

A TRUE CRIME STORY FROM VICTORIAN SALTFLEETBY

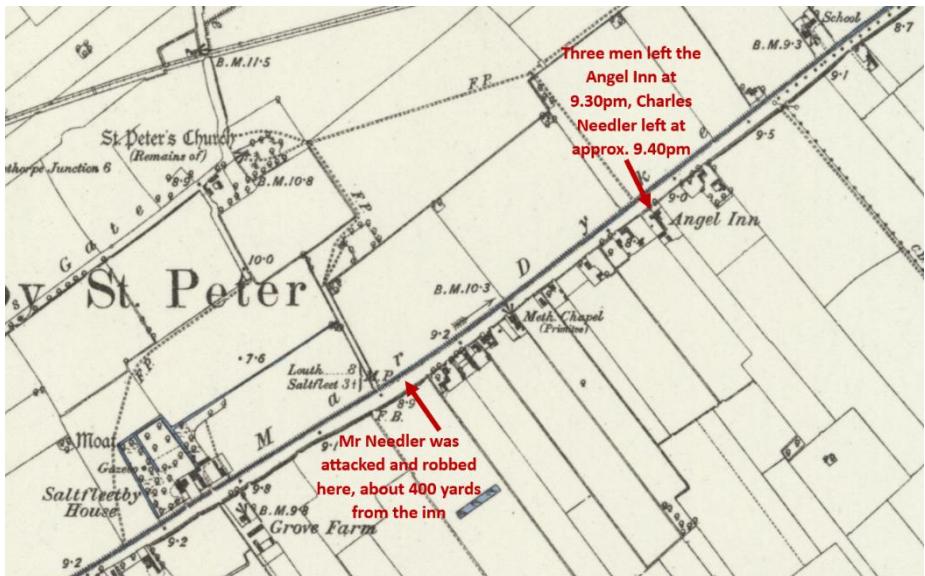
Highway Robbery 1876

On Friday 26th May 1876, 39-year-old Mr Charles Needler, a farmer from Saltfleetby, went to Louth to sell some livestock. He set off from home carrying the sum of about £7. At Louth Stock Market he received £37 6s for the sale of two beasts, then made payments of £26. At about 5 or 6pm he set off for home, riding in the conveyance of his neighbour, farmer William Housham of Saltfleetby.

On reaching Saltfleetby St Peter at about 8pm they called into the Angel Inn on the Main Road. At this time a new railway was being built connecting Louth with Mablethorpe via a new station at Saltfleetby, which opened the following year. Several “navvies” (navigators), manual workers constructing the new railway line, were also drinking in the Angel that night. They asked Mr Needler if he would treat them. On pulling out his purse to pay for some beer, 24-year-old navvy Henry Holmes looked over his shoulder and said “I’ll tell you what, you carry a good purse, old boy”, to which Needler replied “Yes, I’ve a good purse, but I’m sorry to say I’ve but little in it”. They carried on further conversation until Needler said he must go.

At about 9.30pm Holmes and two other men left the pub, first asking Needler which way he was going, offering to walk with him as they were going the same way until the brick yard (now the fishing pond near Marshlands). About ten minutes later Mr Needler left. He called after them, wishing to walk in their company. About 50 yards past the pub, he heard a whistle behind him. He caught up with them, they exchanged a few words before he overtook them about 400 yards from the pub.

At this point one of the men came suddenly behind him, seized him by the neck and pulled him to the ground. Someone seized hold of his legs, but he couldn't tell who. Needler shouted out "man, what are you going to do?", to which he replied "Where's your money you b_____, I know you have some; give it up or I will knock your brains out with this stone". Needler said "for God's sake spare my life if you take all I have". His purse containing £16 15s 7d (worth about £2,000 today) was taken from him, along with his watch and chain. The assailant said "if you ever split one word, I shall murder you". The other two men stood about 7 yards away. As soon as his purse was taken, all three ran away.



Map showing where events took place on the night of Friday 26th May 1876

Mr Needler shouted out "I am robbed" and tried to run after the men, but they were gone. The police were informed of the incident early the following morning. Shortly afterwards Henry Homes was arrested in Grimoldby and identified by Mr Needler as being one of the three. The second man, 20-year-old Joseph Capes was captured on the Monday whilst working on the East Coast Railway. Both men denied complicity in the robbery, but were committed for trial at the assizes.

They were sent to be held at Lincoln Gaol (in the castle grounds) on 2nd June while they awaited their trial.

The third man, that they called "Ginger", real name George Henry Upton, a 21-year-old agricultural labourer from Covenham, remained at large. Upton's description was circulated nationally in the Police Gazette:

ROBBERY AND LARCENY FROM THE PERSON.

Description of **GEORGE HENRY UPTON**, charged with stealing from the person of Charles Needles, of Saltfleetby, St. Peters: a Purse, containing £16 in Gold and Silver: he is 21 years of age, 5 feet 5 inches high, red hair, sandy whiskers, freckled face, walks erect, and surly looking; has a brother residing at Hillsborough, near Sheffield. Information to be given to Superintendent Thoresby, Louth, Lincolnshire, who holds a warrant for his apprehension.—
Bow-street, June 2.

The Police Gazette, Tuesday 6th June 1876

Holmes and Capes were tried at Spilsby on 4th July before Magistrate Cornelius Parker of Louth. Local witnesses gave evidence including Superintendent Thoresby of Louth and PC Smith, who apprehended the prisoners. Mr Barker, the landlord of the Angel, confirmed that the two prisoners, Upton and Charles Needler were drinking together there that night. 19-year-old Mary Frances Dennis, who lived on the Main Road between the Angel Inn and Saltfleetby House, stated that she heard parties walking fast past her house between nine and ten on the night in question, but could not tell who they were.

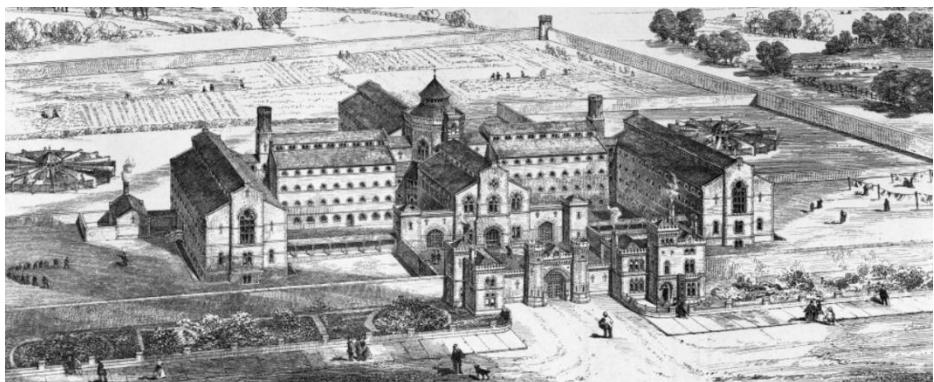
The defence made the case that Holmes and Capes were only charged with being accessories, and had not actually committed the offence. It was suggested that Upton, was the actual thief, but he had escaped while the prisoners had not done so. Perhaps the person that Needler said held his legs was likely the same person that he heard mysteriously whistling in the background earlier? It was argued that

there was no justification for conviction, and had Upton been captured, Holmes and Capes would not have been put in this position. Capes had nothing to do with it, and Upton had threatened Holmes that he would “smash his head if he interfered”.

The jury retired, and after 25 minutes, returned to the court declaring a verdict of “Not Guilty” against both of the prisoners. One said to the jury “You have spoken the truth; we are not guilty of it”.

On 11th July, George Upton was finally apprehended, in Driffield by Pc Swaby who charged him with the robbery. He was searched, and a purse containing £7 was found upon him, as well as a watch and chain. He said “I did not do it by myself, there were two more men with me”. On 12th July Supt. Thoresby received Upton into his custody at Louth, and charged him with robbery. He was committed to take his trial at the October Sessions and held at Lincoln Gaol until then. He had had a previous conviction of larceny in 1870 (six years earlier), for stealing two tame fowl, for which he served 3 calendar months hard labour in Spilsby Gaol.

On 24th October 1876, George Upton pleaded guilty of larceny from the person, before Magistrate Cornelius Parker. He was sentenced to nine calendar months imprisonment with hard labour at the Lindsey Prison, Lincoln (now HMP Lincoln).



“*Prison for the Parts of Lindsey*”, in 1869 when it was newly built.