

## = Murder of Julia Martha Thomas =

The murder of Julia Martha Thomas , dubbed the " Barnes Mystery " or the " Richmond Murder " by the press , was one of the most notorious crimes in late 19th @-@ century Britain . Thomas , a widow in her 50s who lived in Richmond , Surrey , was murdered on 2 March 1879 by her maid Kate Webster , a 30 @-@ year @-@ old Irishwoman with a history of theft . Webster disposed of the body by dismembering it , boiling the flesh off the bones , and throwing most of the remains into the River Thames . It was alleged , although never proven , that she had offered the fat to neighbours and street children as dripping and lard . Part of Thomas ' remains were subsequently recovered from the river . Her severed head remained missing until October 2010 , when the skull was found during building works being carried out for Sir David Attenborough .

After the murder , Webster posed as Thomas for two weeks , but was exposed and fled back to Ireland and her uncle 's home at Killanne near Enniscorthy , County Wexford . She was arrested there on 29 March and was returned to London , where she stood trial at the Old Bailey in July 1879 . At the end of a six @-@ day trial , she was convicted and sentenced to death after a jury of matrons rejected her last @-@ minute attempt to avoid the death penalty by pleading pregnancy . She finally confessed to the murder the night before she was hanged , on 29 July at Wandsworth Prison . The case attracted huge public interest and was widely covered by the press in Great Britain and Ireland . Webster 's behaviour after the crime and during the trial further increased the notoriety of the murder .

## = = Background = =

Julia Martha Thomas was a former schoolteacher who had been twice widowed . Since the death of her second husband in 1873 , she had lived on her own at 2 Mayfield Cottages ( also known as 2 Vine Cottages ) in Park Road in Richmond . The house was a two @-@ storey semi @-@ detached villa built in grey stone with a garden at the front and back . The area was not heavily populated at the time , although her house was close to a public house called The Hole in the Wall .

Thomas was described by her doctor George Henry Rudd as " a small , well @-@ dressed lady " who was about fifty @-@ four years old . Elliot O 'Donnell , summing up contemporary accounts in his introduction to a transcript of Webster 's trial , said that Thomas had an " excitable temperament " and was regarded by her neighbours as eccentric . She frequently travelled , leaving her friends and relatives unaware of her whereabouts for weeks or months at a time . She was a member of the lower middle class and as such was not wealthy , but she habitually dressed up and wore jewellery to give the impression of prosperity . Her desire to employ a live @-@ in domestic servant probably had as much to do with status as with practicality . However , she had a reputation for being a harsh employer and her irregular habits meant that she had difficulty finding and retaining servants . Before 1879 , she had only been able to keep one maid for any length of time .

On 29 January 1879 , Thomas took on Kate Webster as her servant . Webster had been born as Kate Lawler in Killanne in County Wexford in about 1849 . She was later described by The Daily Telegraph as " a tall , strongly @-@ made woman of about 5 feet 5 inches ( 165 cm ) in height with sallow and much freckled complexion and large and prominent teeth . " The details of her early life are unclear , as many of her later autobiographical statements proved unreliable , but she claimed to have been married to a sea captain called Webster by whom she had four children . According to her account , all of the children died , as did her husband , within a short time of each other . She was imprisoned for larceny in Wexford in December 1864 , when she was only about 15 years old , and came to England in 1867 . In February 1868 , she was sentenced to four years of penal servitude for committing larceny in Liverpool .

She was released from jail in January 1872 and , by 1873 , she had moved to Rose Gardens in Hammersmith , London where she became friends with a neighbouring family named Porter . On 18 April 1874 , she gave birth to a son whom she named John W. Webster in Kingston upon Thames . The identity of the father is unclear , as she named three different men at various times . One , a man named Strong , was her accomplice in further robberies and thefts . She later claimed to have

been forced into crime , as she had been " forsaken by him , and committed crimes for the purpose of supporting myself and child " . She moved frequently around West London using various aliases , including Webb , Webster , Gibbs , Gibbons , and Lawler . While living in Teddington , she was arrested and convicted in May 1875 of 36 charges of larceny . She was sentenced to eighteen months in Wandsworth Prison . Not long after leaving prison , she was arrested again for larceny and was sentenced to another twelve months ' imprisonment in February 1877 . Her young son was cared for in her absence by Sarah Crease , a friend who worked as a charwoman for a Miss Loder in Richmond .

In January 1879 , Sarah Crease fell ill and Webster stood in for her as a temporary replacement at Loder 's house . Loder knew Julia Martha Thomas as a friend and was aware of her wish to find a domestic servant . She recommended Webster on the basis of the latter 's temporary work for her . When Thomas met Webster , she engaged her on the spot , though she did not appear to have made any inquiries about Webster 's character or past . After Webster was taken on by Thomas , the relationship between the two women appears to have deteriorated rapidly . Thomas disliked the quality of Webster 's work and frequently criticised it . Webster later said :

At first I thought her a nice old lady ... but I found her very trying , and she used to do many things to annoy me during my work . When I had finished my work in my rooms , she used to go over it again after me , and point out places where she said I did not clean , showing evidence of a nasty spirit towards me .

Webster in turn became increasingly resentful of Thomas , to the point that Thomas attempted to persuade friends to stay with her as she did not like to be alone with Webster . It was arranged that Webster would leave Thomas ' service on 28 February . Thomas recorded her decision in her last diary entry : " Gave Katherine warning to leave " .

= = Murder and the disposal of the body = =

Webster persuaded Thomas to keep her on for a further three days until Sunday 2 March . She had Sunday afternoons off as a half @-@ day and was expected to return in time to help Thomas prepare for evening service at the local Presbyterian church . On this occasion , however , Webster visited the local alehouse and returned late , delaying Thomas ' departure . The two women quarrelled and several members of the congregation later reported that Thomas had appeared " very agitated " on arriving at the church . She told a fellow congregant that she had been delayed by " the neglect of her servant to return home at the proper time " , and said that Webster had " flown into a terrible passion " upon being rebuked . Thomas returned home from church early , about 9 pm , and confronted Webster . According to Webster 's eventual confession :

Mrs. Thomas came in and went upstairs . I went up after her , and we had an argument , which ripened into a quarrel , and in the height of my anger and rage I threw her from the top of the stairs to the ground floor . She had a heavy fall , and I became agitated at what had occurred , lost all control of myself , and , to prevent her screaming and getting me into trouble , I caught her by the throat , and in the struggle she was choked , and I threw her on the floor .

The neighbours , a woman named Ives ( who was Thomas ' landlady ) and her mother , heard a single thump like that of a chair falling over but paid no heed to it at the time . Next door , Webster began disposing of the body by dismembering it and boiling it in the laundry copper and burning the bones in the hearth . She later described her actions :

I determined to do away with the body as best I could . I chopped the head from the body with the assistance of a razor which I used to cut through the flesh afterwards . I also used the meat saw and the carving knife to cut the body up with . I prepared the copper with water to boil the body to prevent identity ; and as soon as I had succeeded in cutting it up I placed it in the copper and boiled it . I opened the stomach with the carving knife , and burned up as much of the parts as I could .

The neighbours noticed an unusual , unpleasant smell . Webster spoke later of how she was " greatly overcome , both from the horrible sight before me and the smell " . However , the activity at 2 Mayfield Cottages did not seem to be out of the ordinary , as it was customary in many households for the washing to begin early on Monday morning . Over the next couple of days , Webster

continued to clean the house and Thomas ' clothes and put on a show of normality for people who called for orders . Behind the scenes , she was packing Thomas ' dismembered remains into a black Gladstone bag and a corded wooden bonnet @-@ box . She was unable to fit the murdered woman 's head and one of the feet into the containers and disposed of them separately , throwing the foot onto a rubbish heap in Twickenham . The head was buried under the Hole in the Wall pub 's stables a short distance from Thomas ' house , where it was found 131 years later .

On 4 March , Webster travelled to Hammersmith to see her old neighbours the Porters , whom she had not seen for six years , wearing Thomas ' silk dress and carrying a Gladstone bag which she had filled with some of Thomas ' remains . Webster introduced herself to the Porters as " Mrs. Thomas " . She claimed that , since last meeting the Porters , she had married , had a child , been widowed , and had been left a house in Richmond by an aunt . She invited Porter and his son Robert to the Oxford and Cambridge Arms pub in Barnes . Along the way , she disposed of the bag that she was carrying , probably by dropping it into the River Thames , while the Porters were inside the pub drinking . It was never recovered . Webster then asked young Robert Porter if he could help her carry a heavy box from 2 Mayfield Cottages to the station . As they crossed Richmond Bridge , Webster dropped the box into the Thames . She was able to explain it away and did not arouse Robert 's suspicions .

The following day , however , the box was found washed up in shallow water next to the river bank about a mile downstream . It was spotted by Henry Wheatley , a coal porter who was driving his cart past Barnes Railway Bridge shortly before seven in the morning . He initially thought that the box might contain the proceeds of a burglary . He recovered the box and opened it , finding that it contained what looked like body parts wrapped in brown paper . The discovery was immediately reported to the police and the remains were examined by a doctor , who found that they consisted of the trunk ( minus entrails ) and legs ( minus one foot ) of a woman . The head was missing and was later assumed to have been thrown into the river separately by Webster . Around the same time , a human foot and ankle were found in Twickenham . It was clear that all of the remains belonged to the same corpse , but there was nothing to connect them with Thomas and no means to identify the remains . The doctor who examined the body parts erroneously attributed them to " a young person with very dark hair " . An inquest on 10 ? 11 March resulted in an open verdict on the cause of death , and the unidentified remains were laid to rest in Barnes Cemetery on 19 March . The newspapers dubbed the unexplained murder the " Barnes Mystery " , amid speculation that the body had been used for dissection and anatomical study .

It was later alleged that Webster had offered two pots of lard to a neighbour , supposed to have been rendered from Thomas ' boiled fat . However , no evidence about this was offered at the subsequent trial and it seems likely that the story is merely a legend , particularly as several versions of the story appear to exist . The proprietress of a nearby pub claimed that Webster had visited her pub and tried to sell what she called " best dripping " there . Leonard Reginald Gribble , a writer on criminology , commented that " there is no acceptable evidence that such a repulsive sale was ever made , and it is more than possible that the episode belongs rightfully with the rest of the vast collection of apocryphal stories that has accumulated , not unnaturally , about the persons and deeds of famous criminals . "

Webster continued to live at 2 Mayfield Cottages while posing as Thomas , wearing her late employer 's clothes and dealing with tradesmen under her newly assumed identity . On 9 March , she reached an agreement with John Church , a local publican , to sell Thomas ' furniture and other goods to furnish his pub , the Rising Sun . He agreed to pay her £ 68 with an interim payment of £ 18 in advance . By the time that the removal vans arrived on 18 March , the neighbours were becoming increasingly suspicious , as they had not seen Thomas for nearly two weeks . Her next @-@ door neighbour Miss Ives asked the deliverymen who had ordered the goods removed . They replied " Mrs. Thomas " and indicated Webster . Realising that she had been exposed , Webster fled immediately , catching a train to Liverpool and travelling from there to her family home at Enniscorthy . Meanwhile , Church realised that he had been deceived . When he went through Thomas ' clothes in the delivery van , he found a letter addressed to the real Thomas . The police were called in and searched 2 Mayfield Cottages . There they discovered blood stains , burned

finger @-@ bones in the hearth , and fatty deposits behind the copper , as well as a letter left by Webster giving her home address in Ireland . They immediately put out a " wanted " notice giving a description of Webster and her son .

Scotland Yard detectives soon discovered that Webster had fled back to Ireland aboard a coal steamer in the company of her young son . The head constable of the Royal Irish Constabulary ( RIC ) in Wexford realised that the woman being sought by Scotland Yard was the same person whom his force had arrested 14 years previously for larceny . The RIC were able to trace her to her uncle 's farm at Killanne near Enniscorthy and arrested her there on 29 March . She was taken to Kingstown ( modern Dún Laoghaire ) and travelled from there back to Richmond via Holyhead , in the custody of the Scotland Yard men . On hearing of the crime for which she was charged , her uncle refused to give shelter to her son , and the authorities sent the boy to the local workhouse until such time as a place could be found for him in an industrial school .

= = Webster 's trial and execution = =

The murder caused a sensation on both sides of the Irish Sea . When the news broke , many people travelled to Richmond to look at Mayfield Cottages . The crime was just as notorious in Ireland ; as Webster travelled under arrest from Enniscorthy to Dublin , crowds gathered to gawk and jeer at her at nearly every station between the two locations . The pre @-@ trial magistrates ' hearings were attended by " many privileged and curious persons ... including not a few ladies " , according to the Manchester Guardian . The Times reported that Webster 's first appearance at Richmond Magistrates ' Court was greeted by " an immense crowd yesterday around the building ... and very great excitement prevailed . "

Webster went on trial at the Central Criminal Court ? the Old Bailey ? on 2 July 1879 . In a sign of the great public interest aroused by the case , the prosecution was led by the Solicitor General , Sir Hardinge Giffard . Webster was defended by a prominent London barrister , Warner Sleight , and the case was presided over by Mr. Justice Denman . The trial was just as well @-@ attended as the earlier hearings in Richmond and attracted intense interest from all levels of society ; on the fourth day of the trial , the Crown Prince of Sweden ? the future King Gustaf V ? turned up to watch the proceedings .

Over the course of six days , the court heard a succession of witnesses piecing together the complicated story of how Thomas had met her death . Webster had attempted before the trial to implicate the publican John Church and her former neighbour Porter , but both men had solid alibis and were cleared of any involvement in the murder . She pleaded not guilty and her defence sought to emphasise the circumstantial nature of the evidence and highlighted her devotion to her son as a reason why she could not have been capable of the murder . However , Webster 's public unpopularity , impassive demeanour and scanty defence counted strongly against her . A particularly damning piece of evidence came from a bonnetmaker named Maria Durden who told the court that Webster had visited her a week before the murder and had said that she was going to Birmingham to sell some property , jewellery and a house that her aunt had left her . The jury interpreted this as a sign that Webster had premeditated the murder and convicted her after deliberating for about an hour and a quarter .

Shortly after the jury returned its verdict and just before the judge was about to pass sentence , Webster was asked if there was any reason why sentence of death should not be passed upon her . She pleaded that she was pregnant in an apparent bid to avoid the death penalty . The Law Times reported that " [ u ] pon this a scene of uncertainty , if not of confusion , ensued , certainly not altogether in harmony with the solemnity of the occasion . " The judge commented that " after thirty @-@ two years in the profession , he was never at an inquiry of this sort . " Eventually the Clerk of Assize suggested using the archaic mechanism of a jury of matrons , constituted from a selection of the women attending the court , to rule upon the question of whether Webster was " with quick child " . Twelve women were sworn in along with a surgeon named Bond , and they accompanied Webster to a private room for an examination that only took a couple of minutes . They returned a verdict that Webster was not " quick with child " , though this did not necessarily mean that she was

not pregnant ? a distinction that led the president of the Obstetrical Society of London to protest at the use of " the obsolete medical assumption that the unborn child is not alive until the so @-@ called ' quickening . ' "

A few days before Webster was due to be executed an appeal was submitted on her behalf to the Home Secretary , R. A. Cross . It was turned down with an official statement that after considering the arguments put forward , the Home Secretary had " failed to discover any sufficient ground to justify him in advising Her Majesty to interfere with the due course of the law . "

Before she was executed , Webster made two statements confessing to the crime . In her first , she implicated Strong , the purported father of her child , who she said had participated in the murder and was responsible for leading her into a life of crime . She recanted on 28 July , the night before she was due to be executed , making a further statement in which she took sole responsibility and exonerated Church , Porter and Strong of any involvement . She was hanged the following day at Wandsworth Prison at 9 am , where the hangman , William Marwood , used his newly developed " long drop " technique to cause instantaneous death . After her death was certified , she was buried in an unmarked grave in one of the prison 's exercise yards . The crowd waiting outside cheered as a black flag was raised over the prison walls , signifying that the death sentence had been carried out .

An auction of Thomas ' property was held at 2 Mayfield Cottages on the day after Webster 's execution . John Church , the publican , managed to obtain Thomas ' furniture after all , along with numerous other personal effects including her pocket @-@ watch and the knife with which Thomas had been dismembered . The copper in which Thomas ' body had been boiled was sold for five shillings . Other visitors contented themselves with taking small pebbles and twigs from the garden as souvenirs . The house itself remained unoccupied until 1897 , as nobody would live there after the murder . Even then , according to the occupant , servants were reluctant to work at such a notorious place . It was later rumoured that a " ghostly nun " could be seen hovering over the place where Thomas had been buried . To the surprise and disappointment of Elliott O 'Donnell , there was no sign that her house was haunted , and Guy Logan noted that the " neat and pretty " appearance of the property gave no hint of the crime that had been committed within : " anything less like the popular conception of a ' murder house ' it would be hard to imagine . "

= = Social impact of the murder = =

The murder had a considerable social impact on Victorian Britain and Ireland . It caused an immediate sensation and was widely reported in the press . Freeman 's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser of Dublin noted that what it called " one of the most sensational and awful chapters in the annals of human wickedness " had resulted in the press " teem [ ing ] with descriptions and details of the ghastly horrors of that crime " . Such was Webster 's notoriety that within only a few weeks of her arrest , and well before she had gone to trial , Madame Tussaud 's created a wax effigy of her and put it on display for those who wished to see the " Richmond Murderess " . It remained on display well into the twentieth century alongside other notorious killers such as Burke and Hare and Dr. Crippen . Within days of her execution an enterprising publisher on the Strand rushed into print a souvenir booklet for the price of a penny , " The Life , Trial and Execution of Kate Webster " , which was advertised as " compris [ ing ] Twenty Handsome Pages , containing her entire History , with Summing @-@ up , Verdict , and interesting particulars , together with her last words , and a FULL @-@ PAGE ENGRAVING of the EXECUTION ? Portraits , Illustrations & c . " The Illustrated Police News published a souvenir cover depicting an artist 's impression of the day of the execution . It depicted " the prisoner visited by her friends " , " the process of pinioning " , the final rites being said , " hoisting the black flag " , and finally " filling up the coffin with lime " .

The case was also commemorated , while it was still ongoing , by street ballads ? musical narratives set to the tune of popular songs . H. Such , a printer and publisher in Southwark , issued a ballad entitled " Murder and Mutilation of an Old Lady near Barnes " shortly after Kate Webster had been arrested , set to the tune of " Just Before the Battle , Mother " , a popular song of the

American Civil War . At the end of the trial Such issued another ballad , set to the tune of " Driven from Home " , announcing :

Webster herself was characterised as malicious , reckless and wilfully evil . Commentators saw her crime as both gruesome and scandalous . Servants were expected to be deferential ; her act of extreme violence towards her employer was deeply disquieting . At the time , about 40 % of the female labour force was employed as domestic servants for a very wide range of society , from the wealthiest to respectable working @-@ class families . Servants and employers lived and worked in close proximity , and the honesty and orderliness of servants was a constant cause of concern . Servants were very poorly paid and larceny was an ever @-@ present temptation . Had Webster succeeded in completing the deal with John Church to sell Thomas ' furniture , she stood to gain the equivalent of two to three years ' worth of wages .

Another cause of revulsion against Webster was her attempt to impersonate Thomas . She had managed to perpetrate the impersonation for two weeks , implying that middle @-@ class identity amounted to little more than cultivating the right demeanour and having the appropriate clothes and possessions , whether or not they had been earned . John Church , the publican whom Webster had attempted to implicate , was himself a former servant who had risen to lower middle @-@ class status and earned a measure of prosperity and effective management of his pub . His commitment to bettering himself through hard work was in keeping with the ethic of the time . Webster , in contrast , had simply stolen her briefly @-@ held middle @-@ class identity .

Exacerbating the crime in the minds of many Victorians was how Webster violated the expected norms of femininity by the standards of the Victorian era . Victorian ideals saw women as moral , passive and physically weak or restrained . Webster was seen as quite the opposite and was described in lurid ways that emphasised her lack of femininity . Elliott O 'Donnell , writing in his introduction to the trial transcript , described Webster as " not merely savage , savage and shocking ... but the grimmest of grim personalities , a character so uniquely sinister and barbaric as to be hardly human " . The newspapers described her as " gaunt , repellent , and trampish @-@ looking " , though the reporter for The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times commented that she was " not so ill @-@ favoured as she has been described . "

Webster 's appearance and behaviour were seen as key signs of her inherently criminal nature . Crimes were thought to be committed by a social " residuum " at the bottom of society who occupied themselves as " habitual criminals " , choosing to live a life of drink and theft rather than improving themselves through thrift and hard work . Her strong build , partly a result of the hard physical labour that was her livelihood , ran counter to the largely middle @-@ class notion that women were meant to be physically frail . Some commentators saw her facial features as indicative of criminality ; O 'Donnell commented upon her " obliquely set eyes " , which he declared " are not infrequently found in homicides ... this peculiarity , which I consider was sufficient in itself , as one of nature 's danger signals , to have warned people to steer clear of her " .

Webster 's behaviour in court and her sexual history also counted against her . She was widely described by reporters as " calm " and " stolid " in facing the court and only cried once during the trial , when her son was mentioned . This contradicted the expectation that " properly feminine " women should be penitent and emotional in such a situation . Her succession of male friends , one of whom had fathered her child outside wedlock , suggested promiscuous female sexuality ? again , strongly counter to expected norms of behaviour . During her trial she attempted unsuccessfully to evoke sympathy by blaming Strong , the possible father of her child , for leading her astray : " I formed an intimate acquaintance with one who should have protected me and was led away by evil associates and bad companions . " This claim played on social expectations that women 's moral sense was inextricably linked with sexual chastity ? " falling " sexually would lead to other forms of " ruin " ? and that men who had sexual relations with women acquired social obligations that they were expected to fulfil . Webster 's attempt to implicate three innocent men also caused outrage ; O 'Donnell commented that " public opinion , as a whole , undoubtedly condemned Kate Webster , as much , perhaps , for her attempts to bring three innocent men to the scaffold as for the actual murder itself " .

According to Shani D 'Cruze of the Feminist Crime Research Network , the fact that she was Irish

was a significant factor in the widespread revulsion felt towards Webster in Great Britain . Many Irish people had emigrated to England since the Great Famine of 1849 , but met widespread prejudice and persistent associations with criminality and drunkenness . The Irish were at worst depicted as bestial and subhuman , and there were repeated episodes of violence between Irish and English workers as well as attacks by Fenians ( Irish nationalists ) in England . The demonisation of Webster as " hardly human " , as O 'Donnell put it , was of a piece with the public and judicial perceptions of the Irish as innately criminal .

= = Discovery of Thomas ' skull = =

In 1952 , the naturalist David Attenborough and his wife Jane bought a house situated between the former Mayfield Cottages ( which still stand today ) and the Hole in the Wall pub . The pub closed in 2007 and fell into dereliction but was bought by Attenborough in 2009 to be redeveloped .

On 22 October 2010 , workmen carrying out excavation work at the rear of the old pub uncovered a " dark circular object " , which turned out to be a woman 's skull . It had been buried underneath foundations that had been in place for at least 40 years , on the site of the pub 's stables . It was immediately speculated that the skull was the missing head of Julia Martha Thomas , and the coroner asked Richmond police to carry out an investigation into the identity and circumstances of death of the skull 's owner .

Carbon dating carried out at the University of Edinburgh dated the skull to between 1650 and 1880 , while the fact that it had been deposited on top of a layer of Victorian tiles suggested that it belonged to the end of this era . The skull had fracture marks consistent with Webster 's account of throwing Thomas down the stairs , and it was found to have low collagen levels , consistent with it being boiled . In July 2011 , the coroner concluded that the skull was indeed that of Thomas . DNA testing was not possible as she had died childless and no relatives could be traced ; in addition , there was no record of where the rest of her body had been buried .

The coroner recorded a verdict of unlawful killing , superseding the open verdict recorded in 1879 . The cause of Thomas 's death was given as asphyxiation and a head injury . The police called the outcome " a good example of how good old @-@ fashioned detective work , historical records and technological advances came together to solve the ' Barnes Mystery ' . "