

## **Frederick Rolfe - the King of the Norfolk Poachers?**

Author of

I Walked By Night

In the early 1930's a small scruffy, elderly man gave to the wife of the farmer for whom he worked as a mole catcher, a notebook filled with the story of his early life as a poacher. The woman, Mrs Longrigg who did not approve of the poacher as he charmed warts, put the document in a kitchen drawer and forgot about it for two years.

One evening, Lilius Rider Haggard the farmer's neighbour and the daughter of Henry Rider Haggard, who wrote ripping yarns in the late 1800s, was talking to Mrs Longrigg about the weekly column she wrote for the Eastern Daily Press, when Mrs Longrigg remembered the dog-eared note book and gave it to Lilius thinking it might give her an idea for an article.

Lilius read the story and got in touch with the mole catcher. She encouraged him to write more and then edited the whole into the now much loved East Anglian Classic, I Walked by Night, published in 1935. It is a story of great deprivation but also of a deep love and understanding for the countryside. People then did not live alongside the landscape; they were part of it, working and watching the seasons change, seeing how the animals and birds behaved and the gamekeeper too.

As a youngster the mole catcher, a difficult child and a naughty school boy, watched and listened, and by the age of eight had snared his first hare.

In 1955 I moved to Bungay in Suffolk where the poacher had lived and read the book. Many years later I married and moved to Norfolk. After paying off our mortgage and reading the deeds of our cottage I was prompted to read the book again; the poacher talked of living in an estate cottage close to where he was born in Pentney, which is about three miles from our cottage in West Bilney. Some of the detail he gave lead me to wonder if it was our house, and I thought it would amuse me to see if I could find out.

That led me a merry dance for 7 years. The first thing I had to do was find his name as he called himself The King of The Norfolk Poachers. With the help of Living History on Radio 4 I found he was Frederick Rolfe.

I know that in autobiographies the truth is often bent a little to paint the subject in a better light, but Fred's economy with the truth confused me utterly.

He relates in the book how he went off the rails after the love of his life, a Marham orphan girl, died giving birth to their son. Fred said she was the same age as him, and they lived together from the age of eighteen, and she became pregnant three years later. I knew from the parish records that he was born in 1862, so I thought it would be easy to research; six months later I

was tearing out my hair. I did not know her name, did not know if they were married, although her referred to her as his wife, could not find a male child born around that time who fitted the bill, and could not find a death for her.

My breakthrough came when I asked a friendly Registrar from a nearby town to search her records for the birth and death. Within 10 minutes she had rung me back to say that the boy I was searching for was in fact a girl, Edith Ann, and far from dying in childbirth, Anna Rolfe (so they had married) went on two years later to have a son, Frederick. This child she registered 6 weeks later, so clearly she did not die in childbirth.

Armed with this information I began to unravel the truth.

Far from being an orphan, it would seem Anna's parents were alive at the time of her marriage, which took place shortly after her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in, Marham church. Edith was born 11 days later on May 25th 1883. Perhaps Mum and Dad refused to give their permission for the marriage to take place earlier, as Fred was already living outside the law. Sadly Edith died at eight months from marasmus, a wasting disease often caused by giving children food that lacked sufficient nutrition for them to thrive; this often happened through ignorance rather than poverty.

On August 31<sup>st</sup> the following year whilst Fred was out poaching he had a fight with two gamekeepers, and believed he had hurt them badly. Even though they had just lost their daughter, and Anna was already pregnant with their second child, to escape justice he fled to Manchester. Young Fred was born in February 1885.

Fred Rolfe did not return to Norfolk until the summer of 1888 and was soon up to his old tricks again. He was summonsed to Grimston court for trespassing in pursuit of game and sentenced to 21 days with hard labour. He was also charged with the offence from the time he fled in 1884 and received a further 21 days hard labour. This was the second period he served inside.

He talks of his first experience in the prison at Norwich Castle in great depth in the book, how he had to walk on the tread mill, and endure the parson trying to reform him and how it turned him forever against the law. He had been sent down for 14 days for snaring 2 rabbits on Pentney Middle Common. He says he was scarce more than a child, but in a number of academic works he was said to be only 12 or 13; and he is held up as an example of the treatment meted out to children in prison at that time.

After being released on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1888 he sent for a girl he had met in Manchester to come and join him, and he and Kitty were married on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1888 in Pentney church.

So where was Anna – was he a bigamist? I found young Fred with Anna's mother in the 1891 census but could not trace a record of her death anywhere. Eventually a search by the General Records Office showed that she died of phthisis (consumption) in All Hallows Hospital Ditchingham, the village where Liliias and Mrs Longrigg lived many years later, and about 40 miles from her family and child in Marham Norfolk. I can only speculate as to why. The hospital was run by nuns who assisted prostitutes and the destitute of Norwich. Had she fled there to support herself, after Fred abandoned her,

and fallen ill? Records from the hospital show that they did also take local needy cases from the area but her large family were miles away - would she have been sent so far from them. I shall never know for sure, but one thing is certain it reflects very badly on Fred.

The next part of his life is well documented. Apart from his book and my research, I have found a manuscript written by Emily his eldest child from his second marriage, which she sent to Liliias Rider Haggard from Canada just after *I Walked by Night* was published. She asked Liliias to publish it as her Mother's version of the story, but Liliias never did. It has only recently come to light.

Emily recalls the stories her mother told her very poignantly; poor Kitty, arriving from Manchester to Pentney, she described as a nousey hostile village. Hating the dark and the quiet; admitting she had never been into field before she took Fred his lunch, whilst he worked on the harvest; beaten by Fred because he thought she had flirted with one of the village lads; forced to pick and sell watercress from door to door to survive, whilst Fred had yet another stint in prison.

Emily's memoir also shows that Fred was the gamekeeper for the West Bilney estate from 1894 to probably 1897, when he was sacked. During that period he did live in our house the Lodge cottage on Common Road. Poor Kitty had been very happy during this time, but sadly then had to join Fred in his endless changes of home as her tried to keep one step ahead of the law.

Fred always maintained he was not a thief, pheasants have no names on their tails he told the magistrates at one court appearance, but in 1892 he served 2 months for stealing two hens, a screwdriver and 11 ounces of solder. He was caught by the marks his corduroy trousers left in the dirt and the dust on his knees. He also had two dead chickens in his hands when apprehended, and the solder and the screwdriver in his pocket. He pleaded not guilty!

When things became too hot for him in West Norfolk he moved to North Norfolk, and then during World War I to Bungay. He joined the Third Volunteer Battalion in 1916 at the age of 54 and became the Regimental rat catcher.

After the War he was briefly an underkeeper at Flixton, near Bungay, but lost his job because he was caught poaching. Clearly from the reports in the local papers of court appearances, he was caught for poaching on a number of occasions. The last prison sentence I can find was in 1927 when at the age of 65 he received 2 months with hard labour for stealing coal from a railway yard.

During my research I was lucky enough to be put in touch with a sprightly 91 year old whose father had been Gamekeeper at Earsham Hall. He recalled that on November 4<sup>th</sup> 1928 his father had gone to check for poachers on Bath Hills, just outside Bungay. He thought that they might be about that night as the noise of their guns would be disguised by the noise of the fireworks the lads were letting off in the town. Sure enough Fred was out and about and was soon apprehended. In the struggle to relieve him of his gun, it went off and shot a hole in the Gamekeepers hat. I went to the local records office and found the case in the local papers and my informant was completely accurate

in his recollection 76 years later; and why did it stick in his mind?; - his mother had been so concerned at what might have happened to her husband when she saw the hole in his hat that she went into labour and gave birth to his twin brothers the next day.

At the next Petty session, in Loddon, Fred pleaded not guilty as usual, saying he was only after a rabbit, being out of work; but the magistrates reminded the defendant that his record was none too good and fined him £2 with 2/6d costs. This he paid rather than face another spell inside.

Frederick Rolfe hanged himself with a snare in an outbuilding in Nethergate Street in Bungay on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1938. He was found at 3.30 pm; the inquest was the following day, and the funeral the day after. Events following a death were obviously speedier in those days.

I met an elderly man during my research who, as a 5 year old running home from school, took a short cut through an open stable and hurt himself there. On going home and being asked why his face was grazed he replied that Mr Rolfe had kicked him. His parents went to Rolfe's home where they learnt from his landlady, Mrs Redgrave, that she had not seen him that day. They later realised that Fred's dangling boots had caught young Les on the side of the face.

The Coroner heard evidence that the Police had recently had reason to speak with Fred on a matter of some seriousness, and Mrs Redgrave said that on the evening prior to his death, on retiring to bed, he had said to her "Goodnight mother, this is the last time I shall bid you goodnight." She told him not to be so silly. After that she heard no more of him. He had enjoyed good health recently she said.

Rumour has it that Fred sexually assaulted a girl behind the coal yard at the railway yard at Ditchingham. I have found no proof of this, and I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, although family members have hinted at a darker side to his nature.

At his funeral the local Vicars wife sent a bunch of daffodils, the card attached read ~ "Happy Memories. The heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind". What memories could a smelly old mole catcher and the vicar's wife possibly share? Despite his shortcomings was she, like me and the warts, charmed by him?

Charlotte Paton

If you would like to know more about Fred Rolfe visit [charlotte@thepatons.co.uk](mailto:charlotte@thepatons.co.uk) where there are details of the biography and DVD of his life and times