

# Medico-Legal aspects of the Ruxton case: A review

Dr. Robin Jackson, Lancaster and Morecambe Medical Book Club Archivist

The Book Club was founded to share the costs of expensive medical textbooks. We still have an extensive library, containing many of our early books, the oldest dating from 1737 and written in Latin. Kept under lock and key in the RLI Library, they may be viewed by arrangement with the librarian.

The book reviewed in this article is: "Medico-Legal Aspects of the Ruxton Case" by Glaister and Brash, published in 1937. It can be bought online, albeit a first edition will cost you £450.

I have a personal and family interest in the case. I used the desk from Ruxton's consulting room; Rosebank Practice "inherited" it! The family interest stems from my father, Geoff Jackson, GP in Lancaster from 1963, who inherited many of Ruxton's former patients. They all spoke highly of Ruxton. He had the ability to sit by the bedside of the patient, hold their hand, and spontaneously weep copious tears of sympathy. When he was tried and sentenced to death, his appeal was supported by a petition signed by ten thousand Lancastrians.

The book narrates the novel forensic techniques used to collect the evidence that convicted Ruxton, including the use of fingerprints, forensic entomology, and superimposing a photograph of the presumed victim on the X-ray of the skulls found.

Having murdered his wife and the maid, Mary Jane Rogerson, he dismembered the bodies in his bath, put them in his car boot and drove north to Moffat where he threw the body parts over a bridge into the Gardenholme Linn (stream). The scene, on the right of the A701, 2.58km north of Moffat, is little changed today. Locals have named it "Ruxton's Dump". Had Ruxton walked an extra 300m and dropped the parts into the River Annan, then in spate, they would likely have been lost in the Solway Firth, indeed the torso of Mary Rogerson was never found.

The human remains were originally examined by the two doctors from Moffat, Huskie and Pringle. Perhaps not the sort of duties a GP would carry out today! It was established that they were the remains of two females, albeit the murderer had

gone to extraordinary lengths by mutilating them, to prevent identification, but the detail of the mutilation suggested the culprit was "someone with anatomical knowledge". Despite the lengths he had gone to, Ruxton wrapped the parts in a copy of the Sunday Graphic newspaper, which the police found had only been sold in Lancaster and Morecambe. Then, a forensic entomologist declared that the maturity of maggots found on the flesh on the 29th September, suggested a date of death of some fifteen days previous, matching the date of the murder, 14th September.

The police then searched the missing persons files: the parents of Mary Jane Hodgson had reported her missing. Ruxton had not reported his wife missing, but when interviewed by the police, could not account for her absence, nor for his movements around the date of the murder. Examination of his house revealed extensive evidence of blood stains, and human remains were recovered from his drains.

He was tried, found guilty, and hanged at Strangeways prison in Manchester, where he is buried in an unmarked grave. Mary Jane Rogerson is buried in Overton Churchyard. Ruxton's three children were taken into care. Their subsequent fate is recorded in the County Archives in Preston, but the file is sealed until 2035. The bathtub in which he dismembered his victims served as a horse trough at the Headquarters of Lancashire Police for many years but has recently returned to Lancaster (see photo) as part of the permanent exhibition in the Police Museum at Lancaster Castle.

This book is a lucid and readable account of a case that laid the foundations for forensic science in the United Kingdom and around the world, and I commend it to you.

**Editor's Note:** Medico-Legal Aspects of the Ruxton case was published in 1937 by E & S Livingstone, Edinburgh. The authors were John Glaister, Professor of Forensic Medicine, Glasgow University and John C. Brash, Professor of Anatomy, Edinburgh University. They had both presented evidence that was used at the trial in 1936.



Ruxton's bathtub, currently in the Police Museum, Lancaster Castle. Photo courtesy of Bryan Rhodes collection