



10 RILLINGTON PLACE - FROM BBC WEB SITE OCT 06

The curious case of John Reginald Halliday Christie perfectly illustrates absolute finality of the death penalty and the reason it causes such controversy in the UK.

John Christie was a murderer who gave evidence at the trial of Timothy Evans, he stood calmly by as the young Welshman was convicted and hanged for murder, which he himself had committed. And his murdering spree and ruthless actions wouldn't end there.

Far from being racked with remorse, Christie went on to commit a further four murders, including that of his own wife, before the law finally caught up with him and he too was executed. Thirteen years later, in 1966, Evans was finally pardoned and his body was moved from unconsecrated ground, to a Catholic cemetery in east London.

By then capital punishment had been abolished and, although miscarriages of justice may continue to be perpetrated, they can at least be discovered and put right while those unjustly convicted are still alive.

Bleak years

The Christie case was set against the backdrop of the bleak post-war years. Britain was still recovering both financially and mentally from the horrors of the Second World War and it was a dreary and cheerless era. Rationing did not come to a complete end until 1954 and rock 'n' roll had not yet burst onto the scene.

The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II lightened the atmosphere a little, but London remained a dull and grimy city where killer smog claimed 4,000 lives due to a lack of air pollution laws. Ladbroke Grove in west London was a particularly down-at-heel part of the capital and Rillington Place was a charmless cul-de-sac hemmed in by the Metropolitan Line and a converted iron foundry.

Christie and his wife Ethel had lived at number 10 Rillington Place since 1938 and despite a criminal record for violence and theft he spent four years as a special constable during the war.

They lived in the ground floor flat and there were two other apartments on the top two floors. The middle flat had been occupied since the 1920s by Charles Kitchener, an ageing railway worker who was spending more and more time in hospital due to his failing health.

The Evans family occupied the top floor, 24-year-old Timothy and his pregnant wife Beryl moved in during Easter 1948 and she later gave birth to a little girl, Geraldine. In the summer of 1949 Beryl fell pregnant again, but this time she was distraught.

The couple were already very hard up and a new baby would mean extra expenses and would force her to give up her part-time job. Abortion was illegal, it was only legalised in 1967, but Beryl was desperate.

Fatal mistake

Aware that her husband, a lapsed Catholic, would object to an abortion she made discreet inquiries and mentioned it to her neighbour, John Christie. It was a fatal mistake.



Christie (pictured above) persuaded her that, instead of using a back-street abortionist in Edgware Road who charged £1, she should let him perform the operation. He showed her medical books and blinded her with scientific talk. In fact, Christie had no medical qualifications whatsoever, but he had an authoritative manner that endeared him to the naïve and almost illiterate young woman.

On November 8th 1949, Evans returned home from work to be met by Christie, who had bad news for him. He said the abortion operation had gone wrong and Beryl had died, though the baby survived. Evans, a weak and gullible character, reacted strangely and his actions were ultimately to cost him his life.

Instead of taking Geraldine, the newborn, to his mother's and going to the police to report his wife's death, Evans agreed to help Christie move her body into Mr Kitchener's empty flat and let his neighbour take care of the child. Ironically Evans was trying to protect Christie, but it was a favour that his neighbour would not return.

The young Welshman, dazed and confused, went back to work the next day and when he returned Christie told him Geraldine was being looked after by a family in nearby Acton. Christie said he would dispose of Beryl's body down a manhole and he suggested Evans left London.

Evans, in thrall to the confident and assertive former policeman, agreed. He sold the furniture in his flat (although much of it was bought on hire purchase) and spent half of the money on a camel hair coat. Evans returned to his native South Wales and stayed with an aunt, but he was racked with guilt and confusion and three weeks after the deaths he walked into a police station in Merthyr.

The combination of Evans' low intellect, his strange behaviour and his attempt to protect Christie was to conspire against him.

Changing story

He told a detective he had disposed of his wife's body, but suggested she had died accidentally after drinking a concoction designed to procure miscarriages. Evans told police they would find Beryl's body down a manhole, but when officers from Scotland Yard searched the drain outside 10 Rillington Place they found nothing.

Baffled and anxious, Evans began to wonder whether Christie had tricked him. He made a second statement in which he changed his story and implicated Christie, for the first time, as a blundering abortionist. Police decided to make another search of 10 Rillington Place and this time they found the bodies of Beryl and Geraldine hidden in a washhouse.

Amazingly the thighbone of one of Christie's earlier victims, Muriel Eady, went completely unnoticed as it lay against a fence in the garden.

At the time the police thought they were dealing with a run-of-the-mill domestic crime, little did they know that they had stumbled into the world of a serial killer. A post mortem revealed both mother and child had been strangled, which contradicted Evans' version of events, that his wife had died during an abortion.

Evans was brought back to London and, without any legal advice, made a third statement in which he claimed he had strangled his wife after a row over money and killed his daughter two days later. He now said he had put both bodies in the washhouse in the middle of the night.

Facts kept from jurors

When he came to trial at the Old Bailey in January 1950, barely six weeks after his arrest, the jury were not told two important facts.

Firstly, there was evidence Beryl had been sexually assaulted after death, which was entirely inconsistent with Evans' version of events.

Secondly, two workmen were prepared to give evidence there were no bodies in the wash-house when they were working in there, which was several days after Evans had supposedly hidden them. This was because Christie had only moved them there two weeks later, after the workmen had finished in the washroom.

The workmen were never called and the jury, convinced by Evans' poor performance in the witness box and impressed by Christie's accomplished denials of any involvement, took just 40 minutes to find Evans guilty of murdering his daughter.

The Crown had decided not to charge him with his wife's murder because the evidence was not as strong. A few weeks later, on March 9th 1950, Evans was hanged at Pentonville prison.

The nightmare returns

Two years passed and the traumatic events at 10 Rillington Place appeared to have been forgotten. By December 1952, Ethel Christie was in poor health, suffering from chronic arthritis and rheumatism, which were not helped by the damp conditions in her home. Christie claimed he simply put her out of her misery by asphyxiating her one night.

It may be true or he may simply have tired of her and wanted more freedom to pursue his macabre hobby. Either way, he kept up the pretence and wrote letters to Ethel's sister in Sheffield, claiming she was alive, but could not write herself because of her rheumatic hands. Ethel's death left Christie free to let his morbid and perverted fantasies run wild.

In the next three months, he invited three prostitutes back to 10 Rillington Place and murdered all of them. Neither Kathleen Maloney from Southampton, or Rita Nelson from Belfast were missed, but Hectorina MacLennan was last seen with Christie by her boyfriend, Alex Baker.

Christie claimed she had wandered off and he kept up this pretence for a fortnight, asking after her whenever he bumped into Mr Baker. The boyfriend assumed she must have returned to her native Scotland, but this was disproved in the most shocking way.

Christie's increasingly bizarre life gradually disassembled in the first three months of 1953. He ignored correspondence from relatives enquiring about his wife and sold all his furniture, even his bed, and ended up sleeping on a mattress.

As the body count rose he became increasingly aware of the unpleasant odour that would no doubt soon become noticeable to his neighbours. Finally, on March 21st, he decided to sub-let his flat illegally to a couple called Reilly, who paid him £7 and 13 shillings, three months' rent in advance.

He took a few remaining belongings and left 10 Rillington Place for good.

A shocking discovery

The landlord soon learnt of the sub-letting and ordered the Reillys out. The new tenant of the top-floor flat, a Jamaican immigrant called Beresford Brown, was given permission to use the ground-floor kitchen.

Mr Brown took it upon himself to tidy up the kitchen, which had become a hovel since Ethel's death. He carried piles of clothes and rubbish out into the backyard and tore off much of the peeling wallpaper. In one corner, he discovered that the paper was covering not a wall, but a door to an alcove, which had once been used as a pantry.

Mr Brown pulled the door ajar and shone his torch into the alcove. What he saw would stay with him for the rest of his life.

In the damp squalor of the tiny room was a body, clad only in a bra, stockings and suspenders, and hunched over in a sitting position.

The police were called and they soon found two other corpses in the alcove: the bodies were those of Kathleen Maloney, Rita Nelson and Hectorina MacLennan.

A more thorough search revealed Ethel Christie's body under the floorboards in the front room. Two more skeletons were found in the garden, they were the remains of Ruth Fuerst, a part-time prostitute from Austria and Muriel Eady, a former work colleague of Christie's. Christie had murdered both during an earlier killing spree between 1943 and 1944.

Britain's most wanted man

Within hours the police had named their prime suspect and issued several photographs of him, which were soon plastered all over the newspapers. Christie left the hotel in King's Cross where he had been lodging and wandered across the capital, aware that he was the focus of a major dragnet.

At one point he rang the News of the World and arranged to meet a reporter in the dead of night. Christie offered an exclusive interview and said he would allow himself to be handed over to the police afterwards. His price? A hearty fry-up that had to include a "thick gammon rasher, two fried eggs, baked beans and some chips".

In the end, the rendezvous never took place because Christie was spooked by the appearance of two beat Bobbies. Eventually, on March 31st 1953, Christie was spotted as he walked along the Thames in Putney.

Confronted by PC Thomas Ledger, he gave his name as John Waddington (his wife's maiden name), but the officer was not fooled and immediately arrested him. Christie knew the game was up and immediately confessed to his wife's murder.

He was then charged with the murders of Mahoney, Nelson, MacLennan, Fuerst and Eady and on June 8th he admitted killing Beryl Evans.

Two killers in one house?

This placed the Crown in a very odd position, as it called into question the validity of another police investigation three years before. Evans had only been convicted of murdering his daughter, but it was widely assumed he had killed his wife too and indeed he had confessed in one of his statements.

But the police and the legal establishment were able to maintain their balancing act because Christie always denied murdering Geraldine. The public were led to believe that two murderers had lived in the same house and both were guilty.

It was only in 1966, following the Brabin Report, that this preposterous state of affairs was amended. And replaced by an even more bizarre suggestion.

Sir Daniel Brabin concluded that Evans was probably innocent of Geraldine's murder, but had also probably killed his wife. He admitted that had the 1950 jury been aware of all the facts (and Christie's confession), Evans would never have been convicted.

Christie went on trial in June 1953 and pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. But his barrister, Derek Curtis-Bennett KC, was unable to persuade the jury that Christie was "mad" rather than just "bad". His sexual predilections, even his propensity for necrophilia, were no proof of insanity and the jury took only 82 minutes before finding him guilty of killing Ethel Christie.

Around 200 people, including tourists from Australia and the US, assembled outside Pentonville at 9am on the July 15th 1953. Inside the public executioner, Albert Pierrepoint performed, the obligatory rituals with his customary efficiency.

At 9.10am a black-edged notice was pinned up outside the prison confirming that John Reginald Halliday Christie had been hanged.

Legacy of horror

In 1965, journalist and broadcaster Ludovic Kennedy wrote a book, ""Ten Rillington Place", which told the "full story of an appalling miscarriage of justice". The Brabin Report came out the following year and Home Secretary Roy Jenkins granted Evans a posthumous pardon soon after.

In 1970, the book was turned into an eponymous film starring Richard Attenborough as Christie and John Hurt as Evans. Gruesome sightseeing trips around 10 Rillington Place (later renamed 10 Ruston Close) continued until the late 1970s when the whole decrepit street was torn down and rebuilt as Bartle Road.

In 1965, the new Labour government, encouraged by Michael Foot, whose South Wales constituency Evans had come from, abolished the death penalty for an experimental period. It remained for acts of treason until it was finally abolished in 1998 and cannot be reintroduced under the European Convention on Human Rights.

John Christie's victims:

- Aug 1943 - Ruth Fuerst, 21
- Oct 1944 - Muriel Eady, 31
- Nov 1949 - Beryl Evans, 20
- Nov 1949 - Geraldine Evans, 1
- Dec 1952 - Ethel Christie, 55
- Jan 1953 - Kathleen Maloney, 26
- Jan 1953 - Rita Nelson, 25
- Mar 1953 - Hectorina MacLennan, 26

This profile of John Christie and 10 Rillington Place was written by BBC News Online's Chris Summers.

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