

## **THE HADDENHAM MURDER MYSTERY OF 1828**

On 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> July 2009 a joint production by Haddenham Players and Haddenham Museum of a specially written play was staged in the Tithe Barn, Manor Farm, Haddenham. 'The Haddenham Murder Mystery of 1828', researched by Alan Rose and written by Margaret Watkins, enacted the true story of the murder on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1828 of William Edden, a Thame man, in Haddenham Fields and the subsequent trial and conviction of two local men.

The three performances were fully sold out and were blessed by favourable weather; the audiences were greeted by members of the cast in costume mingling with them before the performance and during the intervals. The play was performed in the highly atmospheric Tithe Barn and the audience invited to act as jury at the end of each performance.

This was a true local story acted by cast of Haddenham villagers in a historic venue and proved a talking point for all who were privileged to see and participate in the production. Although the play was extensively previewed in the Bucks Herald and Thame Gazette, no reviews were published. Therefore the following background to the production and a review of the play itself have been specially commissioned as a record in The Haddenham Chronicles of a significant community event.

### **The Haddenham Murder Mystery of 1828**

#### **Background to the July 2009 Production in the Haddenham Manor Farm Tithe Barn**

The three performances of the play, The Haddenham Murder Mystery of 1828, were the culmination of a year's work for Margaret Watkins, who wrote, produced and directed the play. From the beginning of the process in the summer of 2008 when she first discussed the project with Alan Rose, the historical researcher, Margaret was determined that this should be a village venture. Alan Rose had planted the seed of the idea in her mind by describing a production he had seen on holiday in the West Country, which had dramatised a true event in his holiday village.

What better story to dramatised than the murder of William Edden, a Thame man, at Haddenham Fields in 1828? Alan Rose, Chairman of the Haddenham Museum Trust, had already researched the story through contemporary newspaper reports, including coverage by the august Times newspaper, London, and the local Bucks Gazette. Alan had written an article for the first issue of the Museum Chronicles; a booklet for the Museum; and had given talks to village groups. All of these had intrigued the Haddenham villagers with the conflicting evidence and the somewhat dubious verdict of the trial of the two accused men, Solomon Sewell and Benjamin Tyler. Were these two men guilty of the murder? Should they have been hanged for the crime?

By Christmas 2008 the play was written and by February 2009 all 35 characters had been cast. Margaret had soon realised that Haddenham Players, whose Chairman she was at that time, could not possibly fill all the roles. So she also contacted many villagers who had taken part in the Millennium Pageant of 2000; Friends of the Museum; as well as many who had never acted before in their lives! With their aid, Margaret's dream of a truly village project was fulfilled.

All talents were utilised, all offers of help were gratefully accepted. Andy Price, who took the part of William Edden, also constructed the convincing courtroom set. Rachel Smith provided the horse and the pony and trap, skilfully converted by Andy Price into William Edden's cart, for filming. Mike Stephens provided the professional touch in the opening filmed sequence. Karen of Blooming Fruity sold so many tickets that all performances were sold out well before the opening night. Tom

Bucknell provided a fantastic setting by allowing the play to be performed in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Tithe Barn of Manor Farm. Haddenham Witchert WI members helped with Front of House and computer skills (no jam here!). Costumes were sourced by Gillian Liddell (and not one item of clothing was allowed on stage unless it appeared historically correct!). Props were borrowed from the Museum and a replica was made of *the* hammer used as the murder weapon. Local shops and businesses generously donated raffle prizes. It is impossible to mention everyone: the list is endless!

The end result gave enjoyment to everyone concerned and became a topic of conversation for weeks to come. All was not finished, however, on those three magic evenings in July 2009 when cast and villagers mingled in the farmyard discussing their own verdicts during the intervals. More was to come!

A DVD of the whole performance, comprising both the film and stage production, was made by Mike Stephens and went on sale a few weeks after the show. Later still, the DVD was played again for a public performance on a big screen for those who had taken part to revel in their successes and, for those who were disappointed and could not get a ticket in July, to experience the drama of this most perplexing and contradictory murder mystery.

Alan Watkins and Margaret Watkins

July 2009

## **The Haddenham Murder Mystery of 1828**

### **A Review**

It is a long time since your correspondent has been able to report on a really outstanding stage triumph but without doubt, this has been achieved with the world premier production of “The Haddenham Murder Mystery of 1828”. The performances ran for three consecutive nights playing to packed houses from the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009. Sadly there were many disappointed people who were unable to obtain tickets because they had left it too late to make their booking!

This chilling tale was performed in that “olde world” Tithe Barn that forms part of Manor Farm in Haddenham. As the lights dimmed the huge oak vaulted barn just reeked of history and added to the tense atmosphere of authenticity as the drama unfolded. Indeed, the story is based on true factual accounts of the events surrounding a notorious murder that took place in 1828 and was well documented at the time by reporters from the Bucks Gazette and The Times newspaper. The script was based on really excellent historical research carried out by Alan Rose, the Chairman of The Haddenham Museum Trust.

Although the considerable success of the production reflected the hard and committed work of the large team of 35 actors as well as many off-stage personnel, much of the credit for this successful enterprise must go to the inspiration of one person, namely Margaret Watkins. Margaret not only wrote the gripping script but also produced and directed the production. The Haddenham Players and villagers took up the challenge of their roles and supporting duties with skill, enthusiastic fervour and, one has to add, like true professionals.

The story revolves around the dastardly murder in 1828 at Haddenham Fields of one William Edden, a local dealer, who was travelling in his pony and cart back from Aylesbury, through Haddenham, to his home in Thame. The scenario goes on to recount the subsequent criminal trials, conviction and execution by hanging of two men, Solomon Sewell and Benjamin Tyler. There has, however, always been a doubt in some people's minds about the correctness of the verdict.

This current performance takes the form of a retrial with the audience being told at the commencement of the evening, that they were now the newly appointed jury. It was also explained that they needed to disregard the outcome of the past trials and should weigh afresh the complex evidence to be laid before them. At the end of trial and in time honoured tradition the jury would be asked if they had reached a decision, based on the evidence, as to whether they found the men to be guilty of the crime or that they judged that there was insufficient evidence to convict them.

As a prelude, the background to this compelling drama was brought to life by the showing of a film of William Edden's journey and some of the people and places which were relevant to his activities on the day of his murder. The film was produced by Mike Stephens, a professional film maker, and provided a graphic exposition of the backcloth to the tragic events.

The majority of the action on stage, following the film, took place in the Aylesbury Magistrates Court and ended with events eighteen months later in the Aylesbury Assizes. The scenery and the costumes – the latter being sourced by that well-known wardrobe mistress, Gillian Liddell – added greatly to the credibility of the actors as well as gravitas to the Court scenes.

It is difficult to pick out particular actors for special mention as the whole cast performed their roles so well but, the two accused - Tom Colley, who played Solmon Sewell and Tim Armitt who took the part of Benjamin Tyler – brought a sense of realism and fear to the Court scenes. There were also some really believable characters such as Gary McCarron as the Bucks Gazette Reporter who acted as a narrator, describing the press coverage of the trials and skilfully guiding the jury through the complicated facts of the case. A cameo gem came from John Davis, as the very aggressive witness John Foster, who threw himself into his short role with great “Shakespearean” energy. All the cast deserve high praise for a job well done!

I will not comment on the verdicts which were reached for I have no wish to influence “juries” who will watch reprises of this excellent play.

The wonderful finale was both chilling and thought provoking, all the lights dimmed except for one spotlight on the back wall and in its glare hung two pieces of rope each tied in the shape of a noose!

Michael Pegge

July 2009