

## **Cambridge Chronicle, 25 March 1836**

*Transcribed from all six images, with overlapping lines included only once. Original wording is retained; “b—” and “d—” reproduce the newspaper’s abbreviated swear words.*

### **SATURDAY, MARCH 19.**

#### **DESPERATE HIGHWAY ROBBERY.**

*Thomas Pepper (19), George Benford (29), Hugh Fletcher (26), James Heley (22), and Emma Heley (22), were charged with violently assaulting William Ratcliffe, putting him in bodily fear and danger of his life, and stealing from him three half-crowns and one shilling and sixpence in silver, a watch-key, a ring, a jean purse, and a hat.*

William Ratcliffe examined: I was at Cambridge on the 5th Dec. last; I went to the Chip Axe; I know female prisoner; I was at the Anchor with the girl Hopkins; no other woman was there; first time I saw female prisoner was against the Chip Axe door; she told me it was of no use waiting for Hopkins, as she was a married woman; I said, “I want no woman;” she replied “Yes you do—you are a stranger, and you shall go home with me;” I went with her over the Market-hill, where we met Hart, the watchman, who shook hands with me; I then went down St. Mary’s passage, across Senate House-hill—there are posts at the corner of it; I went down the passage a little way, and the female prisoner went back to the posts; I did not see her speak to any one—she returned to me, I went down the passage, and turned to the right and then to the left to Gerard Hostel lane; about 400 yards up the lane there was a gate; she asked me for 1s. 6d.; I said I would not give her any such a sum; I turned away from her; she then snatched a stick from me; I said she should not have it, and tried to take it away from her; she said, “You b—, here comes my husband—he will set you to rights;” I turned and saw the prisoner Fletcher—he seemed in a passion; he knocked me down with his hands, and then thrust them into my right-hand breeches pocket; I had three half-crowns, a watch-key and a steel ring, and a box key, in a purse in that pocket; he then searched my watch pocket and my waistcoat pocket; he took a knife with two blades, a comb, some pence, and 1s. 6d. in silver, from my left waistcoat pocket; when I first saw Fletcher, there were more close behind him; when I was on my knee, the prisoner Benford put his hand over my

mouth, and told me if I made any alarm he would knock my head off; the female prisoner stood opposite to me; she struck me several times with a stick, and said I had more money in my pocket; she put her hand into my waistcoat pocket, and I caught hold of her wrist; I was hit very hard on my head with a stick; before female prisoner hit me I was not struck with a stick; she struck me five or six times; I told them not to use me so, whatever they took from me; female prisoner said, “You b—, I’ll make you remember bringing me down this lane;” she said, “Kill the b—;” I then received two violent blows on the head; they then left me; I have a wig on my head now—had not a wig on the night of the robbery. [The prosecutor here took off his wig, and there appeared some scars on his head.] My hat was knocked off, and I saw one of the prisoners come back, pick it up, and take it away; I have since seen my hat; I put my hands to my head to keep the blows from it, and received a blow on my finger, which broke my nail; I have lost the use of my finger; it was done by a stick; the last two blows could not have been struck by one person; while in the lane a gentleman of Trinity college put up his window—the prisoners ran away. I walked up the lane and met Heley; saw him about 40 yards from the place; he said, “You have had some rough usage, old fellow;” I said if I could find the watchman, I would try what I could do; I walked up Trinity-lane, and saw a watchman in the Crescent; I was very weak, and he assisted me to the market-place; as I was going through the Crescent some gentleman threw me a hat out of the window; I went to the Anchor; I was bleeding very much—I could not get in at the door; I felt my senses going; a surgeon was sent for; I was taken to the hospital, and was there five weeks, when I came out, and went to Balsham, but I was obliged to return to the hospital again, and was there three weeks. [The shirt that the prosecutor wore on the night of the robbery was produced, which was covered with blood.] I saw the prisoners no more that night.—

*Cross-examined by Mr. Prendergast:* I was not drunk; I came to Cambridge about four o’clock—had three pints of beer and a glass of rum from that time up to the time of the robbery; made no agreement with female prisoner; saw Fletcher some time ago at Fulbourn—recognised him as that person when I saw him at the prison.—The prisoner Benford asked witness what he swore to him by? he said, the peculiarity of his voice.—The female prisoner asked witness whether he had not some rum-and-water with her at the Chip Axe? he said, he had not.—Did not ask prisoner to go down Gerard Hostel lane, and that he would pay her when they

returned to the Chip Axe; was never down Gerard Hostel lane before—did not know where it was.

Two watchmen stated they saw prisoners and the prosecutor on the night in question.

T. F. Gage, hatter: I was at the Chip Axe on the night of the robbery; Benford, Pepper, and Fletcher were there; I saw a woman named Hopkins and prosecutor at the Anchor at a quarter before 12; I saw the prosecutor after the robbery—he appeared quite insensible; I supported his head while the surgeon dressed his wounds; Pepper, Benford, and Fletcher came in; Pepper said, “How b— busy old Gage makes himself;” I heard him also say, “I wish the old d— may die before the morning”; Fletcher remarked, “Poor fellow, how somebody has been beating him about the head;” saw a stick in his (F.’s) possession; prosecutor had a hat, but it was not his own; Faiers, the constable, shewed me a hat, which I recognised as belonging to the prosecutor—I sold it to him, and can swear positively to it.

George Johnson, a watchman, said, on the night of the robbery I was on Senate-house hill; saw prosecutor and female prisoner coming from St. Mary’s passage; they went down Senate-house passage a little way; I then saw Fletcher and another person coming from St. Mary’s church; the female prisoner left the prosecutor and came and spoke to Fletcher; who went down the passage in the direction of Gerard Hostel-lane; female prisoner joined the prosecutor, and followed Fletcher and the other person; I saw some persons at the corner of the Crescent, who afterwards went down Trinity-back-lane; Fletcher and the other person came up the lane, crossed over by the church, and appeared to be looking for some one; I afterwards saw James Heley come up the passage; he said something to me; I then went down the Crescent (it was three or four minutes past the half-hour after 12) and saw Pepper standing there; it was about 300 yards from Gerard Hostel lane; I afterwards saw prosecutor in the Crescent, he was staggering, and the blood was streaming from his head and eye; he had no hat when I first saw him; as we were going down the Crescent a gentleman threw a hat out of the window: I was afterwards at the Anchor but did not notice the prisoners there; I went down Gerard Hostel lane, and found a stick with blood on it, there was blood on the gate; I gave Faiers the stick; *Cross-examined by Mr. Gurdon*: I saw Pepper at the corner of

Crescent three or four minutes past the half-hour after 12 saw him twice there; I did not see Benford.

William Rayner: I was coming up Senate-house passage about half-past 12; I saw prosecutor and female prisoner going towards Gerard Hostel lane; I saw Fletcher and Benford, by the side of the Senate-house; they were cutting sticks: Fletcher asked me my business; I said I did not know; he said “go either one way or the other, or I’ll give you a b—y good hiding.” I have known Fletcher a year, Benford not quite so long.—*Cross-examined by Mr. Prendergast*: I was at the Chip Axe on the night of the robbery; I drank by myself at first, then with two young men from Trumpington; I was there about an hour, I then went on the Market-hill; saw a young woman there and I went with her down Senate-house passage; the two young men followed me; we said on Sunday morning we thought prosecutor would be robbed, because we saw the men cutting sticks; I did not give information of it until about a fortnight or three weeks ago; saw Benford two or three years ago at Trumpington, and several times since.

— Roupell, Esq., of Trinity college, said, on the night in question, I heard a noise in Gerard Hostel lane as of two sticks meeting, and an exclamation of pain; I was in a room looking into the lane; I saw a woman and about three or four men, amongst them a bald-headed man, I saw the woman strike a blow on the bald-headed man; I spoke to them and they ran away; I saw one of them come back and pick up a hat.

William Reynolds: I keep the Anchor; Ratcliff was there on the evening of the 5th December last; he had a hat on, and a stick; he was brought in about one o’clock bleeding very much; I sent for Faiers the constable, and a surgeon; before prosecutor came, Pepper, Benford, and Fletcher came in; I observed a spot of blood on Fletcher’s face; I asked him if he had been fighting? he said, “yes, we’ve been having a regular mill”; they all heard him say so; I asked them who with? they said “they did not know, but along with some countryman.” I then asked them where? they said “at the bottom of Green street”; Pepper had a stick in his hand; I had seen the stick twice before that evening in Ratcliffe’s hands; knew it by the brass ferrel and the nob; Fletcher snatched it out of Pepper’s hand, and said, “give me that stick, that belongs to me”; I told them it did not belong to either of them, for I knew it well; I saw Fletcher take a watch-key out of

his pocket; I saw it in his open hand; a ring was on it and a piece of steel, I asked him to let me look at it, he said “that’s all right it is mine,” and put it in his pocket; I saw Benford draw out about a foot of a stick with a nob; they then went away; prosecutor was brought in, and about half an hour after prisoners returned; they were then taken into custody; the key was picked up in my house and given to Faiers.—*Cross-examined by Mr. Gurdon*: I won’t swear which of the prisoners said we’ve been having a regular mill.—The female prisoner, Heley, asked witness if he saw her in his house while the prosecutor was there? He said, No, nor any of the prisoners to his knowledge.

John Faiers, constable, said, I was called upon on Sunday morning, the 6th December last, and apprehended Fletcher, Pepper, and afterwards Benford; Fletcher had a hat on; he usually wore a cap; he was put in the kitchen, and I afterwards saw him take the hat off and give it to Pepper, who put it under the settle; I took it up; I afterwards saw him with a cap on; it was Benford’s cap; there were some spots of blood upon Fletcher’s face, hands, and shirt; saw no blood on Pepper, but heard him say, “he wished the old b — might die before the morning, and then they would be all right;” I apprehended Benford at the Anchor; I observed a spot of blood on his cheek and shirt, and pointed it out to the surgeon, who said it was fresh; I took the female prisoner at her house; she said she would go, but she knew nothing about it; she went no farther than the first window in Senate-House passage; her husband said she brought no money home; she asked whether her husband might walk with her. I very willingly agreed, as I was going to apprehend them both; Johnson gave me the stick; there were marks of blood on it; they appeared very fresh; and it seemed to have been recently cut.—The stick was produced, and identified by the watchman as the one he found on the night of the robbery.—Reynolds saw Fletcher the day before the robbery with the stick.

Mr. Barber, surgeon: I was sent for to the Anchor on the night of the robbery; I found prosecutor there; he had violent wounds on his head; they must have been inflicted by a light blunt instrument, as the edges of the wounds were jagged and rough; one wound near the crown of the head must have been inflicted with considerable force; he was quite senseless and faint from the loss of blood; he was in great danger; he was at the hospital 5 weeks; he went away and came again with a swelling of the glands of the neck, produced by the blows; Faiers called my attention to

Benford's face; it had blood on it; Fletcher's face had blood on it too; it appeared quite fresh. Pepper said, "we are to go to gaol, I hope the b— may die"—The prosecutor identified the hat; as well as the key and ring as the property the prisoners took from him.

T. Gage also identified the hat as being the one he sold to prosecutor.

Joseph Fetch, attorney for the prosecution: I was present at the examination of the witnesses; the depositions were taken down, and read to the prisoners; they all signed them, with the exception of Fletcher. The statement of Emma Heley was then read, in which she stated that he ran away upon hearing persons coming down the lane.

Pepper said, he did not see the prosecutor till he saw him at the Anchor after the robbery.

Rev. William Hose, the chaplain, and Mr. Pain, the Governor, of the Town Gaol, gave Fletcher a good character during the time he had been in gaol, but did not know him before.

The learned Judge alluded to the case of Pepper, and said if they had any doubt as to his being really present at the robbery, they must give him the benefit of that doubt. His Lordship also called their attention to the expression made use of by Pepper about the death of the old man, and said it was possible he might have used it in a moment of passion. The learned Judge also alluded to the contradiction in the evidence of Rayner as to the time he had known Benford.

The jury consulted for a few minutes, and then asked his lordship whether, if Pepper was acquitted of the capital offence, he could be found guilty of being an accessory after the fact. His Lordship told them he could not.

The jury returned a verdict of *guilty* against Emma Heley, Hugh Fletcher, and George Benford; and *acquitted* James Heley and Pepper.

His Lordship, in passing sentence, said the nature of their crime was such that he felt hardly justified in not permitting the extreme sentence of the law to be carried into execution. They would, however, be conveyed to a part of the world where they would be despised and treated as outcasts and unfit for respectable society.

