

The following article has been copied with permission from a text which was given to the Local History Group by a well known member of the community of Hetton, Mr Martin Lewins who is now beyond eighty years of age (2012). Mr Lewins is a well respected member of the town who served the community over a long period. He was for years connected with All Saints Church, Eppleton from being a young boy and carried out many tasks on behalf of the church. Exerts are taken from his writings throughout the website.

“I would like to mention some thoughts on “felony”.

Comparisons of behaviour and attitudes of Society, now and in the past, are one of the privileges afforded to our elders. Perhaps it is because we cannot disagree with many of the assertions of our elders that we accept what they say. “When I was a lad we had hotter summers and colder winters than we are having now”, or, “The Big Chapel at Hetton was packed at the door every Sunday”, or, “All people come to the Good Friday concert” and “Everyone attended the Armistice Service at Eppleton Church between 1919 and 1939, with all pews full, so full in fact, that the bell-ringer had to sit on a chair next to the bell rope as his seat in the pews was taken.”

Certainly our elders remind us constantly that there was not the amount of crime in days gone by, that we experience today. “People would leave their doors open all night and nobody would attempt to molest them”. I wonder why a police force came into being? What is more to the point, how effective was the police force in detecting crime and apprehending miscreants.

Crimes were still committed and reached a high level of concern that local residents of Hetton including landowners, shopkeepers, farmers and trades people joined together to form an “ Association for the Prosecution of Felons”. Rewards were offered to anyone providing information leading to the successful prosecution of the thief. By the middle of the 19th century there were sixty such Associations in County Durham. At the time social conditions were deplorable. No work and no money meant that the temptation to steal or poach was very strong. The two examples which follow, illustrate this point.

1. An evil disposed person entered into the garden of Mr ----- and cut and destroyed a number of gooseberry bushes; destroyed a large number of caulifolowers, cabbages and beans; forcibly broke open the greenhouse door, entered therein and disposed of upwards of seventy valuable plants.
2. Whereas a fat wether sheep, the property of the Rev. Archdeacon Prosser of Easington was stolen from the Parson’s meadow and slaughtered in an adjoining field. A reward of 3 guineas was offered by the Association plus a further 5 guineas by the Rev. Prosser. The ducking stool was mentioned but strangely not the stocks.

Prisoners were taken to Durham City to be tried on more serious matters but this may have not been the case in earlier times. There is a Hangman's Lane at Warden Law crossroads – probably where a gibbet was erected to show the body of the offender. Was it ever used? Did Hanging really take place here?

Martin Lewins