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Notice — —
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100 years ago —

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# 'Hang'd in chains' in Croydon in 1750: James Cooper, murderer

Not one but two criminals were to be executed in September 1750, James Cooper and William Duncalf. Both had been found guilty of robbery and murder. Most of their crimes were committed beyond Croydon but the murder of Robert Saxby, in the course of their robbing Robert Boyd near Croham Hurst, brought about their sentence of execution.

One of the most obvious resources to find out about serious crimes committed in the eighteenth century is the Newgate Calendar, according to which James Cooper, a native of Lexton in Essex, had been a butcher in Colchester for thirteen years.[1] Business failure landed him in the King's Bench prison as a debtor. His release secured, he found work in London where he met a notorious thief, William Duncalf, an Irishman who, unable to find employment there, had found work as a porter in London, and [James] Burrell, a soldier in the guards, both of whom persuaded him to join them in a series of robberies in and around London. A Mr James was robbed of his watch and money on the road to Dulwich. Mrs Pearson, who was responsible for Cooper's initial arrest, was robbed in Essex of eight guineas. Ellish, described as a gentleman of fortune, was robbed of money, watch and other articles; and, his servant intervening, they were tied up and thrown into a ditch. Other robberies were committed near Farnborough in Kent, the victims being brother and sister, and near Bromley where they robbed a gentleman on horseback, obliging him to dismount and hand over his watch and money. These are just a small selection of their robberies.

Some, however, took place near Croydon. A farmer called Jackson was robbed of his watch and money, besides being beaten, tied to a tree and his horse let loose. For this crime two farriers, named as Shelton and Kellett, were tried at the Assizes. While Kellett was acquitted, Shelton was executed as Jackson had identified him as the robber.

The *Newgate Calendar* gives a graphic account of the murder of Robert Saxby but the location is given as 'about a mile from Dulwich'. The *Calendar*'s numerous accounts of serious crimes were published in the 1770s but it draws on previously printed accounts such as pamphlets and broadsheets. The account of Saxby's murder may well derive from contemporary sources and deserves to be quoted liberally:

'The next robbery was committed in a lane about a mile from Dulwich, where they stopped two gentlemen, on horseback; but one of them being

[1] *The Newgate Calendar; or, Malefactors Bloody Register* (London, 5 vols. [1773-]), **IV** (No. 34), pp93-105

well mounted, clapped spurs to his horse and got off. The other attempted to ride over them, and actually trod Duncalf down; but Cooper coming to his assistance dragged the gentleman off his horse, and robbed him of his watch and money. The other gentleman whose name was Saxby, and whom they thought had rode away, tied his horse to a gate, and returned in order to assist his companion, but no sooner did the villain see him, then they knocked him down and then shot him dead on the spot.

They then robbed his pockets and returned to London, but the affair making a great noise, some gentlemen who knew Duncalf, and had some suspicion that he was one of the murderers, came down to town, and had him apprehended at his lodgings near Dean's-yard, Westminster. Cooper was taken the same day; but Burrell surrendered and admitted an evidence.'[2]

The same account has a separate heading for William Duncalf in which the last statement about admitting evidence is elaborated: '...that Burrell and himself [Cooper], had often designed to murder their companion Duncalf, because they expected every day that he would go and surrender himself up to justice, and so be admitted on evidence, in consequence of which they would be hanged....'[3]

Cooper and Duncalf were committed to the New Gaol in Southwark. Much space is given to Cooper's remorse after denying he had anything to do with the robbery of Mrs Pearson. The account takes this as its cue to address the value of a religious and moral upbringing. It concludes with the fact that Cooper was executed at Kennington Common on 26 August 1750. This is the only date in the account of the exploits of the three criminals.

Duncalf escaped execution because he died in prison of gangrene. The account of his death is also graphic: 'Soon after his commitment to the New Gaol, Southwark, his flesh broke out in ulcers, and actually rotted off his bones, so that he died.'[4] He, too, was remorseful and confessed that he was a vicious wretch who had two wives alive and would have married a third had he not been apprehended.

Contemporary newspapers add more specific detail about their victims but the location is not near Dulwich but near Croydon. Jackson was William Jackson, a farmer of Addington, robbed in Addiscomb lane on 12 February 1749. Jackson having identified a John Shelton as the robber, he was tried at the Guildford Assizes in the spring of 1750 and executed.[5] What is certain is that Robert Saxby was John Howe's groom at Barrow-Green, that

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[2] *Ibid.* pp101-2

[3] *Ibid.* p104

[4] *Ibid.* p103

[5] *London Evening Post 22 May 1750*

Robert Boyd was game-keeper to Sir Kendrick Clayton of Marden and that the crimes took place in the evening, at 8pm, on Saturday 17 March 1749/1750,[6] on the lane leading from the Croydon turnpike road to Sanderstead, where, somewhere on the lane near Croham Hurst, both men were robbed and Saxby, who had come to Sir Kendrick's assistance, was shot dead.[7]

Also certain is that Cooper and Duncalf were arrested for these crimes not long afterwards as they were committed to prison at Newgate on or about 21 March as the *London Evening Post* of 22-24 March gives the date as 'Yesterday'. Duncalf was the first to be arrested as the same newspaper records that another person was not yet taken. Cooper seems to have confessed to three or four other murders in company with Duncalf but no more details are provided. As for Duncalf's death in the New Gaol, the report adds that, having 'a Mortification in one of his Feet', his leg was to be amputated a little below the knee, an operation he refused, in consequence of which he died in prison.[8]

Another certain fact is that the prisoners were tried at the Kingston Assizes held on 11, 12, 13 and 14 of August 1750.[9]

The fortunate survival of a sixpenny twenty page pamphlet from 1750, so rare that its existence is not recorded in the catalogues of the British Library or of other depositories, including university libraries, adds considerably more information. Its title, here abbreviated, is *The Rev. Mr. Wilson's Account of the Behaviour, Confession, and Dying words of James Cooper, Butcher...* .[10] William Wilson, lecturer at St John's, Southwark, was the clergyman who attended Cooper at the New Gaol and took down his detailed confession of his crimes as far as he could remember them all. As an innocent man had been executed because of him, the pamphlet devotes considerable space to Cooper's remorse.

While the *Newgate Calendar* includes Robert Saxby's murder and Jackson's robbery, Wilson's pamphlet lists other robberies committed near, and in, present-day Croydon. One Sunday 'near a place called Smitham Bottom' they attacked a gentleman on horseback and robbed him of six

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[6] The Julian Calendar was not replaced by the Gregorian Calendar until 1752. In the Julian the new year began on 25 March.

[7] *General Advertiser* 20 August 1750

[8] *London Evening Post* 22-24 March 1750

[9] *Penny London Post* 17-20 August 1750

[10] Printed for J. Nicholson near the Sessions House in the Old-Baily, and sold at all the Pamphlet-Shops in London and Westminster (n.d). [ hereafter Wilson] The pamphlet is in the possession of Richard Heaton and can be downloaded from www.lastchancetoread.com for a small charge. (accessed 21 August 2015)

and a half or seven and a half guineas and a silver watch.[11] On another occasion, a Saturday evening, Cooper and Duncalf robbed a butcher returning from Croydon market of 27s at the same place at which Saxby was shot; and a quarter of an hour later robbed another butcher of 34s. On another evening, at the same place, they robbed a man of his coat and 6s or 7s; and on the same evening, at the same place, they robbed a Mr Boyer of two silver watches, one of which Boyer had slipped into his breeches, and 'while Duncalf was rifling him, Cooper was employ'd in taking off his Silver Spurs, they took some Money from him, but can't recollect the Sum, the Watches they pawn'd'.[12]

How Jackson was robbed is more detailed because of its fatal consequences and Cooper's remorse.[13] 'On Saturday evening February the 10th 1749, Duncalf and Cooper being down at Croydon, about Seven o'Clock they went into a Lane about half a Mile beyond the Town with an Intent to rob, and Cooper set open a Gate belonging to a fallow Field, in order to take the Party they should happen to stop into that Field, that they might more conveniently rifle and bind him; they had not been long there before a Farmer came from towards the Town on Horseback, which proved to be *William Jackson* of *Addington*, in the County of Surry'. As he resisted, 'he had several blows given him by Cooper, and Duncalf made a Stroke at him with his Hanger, which happily did no Damage', after which, they pulled him from his horse and rifled him of 'seven Shillings in Silver, a Great Coat, a silver Watch, about two Pounds of Raisins, a Pair of Gloves, a small Key, (which they throw'd away on the Common afterwards) and an Ashen Stick...when they had done robbing him they bound him Hands and Legs and left him in the Field'. Subsequently John Shelton and Charles Kellett, farriers, were tried for the same, but Kellet was acquitted, Shelton alone being executed.

Saxby's murder is dated to Thursday 17 March 1749, again a Saturday evening, when he and Boyd were coming from Croydon.[14] Duncalf caught hold of Boyd's bridle but Saxby rode away and 'as he passed Cooper made a Blow at him'. Duncalf then pulled Boyd off his horse and they both fell to the ground. As Boyd still held the bridle, he 'caused the Horse to go quite over them both'. Cooper came to Duncalf's help and robbed Boyd of his 'Silver Watch, a Pair of Gloves, an old Handkerchief, and some Money:'. Saxby once again came to Boyd's assistance: 'he came behind Cooper, and with his Whip or a Stick, gave him a violent Blow and fell'd him to the Ground, and fell upon him, and almost got the Pistol that he had in his

[11] Wilson p8
[12] *Ibid.* pp13-14 for both events
[13] *Ibid.* pp14-15
[14] *Ibid,* pp16-17

Hand from him...Duncalf quitted Boyde (*sic*) and came to him, and shot Saxby as he lay upon him, and not being certain that he had done Execution, he with the But-end of his Pistol hit the Deceased Saxby a violent Blow on the Head, which occasioned him to fall off Cooper; they took from Saxby after he was shot, some Silver, how much he said he could not remember; they took a Portmanteau...' and took out some clothes and then returned to London. Cooper blamed Duncalf for not being as brave as Saxby for they might have then got away without bloodshed.

Uncertainty still muddies the reports. Cooper, so the *Newgate Calendar* attests, was executed at Kennington Common on 26 August. The Common was a frequent place of execution and so the Calendar's account is very credible. It is, however, not seemingly supported by the contemporary press. The *Penny London Post*, or *Morning Advertiser* states, in its edition of 24-27 August, that Cooper was to be hanged in chains on 'Croam-Hurst, near Croydon'. Confusingly, the same newspaper on 5 September, gives the place of execution as Smitham-Bottom, and adds the date as being 'last Thursday'.

So where was Cooper hanged? Was it at Kennington Common? Was it at Smitham Bottom or near Croham Hurst? A newspaper report states that in mid-August the 'Dead Warrant came to the New Gaol....ordering the Execution of the following Malefactors next Wednesday on Kennington Common, viz. John Roney, Jasper Vincent and Charles Lewis, for Highway Robberies. Cooper is to be hang'd in Chains on Croom-Hurst, near Croydon, in Surrey.'[15]

The burial register for St John the Baptist has an unusual entry referring to the murder. 'James Cooper a Highway man was Executed on a gibet in Smithden and their (*sic*) hang'd in Chains for Murdering and Robing of Robert Saxby Groom to John How Esqr of Barrow Green in the Parish of Oxted in Surrey on the 17th March 1849.'[16]

Earlier newspaper reports make it clear that Croydon was a place of execution. In 1720 John Colethorpe alias Sculthorpe, a highwayman, was executed at Croydon, declaring on the gallows that he had been involved in twelve robberies;[17] and in 1722 Butler Fox and five others were executed at Thornton Heath.[18]

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[15] *Penny London Post* 24-27 August 1750

[16] I have used the transcript in the Museum of Croydon: Croydon Parish Register **vol.8**, Burials 1731-1751.

[17] *Applebee's Original Weekly Journal* 20 August 1720

[18] *Post Boy* 29 March 1722; See also the *Gentleman's Magazine*, **Vol. IV**, New Series, July-Dec. 1835 p152

However, the phrase 'hang'd in chains' should not be overlooked. It implies that the place of execution and the place where a corpse was 'hang'd in chains' were not identical. In 1717 a John Price was executed in Bunhill Fields and hung in chains near Holloway.[19] A felon could be hung at the scene of the crime: 'By [the middle of the 18th century] it had become usual for the court, in atrocious cases, to direct that the murderer's body should be hung upon a gibbet in chains, near the place where the fact was committed' or hanged on a highway: 'travellers approaching London...were offended, both in sight and in other ways, by the number of dingy, dead, iron-bound bodies that welcomed them'. In 1795 Lewis Avershaw was hanged at Kennington Common but 'was afterwards hanged in chains at Wimbledon Common and "for several months, thousands of the London populace passed their Sundays near the spot, as if consecrated by the remains of a hero"'.[20] Several months could extend to years. Another butcher, John Breeds, executed in 1742, was left hanging 'for many years...and when all the upper part of the skull had dropped away, the chain and frame were rescued by the Corporation of Rye.' If Cooper was similarly hanged twice, then he could have been hung from the gallows at Kennington Common and afterwards 'hang'd in chains' from a gibbet near Croham Hurst or at Smitham Bottom.

Was Cooper 'hang'd in chains' near Croham Hurst or at Smitham Bottom? A map provides the answer: John Senex published his map of Surrey in 1729 and Smitham Bottom is written alongside the road leading from Croydon to Leaden Cross (a name formerly used for what is now part of Coulsdon), but which refers not necessarily to the road from Croydon, now the Brighton Road, but to the bottom of the valley.[21]

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[19] Unless a different reference is give, this information in this paragraph comes from: Albert Hartshorne (1891), *Hanging in Chains*, London:T.F. Unwin – Price, p59; 'atrocious cases' p70; 'travellers' p74; Breeds pp64-5.

[20] V.A.C. Gatrell (1994), *The Hanging Tree,* Oxford, p33, quoting George Barrow, *Celebrated trials and remarkable cases of criminal jurisprudence from the earliest records to the year 1825* (6 vols. 1825) **V**, p368

[21] I have not used the original map, 'A Map of the County of Surrey, from an actual survey', but a reproduction: [William Desmond Ravenhill] *Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Map-Making in the County of Surrey, A Collection of Printed Maps Published Between the Years 1579-1823, with Introduction and Notes by William Ravenhill* (Harry Margery Lympe Castle Kent, 1974). Senex's map is in four sheets: Smitham Bottom is written on sheet 2 which goes only as far as Leaden Cross: it is not written on sheet 4, the southern continuation of sheet 2.

The lane near Croham Hurst was therefore in Smitham Bottom.[22]

Wilson's pamphlet must have the last word. The title abbreviated above continues, stating that Cooper, the butcher, 'was Executed at Smitham-Bottom, near Croydon, Surry, on Thursday, the 30th of August, 1750, for ROBBERY and MURDER, and now hangs in chains on the Gibbet where he suffered'.[23]

**Brian Lancaster**

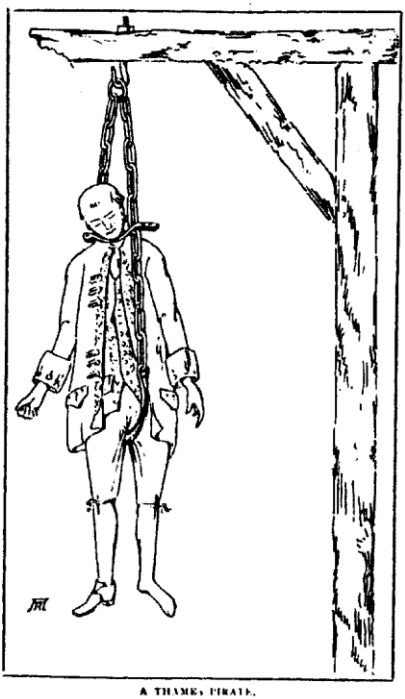

***Figure 1*** Hang'd in chains (from A. Hartshorne, ref. 19)

[22] The earliest newspaper reference to Smitham Bottom that I have found, from newspaper databases from 1600 to 1900 at the British Library, is 1728. 'Smithden' brought up no references.

[23] The same date is given in the website for Surrey executions but with Kennington Common as the place of execution: www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/surrey.html . There is also Martin Baggoley, *Surrey Executions: A Complete List of those Hanged in the County during the Nineteenth Century* (Stroud:Amberley, 2011) which I have not seen but which may be the source for the website or *vice versa*.

## From the Membership Secretary

Thanks to all who have paid your 2015 subscription. Any member who hasn't paid won't receive this Autumn mailing until you are up to date. You won't lose out because as soon as you pay we will send you anything you have missed.

Subscriptions for 2016 are due on 1 January. Our costs continue to increase, especially room hire and postage, so we are increasing our subscriptions to **£18 for Ordinary and Group Members, and £10 for Associate Members (additional members at the same address as an Ordinary Member, or those who are already Associate Members). Life Membership will be £175.**

CNHSS membership is great value for money. Members receive two mailings a year and we hold about 60 meetings and events each year. You won't be able to go to all these – I tried when I was President and achieved about 60%!

If you pay by Standing Order, please amend it for the new rate. If you would like to pay by Standing Order, please request a form and I won't have to send you a reminder if you forget to pay.

**Jane McLauchlin**

## Book Review

*An Early 20th Century Tram Journey from Norbury to Streatham* by David Clark, (Local History Publications 2015)

Of the number of books of old photographs there seems to be no end. This one by David Clark breaks the mould for, instead of just arranging them chronologically, he takes the reader on an imagined tram journey from London Road on the southern boundary of Norbury to the tram depot at Streatham. The journey need not be just imaginary as readers might take one or more maps with them, preferably the old Ordnance Survey ones such as are published by Alan Godfrey Maps, and then the reader can note all the changes that have happened since the photographs were taken. The book has two pictures a page, including an architect's drawing, each with several lines of text, and there are 41 such pages, so there is much to note. We see country lanes, flooded roads, imposing villas, trams, horse-drawn carriages, public houses, private schools, cinemas, wooden cottages, and churches. A curious building shown on page 23 is the Beehive Coffee Tavern next to the Pied Bull public house. Now used as offices, it recalls the importance of the 19th century teetotal movement. Not all buildings have disappeared or changed beyond recognition. The Thrale Alms Houses in Streatham, pictured on page 36, remain but have been refurbished and extended to provide rental accommodation. This is one of the changes that the Streatham Society has monitored.

The book has much to recommend it. Published by John Brown's Local History Publications it is priced £4 or £5 p&p. Cheques should be made out to the Streatham Society and sent to J. Harris, 125 Thornlaw Road, West Norwood, SE27 0SQ or by hand, first ringing Brian Bloice on 020 8764 8314 and giving your address.

**Brian Lancaster**

## Wandle — September

The Heritage Lottery-funded Living Wandle Landscape Partnership has collated over 70 events offered by dedicated Wandle Valley organisations. The events are diverse; from walks, heritage, sports, music, art, a photography competition and much more.

September also sees the month-long Totally Thames Festival and, on the 27th, World Rivers Day. The Living Wandle team are marking the day by requesting people to join them on a Wandle Trail Relay, join them for all or part. To pledge a mile or two contact LivingWandle@wandsworth.gov.uk.

For a copy of the leaflet, visit the Wandle Valley Regional Park web page www.wandlevalleypark.co.uk/Projects/River-Celebration

To see the Living Wandle team's comprehensive quarterly newsletter go to www.wandlevalleypark.co.uk/Projects/Living-Wandle or, to get a copy sent to you, email LivingWandle@wandsworth.gov.uk .

## 100 years ago

A list of the Society's members revised to January 1915 includes 124 persons, the majority resident in Croydon and adjoining areas, but with others from Beckenham, Carshalton, Caterham, Chipstead, Kingston-on-Thames, Nutfield, Seaton (Devon), Streatham, Wallington, Westminster and Woldingham. Only two individuals, W.J. Blake and Baldwin Latham, are described as original or Founder members. The President was N.F. Robarts F.G.S., while Miss Grace Bigby B.Sc., F.L.S. was still the Honorary Secretary and Miss M.S. Elliott B.A. was a member of the Society's Council. The membership of 124 was one higher than that in 1914 and was maintained during the year despite two deaths and 15 persons leaving the area and resigning. It is noteworthy that of the 17 individuals elected during the year 10 were ladies.

The various Sectional Committees of the Society were *Anthropological and Archaeological*, *Botanical*, *Editorial*, *Geological*, *Meteorological*, *Microscopical*, *Photographic*, *Regional Survey*, *Sociological* and *Zoological*.

The effect of war conditions was felt throughout the year and the *Zoological* and *Microscopical* sections held no meetings. Others either attended excursions of other societies or only held summer outdoor meetings. There were fewer persons working on *Regional Survey* and although the *Botanical* section did considerable work on Dr Parsons' herbarium no member had come forward to sort and classify the non-flowering plants.

"Thanks to the untiring zeal of the Secretary of the Section, the meteorological work has been uninterrupted."
The meteorological reports of F. Campbell-Bayard, F.R.Met.Soc., include notes of about one page per month with considerable detail. From the January notes we learn that:
"The month has been very unhealthy, influenza, coughs and colds being very prevalent. Snow fell on the ... 22nd ... and did not disappear finally till the 31st. ... The depth varied from 2 to 3 in. at Byfleet [Observer - Rev. G.E. Money] to between 15 to 18 in. at Firs Road, Upper Kenley [Observer - E. Surrey Water Co.].
There were falls of 8 to 9 in. at Croydon (Avondale Road) [Observer - Dr. G.J. Hinde] and 10 to 12 in. at ... Purley (Riddlesdown Road) [Observer - J.E. Clark]."

One special committee, set up for the war effort, had only a short existence:
"Following upon the receipt from the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries of a letter dated March 13th, 1915, asking for the assistance of Natural History Societies in the collection and cultivation of medicinal plants, in order to meet the possible shortage in supplies owing to the war, a meeting was held and a committee was formed to consider in what way this Society could assist. This led to correspondence with the Board, by whom the matter was passed on to the Agricultural Organisation Society, and one of the members met and corresponded with their Botanical Adviser, Mr. F. Escombe, who was appointed to investigate. As a result, Mr. Escombe reported to his Society that the whole business proposed was commercially unsound and that his Society could not concern itself further. This was on October 20th. At the same time he expressed thanks for the interest taken and for information obtained."

On the evening of September 21st 1915 there were four short talks. One of these, published *in extenso* in Proceedings, was delivered by E. A. Martin F.G.S. on *Gingko biloba* and entitled *The Maidenhair Tree - A Living Fossil.* Interestingly, Martin quoted from the book *Ancient Plants* by Marie C. Stopes D.Sc. This had been published in 1910, a product of her work as a palaeobotanist.

A half-day joint excursion with the Geologist's Association and the Geological Field Club of South-Western Polytechnic was made to Marden Park on May 8th 1915. The conductor was W. Whitaker F.R.S., F.G.S. and the party visited an outlier of the Blackheath Beds at Tandridge Hill. C. C. Fagg provided a sketch map (Figure 2) and this, with photographs of a pit and a section taken by C.C. Fagg and N.F. Robarts F.G.S. respectively, are in our Proceedings.

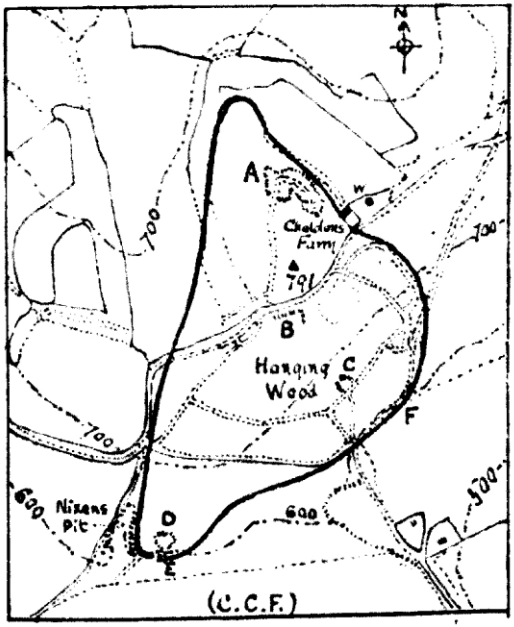


***Figure 2*** - Plan by C.C. Fagg of an outlier of Blackheath Beds at Tandridge Hill. The letters A to D mark pits that had been dug in recent years.

[*Proceedings of the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society*, Volume **VIII**, part 2, pp. xxxvii - lxxix and additional items]

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