



by **Jim McBeth**

Today, it is known for its scenery and rural tranquillity. But 'The Shire' has a past littered with axe killers, arsonists and enough vile crime to rival the worst city slum

THE tiny newborn baby was swaddled in linen and hidden in the desk of Duncan Clark, a solicitor, notary public and pillar of society. Its lifeless little body lay between a compartment containing postage stamps bearing the likeness of Queen Victoria and a tablet of vellum on which Clark's name and legal credentials were printed in ornate copperplate script.

Confronted by officers of Perthshire Constabulary, the lawyer declaimed he had no knowledge of how the child – his daughter, it would transpire – met her untimely end or had arrived in his bureau.

His participation would be resolved later by a jury and a judge who ordered that he should be hanged by the neck until dead.

Perth's residents were shocked when Clark's errant behaviour was revealed. It was a surprising reaction, really, considering the good folk of the Shire were familiar with as gory a collection of footpads, arsonists, mad axepersons and psychopathic blanket thieves as one might shake a blunt instrument at.

The rolling hills which enfold the Fair City may suggest bucolic harmony but, alas, it was not always an idyll. Perthshire in the 19th century was, it seems, reminiscent of the fictitious Midsomer of today. Violent death was a blot on the landscape, with a series of murders that would have shocked even the hardened slum dwellers of Glasgow.

The victims included kindly 'Jennie' Anderson, who had a hatchet embedded in her skull. Then, there was John Miller, who

suffered a shotgun blast in what became known, in somewhat lurid fashion, as the Blairingone Bread Cart Murder.

They were joined by Lizzie Law, battered to death for her bedding, and toll-keeper 'Johnny' Miller – another John Miller – who was robbed of life for his clothes.

Also included in the mix was the family that escaped being burned

'Scene of our oldest unsolved homicide'

alive, thanks to a quick-thinking servant girl and the foolishness of three miscreants who had come to their home armed with a firearm and a quantity of combustible liquid.

And these are only 'highlights', according to historian Geoff Holder, author of *Perthshire Murders*, who is about to confront the inhabitants

with their gruesome but unknown history.

'It's pretty awful,' he says. 'Violence in the slums was accepted but in a beautiful place it was shocking – and there seems to have been a bit of it going on. Perthshire is also unique as the scene of Scotland's oldest unsolved homicide.'

Such was the level of wilfulness that, in the course of 50 years, the constabulary was transformed from country 'plods' into officers capable of dealing with dastardly crime.

Mr Holder adds: 'Murders usually fall into two categories. The first is the "domestic" – drunk man kills nagging wife – which is easy to solve. The second is more problematic, the inexplicable murder, with no witnesses.'

'In the first half of the 19th century, Perthshire cops didn't have a clue. By the 1860s, they had become a professional force.'

In November, 1816, the constabulary was still at the struggling stage when a gun-wielding trio attacked the local toll booth, run by William McRitchie. John Larg, James Mitchell and Alexander Steel turned up and presented a firearm

through the window of the McRitchie home and threatened to burn it down. McRitchie opened the door, and servant Charlotte Taylor escaped. Within hours, Larg and Mitchell were in custody.

Justice was administered swiftly. 'Hanged!' says Mr Holder. 'Steel was captured later and sentenced to Transportation for Life to Australia. Unfortunately, he opted to return and followed his friends onto the scaffold.'

Shortly afterwards the police were again in action, this time pursuing the Mad Axe Murderer of Dunning, the nation's oldest unsolved murder.

The victim was Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Law, 75, who lived south of Perth. Clothing and bedding were taken by her killer but the investigation was ineffective and there were no suspects.

Police eventually stumbled on one. Margaret Boag, a known thief, was found in possession of Lizzie's property. Investigators concluded she was the killer.

Mr Holder says: 'When it came to trial, the entire affair was unsatisfactory. Witnesses were unclear and the jury delivered a verdict of