

Intro

Camden Town has always been a wild frontier. Two hundred years ago there was nothing here but fields and farmsteads, crossed by the long-buried River Fleet. But bucolic bliss it never was. In earliest days of settlement, the 1790s, there were two coaching inns in what is now the High Street, The Mother Red Cap, where The World's End now stands and The Southampton, now Edwards. Between them hung a gibbet, and all around roamed Highwaymen.

Even the name of The Mother Red Cap was derived from a local legend about a witch. A woman called Jinney, the daughter of a Kentish Town brickmaker, whose parents were hanged for witchcraft. She was suspected of keeping up the family tradition after two of her husbands perished in the oven of her cottage and nicknamed Mother Damnable or Mother Red Cap for the colour of her hat. Witches have left their mark in Camden. Across the road from the original Red Cap is the The Black Cap, another allusion to a local sorceress, which is the pub made famous in *Withnail and I* and today better known for its glamorous queens.

Its Gothic pedigree is indisputable. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in this parish, and first consummated her relationship with future husband Percy Shelley in the graveyard of St Pancras. The creator of Frankenstein might never have left – there are the largest congregation of Goths in the known world still haunting the High Street.

From the miasmas step other figures of deadly repute. The poisoner Dr Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen who filleted his wife in the cellar of 39 Snowdrop Crescent in 1910, a house that was levelled by the Luftwaffe in the War. The unfortunate prostitute Emily Dimmock, who had her throat cut here in 1907, in a case that would become known as The Camden Town Murder and be forever linked with Jack the Ripper and the artist Walter Sickert.

Dickens knew Camden well. Placing a character here was a shorthand for saying that they came from the wrong side of the tracks, the poorest part of town. That's why Bob Cratchett lived here. William Butler Yeats pursued occult interests in Primrose

Hill, in the same house where Sylvia Plath would later take her own life. Arthur Rimbaud stayed for a while in Royal College Street, it inspired him to write *A Season In Hell*.

Danger, art, the occult, literature and eternal notoriety – these are the leylines of Camden and why I was compelled to set my own fictions here. After all, the characters in my books are only following local traditions, walking in the footsteps of all the cut-throats, guttersnipes, sorcerers, drinkers and dreamers who have come this way before.

Corner of Prince of Wales Rd and Malden Road

Dennis Nielsen

One of Britain's most notorious serial killers, Dennis Nielsen worked at the Jobcentre in Kentish Town Road by day and lured unsuspecting men to his Muswell Hill home when he became lonely at night. He never wanted them to leave. Trained as a chef in the army, Nielsen, who butchered his victims and secreted their remains throughout his house and garden, was very fond of cooking. He would reputedly often make curries on festive occasions for his fellow colleagues, served up in industrial-sized vats where later, remains of his victims were found. He was tried for killing six – although he had confessed to 15 – and was found guilty of his crimes at the Old Bailey in October 1983.

Hawley Crescent

The Murder Mile

On the front cover of my first novel, *The Not Knowing*, is a photograph of me standing on this spot, looking down to the railway arches to where the scene of a murder has taken place. This is the land where my killer lurked – “lock-ups used by the market traders, railway arches used as rehearsal spaces and makeshift speakeasies, boarded-up places that were easy to break into – once you nosed around a bit, they

were easy to find.” It is here that my fictional film director Jon Jackson came to a grisly end. He didn’t pay attention to the plot or the signs that were here all along. This interzone, linking Camden Town, Chalk Farm and Kentish Town gained the grim soubriquet ‘Murder Mile’ in 2002, when Thomas Breen, Hassan Abdulhai, Tommy Scott, Jamhai Conquest, Jason Gibson and Andreas Hinz were all killed between July and August of that year. The July murder of German trainee rabbi Hinz was the most bizarre and bleak of all these horror stories. He had gone for a drink in the Black Cap, where he met not a witch but a severely disturbed young man from Ballymena, Northern Ireland, Thomas McDowell. McDowell, like my fictional killer in *TNK*, had suffered terrible abuse as a child and suffered from incurable mental illness as a result. Poor Hinz, a gentle and studious 37-year-old, followed McDowell back to his flat in Cauldfield House, Baynes Street – just north of where we are standing – a block of flats that became a notorious crack den. He was strangled and then cut up into pieces with a razor and a rip-saw that McDowell had borrowed from a Drop-In Centre. McDowell – who signed letters from prison as ‘Tommy the Hacksaw’ – left his victim’s remains in a wheelie bin outside his flat, which, as we shall see, is a grisly hallmark of Camden crime.

Corner of Hawley Road-Kentish Town Road

Anthony John Hardy – The Camden Ripper

2002 was a shocking one in the annals of Camden crime. That year ended on the Murder Mile with a grisly late December finding on Royal College Street, the road parallel to where we are now standing, where the top of that junction meets the main road. A homeless man, foraging for food in wheelie bins there, pulled out a binbag full of human remains. Two days later, another bag was discovered in nearby Plender Street. Police raided the home of Anthony John Hardy in Royal College Street and began to unravel a nightmare that had begun at least a year before.

Hardy, a strapping six-foot 53-year-old, was known to residents in the Hartland Block of flats as ‘bonecrusher’, ‘the bear’ and ‘Mr Bow Wow’ for the way he would

intimidate people by giving them hugs if they tried to complain about his behaviour. And they had a lot to complain about. Police had been called to his flat a year before, in January 2002, where they found the dead body of Sally Rose White. Hardy was arrested for murder and sectioned. But after the pathologist found that the 38-year-old woman had died of natural causes, he was released again in November 2002.

A month later, on December 30, the discovery of a pair of human legs was made. When police entered Hardy's flat on New Year's Eve they found the torso of Elizabeth Valad in a grim tableau of pornographic magazines, a hacksaw and knives. The Plender Street, remains were of Brigitte MacClennan, who had been killed on Christmas Day. Hardy had already fled.

He was apprehended on 2 January 2003 at Great Ormond Street Hospital, where he was begging for drugs to treat his diabetes, exacerbated by alcohol abuse. He eventually pleaded guilty to the murders of all three women and there were lurid accounts in local papers of how he had strangled them and dressed them up in demonic masks before cutting up their bodies. The heads and hands of Valad and MacClennan were never found.

One hundred and twenty years previously, the poet Arthur Rimbaud and his lover Paul Verlaine were residents of Royal College Street. Their frequent rows and Verlaine's subsequent abandonment of Rimbaud here led the poet to pen his verse *A Night In Hell*, which would later form part of his best-known book, *A Season In Hell*. Which is what the residents of 21st century Royal College Street had most certainly been living through.

The Devonshire Arms

As you can see, this pub is the centre of the current Camden Town Goth universe, which is why I used it in a setting for my second novel, *The Singer*. Here, journalist Eddie Bracknell, who is investigating the disappearance of singer Vincent Smith some 20 years previously, goes to meet one of his old associates, a decaying Goth named Robin Leith. This is the start of a world of trouble for Eddie, as Robin warns

him: "If you're going to go disturbing old graves, don't be surprised if something jumps out at you".

Inverness Street

The Old Bedford Theatre, Crippen, Walter Sickert and the Camden Town

Murder

The building just over here to the right stands on the site of what was once a music hall, The Old Bedford Theatre, which was a hangout for the artist Walter Sickert, leader of the Camden Town Group of painters. He immortalised the place in his 1888 painting *Little Dot Hetherington at The Old Bedford*.

The original Music Hall was built in 1861, on part of the tea gardens belonging to the original Bedford Arms pub. The interior was apparently a splendid auditorium, capable of seating 1168 patrons on three tiers. Although it was destroyed by fire in 1899, a second Music Hall was rebuilt on the site, and one of the many actresses to tread the boards here was Cora Turner, who went under the stage name Belle Elmore. Cora arrived in Camden Town in 1900, newly married to the American Dr John Hawley Harvey Crippen. She was a popular character; Crippen was not. The jealous doctor took a mistress, his secretary Ethel Le Neve, who lived nearby in the nearby Goldington Buildings. He ordered a large quantity of the poison hyoscine hydrobromide, then told everyone that his wife had been called back to America by the death of a relative. In fact it was poor Cora who was lying dead, in various pieces, in the cellar of number 39 Snowdrop Crescent. Crippen and Le Neve fled but were apprehended aboard the *SS Montrose*, en route to Canada. He was hanged in November 1910.

Walter Sickert may well have seen Cora perform at the Bedford, but it was with another Camden Town murder that his name would become embroiled.

On the morning of 12 September 1907 a prostitute called Emily Dimmock was found with her throat cut in her lodgings in St Paul's Road, not far from Hilddrop Crescent in the area that is now Agar Grove. Police arrested a young man called Robert Wood,

who was the last person to be seen with Emily, who went by the working name of Phyllis, and who had sent her a postcard asking her to meet him at a local pub. At the time, Emily had a common law husband, Bert Shaw, who worked on the railways and was away at the time of her death. He discovered her body in their ransacked rooms. She had apparently been slashed with one of Bert's razors and her postcard collection had been scattered around the room.

Wood's postcard got him arrested, but in a celebrity trial at the newly-opened Old Bailey, he was represented by Arthur John Newton solicitors, who would go on to defend Dr Crippen, under the stewardship of Edward Marshall Hall QC, the pop star barrister of the day. Marshall Hall's defence of Wood was so brilliant that Wood was acquitted. Bert Shaw had a watertight alibi – he was in Sheffield when the offence took place – so the police never did find the killer.

Sickert's alleged involvement was tenuous – during the 1890s and 1900s he had produced a series of paintings called *The Camden Town Murders*, based on the crimes of Jack The Ripper in Whitechapel. Sickert, who lived in Mornington Crescent, was fascinated by the underworld of Camden is believed to have modeled his painting *What Shall We Do for the Rent* on the Dimmock case.

But in all contemporary accounts of the actual criminal case, the artist's name is never mentioned. However, this hasn't stopped a famous modern author from trying to connect the Camden Town Murder with Jack The Ripper and coming up with Walter Sickert as the villain of both pieces. Patricia Cornwell's 2002 book *Jack The Ripper: Case Closed* fingered the suspect after the author of the Kay Scarpetta series invested a fortune buying his paintings and having them forensically examined to try to prove her point. The book caused uproar in the art world and with Ripperologists alike – who were quick to point out that Sickert was in Dieppe at the time of the Whitechapel murders.

As for the Camden Town Murder, the artist, like so many unfortunates on our travels, was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Regent's Canal

In both *The Not Knowing* and *The Singer*, murders take place along the stretch of the Grand Union Canal stretching from here, Regent's Canal, up to King's Cross. There is a reason for this, if you cannot already divine a shady atmosphere.

In July of 2005, a passer-by fished a shopping bag out of the canal just around the corner, opposite London Zoo. They were suspicious that the bag might have unwanted pets in it. I remember that morning very clearly, as I was walking to work that day and the police were continuing to search the canal as I passed by. Luckily I didn't see what the passer-by had found, or what the police diver later came up with – the remains of Marvin Gentles, a drug dealer who had been carved up into 133 different pieces by demented crack addict Abdul El-Gharras.

Horribly enough, there are grisly precedents to this crime. In February 2001, an angler fished six holdalls out of the canal here. They contained the dismembered remains of Paula Fields – well, most of her remains. Her head and hands were missing, which led to initial speculation that this could have been the work of Anthony John Hardy. But the trail eventually led to another profoundly disturbed misogynist, John Patrick Sweeney, who, like Hardy, decorated his Kentish Town flat with murals depicting women as demons. He had been on the run for six years after attacking a former girlfriend in his native Liverpool with an axe. Sweeney had spent most of those years working on building sites in Europe, where it is believed he may also have murdered a previous girlfriend in Amsterdam. Paula Fields had the bad luck to meet Sweeney, who she introduced to friends as Scouse Joe, in September 2000. By December she was missing. Sweeney was finally convicted of her murder in March 2002.

And still there's more.

Two years after Sweeney's conviction in March 2004, children playing by the canal saw something suddenly float to the surface. It was the torso of a woman, a Somalian refugee called Nasra Ismail, who had the misfortune to share a crack pipe with an outwardly respectable 55-year-old called Daniel Archer. Archer, who had been building up to the killing with a spree of violent encounters with prostitutes, murdered

Ismail in his brother's flat in Kings Cross. He cut her up with a hacksaw and deposited her remains in a holdall and a suitcase, both of which he deposited in the canal. Archer was jailed for life in December 2005.

Fitzroy Road

WB Yates and Sylvia Plath

Just as murderers love Camden Town, so writers and creatives love the rarefied air of Primrose Hill, a whole different world just minutes and worlds away. Yet this beautiful enclave of parks and Victorian terraces is not immune from darkness or madness. The great poet and mystic William Butler Yeats arrived at 41 Fitzroy Road as a young boy in 1867 and by the turn of the century was part of a group of aesthetes who had fallen under the spell of the Russian medium and seer Madame Helena Petrova Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society, which taught a blend of Eastern mysticism and Western esotericism in an attempt to cross the divide between science and religion.

In a search for greater truth Yeats was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890 and took for his motto *Demon est Deus inversus* – the Devil is the converse of God. But in 1899 he would encounter the Golden Dawn neophyte who would come to be known as the Great Beast himself, the young Aleister Crowley. Crowley was in awe of Yeats poetry and tried to impress him with his own verse, but Yeats was painfully aware of Crowley's lyrical shortcomings. In turn Crowley poured scorn on Yeats magical abilities and so began a bitter adversary that would eventually split the Golden Dawn. It was claimed by the poet Katherine Raine that it was Crowley who was alluded to in Yeats' famous poem *The Second Coming*, with its "rough beast, it's hour come round at last" that "Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born".

Almost a hundred years after Yeats came to Fitzroy Road, another tragic poet was drawn here. Sylvia Plath had lived around the corner in Chalcott Square with her husband Ted Hughes and had first thought about buying the house in 1960. By

December 1962 they had separated and Plath and their two children moved into the top floor maisonette of number 41. She wrote 12 poems here, including *Mystic*, that reflected her spiralling depression. Finally, on February 11 1963, she gassed herself to death in the kitchen, aged only 30.

The Roundhouse

In an echo of Yeats, in 1970 George Melly wrote: "Sooner or later a new generation of teenagers will adopt some form of music with its accompanying lifestyle to symbolise and reflect their revolt. It may even be that at this moment, in a cellar or church hall in Runcorn or Middlesbrough, in the back room of a pub in Slough or Welwyn Garden City, a movement is gestating and will soon slouch towards The Roundhouse to be born."

The Roundhouse was originally an engine shed that spent nearly 100 years as a warehouse for Gilbey's Gin. It was finally rescued by the playwright Arnold Wesker in the mid-Sixties, and the first event to be staged at the new arts venue was a party for *International Times*, the underground paper usually called *IT*, on October 15 1966. Among the variety of unusual entertainment aired that evening was a screening of a film made by a young admirer of Aleister Crowley, Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*. Among the partygoers were a glittering couple who would later fall under Anger's spell, Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull. Faithfull would go on to star as the witch Lilith in Anger's most controversial and ill-fated film *Lucifer Rising*, for which Jagger was supposed to play the lead and supply the soundtrack. In the end, the former role fell to Manson Family member Bobby Beausoli and the latter to fellow Crowleyite and Led Zeppelin legend Jimmy Page. But that's another story for another time. Just never let it be said that Camden doesn't have an enormous amount of sympathy for the Devil.