

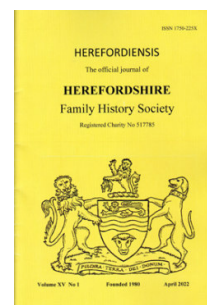
# The Infamous Solicitor of Ross

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This article first appeared in *Herefordiensis*, Vol XV, No. 1, pp28-9 (April 2022)

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I've been doing a One-Name Study of the Skyrmes of Herefordshire for about 10 years and have found some interesting individuals, as I have reported in past issues of *Herefordiensis*. This is the story of John Henry Skyrme (1836-1873). Although John was born at Splott House in Roath, now a suburb of Cardiff, both his parents were from Herefordshire. His father was John, a farmer from Dewsall and his mother Elizabeth née Jones from Baysham.

After his father's death in Roath in 1843, John and his mother and sister moved back to Baysham. By 1859 at the age of 23 John had established himself as a solicitor in the High Street at Ross and had become a freemason. Several leases and indentures at Herefordshire Archives and Records bear his signature. Throughout the 1860s he was a prominent member of the local establishment. Among offices held were secretary of the cricket club, on the Board of the Ross Town Commissioners, a committee member of the Ross Literary Society and Clerk to the Trustees of the Ross Turnpike Trust. He was also active in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Herefordshire Volunteer Rifle Corps where he was appointed Ensign in 1865 and Lieutenant in 1871.



cc-by-sa/2.0 - Merton House, Ross-on-Wye by Stephen Richards - geograph.org.uk/p/5498200

He married local girl Elizabeth Watkins in 1866. She was the daughter of Benjamin Watkin gent, of Baysham Farm. In the same year John is described as a gentleman when he was the executor of the will of his uncle William Jones, a farmer. He obviously prospered since by 1871

the couple were living at Merton House, Trenchard Street with three servants. This is now the Merton House Hotel at Edde Cross Street “a holiday hotel for the elderly frail and people with disabilities”.

So far, all is above board and John seems to be a pillar of the local establishment. Even his death notice in May 1873 gave no indication of what was to be discovered later:

*“SKYRME. April 27, at Merton House, Ross, after a short illness, aged 36, John Henry Skyrme, Esq., solicitor”*

But shortly afterwards we find newspaper headlines such as

*“WHOLESALE FORGERY AND EMBEZZLEMENT BY A SOLICITOR”*

*“EXTRAORDINARY FRAUDS AT ROSS”*

*“SUICIDE AND FRAUDS BY A SOLICITOR”*

The various articles over the ensuing weeks and months run to many column inches. Here is a flavour from the *Western Mail* of 8<sup>th</sup> May 1873:

*"The death of John Henry Skyrme, a solicitor in extensive practice at Ross, in Herefordshire, has caused great excitement in that locality... In two days he was buried, and the town, out of respect, partly closed all its shops."*

It says that he was apparently rich owning property around the town, as well as a landed estate near Ross and another, Court St. Lawrence, near Usk. The newspaper report continues:

*"Scarcely had the grave been closed, however, before a strong revulsion of feeling ran through the town. People began to find that they were victims of fraud. Forgeries turned up at once of an astounding character - sham mortgages, suppression of deeds, sales of property previously mortgaged, involving ruin to numerous families."*

He had an overdrawn bank account of £20,000. The many tradesmen of the town who had extended him credit were also cheated. Almost every day later that May and into June a new victim of fraud came forward. For example, a gentleman in Monmouth was defrauded of £4,000 and the Ross Town Commissioners £1,060.

The trail led to several court cases. One of the most complex ones was over ownership of parts of the Merrivale estate “a fine property outside

Ross” that had come into John’s possession a few years earlier. He divided some its land at Ashfield into building plots one of which was sold to local builder J. B. Kemp on which he built “a fine villa”. He mortgaged this to John Warren for £700. But John Skyrme also sold it as his own property to Miss Beeston of Ross for £1,500.

There was conjecture that he might have poisoned himself since he made a will the day before and he had had a fraught meeting with some creditors in Gloucester earlier in the day.

After his death rumours grew that he might not really be dead, that the burial might have been a sham and even that he may have gone to America. These rumours were put to rest when his wife died two years later and the opportunity was taken to open and inspect his coffin. His body had only partially decomposed and his face was very recognisable.

When researching your family history one sometimes comes across ‘skeleton in the cupboard’. But few can match this abrupt transition from a person in high regard to a fraudster. So far John Skyrme’s skeleton is not in my cupboard. Along with several other researchers we have yet to find a definitive link between the Skyrmes of Herefordshire and Pembrokeshire, although there is an obvious one yet to be discovered.

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