

The Jetty

A Story

By Simon A. Perry

I've still got the original picture; it's here on the desk in front of me. A completely normal-looking picture. In case you haven't seen it, I'll try to describe it.

A ramshackle jetty runs from the bank, in the foreground, to the top of the picture. Empty rowing boats can be seen at the right and left-hand sides of the photo. About halfway along the jetty is a door, plainly labelled "Keep Off". On top of, and to either side of the door are coils and lines of barbed wire placed to stop people from simply edging round the door to the end of the jetty.

Nothing too out of the ordinary, I'm sure you'll agree. Okay, the door sitting in the middle of the jetty looks odd. Indeed, that's what made me give the whole thing some attention in the first place. But still a normal, every-day photograph.

The problem is, what I saw and *thought* I had photographed isn't what I'm looking at now. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning, rather than at the end. In that way, perhaps, I'll be able to get down on paper my experiences that autumn morning. Maybe by capturing them in black and white the whole affair will seem less strange. Perhaps.

It was early October, nine years ago now. My wife and I had taken a cottage for the weekend, on the banks of the Ouse just north of York. We arrived at dusk, and as we were looking out of the bedroom window at the river below, I happened to look upstream. I could see the jetty sticking out into the river as it curved away into the distance. I remember then thinking how funny it looked, with the door planted squarely in the middle, and thought it would make a good picture. I'm a bit of an amateur photographer, and always take my camera with me wherever we go. It was too dark to go out then, so I decided that I'd do it first thing next morning.

Early the next morning I got up, ready to go out and see what I could find. I prefer early mornings, when the sun is just rising. The light feels better, and the quietness and expectancy in the air makes the whole process feel much more special to me. But it was not to be. I drew back the curtains to find the river blanketed in thick fog, with the jetty nowhere to be seen.

The fog never really lifted all day, and with the short autumn nights, the whole day was a wash-out as far as photography was concerned. Fortunately for me (or, perhaps, unfortunately, but I will leave you to decide that) the next (and our last) morning was a glorious one, with an icy-blue crystal-clear sky, and the Sun shining full across the river.

I grabbed my camera, slipped on my coat, and left the cottage. The lane outside the cottage ran northwards towards the area where I thought the jetty was located, and I followed it as it ran between laid hedges, now mostly bare of leaves.

After about 500 yards, the lane turned off to the right and I found myself standing in front of a lich-gate, with a small and rather dilapidated church

beyond standing on the edge of a forlorn-looking, overgrown graveyard. I could see the river on the other side of the church, with the end of the jetty just peeking past the end of a line of Yew trees bordering the southern end of the graveyard.

I like graveyards, particularly old ones out in the countryside. They are sad, but very interesting places. Just try it one day. Have a stroll through and read the gravestones. Try to imagine the stories and heartache and sadness lying behind the names, the generations, recorded on the stone. I got some good pictures from that graveyard that morning. A particularly fine angel adorned one family grave, and it made a splendid photograph.

I spent about an hour wandering amongst the gravestones, pulling back the undergrowth and scraping off moss to get a better look. I wondered what had happened to lead to such neglect and abandonment. By the look of the place, nobody had used or cared for the graveyard for a very long time.

The morning was passing, and I had set out to get a photograph of the jetty, so made my way over to the river. I could just see the end of the jetty and the top of the door, but the rest was blocked by the Yews that ran right up to the water's edge. An overgrown path pushed its way past the trees, skirting the edge of the river.

I ducked down and pushed my way through, standing up on the other side of the trees, about twenty yards from the jetty.

And I stopped dead. I *must* be in the wrong place, surely. The jetty I had seen from the cottage window was old, and patched together and had that ridiculous door sitting in the middle of it. The one in front of me looked fairly new and freshly painted, and there certainly wasn't a door on it. I looked south along the river, thinking that there must be two jetties and that I had walked further than I intended, somehow missing the turning. But there was our cottage, and there was no other jetty to be seen.

I shivered, then, feeling very cold. My skin seemed to turn to goose-pimples all over and I remember thinking that this must be a dream, that I would wake up at any time. At that moment I heard a noise and saw something I hadn't noticed before. Tied to the end of the jetty was a large rowing boat, which seemed to be full of bulging brown sacks. Walking towards me along the jetty was an old man, flat-capped and clad in tweed. He hadn't seen me so I crouched down behind a hedge that at that point joined the Yews.

My heart was pounding as he walked past me, and my breathing seemed so loud that I was certain he would hear me. He didn't. He walked past towards the churchyard, and as he did so I saw that he had a sack over his shoulder.

When he had passed I jumped up and fired off a couple of shots of the jetty. I wanted some kind of proof that I wasn't going mad. I didn't have time for anymore, because I could hear him returning. I only just managed to hide again before he returned and went back to the boat.

This time when he passed me I paid more attention to the sack he was carrying. It wasn't very big, about two feet long. At the bottom was a hole, and hanging out of the hole was a *blood-covered human hand*. I must have gasped, for the old man turned straight towards me, dropped the sack and went running towards the boat.

I dropped my camera and gave chase. Just as he was about to reach the boat (and I was about to reach him), he tripped, cried out and fell towards the river. I jumped forward trying to grab him, but missed. I must have hit my head on the jetty, for the next thing I knew I was coming-to, face down on some rough wooden planking. I sat up and looked round. The boat was gone, the man was gone, and behind me was the door and barbed wire of the jetty I had come to photograph.

I hurried back to the cottage, picking up my camera from where I had dropped it. My wife must have thought something was wrong the instant I walked into the cottage; the question she started to ask died on her lips the instant she saw my face. I told her what I had seen, but she didn't believe me. Yes I had obviously banged my head. The lump proved that. I must have imagined everything while I was unconscious. She even came back with me to the churchyard and jetty, but everything was normal. No sacks lying around, no sign that anyone had ever been there other than myself. Even the photos I had taken failed to back me up. They showed a rather neglected jetty, with a door placed improbably in the middle of it. Again, no boat, no man, no new jetty.

That would probably have been it, if I had left things well alone. In fact, as far as my wife is concerned, that was it. I have never shown her the newspaper article I found a year later, when I decided to see what I could find out about the church and jetty. Here it is:

Yorkshire Sentinel, October 7th 1937

Police today closed off the area around St. John's Church and Beckman's Jetty, Tarnley, Yorkshire, following a gruesome discovery by Mr. Charles Webster, Verger of St. John's.

Mr. Webster was making his way to the church early this morning when he noticed a freshly dug grave. Knowing that there were no funerals arranged for today he walked over to investigate. Looking into the hole, he saw a number of brown sacks, with a further sack lying on the path some distance away, as it passes the end of the Yews on the way to the neighbouring Beckman's Jetty.

On opening the discarded sack, he was shocked to find a severed human arm. He immediately summoned the village police officer, Constable Stanley Underwick. On further investigation, the pair made even more shocking discoveries. In a boat tied to the end of Beckman's Jetty were a number of additional sacks containing the remains of a young man and a young woman. Floating face-down in the river, trapped against the side of the jetty was the body of an older man who has since been identified as Harold Slipston, a local farmer.

Police believe that the remains of the woman are those of Mr. Slipston's young wife. The identity of the man is unknown. The presence of a second set of footprints on the jetty lead police to believe that Mr. Slipston was disturbed in his appalling task. Local police are appealing for anyone with information to come forward.