

Missing monuments

Stanley Stokes - 23rd May 1836

Stanley Stokes – a legal clerk from London – made frequent short trips to Brighton, lodging in the same boarding house at 64 Ship Street for 16 years.

During his final visit he was accused of making 'improper approaches' to a male groom who worked in the stables of the New Ship Hotel. He was then assaulted by a mob in East Street; his face was tarred and his throat was cut - according to the Mob, this was a self-inflicted wound.

Following the attack, he was taken to the Police Station – then at Brighton Town Hall – and from there to the County Hospital where he subsequently died.

Stokes was buried at St Nicholas although the location of his grave is not known.

The inquest which followed Stokes's death and was reported in the Brighton Herald and other local journals reads today as a flawed investigation, which ignores likely lines of enquiry as easily as it accepts contradictory and dubious testimony from witnesses who were also likely to be members of the mob behind the assault.

The only critical commentary of the process which has been identified was published in the 'Brighton Patriot'. From its opening paragraph:

“ For the last week nothing, comparatively, has been spoken of, in any society, except the death of Mr Stanley Stokes, and the inquest upon his body. The greatest dissatisfaction prevails throughout the town, and yet the press has contented itself with publishing the meagre evidence given on the inquest, and there exists, in more quarters than one , an evident desire to hush up this horrible and extraordinary affair. This is disgraceful to us as a town, and dishonourable to us all as individuals.”

The inquest as reported left many questions unanswered:

Stokes was alleged to have cut his own throat. Although he was surrounded by a mob at the time, no witness could testify to seeing him do it—they were all looking the other way at the time...

The Groom at the centre of the allegations admitted accepting money from Stokes, and - despite claiming to be afraid of him - appears to have engineered a series of encounters with him over the course of the preceding days.

Although Stokes was lucid to the end, no witness who spent time with him in the hospital could remember anything he had said following the assault. The inquest did not press this issue, seeming to view Stokes's point of view as irrelevant to their enquiry...

During the assault by the mob, Stokes face was tarred and his coat was badly torn. No witness could explain to the inquest how this came about, and no witness was pressed for an explanation

The surgeon who examined Stokes at the Town Hall was certain that the knife wound was not so severe as to be the cause of death.

The final verdict reached by the inquest jury was;

“ that deceased, while labouring under cerebral affection and temporary derangement, inflicted a wound in his throat, from the combined effects of which he subsequently died”

170 years have passed since the death of Stanley Stokes. The scant material which survives makes it unlikely that the truth of his story and his death will ever be finally resolved.

It is clear that Stokes was the victim of a homophobic attack; it is likely that the wound in his throat was afflicted by the mob, who then concluded to infer suicide rather than murder.

As this explanation became untenable, and probably with pressure from the family unwilling to accept a verdict of suicide, which would deny Stokes a Christian burial, the final verdict seems formulated as a way of closing this embarrassing episode without the need for further investigation of any of those involved. Stokes – although having a large family in London, and no local connections, was buried at St Nicholas, although the location of his grave is unknown.

