


City that Walks on Water Southend Stories



Title:	<u>The Prittlewell Murderer</u>
Date:	Winter 1894
Location:	Prittlewell
Image:	 <p style="text-align: center;">I. JAMES CANHAM READ, THE SOUTHEND MURDERER.</p>
Headline:	
Fact 1	On the evening of Monday, 25th June, 1894, the body of Florence Dennis, aged 23, was discovered in a brook near the village of Prittlewell. She had died from a single bullet wound to the head.
Fact 2	Miss Dennis was eight months pregnant and had been staying with her sister, Mrs. Ayriss, in Southend and on her sister's evidence at the inquest, James Canham Read, a married man who had had a relationship with Miss Dennis, was arrested for the murder.
Fact 3	As well as Read's home in Stepney where he had a wife and several children (accounts varied from four to eight), he also rented another house in Mitcham, under the name Mr. Benson, where he was living with another woman, Miss Kempton, with their young child. In the course of the trial it was revealed that he had also had a relationship with Mrs. Ayriss and was probably the father of one of her children. Read maintained throughout the trial that he was innocent of the crime.
Fact 4	The Pall Mall Gazette from 16 November, 1894 wrote, "Rarely is so squalid a case discovered in our courts. To be guilty of such infamy a man must lack even the first elements of humanity. When the girl's condition claimed his remorseful pity and his aid he could think of nothing better than a bloody butchery. If there was ever a criminal worthy of the rope it is James Canham Read."

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Fact 5	However the writer and poet, Robert Buchanan, wrote a letter to the Press, dated Nov. 28, "I have waited silently from day to day in the hope that some more authoritative voice than mine might be raised in protest against the judicial murder which will take place, unless the royal prerogative is exercised, on Tuesday next. To my surprise and sorrow, the leading newspapers are still silent concerning the sentence of death pronounced on James Canham Read, the reputed murderer of Florence Dennis. I say the "reputed" murderer, because in my opinion, and in that of many thinking men, the Crown failed utterly to establish its case against the prisoner."
Fact 6	James Canham Read protested his innocence to the last, and in a letter to his brother 2 days before he was hanged at Chelmsford Prison James Read wrote, "My dear Harry, In spite of the truth, and in defiance of the evidence presented to him proving my innocence, the Home Secretary has endorsed the murderous conspiracy of his professional brethren."
Close:	Although convicted on purely circumstantial evidence, James Canham Read was executed at Springfield Gaol, Chelmsford on 4th December, 1894, the executioner, Mr Billington, was bought down from Bolton to ensure that Mr Read was hanged by the neck until dead.
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