

LOCAL STUDIES EDUCATION SERIES

# JOHN LEE



THE MAN THEY COULD NOT HANG  
*(1864 -?)*

In 1885, a convicted killer suddenly became a legend. Sentenced to death for the murder of his employer at her home on Babbacombe Beach, John Lee mysteriously survived three attempts to execute him at Exeter Prison. Having placed a noose around Lee's neck, the hangman pulled a lever to release the trapdoors beneath the prisoner's feet, but they refused to open. Amazingly, each time Lee was led away, the apparatus was tested and worked perfectly!



# JOHN LEE

## 'THE MAN THEY COULD NOT HANG' (1864 -?)

Influenced by the fact that Lee swore his innocence and had dreamt that the execution would fail, many people believed that God had intervened to save an innocent man. Superstitious folk believed that a witch had cast a spell on the gallows. Rumours also persisted that the real murderer had bribed the hangman to bungle the execution. Closer to the truth were claims that the scaffold had been 'fixed' during carpentry work carried out by convicts. However, prisoners did not make the trapdoors which, upon closer inspection, were found to be too thin. They bent and jammed the mechanism when a man's weight was placed upon them.

Instead of dying on the scaffold, Lee served life imprisonment. Released in 1907, he was treated as a celebrity and sold his life story to a national newspaper. Married in 1909, he went abroad two years later, abandoning his wife while she was expecting their second child. Several unconfirmed reports of his death were received from America, Australia, Canada and many parts of England, thereby creating a further unsolved mystery about John 'Babbacombe' Lee - 'The Man They Could Not Hang'.



## THE GLEN

Built in 1812, The Glen was left to Emma Keyse by her mother who once nursed the infant Princess Victoria when the Royal Family visited Sidmouth. Emma met the future Queen when Her Royal Highness visited The Glen in 1833. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, and their son the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) also called in during a visit to Babbacombe in 1852. The Babbacombe Murder occurred on 15 November 1884. Emma Keyse was struck on the head with an axe, her throat cut and her body set on fire. Six months later the entire contents of The Glen were sold at auction. Several hundred souvenir-hunters attended, and the house was so crowded the sale had to

take place on the beach! Rumours that a buyer from Madame Tussauds would attend proved to be untrue, although John Lee's image was displayed in the 'Chamber of Horrors' at the famous London waxworks! The Glen was eventually demolished in 1904 and the opportunity of a permanent tourist attraction overlooked. Interest in the tragic events would have proved a money-spinner - as demonstrated by a barmaid from the Cary Arms. She found an old piece of rope on the beach and sold several strands to gullible visitors, claiming it was the noose used at the attempted execution of John Lee!

# DID YOU KNOW?

John Lee's birth sign was Leo. He was born on 15 August 1864 at Elm Cottage, in the village of Abbotskerswell.

After leaving school he worked as a servant at The Glen. In 1879, he realised an ambition to become a sailor when he joined the Royal Navy.

Invalided out of the navy three years later following a serious illness, John worked as a boot-boy cleaning shoes for guests at the Royal Dart Hotel in Kingswear.

He moved to Torquay and worked as a railway porter at Torre Station before becoming a footman at Ridgehill (now called Taplow Court) in Middle Warberry Road. In July 1883 he was imprisoned for six months for stealing from his employer.

Released from Exeter Prison in January 1884, Lee returned to his old job at The Glen and soon became engaged to Kate Farmer, a dressmaker from Grafton Terrace, Ellacombe.

Lee denied that he had killed Emma Keyse. He tried to blame his half-sister, who was cook at The Glen and expecting a baby. Lee told the prison chaplain that she was covering up for her lover who had visited her on the night of the murder. His story was investigated by the police but not proven.

Executioner James Berry sold the hangman's rope used on Lee to the landlord of a pub for £1.25.

Lee spent 23 years in prison. His parents were allowed to visit him four times a year and stay for only 30 minutes.

The Glen stood on what is now a car park on Babbacombe Beach, near the Cary Arms.

In May 1925, relatives of John Lee watched a silent film of his life called *The Man They Could Not Hang*. It was shown at the Empire Cinema, Newton Abbot.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Books about the life of John Lee available from Torbay Library Services include:

*The Man They Could Not Hang* - John Lee (1908)

*The Babbacombe Murder* - Frank Keyse (1988)

*The Secret of the Babbacombe Murder* - Mike Holgate (1995)

For more about the history of Torbay - visit the Local History Collection at Torquay Central Library or view the Torbay Council website ([www.torbay.gov.uk](http://www.torbay.gov.uk)) for information on the following subjects:

History of Torbay/Torbay's Heritage/People and Places/Famous People. The site also contains opening times, news of forthcoming events and general information about the following historic buildings and museums which are all well worth a visit:

Torre Abbey Historic House & Gallery, King's Drive, Torquay. Torquay. Tel: 01803 293593

Torquay Museum, 529 Babbacombe Road, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293975

Oldway Mansion, Torquay Road, Paignton. Tel: 01803 201201

Brixham Heritage Museum, Bolton Cross, Brixham. 01803 856267



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