

Rye

Remains of John Breads

Grisly memento of a careless killer

Creep up to a town hall attic room in Rye for a sight both creepy and resonant of past judicial history: a body-shaped cage containing a skull that is all that's left of an 18th-century killer condemned forever to remain unburied.

The man was John 'Butcher' Breads, whose nickname arose both from his profession and propensity for violence. In 1729, he took over the Flushing Inn, turning its back yard into an abattoir. Breads had already been charged with stabbing a man in the arm before his ultimate downfall came on a rainy night in March 1743 when he sought revenge against one man – but mistakenly killed another. The intended victim was Rye mayor James Lamb, who had fined Breads for selling meat using false weights. In revenge, Breads hatched a plan to murder Lamb as he returned from an evening event. But Lamb was unwell on the day, and sent brother-in-law Allen Grebell in his place – fatefully wearing a red cloak borrowed from the mayor. As Grebell crossed a churchyard, Breads attacked, fatally stabbed the man he thought was Lamb, then fled. A few hours later, he was arrested, drunkenly staggering around and shouting: “Butchers should kill lambs”.

Ironically, Breads was tried by Lamb, the person he meant to kill – believed to be a first in English legal history. Found guilty, he was held in Ypres Castle tower, then taken to be hung. With further irony, Breads was taken into his own Flushing Inn “for a last drink” before execution. His sentence also decreed the body should never be buried, to hinder any chance of entering the afterlife.

The strange tale of Breads' corpse began immediately, with the body left to wither on the marsh for 50 years – with gruesome legend saying some locals removed flesh to make infusions as a supposed cure for rheumatism! Now, in line with his sentence, 'Butcher Breads' hangs unburied – but part of Rye legend.

Address Town Hall, Market St, Rye TN31 7LA; ryetowncouncil.gov.uk/town-hall/

Getting there 15 minutes walk from Rye railway station.

Hours The body can be viewed by appointment – contact the Town Hall.

Tip A landscape depiction of 1980s Rye by painter John Breeds hangs in Rye Heritage Centre, celebrating his skill while noting his being a “descendant of the infamous 'Breads the Butcher'.”