

# A woman, a brawl, and a bloody death

The little township of Henderson was abuzz with speculation on the morning of October 14, 1902.

Its occupants awoke to the news that a man's body had been found lying in a pool of blood, alone in a paddock.

Police soon established the identity of the deceased.

He was Jeremiah Driscoll – a 35-year-old gumdigger who'd lived at Don Buck's camp, a short distance from where he gasped his last breath.

The camp was notorious as a den of iniquity and was home to numerous ex-convicts employed by its owner Francisco Rodrigues "Don Buck" Figueira. Many had arrived there straight from Mt Eden prison after being given free passage out west and the promise of work and accommodation.

Driscoll was typical – a drifter who'd spent much of his adult life in and out of trouble – no stranger to jail or violence.

The full extent of his criminal past is unclear but records show a Jeremiah Driscoll up before the courts numerous times over a 20-year period charged with vagrancy, larceny, robbery, assault and drunkenness in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Matthew Gray goes grave-hunting out west.



It is no surprise to learn that he appeared in court on the day before his death fully expecting to receive a short custodial sentence on a charge of bad language.

So he was no doubt in high spirits when the magistrate dismissed the case and let him walk free.

Driscoll headed back west to share the news with friends, including Alice Hartley – a woman he'd been living with for a number of months.

Alice was not expecting to see him so soon and had already switched her romantic attentions to a man named John Baxter.

Both were in a hotel at 10pm on the evening of Driscoll's return when Alice made her new arrangements known. Driscoll was outraged and threatened both parties with violence. Baxter responded by throwing him out of the pub.

Witnesses told police about the altercation after Driscoll's corpse was located a few hours later and Baxter soon found himself in court

facing a charge of murder.

He said Driscoll had made good on his earlier threats by attacking him with an axe later in the evening.

Baxter said he'd punched Driscoll directly in the face – a powerful blow that dropped his assailant and ultimately resulted in death.

The jury had its doubts over the accused's version of events and spent five hours deliberating over his fate.

But no one could agree on a verdict and a second trial was held a few weeks later.

The new jurors took just five minutes to find Baxter not guilty of a lesser manslaughter charge, saying he'd used reasonable force to protect himself from harm.

Baxter was let loose and the case was laid to rest.

Driscoll was buried at Waikumete Cemetery.

**• What about other players in the story? An Alice Hartley of Henderson Valley appeared before the courts in 1915 aged 49 on charges of prostitution and breaking a prohibition order. The arresting police officers said she'd been seen "accosting" seven men in Cook St and doing "a shocking good trade". Email matthew gray at edwl@snl.co.nz if you know what became of her or John Baxter.**



**Grave hunt:** Waikumete chapel and cemetery attendant Leigh Harder uses a map to locate the unmarked grave of Jeremiah Driscoll.

Photo: MATTHEW GRAY