and with one hand aiding her rise she put the other across her throat to counter his action.

The blade slit the back of her hand at this point and made a lesser incision to her neck, she began screaming and fighting for her life, which inevitably was to no use. Panicked by her outbursts John Danks took a second effort at her throat, slashing rather than cutting as in his first attempt. Decisively ending her life, blood thrust from

the opening, covering everything in its path. John cast down her head and her body followed it to the floor. John set off for home, throwing away the weapon without thought.

This was not quite the end to Polly button, barely conscious, she crawled for home. She was found early the next morning, lifeless, around 15 metres from the barn, along the track which would have taken her back to her loved ones.

Keeping the story short, the evidence was overwhelming against John Danks, even to the point they found bloodstained clothing in his house, which also was the first point of call for Constable Haddon (Nuneaton's only Policeman at that time). John Danks was hung at Warwick on the 9th April 1832. Many attended the trial from Nuneaton, setting out at 3.30am in order to get there for the start, around 9am and not getting home till after dark of the same evening, just to return again the following day for the next instalment, it was such a big case.

I am told that John and Polly are regularly seen on early winter evenings, walking hand in hand across Weddington Fields, where you can cross to Caldecote from alongside Weddington [St James'] Church. Her house was reputedly haunted but was knocked down during the Second World War. A stone containing two carved effigies once adorned her front door, some romantically believe that it replicated the faces of the two lovers, but others believe it was taken from the Abbey, as was so much since its dissolution. The stone is now on permanent show in the town's museum in Riversley Park.

There was one couple who lived in Weddington who were sure that they had seen the shade of one of this duo around the hall / stairs are of their home but whether this is 'true' awaits proving.



The effigy stone that once adorned Polly Button's house