



**Devizes Prison**

## **John Gurd - Life and Crimes**

John Gurd was born on 9th May 1863 at Charlton, Donhead St. Mary. His parents were Joseph Gurd (1810-1877) and Sarah Davis (1827-1902).

When the 1881 Census was taken, John Gurd was serving in the Dorset Militia and stationed at Fordington Barracks in Dorset. His first name is given incorrectly as James. This may have been an administrative error, or perhaps John was already trying to conceal his true identity.

Home Office records state that he saw further Army service in India and West Africa (possibly in the Dorset Regiment). His Army Records show that he joined the Dorset Militia on 23rd November 1880 and transferred to the Dorset Regiment (Brigade Corps) on 2nd May 1881.

He arrived in India with his Regiment on 15th January 1883. His Medical Records note that he became ill 2 months after his arrival in India. After hospitalisation for 'Ague' and 'Palpitations', he was sent home to England and discharged from the Service on medical grounds on 18 March 1884. See below for details from the Records:

From 1890-1892 John Gurd worked as an Attendant at Devizes Lunatic Asylum, under the alias of Louis Hamilton. The reason for his use of an alias is not yet known. It is possible that he had committed a crime and had to conceal his true identity to evade capture and prosecution. The Home Office records note the use of an alias, but if enquiries were made regarding this, the relevant papers haven't survived.

### **John Gurd's record in the Censuses:-**

1871 Census Donhead St. Mary, Wilts - Charlton Street  
Joseph Gurd; Head; 59; Ag Lab; b. Donhead St. Mary, Wilts  
Sarah Gurd; Wife; 40; b. Enmore Green, Dorset  
John Gurd; Son; 7 ; Scholar; b. Donhead S.t Mary, Wilts  
Charles Gurd; Son; Single; 40 ; Ag Lab; b. Donhead St. Mary, Wilts

On the night of the 1881 census, John Gurd was either noted in error as James on the census form, or he was deliberately using a different first name.

1881 Census Fordington, Dorset - District New Depot Barracks  
Among the soldiers listed  
James Gurd; Single; 17; Militiaman; b. Donhead, Wilts.

By 1891, John Gurd had left the Army and was already living under his alias of Louis Hamilton.  
1891 Census Devizes, Wilts.

Wiltshire County Lunatic Asylum

Among the staff

Louis Hamilton; Single; Attendant; 37; b. Coombe, Shaftesbury

NOTE: John Gurd's (Louis Hamilton's) age is given wrongly. It should read 27. He may have given a false age, to further conceal his identity. His statement that his birthplace was in Coombe, near Shaftesbury, refers to the part of Donhead St. Mary where his family lived.

In April 1892 John Gurd was working as an Attendant at Devizes Asylum in Wiltshire. While he was visiting his family in Shaftesbury, the Asylum Housekeeper Mrs. Spencer, told his fiancée Florence Adams that he was in debt. Florence immediately wrote him a letter breaking off their engagement, saying she didn't want to see him again.

John believed that Florence's uncle, Henry Richards, was responsible for her breaking off the engagement and on Saturday the 9th of April 1892 travelled to Melksham to seek him out.

After drinking together at the Crown Inn in the Market Place, John and Henry walked together along Spa Road towards the bridge over the canal. When they reached the bridge, John took out a revolver and shot Henry Richards twice in the back. He calmly walked back towards the town centre and made his escape.

The Police searched for him throughout the Sunday and Monday, then late on Monday evening (the 11th April), they received information which led them to believe that John might be trying to reach Warminster. They began walking along the road in the direction of the town and in the early hours of Tuesday 12th April, found him near the gates of Longleat House, where they attempted to arrest him. In the ensuing struggle John Gurd shot Police Sergeant Enos Moulden, who died shortly afterwards in a cottage nearby.

John Gurd was tried for Murder at the Assizes Court in Salisbury Guildhall, where he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

The Times Newspaper: Wednesday, Jul 27, 1892; pg. 5; Issue 33701; col F  
EXECUTION AT DEVIZES.-John Gurd, alias Hamilton (News)

"John Gurd was taken to the Gallows at 8 o'clock and although he never denied his guilt he did express deep contrition for what had happened. He walked firmly to the Gallows. Although a 6'10" drop was allowed by Billington, the vertebrae of the neck was not dislocated. The medical testimony, however, was to the effect that death which resulted from shock, was particularly instantaneous".

John Gurd was buried in Devizes, Wiltshire aged 29 after his execution at Devizes Prison on 26th July 1892