

Why a Sherlock Holmes story?

My 'February' story was inspired by a wonderful photo of Frederick Leach (David Parr's employer) and his assembled workers taken in 1882 on a day out to Clayhithe. The men are arranged in rows, like a college photo.

(Clayhithe is a hamlet which sits next to the banks of the river Cam, approximately five miles North-North-East from the centre of Cambridge. Its pub, the aptly named 'The Bridge', has long attracted boatmen and rowers from the city and the university.)

What makes the photo so appealing is the array of hats worn by the men.

One man stands out from all the others because of his physique and his hat. The man is tall, has a Holmesian quality, and, most importantly, is the only one wearing a deerstalker. The wearer is none other than David Parr.

What more inspiration does a writer need?

Research revealed that both men were born in 1854. What were the chances! David Parr was born on 19th July 1854 and in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'His Last Bow', set in 1914, Sherlock Holmes is described as sixty years of age. His birthday is 6th January.

What's more, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle never specified where Holmes studied. There are references to "...the university..." in 'The Gloria Scott', 'The Musgrave Ritual', and the 'The Adventure of the Three Students', although the question of which one Holmes attended is open to debate. According to William S. Baring-Gould, in his 'Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street' (published in 1962), Holmes attended both based on textual evidence. Whereas Dorothy L. Sayers suggested in her 'Unpopular Opinions' (published in 1946) he was a chemistry student at Sidney Sussex, Cambridge. However, when considering the college's high-achieving alumni, one might deduce that it only excelled at developing scientists post 1900s.

We do know that, in 1873, G. F. Bodley was commissioned by Queens' College, Cambridge, to devise a new decorative scheme for its Old Hall. He, in turn, sub-contracted Frederick Leach to execute his design. The work was completed in 1875 and can still be seen today, restored and re-gilded. Given that David Parr and Sherlock Holmes would both have been 19 years of age when the work was commenced and Parr was in Leach's employ, it is possible that they could have met.

'Vamberry the Wine Merchant'



Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson by Sidney Paget

Strand Magazine

In some of his stories, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle eluded to other Sherlock Holmes mysteries. An example being the 'Giant Rat of Sumatra', which is mentioned in 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (written in 1924).

'...Matilda Briggs was not the name of a young woman, Watson," said Holmes in a reminiscent voice. "It was a ship which is associated with the giant rat of Sumatra, a story for which the world is not yet prepared...'

'Vamberry the Wine Merchant' is one such tale. It is mentioned in 'The Musgrave Ritual', in an illuminating scene, which commences in the second paragraph.

"...One winter's night, as we sat together by the fire, I ventured to suggest to him that, as he had finished pasting extracts into his commonplace book, he might employ the next two hours in making our room a little more habitable. He could not deny the justice of my request, so with a rather rueful face he went off to his bedroom, from which he returned presently pulling a large tin box behind him. This he placed in the middle of the floor, and, squatting down upon a stool in front of it, he threw back the lid. I could see it was already a third full of bundles of paper tied up with red tape into separate packages.

“There are cases enough here, Watson,” said, he, looking at me with mischievous eyes. “I think that if you knew all that I had in this box you would ask me to pull some out instead of putting others in.”

“These are the records of your early work, then?” I asked. “I have often wished that I had notes of those cases.”

“Yes, my boy, these were all done prematurely before my biographer had come to glorify me.” He lifted bundle after bundle in a tender, caressing sort of way.

“They are not all successes, Watson,” said he. “But there are some pretty little problems among them. Here’s the record of the Tarleton murders, and the case of Vamberry, the wine merchant, and the adventure of the old Russian woman, and the singular affair of the aluminium crutch, as well as a full account of Ricoletti of the club-foot, and his abominable wife...”

‘Vamberry the Wine Merchant’ being a tale which pre-dates Dr. Watson allowed for David Parr to become a proto-Watson. As mentioned above, I could place both Holmes and Parr at a Cambridge college, thereby I had the framework for a story.

Talking to a colleague, who went to a Cambridge college, he mentioned that the bedders often know more about what is going on at the college than staff and students alike. And, more importantly, that the bottles of wine at his college had bespoke labels. I suspect this *may* be a 20th or 21st century introduction so please forgive this little anachronism on which my plot hangs. Despite much research, I didn’t investigate this detail too hard as sometimes it’s better not to know – I didn’t want to spoil the story for myself.

Fingerprints

The use of fingerprints as a forensic tool was adopted by Scotland Yard in 1901, nearly three decades after my story, even though men of science and learning had long known of their potential as a means for identification for over a century. Therefore, I could imagine the open-minded Sherlock Holmes, who was interested in scientific developments, using them to aid his deductions. Of course, as indicated by my story, it would have met with resistance.

It took a dispute between two British gentlemen to bring the forensic use of fingerprints to wider attention.

Henry Faulds, a Scottish surgeon who worked in Japan for several years and had accompanied the American archaeologist Edward S. Morse to an archaeological dig, noticed delicate impressions left in ancient clay fragments. Examining his own fingertips and those of friends, he became convinced that the pattern of ridges was unique to individuals.

Shortly after, when his hospital was broken into, the local police arrested a member of staff whom Faulds believed to be innocent. He compared the fingerprints left behind at the

crime scene to those of the suspect and found them to be different. On the strength of this evidence the police agreed to release the suspect.

On the back of his success, he sought the help of his friend Charles Darwin so they might promote fingerprint identification. Darwin declined but passed Faulds' letter on to his half-cousin Francis Galton, who, in turn, forwarded the letter to the Anthropological Society of London – both Darwin * and Galton were Cambridge graduates, which, in respect of my story, makes it plausible that Galton also wrote to a Cambridge Society where it might have come to the attention of Sherlock Holmes.

Galton wrote about the technique for identifying common patterns in fingerprints and devised a classification system, which is still in use today.

As a result, he sparked controversy as to who invented modern forensic fingerprinting. Faulds' first paper on the subject was published in the scientific journal 'Nature' in 1880.

The following month, Sir William Herschel*, a British civil servant based in India, wrote to 'Nature' saying that he had been using fingerprints to identify criminals since 1860. However, Herschel did not mention their potential for forensic use. This prompted Faulds to conduct a bitter rivalry with Herschel for years. In 1894, he demanded proof that Herschel had used fingerprints for his official work, which Herschel duly provided. Even so, their rivalry continued until Herschel's death in 1917.

(* Herschel was the son of Sir John Herschel, a graduate of St. John's College, Cambridge and a polymath who was buried at Westminster Abbey. And, his grandfather was the German born William Herschel who studied astronomy with his sister, Caroline and accepted the office of King's Astronomer to George III. Caroline assisted her brother in his work and went onto make many discoveries in her own right.)

Francis Galton never acknowledged that the original idea was not his.

Only when the French scientist Paul-Jean Coulier developed a method for transferring latent fingerprints from surfaces to paper did Scotland Yard commence fingerprinting individuals so they might identify criminals.

The above is a potted history of using fingerprints for identification. In fact, it stretches much further back. In advanced ancient cultures, particularly in Babylon and China, fingerprints were used for authenticating contracts.

I work with archaeologists and often see an unmistakable fingerprint left in a pottery sherd. Only last week a colleague gathered some interesting pieces to show a client, including a collection of roof tiles which showed patterns left by their makers. It was common practice for the makers to run their fingers over the soft surface of the wet clay using a pre-agreed pattern, by which their output could be identified, and they were paid accordingly. Whilst my second example doesn't relate directly to fingerprints, it, nevertheless, demonstrates there has always been a need for a means of identification.

* There is also a Darwin/Frederick Leach connection. Maud Darwin (pictured and quoted below) was the wife of George Darwin, the University of Cambridge astronomer, whose father was the naturalist Charles Darwin. George Darwin bought *Newnham Grange*, Cambridge in 1885. Their home features in his daughter Gwen Raverat's 'Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood' (1952) and his other daughter Margaret Keynes' 'House by the River: Newnham Grange to Darwin College' (1976).



Lady George Darwin – Cecilia Beaux (1889)

From Gwen Raverat's 'Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood'

"Mr Leach is a man who has a great deal of taste and people send all over England for him to do their houses..." Maud Darwin, 1885

Bernard Quaritch (1819 – 1899)



Unknown photographer - Bernard Quaritch Ltd.

Those of you who read my 'January' story, 'Scrolls, Peacock Feathers & Rivalry', may have spotted that the character 'Mr Conrad' was based on the unequalled antiquarian books and rare manuscripts seller Bernard Quaritch.

Quaritch learnt his trade both in Germany and in London, before setting up his own business in 1847, at the age of 28, just off Leicester Square. His business is still active today, albeit in another part of London.

Prime ministers and Prince Louis Lucien Bonaparte (Napoleon's nephew) were amongst his eminent clients, as well as American millionaires and William Morris whom he helped to stock their libraries.

Emery Walker is rightly credited with helping William Morris to set up his Kelmscott Press. Bernard Quaritch also provided invaluable advice and support, and, for some publications, provided the means for distribution.

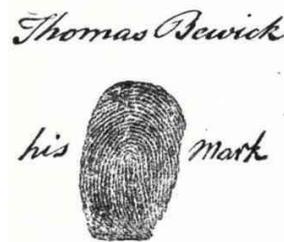
Quaritch came up when I researched my 'January' story and again when researching my 'February' story, suggesting he was the 'go-to man' of Victorian London.

This example is taken from the section on 'Thomas Bewick' in William J. Herschel's 'The Origin of Finger-Printing':

'...Of modern cases the first known is that of Thomas Bewick. He was a wood-engraver, as well as an author, and had a fancy for engraving his finger-mark. He printed, as far as I can ascertain, only three specimens, by way of ornament to his books.

1. 1809. 'British Birds', p. 190. The impression of the finger appears as if obliterating a small scene [Pg 33] of a cottage, trees, and a rider, but the paper between the lines of the finger is almost all clean.

2. 1818. The 'Receipt'; of which, by **Mr. Quaritch's** favour, I possess one. This is, beyond all possibility of doubt, quite free from any tooling. How it was transferred to paper in those days (of which there is an indication) I am unable to say, but for his purposes it was an original 'finger-print' of Thomas Bewick. Even the fine half-tone process of this facsimile cannot reproduce its delicacy.



3. 1826. Memorial Edition of Bewick's Works, 1885, on the last page of the last volume, under a letter dated 1826, in which he rates someone for copying his woodcuts. When I saw it at the British Museum some years ago, I thought it showed toolwork.

These three seem to be all the specimens now available, and they are from three different fingers, of which two are certified to be his own.

Gathering that **Mr. Quaritch** was exceptionally [Pg 34] familiar with Bewick's life, I told him that I wished to leave no stone unturned to do ample justice to him, if he was known to have done anything more than appears above. **Mr. Quaritch** took the matter up very kindly, and finally informed me that he had been unable to trace any writing of Bewick's concerning these prints. There seems, therefore, no evidence that he ever took impressions of any finger but his own. Now it is true that no one of observant habits, and least of all an engraver, could fail to perceive the peculiarities of his own finger. The brick-makers of Babylon and Egypt, and every printer since fingers were dirtied by printer's ink, must have noticed them. But it is a long step from that to a study of other men's marks, with a view to identification. What Bewick certainly did do might easily have led him to such a study, but it looks as if he was satisfied with recognizing his own mark.

Remembering, as I have already said, how one of his marks had struck my fancy as a boy, I am disposed to believe that, all unwittingly, I was guided to seize upon a thread which Bewick had let fall...'

Location, Location, Location

Sir Scrope (pronounced Scroop) meets his end on the Chelsea Embankment. Why that location? Because it had been recently opened – the series of new Embankments along the shores of the Thames reclaimed land for an increasing population, who needed improved sewage and transport systems and a means for dealing with all the tributaries which fed into the Thames.



An impromptu dance – a scene on the Chelsea Embankment, by Frederick Brown, 1883

Private collection

The location is also a nod to Frederick Leach (& David Parr), who were commissioned by William Morris to execute his designs for the interior of Swan House, at no. 17 Chelsea Embankment, completed in 1876. Its architect was Richard Norman Shaw.



Swan House, no. 17 Chelsea Embankment – circa 1885

As Sherlock Holmes's brother, Mycroft, has an unspecified role in the British government and "...Occasionally he *is* the British government [...] the most indispensable man in the country", for the purposes of my 'February' story, I could place him at the Foreign Office. I visited last year and could imagine him occupying one of the corner offices until a crisis in another department called him away again.



The Foreign Office - author's own photo

Lastly...

A QUESTION OF STYLE etc.

I researched my 'February' story by re-reading some of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes adventures. Conan Doyle uses 'sir' when writing dialogue – with a lower case 's'. He only uses 'Sir' if the gentleman is an actual 'Sir'. I not only followed his convention when writing my 'February' story but for my 'January' story too as they are set in the same era.

Researching William Morris, I learnt that, when he became politically active, promoting the socialist cause, he started addressing others as 'comrade'. Convention would dictate that a capital 'C' ought to be used in dialogue when another character is addressed.

I went back to J. W. Mackail's biography of William Morris, published only three years after his passing. Whilst a good number of letters are published in full, I didn't find one in which Morris refers to anyone as 'comrade'.

Given that socialism promotes equality, it struck me that William Morris would deem his address of comrade to be with a lower case 'c'.

In respect of 'January's Afterword and my suggestion that William Morris was sure to have taken his daughters to see the Ghent Altarpiece, during their stay in Bruges, as it was only a short train ride away, a reader asked if trains were even in operation at that time.

I can confirm that the first railway in continental Europe was opened between Brussels and Mechelen in 1835, and, by 1840, Ostend, Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Mechelen, Brussels and Leuven were all connected.

Otherwise, I can only apologise for the odd typo and missed word etc. which weren't spotted before submission.