

Luke Phipps

This is the tragic story of Luke Phipps, a son of a Hook Norton smallholder who emigrated to the New World in 1850 when Luke was six. At the age of thirty nine, Luke shot his estranged wife on the ferry between Detroit and Windsor, Ontario. His story hit the headlines in the USA and Canada.

A WIFE-MURDERER HANGED.

CANADIAN JUSTICE METED OUT TO LUKE PHIPPS.

DETROIT, Mich., June 17.—On the evening of Aug. 10, 1883, Mrs. Luke Phipps, of this city, took the steam ferry-boat Hope, at the foot of Woodward-avenue, to go to Windsor, Ontario, on the opposite side of the river. Just before the boat left the dock, her husband, excited with liquor, rushed on board and spoke to his wife in a low tone. Loud and angry words followed from both. The boat had left the dock and was well on her way across the river, when the passengers were startled by the report of a revolver. The report was followed by a scream and Mrs. Phipps, pursued by her infuriated husband, rushed wildly from one end of the boat to the other, crying, "Murder! Murder! Save me! Save me!" A second report followed the first, and Mrs. Phipps sank to the deck and died, both shots having taken effect. Phipps denounced the woman who lay dead at his feet as his unfaithful wife. He was led from the boat by some of the passengers, who turned him over to the Canadian officers. Phipps was taken to Sandwich Jail and locked up. As time passed he began to realize the enormity of his crime.

New York, *The Times*, 18 June 1894

Hook Norton Roots

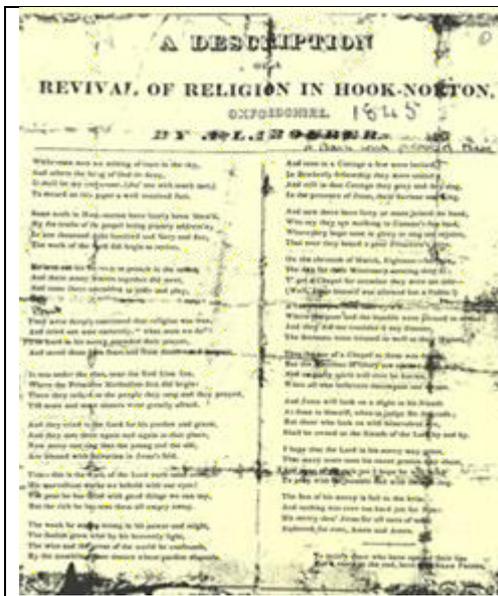
I was born in Hook Norton, Oxfordshire, England in 1844. My father and mother, with a family consisting of three brothers and two sisters, emigrated in 1850 to Victor, Ontario County, N.Y. During the voyage my youngest sister lost her life by being scalded. Shortly after our arrival at Victor, N.Y., my mother, who had been sick for some time, died, which caused our family to break up.

Luke Phipps, Toronto *Daily Mail*, 18 June 1884

Luke did not have an easy start in life. His parents were Mary Ann and George Phipps, members of a long established Hooky family whose antecedents are recorded in the Parish Registers as far back as 1613 when "An Phippes daughter of Larrens" was baptized. George himself is described as a labourer in the parish records: various members of the Phipps family had owned some fifty acres in the Common Fields of Hook Norton in the 18th century, but the upheaval of Enclosure in

1774 led to impoverishment for most of them. [See the article on "Enclosure" in [Economic Life](#)]

The reorganization of land, and the compulsory burdens imposed, meant that families like the Phipps that had done very well as subsistence farmers became labourers dependent on casual work in an over-crowded market. After Enclosure more people needed community assistance and the poor rate contributions rocketed. There were other pressures: the Napoleonic Wars, bad weather, agricultural depression, even religious discontent, all contributed to the misery of the poor.



*A barn was provided by a kind family friend
Where the poor and the humble were pleased to attend;
And they did not consider it any disaster,
The Servants were treated as well as their master*

Elah Phipps

From Hook Norton Museum Archive

Elah was by no means the only dissenter in the family. A Mary Phipps was included in an annotated list of Baptist church members who were said to have "Gone to America" in the early 19th century. Even the Baptist pastor, William Richards, had emigrated to the New World in 1830/31. [See the essay on "William and Ann Richards" in this section.] William Jaques, Methodist minister in Stourton, and his Hook Norton born wife Dinah planned to leave, as he said, so that his sons should possess land in America. [See the article on "Dinah French" in this section] Relations who had emigrated in earlier years might also have influenced George and Mary's decision. The promise of land and escaping poverty must have been powerful incentives. Reinforcing these hopes were advertisements in the papers and agents from developing countries seeking skilled labourers extolled the huge

potential for emigrants to entice settlers. Some parishes or poor law unions would contribute to the costs of emigration: a short term outlay for long term savings on the poor rates.

Emigration wasn't an easy option.

The Journey

I have been told that a saying in the village was, "to go the footway to America." This meant that the Emigrant walked to Banbury, and went from there to Liverpool by canal boat, the passage on which included a good deal of walking on the towpath.

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton*

Whether Luke and his family walked to Liverpool is not known, but it is quite likely. It would not have been the worst part of the journey. Conditions on the ships could be brutal, demeaning and sometimes criminally neglectful. The voyage was to have a devastating effect on Luke's future. His youngest sister died after being scalded and soon after their arrival in America Luke's mother and her newly-born baby also died.

Luke's Rootless Years

The tragedy devastated the family. A return to Hook Norton would be almost impossible and soon Luke, and possibly his sister and brother, William, were given up for adoption. The family drifted apart, though there was some sporadic contact over the years. Luke's father, George Phipps, and his sister Anne appear on the 1860 Federal census for Harmon, Lee County, Illinois, working on a farm where his nephew George and his family were living.

Luke's adoptive mother, Mrs Bushnell, lived in Victor, New York State. She provided Luke with "all the education that my heart could wish for", he said on the eve of his execution. He was still at school in 1861 when the American Civil War broke out, but promptly enlisted in the Union Army, was wounded, recovered and re-enlisted – this time with his brother and uncle, both called William – to fulfil his "three years". Uncle William was killed in battle.

Phipps, Luke 1142

ENLISTED				MUSTERED IN			
WHEN		WHERE		WHEN		WHERE	
YEAR	MONTH	DAY	YEAR	YEAR	MONTH	DAY	YEAR
18	7	May	1861	Victor	2	22	May
							61
							Pat. 8
							33
							27

LEFT THE ORGANIZATION

HOW	WHEN			IN WHAT GRADE	EXPLANATION
	DAY	MONTH	YEAR		
Dischd	18	Oct.	61	Cot.	at Camp Griffin Va.

REMARKS *Paid by the State from May 7-21/61-5⁵⁰*

Born *England* Age _____ years. Occupation _____ Cong. Dist. _____
 Eyes _____ Hair _____ Complexion _____ ft. _____ in. high. Cr. _____ Sub. Dist. _____

New York, Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1900
 New York State Archives

Ever restless, Luke travelled widely across North America in pursuit of work. In 1872 he secretly married Effie Brown, and her adoptive father often attempted to support them. For a time they lived in Rochester, New York State, running a boarding house. Luke also worked in grocery stores, tried his hand at farming and went west (meeting his brother William in Shelbyville, Missouri).

Downfall in Detroit

By 1882 Luke and Effie were in Detroit, living and working in the Exchange Billiard Room. They had four children: William and Daisy, born in New York State in 1871 and 1874 respectively; Louie and Harrie born in Michigan in 1876 and 1878.

Detroit with its billiard room society, abundant alcohol and pursuit of pleasure proved irresistible to Luke and Effie. They were both adopted, perhaps less rooted in family values: it is rumoured that they were easy-going about extra-marital affairs.

Harry Livingstone too worked at the Michigan Exchange.

As I had a room to spare I decided, as my wife's expenses were high, to rent it out to him, the greatest mistake of my life.

Luke Phipps

That November Livingstone fell ill and Effie nursed him. Luke, whose work took him out early and home very late, became suspicious and asked Livingstone to leave. On Christmas Day Luke "had trouble" with his wife which resulted in a thirty-day spell in the House of Correction for him. On his release he discovered that Effie had left him and had taken the children to the Home for the Friendless and was paying for their board there. She refused to let him see the children and he learned that she had applied for divorce.

The divorce claimed that I was an habitual drunkard, that I did not support my family, that I had committed adultery, and other charges too numerous to mention. A few evenings after that a particular friend of mine called on me at the billiard-parlour and pointing to Harry Livingstone, who was behind the bar, said, "Watch that man and follow him. If you do you can stop that application for divorce." I did so, and after following him found that during the time I was in the House of Correction Harry Livingstone and my wife were living together as man and wife.

Luke Phipps

Luke's and Effie's lives became a constant battle for the custody of their children, an attempted reconciliation, mutual recriminations and deceit. The children were shuttled back and forth. Luke found Louie in an orphanage; later Effie left the children with her parents. Luke lost sight both of Effie and of his children.

Just across the river from Detroit was the Canadian town of Windsor, Ontario. There was a good ferry service linking the two towns. Effie lived there for a while.

The Incident

On Aug. 19, 1883, I was working in the billiard-hall, and at 7 o'clock in the evening went to take a lunch, after which I walked down to the ferry wharf at the foot of Woodward avenue. I was looking at the steamer Hope, and while doing so thought I saw my wife go on board.

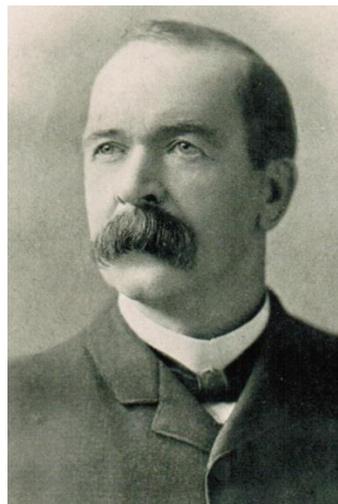
Luke Phipps



The Hope Steamer, on the right
Photograph courtesy of Boblosteamers

Luke followed Effie. Though their initial greeting was civilised, he said, she taunted him and drove him "completely wild". He knew nothing more until he was knocked down and held by passengers. A graphic newspaper account states that he was enraged and managed to fire three shots into her even as he was knocked back by passengers. The ferry was halfway between the United States and Canada; there was some doubt about jurisdiction. Luke was taken to Sandwich Jail in Windsor to await a judicial decision.

The Escape



John Wilson Murray
from *The Memoirs of A Great Detective* (1905)

Whereas Luke's account of his life in America up to this point is reasonably well-balanced and well-written, the account of his escape is not. The modestly entitled

autobiography of John Wilson Murray, *The Memoirs of A Great Detective*, is open to suspicion of inaccuracies and embellishment. These memoirs were used as a basis for plays, novels and two later Canadian television series.

Luke did escape from Windsor Jail. He and a fellow prisoner (and murderer) Bucky Greenwood fled through jail cell bars. After crossing the Detroit River in a barely seaworthy vessel, Luke took refuge with a friend in Detroit. He got a job in a non-temperance hotel, the Florence, in the industrial town of Pullman (13 miles south of Chicago) built by railway magnate George M. Pullman. Unfortunately Luke was recognized by the son of Sheriff McEwen who had been sacked for mismanaging Windsor Jail.



A SHIFTLESS SHERIFF.
DETROIT, Mich., Jan. 13.—Sheriff John McEwan, of Essex county, Ont., has been officially notified of his dismissal from office for negligence in allowing Harry Greenwood and Luke Phipps, the murderers, to escape from Sandwich jail last November. He confessed that he had not inspected the jail for over two years. He has held the office for thirty years.

Milwaukee *The Sentinel*,
13 January 1884

Recapture

A WIFE MURDERER CAUGHT.
LUKE PHIPPS, THE DETROIT Uxoricide, CAPTURED AT PULLMAN, ILL.
[Special Dispatch to The Sentinel.]
CHICAGO, Feb. 19.—Luke Phipps, the Detroit wife-murderer, and who subsequently broke jail at Windsor, Can., where he was confined for his crime, was captured at Pullman to-day. The tragedy, which was the fruit of the woman's treachery, took place on the 19th of August last while the couple were journeying on board the ferry boat from Detroit to Windsor. Phipps had only a short time before separated from his wife. She fled with her lover to Canada to escape a process of law instituted by the injured husband, and he chanced upon her while he was hunting to kill her paramour. The meeting between the husband and wife was purely accidental. Phipps did not know his

Milwaukee *The Sentinel*, 19 February 1884

John Wilson Murray recaptured Luke and later wrote that he took a liking to him. He claims that on the way back to jail, he took Luke to the Michigan Exchange for a last

drink with friends and drove him along Jefferson Avenue where Luke and Effie "were once happy". He describes Luke as "a nice fellow about thirty-four years old, with fair, brown hair and sandy moustache". He loved his children, he said.

Extradition

PHIPPS TO BE EXTRADITED.
(Special Dispatch to The Sentinel.)
CHICAGO, March 31.—Commissioner Hoyne received notification to-day from Secretary Frelinghuysen that the department of state had decided to allow Luke Phipps, the wife-murderer, to be taken back to the jail at Sandwich, Can., to await trial for his crime. Phipps shot his wife on board a ferryboat, plying between Detroit and the Canadian shore. He then escaped to Chicago, and was captured here last night. He is now in the county jail. Phipps claims that he killed his wife on the Michigan side, but the government has decided otherwise. If Phipps was tried in Detroit, under the Michigan laws, he is sure not to be hanged. Under the Canadian laws he is liable to capital punishment.

Milwaukee *The Sentinel*, 31 March, 1884

Luke was extradited and tried in Windsor, Ontario where capital punishment still prevailed. He was sentenced to death by hanging. The state of Michigan had no such law, then or now.

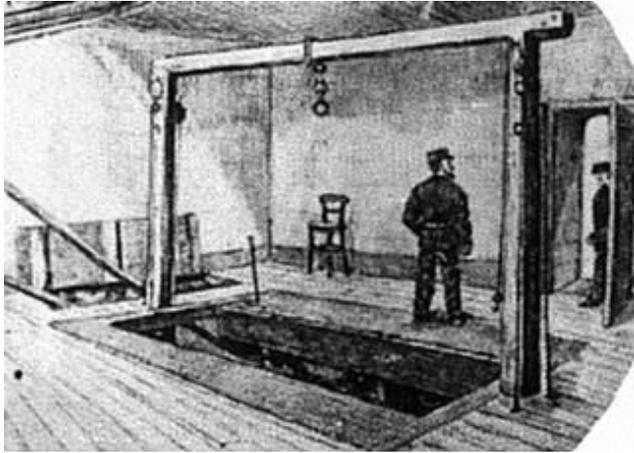


Sandwich Jail

The Reverend Gray, Minister of St Andrews Presbyterian Church, Windsor, supported Luke during his time in Sandwich Jail and found him quiet and contemplative. It was during this time that Luke wrote an account of his life in America that was published in the newspapers shortly after his death.

The Hanging

Luke was hanged on 17 June 1884. It is said that he went bravely to his execution.



A hanging at Sandwich Jail



The trapdoors

Copyright: www.windsormuseum.ca

These wooden trap doors, part of the gallows used at the Essex County Jail in Sandwich, are now on display in Windsor Museum.

The Toronto *Daily Mail* published an account of the hanging of Luke Phipps. It was a horrifying occasion which attracted very many people. Tickets issued for "the exhibition" numbered about 200 but the number of people who gave in to their "morbid curiosity" and who were determined to get access was set at 1500.

Luke's body was taken to a nearby undertaker, where the Reverend Gray said prayers. It was then conveyed four or five miles to a mortuary at Woodward where it was turned over to a group of women who had shown interest in the prisoner. Mrs Clark, a former landlady, had been given permission to receive Luke's remains.

It was a sad end for the son of a Hook Norton smallholder. Four children became orphans.

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This article is based on talks given at Carry on Learning and the Local History Group in Hook Norton in 2009 and 2010. An account was also published in *The Oxfordshire Family History Journal* in December 2009. We are grateful to Windsor's Community Museum (www.windsormuseum.ca) for help in research and for providing the photograph of the trap doors used at Luke Phipps's hanging.

Further reading

Windsor Community Museum, Ontario: www.windsormuseum.ca

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928)

Pauline Ashbridge, *Children of Dissent*, (London, 2008)

John Wilson Murray *Memoirs of a great detective: Incidents in the life of John Wilson Murray*, first published in London in 1904.