



Above: the only known illustration of Frederick Abberline, who was said to look like a bank manager.

On Saturday 29th September 2001, Bournemouth welcomed Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Grieve of the Metropolitan Police, to unveil a plaque to Frederick Abberline in the presence of His Worship, the Mayor of Bournemouth, Councillor Douglas Eyre. But why?



Above: John Grieve unveils the plaque to Abberline.

The plaque was on the front of 195 Holdenhurst Road, which was Abberline's home in the 1920s. At the time, Holdenhurst Road was guesthouse-land, fuelled by holidaymakers pouring out of the nearby railway station. Abberline and his wife reportedly took in paying guests.



Above: Holdenhurst Road, in Abberline's time. King's bakery, left, was almost opposite his house; The South Western Hotel, right, may have been his 'local'.

Not a lot is known of Abberline's life in Holdenhurst Road, various reports suggest that he was fond of growing roses, kept a diary full of speculations about his police work and left a scrapbook focussing mainly on his time spent working in Monte Carlo. Maybe Abberline bought bread from King's bakery opposite his house; drank at the South Western a little further towards town, even used the local wine merchant's at 99 Holdenhurst Road - the proprietor, Nelson Edwin Lees was eventually Abberline's executor. Conceivably, he drank at the Railway Hotel (a few doors from Lees' shop) run by local entertainer John Hancock, where Tony Hancock the comedian was growing up.



Above: Jeremy Beadle, attending the unveiling of the Abberline Plaque.

There was no clue in the local press, when Frederick Abberline died in 1929, to suggest that over 70 years later well-known prankster Jeremy Beadle would turn up to see his home marked with a plaque. At the time of Abberline's death, the local newspapers were reporting on five days of severe gales that had

demolished the sea wall, and on some new films being released in both silent and talkie versions – the latest innovation! But there was no feature on Abberline. This is not surprising, anonymity was Bournemouth's attraction. People at the top of society came to Bournemouth's Italianate villas, set in large private grounds, when they wanted to rest from socialising. The Prince of Wales came here to be with Lily Langtry in secret; the French poet Verlaine came here to lay low after being jailed for shooting his boyfriend. Frederick Abberline quietly retired here, left no known photograph and was buried in an unmarked grave.



Above: A map of Holdenhurst Road, showing both of Abberline's houses.

For decades, few in Bournemouth were aware of anything special about Abberline. The house in which he died, at 195 Holdenhurst Road, was divided into flats; his earlier home, at 4 Methuen Road was demolished to make way for Wessex Way, the Town Centre bypass, without a protest being raised.



Above: Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Grieve, speaking about Abberline at the unveiling.

It was finally this complete lack of recognition which prompted an Australian, John Godl, to write and urge Bournemouth Council to recognise Abberline as an important citizen of the town. Mr Godl pointed out that Abberline was one of the Metropolitan Police's most esteemed and honoured police officers.

Mr. Godl was anxious to have Abberline's grave marked in memory of the great man, however this proved impossible. The Council bylaws do not permit a grave to be marked unless the permission of the family has been obtained and no one knew the whereabouts of Abberline's family. It was suggested that a blue plaque could be put on Abberline's last house instead.



Above: Paul Begg – author and conference organiser.

A new urgency was given to considerations about Abberline, when Paul Begg of the 'Cloak and Dagger' club contacted the Council. The club, which has an interest in murder and mystery was planning to host a Jack-the-Ripper conference in Bournemouth in September 2001 and had a special interest in Abberline.

Paul Begg is a respected author in the field of Jack-the-Ripper books, noted by fellow Ripperologists for his sober approach to the subject. It is a brave author who publishes a Ripper theory without trying first to obtain a few favourable words from Mr Begg. Paul Begg wrote that Abberline was 'the man most closely associated with the Ripper investigation, although he was not the officer in charge of the case but was in charge of investigations in Whitechapel.'

Plans were made for a blue plaque to be put up on 195 Holdenhurst Road, where Abberline had lived. The unveiling ceremony was arranged to tie in with the Jack-the-Ripper conference. Various celebrity names were floated as possible guests to perform the unveiling, including American heart-throb actor Johnny Depp, who portrayed Abberline for a movie version of the Ripper story called 'From Hell' due to be shown in Britain in 2002, however Mr. Depp proved unavailable. The eventual guest star at the unveiling, suggested by several people, was John Grieve of the Metropolitan Police, one of Britain's top policemen.



Above: His worship, The Mayor of Bournemouth, Councillor Douglas Eyre.

John Grieve, who travelled down to Bournemouth for the Jack the Ripper conference, was welcomed at 195 Holdenhurst Road by Bournemouth's Mayor, Councillor Douglas Eyre. The Mayor explained some of Abberline's more high profile cases, such as the Ripper investigation and the Cleveland Street Scandal. Both the Mayor and John Grieve stressed that the Plaque honoured more than these two notorious cases and that Abberline's reputation rested largely on his many years of hard work.



Above: Ripperologists and celebrities mingled to see Abberline's plaque unveiled.

It is rather ironic that whilst Abberline's long service gave him his reputation as an outstanding police officer, it was his connection to the Ripper case, which was never solved, that ensured his enduring fame. However the enduring appeal of the gruesome Ripper case lies largely in the fact that it was never solved. Abberline may have thought the idea of putting up a plaque was daft, he was, from all reliable accounts a down to earth chap, who looked more like a bank manager or lawyer than a policeman.

What is significant about this plaque is that it is the first one to be put up to an ordinary police officer. The mention of Jack-the-Ripper is more for the benefit of people coming to see the plaque, than for Abberline himself; as is the title used on the plaque - Inspector. Abberline is most commonly known as an Inspector, although he was subsequently promoted to Chief Inspector.



Above: Joseph Sickert, in the white cap, attended the unveiling of Abberline's plaque with a fellow Ripper author.

One of the most fascinating and convoluted theories about the Ripper murders seems to have originated with the 19th century artist Walter Sickert. His tale combines adultery, royal scandal, masonic conspiracy, and a catholic threat to the throne and government of England. The theory has been reworked for several books and films and is the background to the forthcoming 'From Hell'. Walter Sickert's son, Joseph, attended the unveiling of the plaque. However, there is nothing in Abberline's life in Bournemouth to substantiate some of the more colourful theories about him.



Above: 195 Holdenhurst Road, Abberline's final home in Bournemouth.

One suggestion is that Abberline's early retirement from the police was forced on him by Freemasons. This is probably not the case – it seems he simply took advantage of a new pension scheme. In any case, he went first to Monte Carlo (where his reputation as a Pinkerton agent struck fear into the hearts of the

opportunistic petty criminals) so Bournemouth holds no evidence to support that speculation.

Another idea suggests that Abberline's Bournemouth retirement home was a golden-gob-stopper from the police force. The notion is that in return for a discreet silence regarding the scandalous truth behind the Ripper murders and Cleveland Street, Abberline enjoyed a comfortable seaside home. Sadly, 195 Holdenhurst Road seems to hold no clues here either, for Abberline's first Bournemouth home was 4 Methuen Road, since demolished when a by-pass was built.



Above: Michael Caine portrayed Abberline in a 1988 movie for television.

Film buffs may fondly believe that in retirement a drunken Abberline regaled all and sundry with opium addled tales of Jack-the-Ripper. This is not the case. The demands of the film medium for a leading man in a movie have meant that Abberline has taken centre stage in several films about the Ripper. Michael Caine gave one memorable performance of Abberline as a man too often in his cups. Johnny Depp has reportedly brought opium addiction and psychic powers to his portrayal of Abberline.

Whilst Abberline neglected to leave any proof of masonic shenanigans and royal dalliances, a less sensational story can be told about him with greater confidence. Here is an outline of his life from Paul Begg.

'Abberline was born in 1843 in Blandford, Dorset, the son of Edward Abberline and Hannah (nee Chinn). His father was a saddler but also the Sheriff's Officer and Clerk of the Market, so was active in local government activities. He died in 1859, leaving Hannah to open a small shop and raise their three children, Harriett, Edward and Frederick.

'Frederick worked for a while as a clocksmith, but joined the Metropolitan Police in 1863. In 1868 he married Martha Mackness, but she died of consumption two months later.

'In 1873 Abberline was promoted to Inspector and transferred to H Division. The Metropolitan Police referred to different areas of London by letters, H was the Whitechapel area, just east of the City of London. In 1876 Abberline married Emma Beament and in 1878 he was put in charge of H Division, becoming its Local Inspector. In 1887, the year before the Ripper crimes, Abberline was transferred to Scotland Yard.'



Above: the blue plaque, commemorating Inspector Abberline



Above: The Mayor and Mayoress of Bournemouth, DAC John Grieve and Jeremy Beadle, at the unveiling of the Abberline plaque.

Paul Begg continues *'In the 1880s and much later, senior policemen were celebrities, much as movie stars are today, and their exploits were avidly reported in the newspapers and read by an increasingly literate society. Despite this fame, policemen were and are soon forgotten. Abberline is more fortunate in that he is remembered - celebrated even - because of his work on the Jack the Ripper investigation. He has been portrayed, in movies by Michael Caine and Johnny Depp, two respected and popular actors; this gives Abberline a further distinction not generally accorded a Bobby. It is an irony, really, that such a respected policeman should be remembered for the case he failed to solve!*

'And did Inspector Abberline have a theory about the identity of Jack the Ripper? Well, apparently he did. He saw similarities with George Chapman, real name Severin Klosowsky, a wife poisoner. But the theory didn't and hasn't impressed anyone, it being believed that a murderer as vicious as Jack the Ripper would not have changed his modus operandi to poison.

'Abberline was a trusted police officer, as being put in charge of the so-called Cleveland Street Scandal indicates - this was an investigation into a homosexual brothel allegedly frequented by the Duke of Clarence, then second in line to the throne, as Prince William is today. Clearly this was a delicate investigation requiring tact and diplomacy.

'Promoted to Chief Inspector in 1890, Abberline retired on a full pension in 1892 and worked for the famous American Pinkerton Detective Agency as their European Agent. In 1904 he retired to Bournemouth, living first in Methuen Road and from 1911 onwards in Holdenhurst Road. Very little is known about Inspector Abberline. No photograph is known to exist, but in a press-cutting book compiled for a friend there is a drawing of him. In the same book he made some brief handwritten annotations in which he said that he had received 84 commendations and awards, something which he felt was near a record. He died in 1929 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Wimborne Road Cemetery. His wife Emma died the following year.'

With final irony, Abberline was buried close to leading members of the Druitt family (cousins of Ripper-suspect Montague Druitt). Celebrity aside, Abberline's example has been an inspiration for others to join the police and his methodology is still studied by police trainees. And for anyone who ventures to see the latest Abberline film 'From Hell' next year: Holdenhurst Road leads to an ancient village of that name on the edge of Bournemouth: the name Holdenhurst means holly wood. Cue lights . . camera . . misrepresentation!