

The Tale of James Calcutt and James Demsey: A Story of Revenge and Tragedy

James Calcutt, born in 1792 in Ireland, spent over six decades brewing after starting at age 14 until his death in Cobourg. Calcutt's Mountmellick-based brewery business was thriving, leading him down a path to immense prosperity. However, circumstances beyond his control forced him to emigrate. Calcutt left his home country due to the "whiteboys," a group that had taken over Ireland. During a traditional 'Orangeman' ceremony, Calcutt did not attend, resulting in a Parish Priest denouncing him from the altar of the RC Chapel. The leader of the "whiteboys," James Demsey, also known as 'Phil Cassidy,' was responsible for driving Calcutt out of Ireland. Calcutt fled his native land and decided to start anew in Canada.

James Demsey's attempt to rid Ireland of Calcutt is a story of vengeance and heartbreak. After successfully forcing Calcutt out of Ireland, Demsey refused to let the matter rest. He boarded the William IV in hopes of purchasing land near the lakeshore in Cobourg to complete his mission. However, fate had other plans. The boat crashed while trying to avoid a dangerous wharf, and two passengers fell overboard. The following morning, a body was discovered on Calcutt's land, identified as James Demsey. The coincidence of Demsey's death and the location of his body almost seems like an urban legend. It is a tragedy that Demsey's quest for revenge ended in such a way, and a reminder that violence and revenge often lead to further tragedy.

Further Reading:

Calcutt Family – **Archival Folder** or more articles online in the **Our Ontario database**:

- James Calcutt - [Results: Cobourg Images \(ourontario.ca\)](#)
- Obituary for James Calcutt - [0000485922T.PDF \(ourontario.ca\)](#)
- Article regarding the death of James Calcutt - [0000485941T.PDF \(ourontario.ca\)](#)
- Lakehurst: brewery owner built the earliest brick house in Cobourg - [0000479681T.PDF \(ourontario.ca\)](#)



HERITAGE



Calcutt's revenge

If you wanted to illustrate the benefits of immigration to Canada in a melodrama, you couldn't improve very much on what actually happened to Cobourg's James Calcutt.

James Calcutt was a Protestant brewmaster born in Mountmellick, Ireland, in 1792. When troubles erupted in his district over the erection of some kind of Protestant commemorative Orange-poles in the early 1830s, James was summoned by the authorities to be present at their removal. Why he had to be there, we do not know. Suffice it to say that he refused to do so on the grounds that, though Protestant, he wasn't a member of the Orange Order.

This didn't satisfy the local Catholic priest, who twice called for James's attendance, only to be twice refused — whereupon the priest denounced him officially from the pulpit of the local church.

This was very serious and meant open season on James and his brewery. Over the next few months, Catholic "white-boys" or "white-feet" boys attacked the brewery's premises, wagons and some of his employees. They even killed some of the company horses. The authorities seemed powerless to stop the rampage, and eventually James determined to emigrate to Canada.

On October 1, 1832, the *Cobourg Star* hailed the arrival of the Calcutt family on the steamer *William IV*, prophesying that Cobourg would soon revel in its new brewery and distillery. Calcutt quickly purchased the lot bounded

by Hibernia, Durham and Orr streets and the lake front, and commenced a very profitable business.

In Ireland, the white-boys' depredations continued and escalated almost to the point of murder or, as they called it, assassination. The foremost of James's persecutors, however, got cold feet finally and informed on his fellow conspirators. They were promptly rounded up. To escape the rough justice of the other members of the secret society, he too decided to escape to a comfortable anonymity in North America.

His name seems to have been James Demsey, though later versions of the story pointedly gave him the fictitious name Phil Cassidy. We do not know why. Uncannily, of all places in the colonies, he too arrived off Cobourg, also via the steamer *William IV*, in early October of 1832.

According to one story, James learned of his arrival ahead of time from a friend, though just how or to what purpose is unclear.

At any rate, the steamer tied up to the west side of the town wharf — at about where the Coast Guard cutter docks now — in the face of a growing southeasterly gale. When the passengers for Cobourg had disembarked, the steamer

attempted to back away from the pier and turn its bow southeast to head out into the lake. At this point, wallowing somewhat in the trough of one wave, it was hit on its forequarter by another, which swept over the ship, washing two men overboard who had been standing in the as-yet-unsecured gangway.

One was an unfortunate member of the crew, but the other was James Calcutt's mortal enemy, James Demsey.

The crew tried to launch a lifeboat, and a shore party struggled to launch a rescue of some sort, but both were unsuccessful. The unlucky crew member was fished from the open lake that day, but the other body turned up only the next morning, when it was found, battered and broken by the waves, half-buried in the sand of James Calcutt's own beach.

"He fled — for the life his treach'ry prolonged
From a hundred hands was in danger.

He was cast at the feet of the man he had wronged
As tho' Heav'n were the man's avenger..."

So sang the *Cobourg Star's* poet F.P. Rubidge in its next edition. Where the body landed has long been a matter of dispute, as James

Calcutt had two Cobourg lakeside properties. The newspaper report says only that it was "a half-mile" from the wharf. The brewery's location fits that, but then so does the other Calcutt home which is now known as The Breakers at the foot of Green Street.

Frankly, it seems a shame to have to decide which location is the more likely, since both have such excellent poetic merit. Early accounts of the story stress the fact that James Calcutt's home was one chain (19.8 metres or 66 feet) away from the beach, which is impossible for the brewery location — that is, if we assume that the first Calcutt home was on the site of the later Lakehurst, which he built on the brewery site on Durham Street.

On the other hand, it now seems likely that the famous Captain Boswell owned The Breakers until 1840. Our adventure is very firmly dated by the *Cobourg Star*, so that probably decides the issue. It is true that the owner and occupier of the house were not always the same back then, but it seems likely — given the way the story was covered in the press — that James's staying in a rented house would have found mention elsewhere.

For what it's worth, there is also the southeast gale to take into account. One would think this would tend to blow the body toward the west, but this is by no means conclusive.

I prefer to leave the last word to the local poet:

"On the sands of the shore a bloated corpse

He lay where the waves had thrown him...

Why missed th' Atlantic shark his prey?

Why wander'd he thither to perish?

To yield, in the judgment which snatched him away

A warning for us to cherish."

Off to camp

Eighteen-year-old Ross Quigley of Cobourg has accepted an invitation from the New York Rangers' organization to attend a four-day rookie camp in Kitchener beginning August 25.

He will be one of 70 hopefuls hand-picked from all the province at the sessions. If he impresses officials, he will be invited back to the Kitchener junior 'A' training camp late in September.

Kitchener is the new home of the old Guelph club. Other teams in the OHA junior 'A' setup for the coming season are Peterborough TPT Petes, Montreal Canadiens, St. Catharines Black Hawks, Niagara Falls Flyers, Hamilton Red Wings, Oshawa Generals and Toronto Marlboros.

Ross was interviewed Sunday at his home by Les Moore of Whitby, the same scout who recommended Leonard Bazay, another Cobourg boy, one year ago. Bazay was one of Guelph's regular defencemen last winter.

Quigley, with two seasons of junior hockey left, played centre for Cobourg's junior 'C' squad in 1962-63.

Although he was not a high goal scorer, he nevertheless was one of their leading performers because of his hustle, skating and checking.

The 155-pounder packs a hart shot in his arsenal too.

Now a forward, Quigley was a fine goaltender at one stage of his hockey development (Bantam and Midget days.)

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COBOURG:
PAST UNDERSTANDING



Colin Caldwell



localnews

■ WEST STUDENTS DISPLAY WRITING TALENTS

The mysterious follower

DESAREE ROSSKOPF
CDCI West student

COBOURG — Had you been walking down King Street sometime after Aug. 1, 1832, you might have happened upon a man by the name of James Calcutt. Upon first glance James Calcutt would look like an ordinary business man who had a considerable cash capital and beautiful property. Perhaps you might have stopped him for a chat about his brewery or his family,

but nothing deeper than that and certainly not about his life before he came to Cobourg.

Calcutt's arrival from Ireland was recognized by the Cobourg Daily Star on Aug. 1, 1832, and since his arrival, he became one of the most respected and beloved individuals in Cobourg. He was part of the town's architects and directors of Cobourg's Destiny as well as a fantastic brewer and a considerable cash capital that allowed him to buy a beautiful piece

of property fronting Lake Ontario that came to be known as 'Calcutt's Property.'

On this property, Calcutt built a mansion which was one of the first brick buildings erected in Cobourg, a brewery, distillery, malt houses and kilns, office, workshops, and a steam flour mill. From his distillery, Calcutt produced numerous products including "Calcutt's Malt" and "Calcutt's Ale". Since Calcutt was so well respected it is not surprising that he later found himself occupying a seat on the Board of Police and afterward a seat in the first town council. Calcutt was also one of the first to begin paying his workers with cash every Saturday.

Few people knew why Calcutt really emigrated to Cobourg from Ireland where he was born and lived for 40 years of his life. There Calcutt began brewing at the age of 14, and continued to do so for over 60 years until he finally died in Cobourg. Calcutt's brewing industry earned him a ride on the road to wealth (this was the reason he came with such a high cash capital).

However, Calcutt was forced to hastily emigrate from Ireland after Ireland had been taken over by a band of "whiteboys" during an Orangeman ceremony around their honored "Pole" that Calcutt refused to attend. After this, Calcutt was denounced

by a parish priest from the altar of the RC Chapel and the leader of the "Whiteboys" named James Demsey, referred to as Phil Cassidy by the newspapers, took personal responsibility of driving Calcutt from his native land. Calcutt fled to Canada where he made his home in Cobourg.

One would think that Calcutt's emigration to Canada would have appeased James Demsey enough, but Demsey did not leave well enough alone, eventually costing him something more precious than anything that could be gained by murdering Calcutt. Demsey boarded the William IV, the same ship that Calcutt had taken to Cobourg, and followed him to Cobourg. His intentions were to finish off what he considered to be his duties in finishing off Calcutt. Though it is beginning to look grim for Calcutt, in a turn of events that local history teacher at CDCI West Christopher Robins calls 'the most ironic part,' was a newspaper article printed on Nov. 14, 1832 telling of Demsey's death. According to the article in the Cobourg Daily Star, it was reported that Demsey was on his way to Cobourg to buy land near the lakeshore and to make plans for Calcutt's assassination.

However, almost as if this very town wished to protect such a beloved individual, tragedy struck. During this period of time, Cobourg's harbor did not exist and as

William IV came to shore, it was forced to avoid a dangerous wharf (a small pier) and while backing up, the boat crashed, sending two passengers overboard and into the water.

One of these passengers was Phil Cassidy otherwise known as James Demsey.

The next morning a body was discovered by Mrs. Calcutt on the shoreline of one of Calcutt's properties half a mile from the wharf. The body was identified as that of Phil Cassidy's.

Whether Calcutt was afraid of the possibility of this very incident happening, or just being a very shady businessman, Calcutt had tunnels in all his homes. The questions of these tunnels have yet to be answered - but the buildings were also used as barracks during the war of 1812 and it is possible they were installed during that time.

Which poses questions to the true use of these tunnels and the buildings that hold them. Calcutt died on May 18, 1869 according to his death notice that was placed in the Cobourg Daily Star's May 20 edition. It read - "In this town, on Tuesday last, 18th, James Calcutt...one of the first settlers and most respected citizens of Cobourg, aged 77 years." Calcutt died as a well respected, deeply loved, and successful individual and as the root of one of Cobourg's most ironic and greatest mysteries.

BAA

Business Achievement Awards 2012

The Town of Cobourg and The Northumberland Central Chamber of Commerce present
The 2011 Business Achievement Awards
nominations are now being accepted
deadline for nominations is Friday, January 13th, 2012

This year's award categories are:

- AGRIBUSINESS
- COMMUNICATIONS & TECHNOLOGY
- EMERGING BUSINESS
- HEALTH & WELLNESS SECTOR

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