

# Did Leather Apron Really Exist?

By Paul Begg

“Leather Apron” was probably the most prominent figure in the early days of the Whitechapel murders investigation. He was a mysterious and unpleasant character who extorted money from the local prostitutes, apparently by wielding a knife and threatening to rip them if they failed to pay up. He was the subject of lurid press reports, mainly in *The Star* newspaper, and his name became so well-known that he was the title character in one of the earliest pieces of Ripper literature, Samuel E. Hudson’s *Leather Apron or the Horrors of Whitechapel*, published in December 1888.<sup>1</sup>

But did “Leather Apron” really exist?

At first glance it would seem that this is a silly question because we have some police reports making unequivocal statements that “Leather Apron” not only existed but that he was a man named John Pizer.

The earliest of these reports and the one most often quoted was by Inspector Joseph Helson and dated 7 September 1888. He wrote:

*The inquiry has revealed the fact that a man named Jack Pizer, alias Leather Apron, has, for some considerable period been in the habit of ill-using prostitutes in this, and other parts of the Metropolis, and careful search has been, and is continued to be made to find this man in order that his movements may be accounted for on the night in question, although at present there is no evidence whatsoever against him.*

This report doesn’t leave much room to doubt that Jack Pizer was “Leather Apron”, but what is interesting is that Helson says that this man’s ill-use of prostitutes was “revealed” by “the inquiry”. To labour this point a little, what Helson is saying is that the inquiry into the murder of Mary Ann Nichols revealed that Jack Pizer, alias Leather Apron, had been ill-using prostitutes. In other words, prior to the inquiry into the murder of Nichols the activities of Jack Pizer were unknown.

But let’s look at another report, this time by Inspector Abberline and written on 19 September 1888, in which he stated:

*In the course of our inquiries amongst the numerous women of the same class as the deceased it was ascertained that a feeling of terror existed against a man known as Leather Apron who it appeared have for a considerable time past been levying blackmail and ill-using them if his demands were not complied with although there was no evidence to connect him with the murder. It was however thought desirable to find him and interrogate him as to his movements on the night in question...*

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson, Samuel E, *Leather Apron or the Horrors of Whitechapel*, London. Philadelphia, Town Printing House, 1888.



Inspector Frederick Abberline

This report is particularly interesting because it seems to tell us a few things which raise some questions. Abberline says:

*'In the course of our inquiries amongst the numerous women of the same class as the deceased...*

Once again we are being told that it was during their inquiries among the prostitutes following the murder of Nichols that the police learned that a feeling of terror existed against a man called "Leather Apron".

Now, there had been two previous murders – Emma Smith and Martha Tabram – but it would appear that police inquiries into those deaths had not turned up the name of "Leather Apron".

And this seems to be confirmed by the press. *The Star*, on 5 September 1888, reporting: *"Ever since the last murder the name "Leather Apron" has been falling repeatedly on the ears of the reporters."*

The "last murder" was the murder of Nichols, so it would seem that journalists didn't hear about "Leather Apron" until after the murder of Nichols either.

So, immediately after the murder of Mary Nichols the press and police alike began hearing stories about a man nicknamed "Leather Apron". There doesn't seem to be any evidence that either had heard of "Leather Apron" prior to that time. In particular "Leather Apron" had not surfaced during inquiries into the murders of Smith or Tabram. And the police and press learned about "Leather Apron" from the local prostitutes.

But who identified "Leather Apron" as John Pizer?

Well, it's difficult to say because there is no record of John Pizer having been confronted with any of the prostitutes who had described "Leather Apron", nor is there any newspaper report of any prostitute identifying or naming "Leather Apron" as John Pizer – for example, amid all the luridness of *The Star's* reports, there is not so much as a hint that "Leather Apron's" real name was known.

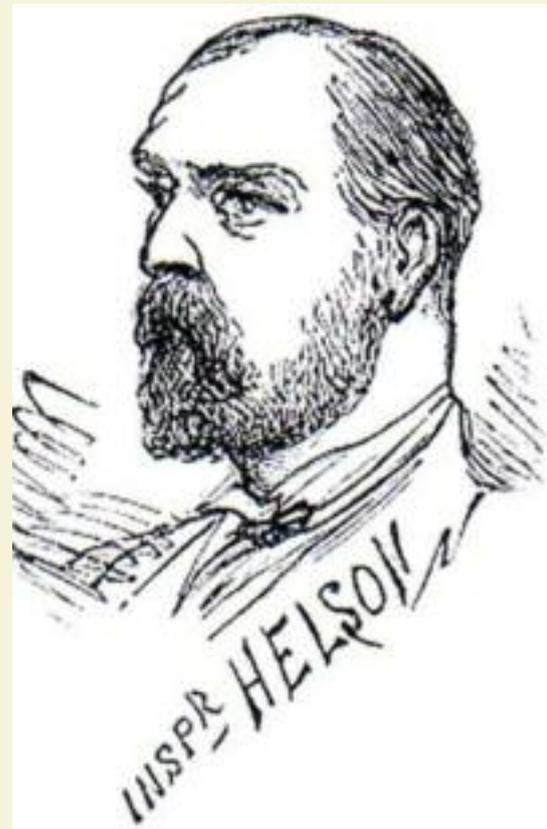
What we do know is that John Pizer was fingered by Sgt. Thick, who was reported in *The Star*, 11 September 1888:

*"I've known him for years," he said. "I didn't take him on the strength of any published descriptions of him. It was not, however, till the early hours of this morning I was told where I could put my hands on him."*

The newspaper also – and perhaps tellingly – reported that Sgt. Thick...  
*says almost positively that Pizer is "Leather Apron."*

"Almost positively". It's that "almost" which is so telling here. What did it mean? Did it mean that Thick entertained some doubts that John Pizer was nicknamed "Leather Apron", or that Thick entertained some doubts that John Pizer was the man who the prostitutes meant when they referred to "Leather Apron"?

What we know, because Sgt. Thick tells us, is that he had known John Pizer for years and that when anyone spoke of "Leather Apron" they meant John Pizer. What it would seem Sgt. Thick did not know is that John Pizer terrorised the local prostitutes because both Helson and Abberline tell us that the first the police heard of "Leather Apron" was after the murder of Nichols. If Thick





H Division 1889. Sergeant Thick highlighted.

in fact knew that Pizer terrorised the local prostitutes, one can only wonder why he hadn't hauled Pizer in for questioning at the time of the Emma Smith and Martha Tabram murders? What Sgt. Thick in fact knew was only that John Pizer was nicknamed "Leather Apron".

In fact the *Echo*, 11 September 1888, perhaps suggests that John Pizer was arrested because the powers that be were demanding that the mysterious "Leather Apron" be arrested:

*"The police authorities, however, determined that a "Leather Apron" should be apprehended, and it was left in the hands of Detective Thicke to carry out the order."*

In fact, even the earliest newspaper reports state that the police had never heard of "Leather Apron":

*One peculiar feature of the case is that none of the police or detectives appear to know him, he having always kept out of their sight, and they are now gleaning information concerning him from women he has assaulted.*

That was reported in the *Kansas City Star* on 4 September 1888. It's an important news report because it is clearly the one possibly sent to the *New York Times*, possibly by Harry Dam, about whom more anon. What is important about it is that although it was published on 4 September, as was the *New York Times* story, unlike the *New York Times* it is datelined 1 September. So the "Leather Apron" story seems to have been "created" at least as early as 1 September.

# GHASTLY MURDER

IN THE EAST-END.

DREADFUL MUTILATION OF A WOMAN.

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## Capture : Leather Apron

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Another murder of a character even more diabolical than that perpetrated in Back's Row, on Friday week, was discovered in the same neighbourhood, on Saturday morning. At about six o'clock a woman was found lying in a back yard at the foot of a passage leading to a lodging-house in a Old Brown's Lane, Spitalfields. The house is occupied by a Mrs. Richardson, who lets it out to lodgers, and the door which admits to this passage, at the foot of which lies the yard where the body was found, is always open for the convenience of lodgers. A lodger named Davis was going down to work at the time mentioned and found the woman lying on her back close to the flight of steps leading into the yard. Her throat was cut in a fearful manner. The woman's body had been completely ripped open and the heart and other organs laying about the place, and portions of the entrails round the victim's neck. An excited crowd gathered in front of Mrs. Richardson's house and also round the mortuary in old Montague Street, whither the body was quickly conveyed. As the body lies in the rough coffin in which it has been placed in the mortuary - the same coffin in which the unfortunate Mrs. Nicholls was first placed - it presents a fearful sight. The body is that of a woman about 45 years of age. The height is exactly five feet. The complexion is fair, with wavy brown hair; the eyes are blue, and two lower teeth have been knocked out. The nose is rather large and prominent.

However, not only does it seem that we can question whether Sgt. Thick in reality knew anything about John Pizer apart from believing that he was nicknamed “Leather Apron”, the only newspaper which really managed to get any interviews with anyone who knew “Leather Apron” was *The Star* but other newspapers began to question whether “Leather Apron” even existed.

The *Leytonstone Express and Independent*, 8 September 1888, mildly wondered whether Leather Apron was “a mythical outgrowth of the reporter’s fancy.”

The *Manchester Guardian*, 10 September 1888, was more direct:

*A theory exists that “Leather Apron” is more or less a mythical personage, and that he is not responsible for the terrible crimes with which his name has been associated.*

The *Yorkshire Post*, 10 September 1888, attributed this view to the police:

*It is true that they possess a description of the man who is known as ‘Leather Apron’ and will arrest him if he can be found, but their theory is that ‘Leather Apron’ is more or less a mythical personage, and that he is not responsible for the terrible crimes with which his name has been associated.*

The *Manchester Guardian*, 12 September 1888, reported a story from the Central News Agency that among the various groups of people huddled on the pavements during the weekend of Annie Chapman’s murder:

*The words most frequently heard in conversation are ‘Leather Apron’. The term has become a by-word of pavement and gutter, and one more often hears it accompanied by a guffaw than whispered in a tone which would indicate any fear of the mysterious individual who is supposed to live under that soubriquet. Whilst a large number of persons – including many members of the police force – firmly believe in the existence and almost certain guilt of the aproned one, the talk of the footways indicates that a large number of the inhabitants of the East End are sceptical as to his personality.*

In fact it was as early as 5 September that the *Echo* not only reported that the “Leather Apron” story was a journalistic invention, but provides a clue to the possible origin of the story.

*A very funny incident occurred in connection with the latest Whitechapel murder yesterday. An American journalist, anxious to distinguish himself in his paper, sent another scribe hailing from the other side of the Atlantic down into Whitechapel to interview the natives on the subject of the murder, and get their ideas. They gave him them, which were to the effect that they believed the murder had been committed by a “wild looking man, wearing a leather apron,” who had been seen about in Whitechapel lately, and was believed to be an escaped lunatic. Filled with this splendid idea, the young man made some “beautiful copy,” which his chief telegraphed off to New York forthwith, only*



Sergeant William Thick

to learn, a very little while afterwards, that his assistant had been thoroughly well hoaxed, and that the real murderer is, if not actually known to the police, is believed to be within very easy reach of a warrant—and quite sane.

According to the *Echo*, then, the whole story of “Leather Apron” was based on a story told about a ‘wild looking’ man who wore a leather apron and who was supposed by some to be an escaped lunatic. He was not nicknamed “Leather Apron”, he did not terrorise the local prostitutes.

And as most of you will know only too well, the American journalist in question appears to have been Harry Dam. Writing in 1924 the distinguished journalist Lincoln Springfield recalled in his book *Some Piquant People*<sup>2</sup> his days as chief reporter for the fledgling *Star* newspaper and wrote about ‘an amusing American named Harry Dam’ who...

*had joined us on The Star, and had, like the rest of us, been put upon the job of solving the mystery of the Whitechapel murders. But Dam, a free-born American, was not, as were the rest of us, cowed by the English libel laws, and he created a sensation by developing a theory of the authorship of these grisly crimes. They were, he proceeded to demonstrate, the work of a miscreant known as*

*“Leather Apron,” and so known in consequence of the attire he wore at his everyday trade of tanning, or slipper-making, or whatever it was. Day after day Dam gave the public all the thrills it wanted along these lines. But unfortunately there actually was in existence a man known to the nobility and gentry of the Mile End Road as “Leather Apron,” and he was an honest, hard-working fellow, as innocent of the series of Whitechapel murders, or any one of them, as you or I.*

Anyone who has been reading the series of article about Dam in *Ripperologist* now knows far more than they ever wanted to know about Dam, including the fact that at various times over the years there were references to a journalist who had “worked up” the “Leather Apron” story.

#### JOHN PIZER

John Pizer was born in London in 1850, the eldest son of Israel and Abigail Pizer (nee Moss). His mother, Abigail, died in 1853 and the following year Israel married Augusta Cohen, who had probably very recently arrived in Britain, and the couple would have three children, Janet (b. 1857), Samuel Gabriel (b. 1860) and Barnet (b. 1861). In 1872 Israel Pizer died.



Harry Dam

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<sup>2</sup> Springfield, Lincoln. *Some Piquant People*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924

John Pizer was described as a man of medium height, with a florid complexion,<sup>3</sup> of slight build, with small moustache, side whiskers, and hair turning grey. He did not speak with any kind of foreign accent.<sup>4</sup> He certainly did not look like the well-known drawing of him.

In early newspaper reports his mother was quoted as saying that Pizer was of weak intellect:

*He is unmarried, and a very simple man. He was never very bright here (touching her forehead), but he could not do such things as spoken about.*<sup>5</sup>

This may have been a misunderstanding resulting from Augusta Pizer's poor fluency in English, because Pizer was later reported to be an intelligent man. He was an 'active politician'<sup>6</sup> and after his release was congratulated by

*Some East-end Liberals to whom it now appears he is well known, and among whom he has been an active worker*<sup>7</sup>

His associates described him as 'a rather intelligent man'<sup>8</sup> and one journalist formed the opinion that 'He displayed more than an ordinary amount of intelligence.'<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Pizer also suggest that he was an articulate man.

Friends, including a young woman who lived next door, apparently denied that Pizer had ever been known as "Leather Apron".<sup>10</sup> Residents of Mulberry Street, where the Pizers lived, gave him a good character and spoke of him as a harmless sort of person.<sup>11</sup> His family claimed that Pizer suffered from ill-health, having sometime previously been seriously injured in a vital part, a result of which was that he could not do much work. He had been hospitalised in July with a carbuncle, then been sent to a convalescent home from which he'd been released at the end of July or very early in August 1888.

Apart from an assault by someone called John Pozer on a man named James Willis in July 1887,<sup>12</sup> it being suggested that Pozer and Pizer were one and the same, the only known case of alleged violence attributed to Pizer is a charge of indecent assault brought against him at the Thames Magistrates Court on 4 August 1888. The case was dismissed. No further details are known.



A sketch of John Pizer from a contemporary newspaper, which certainly bears no resemblance to him whatsoever.

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3 *Echo*, 12 September, 1888

4 *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September, 1888

5 *Evening News*, *Daily Telegraph* 10 September, 1888

6 *Daily Telegraph* 11 September, 1888

7 *The Star*, 12 September, 1888

8 *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September, 1888

9 *Echo* 12 September, 1888

10 *Evening News*, 10 September, 1888

11 *Echo*, 10 September, 1888

12 *The Times*, 8 July, 1887

On the night of 30–31 August 1888, Pizer was staying at Crossman's common lodging house in Holloway Road, and at 1.30 a.m. walked down to Seven Sisters Road and talked with a policeman about the glow in the sky visible from the fire at London Docks. The following day he went to Westminster where he stayed in a lodging house in Peter Street.

There was an incident in Church Street, Spitalfields, on Sunday, 2 September, which we'll come back to a little later on, and on 4 September the stories that the Whitechapel murderer was an unknown local Jew nicknamed 'Leather Apron' broke in the press.

On Thursday, 6 September, Pizer returned to 22 Mulberry Street, staying on and around the premises for the next four days as his brother had warned him that there was 'a false suspicion' against him.

He was arrested by Sgt. Thick on the morning of Monday, 10 September at 22 Mulberry Street. *The Daily Telegraph* on 11 September reported that when confronted by Sgt Thick, Pizer turned pale and trembled, saying to his stepmother, 'Mother, they've got me,' after which he was taken to Leman Street Police Station without further questioning. From Leman Street Police Station Pizer was taken to Commercial Street station



Leman Street police station.

where, according to *The Star*, a woman had been sitting, apparently waiting to identify him, all afternoon. This may have been Mrs Fiddymont who was at some point shown Pizer, and could not identify him. *The Star* believed that women from Wilmott's Lodging House who knew Leather Apron were to be brought to identify him, but this seems never to have happened. Pizer was shown to Emmanuel Violenia who positively identified him as a man he had seen talking angrily with a woman outside 29 Hanbury Street in the early morning of 8 September, and said that he knew Pizer as 'Leather Apron'. Pizer expressed outraged astonishment at this identification, but Violenia was in any case dropped from the case as unreliable. No other evidence was found against him, and on Tuesday evening Pizer was released.

On Wednesday, 11 October he was summoned to Annie Chapman's inquest to be cleared of suspicion of murder. Here, in answer to the opening questions, he said that he was nicknamed Leather Apron. The undoubted fact of his presence in Holloway on the night of Mary Ann Nichols' murder was brought out, and Pizer was told he could go. He protested. 'Sergeant Thick who arrested me has known me for eighteen years' – but was interrupted by Coroner Wynne Baxter with the remark, 'Well, well, I do not think it is necessary for you to say more.'

Sergeant Thick then gave the only testimony, apart from Pizer's response to Mr Baxter, ever elicited that Pizer was known as 'Leather Apron': he said that he 'had known Pizer for many years, and when people in the neighbourhood spoke of "Leather Apron" they meant him.'

The press was totally unable to confirm this. The *East London Advertiser* of 15 September was one of several papers reporting that Pizer's neighbours, friends and family flatly denied that he was known as Leather Apron, though *The Globe* of 10 September had found a Polish cobbler who had tried unsuccessfully to find a policeman and relay information that he believed Pizer to have murdered Annie Chapman. *The Star*, which had been the most energetic paper in writing up the Leather Apron scare, described Pizer's arrest as 'a police blunder'. They now asserted

that Pizer was not Leather Apron, 'at least not the "Leather Apron" who has been the terror and blackmailer of women in Whitechapel'. Pizer's somewhat self-serving interview with the Press Association averred that he had never known he was called Leather Apron until, to his surprise, Thick told him so.

All subsequent police reports described Pizer as Leather Apron, an early suspect who had been cleared, and most modern commentators accept this despite the energetic assertions of his peaceful and law-abiding nature made to the press by his family and friends.

It was reported that Pizer was given handsome financial compensation by newspapers which had described him incautiously, but we only know that *The Star* paid him any money, but it was a nominal amount. The newspaper nevertheless felt that it had got off lucky.

In July 1897, Pizer, whose health had always been poor (he suffered from a hernia), died of gastro-enteritis in the London Hospital, still resident at 22 Mulberry Street.

It is perhaps worthwhile pointing out here that in general there seems to be an utter lack of good, solid reports of Pizer terrorising prostitutes. Nobody seems to have explained that whilst Pizer was innocent, his own behaviour in terrorising the local prostitutes had understandably made him an obvious and valid suspect. Wynne Baxter didn't admonish Pizer for being a terror to the local women, remind him that he was lucky not to have gone to prison and suggest that he mend his ways. The newspapers did not generally vilify him for being the terror of the local prostitutes, but treated him as a man with a reputation unsullied, free of even a blemish. And the *Star* thought he had a genuine case against them which could have cost them a considerable amount of money.

So, what we have here is little enough evidence to suggest that anyone, neither journalist nor policeman alike, had heard of "Leather Apron" before the murder of Mary Ann Nichols. We have a story that the local prostitutes "worked up" a story about a "wild looking" man who wore a leather apron and who they imaged to be an escaped lunatic. We have a suggestion that the police wanted to capture someone called "Leather Apron", and we have Sgt. Thick arresting John Pizer, whom he had known for many years and who, when anyone spoke of "Leather Apron", he alleged, was the man meant. But there is no suggestion that John Pizer was known to Sgt. Thick for terrorising and extorting money from the local prostitutes, the press don't seem to have unearthed any stories about John Pizer being charged with or convicted of assault, or even of any prior arrests. And, of course, John Pizer's family and friends protested his innocence. And eventually John Pizer was given the opportunity to publicly exonerated himself, and he took legal action against several newspapers. *The Star*, we know, paid up. It is to be assumed that the other newspapers did so too. But what is interesting is that none of these newspapers defended themselves by saying that the local prostitutes had spoken of John Pizer as the man who terrorised and extorted money from them by threatening to rip them, and that there was therefore a reasonable and genuine foundation for the speculation. Nor did the newspapers point out that it was the police, not they, who had identified John Pizer as "Leather Apron".

So it is very, very tempting to conclude that, possibly, a "wild looking" man wearing a leather apron and who some of the local women thought was an escaped lunatic, was seen in Whitechapel at the end of August 1888. That this man who didn't have a name or nickname came to be referred to as "Leather Apron" and that he was identified by some women and by Sgt. Thick with John Pizer – that is to say that these people knew that Pizer was nicknamed "Leather Apron" and that it was assumed that he was the terror of the local prostitutes – and that somehow details about Pizer came to be combined with the "wild looking" "Leather Apron". Because it would appear to be evident from Inspector Helson's report that even the police did not doubt that Pizer was "Leather Apron" and was in turn the "Leather Apron" who was terrorising the local prostitutes.



street, by Cohen's Sugar refinery, when a woman rushed across the street and screamed out, "There goes 'Leather Apron,' the Whitechapel murderer," to the policeman standing at the corner of the turning. "Run after him," she shouted: "now you have a chance of catching him, you won't try. There he goes," pointing to a low, villainous looking man. The constable then mustered up courage to run after the man, who seemed to be in a hurry. After about 400 yards' run he caught the man, whereupon two other constables put in their appearance, and inquired what the matter was. The woman who had run with the policeman up to the man at once began to accuse him of being the man the police were looking for – "Leather Apron." This she repeated about 20 times without receiving a single denial from the man. She said she knew the man well by sight. This the man denied by saying he had never seen the woman before, but later on he said to one of the other constables that this woman was constantly annoying him like this; she should be careful what she was saying. She thereupon said she knew two women, and could bring them, who saw him pacing up and down Baker's-row with the murdered woman about two hours before the murder took place. She further accused him of cruelly illusing two poor unfortunates in a common lodging-house in City-road one night last week; and, further, she said that among the unfortunates of Whitechapel he was well known as a cruel wretch. These accusations the man simply met with a sneer, and said she did not know what she was talking about. But she stuck to her point. But, to crown it all, the policeman then let the man go.

The newspaper continued:

At first the police attached little importance to the story of "Leather Apron," but after the appearance of the above letter the detectives showed their regret at the stupidity of the constable in failing to arrest him by eagerly searching different lodging-houses and casual wards for this "Leather Apron." A chase has now begun in earnest. He was last seen outside the Leigh Hoy public-house in Spitalfields. In addition to being known as "Leather Apron" he is also known as the "Mad Snob." The police description of him is:- Aged 30 years; height, 5ft. 3in.; complexion, dark, sallow; hair and moustache black; thick set; dressed in old and dirty clothing; and is of Jewish appearance. The inquiries of our special representative led to the discovery that he is the son of a fairly well-to-do Russian Jew, but he is discarded by the Jewish fraternities as one who is a disgrace to their tribe.

On 11 September 1888 *The Star* managed to get a brief interview with Sgt. Thick:

"Leather Apron" has not been into a lodging-house since the Sunday the woman denounced him in Whitechapel, and the police were bamboozled into letting him go." The Sergeant modestly disclaimed any great deal of credit in making the capture. "I've known him for years," he said. "I didn't take him on the strength of any published descriptions of him. It was not, however, till the early hours of this morning I was told where I could put my hands on him.

On 12 September 1888, *The Star* reported John Pizer making what was in isolation a bizarre statement, but put in the context:

Last Sunday week I was accosted in Church-street by two females unknown to me. One asked me 'Are you the man?' (Presumably referring to the Buck's-row murder.) I said, 'God forbid, my good woman.' A stalwart man then came up and said, "Come in, man, and treat me to half a pint." I went on.

On that same day, 12 September 1888, *The Echo* reported the same story with a little greater clarity:

On Sunday week last, while I was walking through Church-street, two women accosted me. I did not know them.

One of them accused me of committing the crime in Buck's-row. The other, the elder of the two, however, said, "You are not the man, are you?" I said, "I know nothing about it. At that moment a stalwart and strong-looking man came up. Addressing me, he exclaimed, "Mate, come and stand me half-a-pint." I, however refused, and walked away.

The question is, as far as research has thus far turned up, the name "Leather Apron" was first revealed in the press on 4 September and would possibly relate to John Pizer because it was a passing reference in *The Star* to "Leather Apron" not having recently been seen in his usual haunts. So, what long concerned me was how the woman who confronted John Pizer on 2 September knew that the police were looking for him. However, although the lurid story which likened "Leather Apron" to Dickens's Quilp and Poe's baboon doesn't appear to have been published until 4 September, we know that story was sent to the *New York Times* from London on 1 September, so we know that on that date and probably earlier the "Leather Apron" story was being discussed on the streets on or before 1 September. How widely and extensively we don't know, though not greatly among the police at that time if the reactions of the policemen addressed by the woman are anything to go by, but it was certainly enough for the woman to charge Pizer to the policemen.

What is interesting about this and possibly of far greater significance, is that if "Leather Apron" had what would appear to be an extensive street currency on 1 September, yet didn't even get a mention in the press until 4 September, can we be at all sure that the name "Jack the Ripper" didn't have a street currency before "Dear Boss" was received?

So, I hope that the foregoing has demonstrated that what began as an unequivocal statement that John Pizer was the "Leather Apron" who terrorised the local prostitutes in fact has to have a great big question mark hanging over it.

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He lives in Kent where he runs a 15th century pub and restaurant – actually all the work is done by his wife, Judy, and daughter, Sioban, and two Jack Russells.

