

From the Berkshire Chronicle, dated 13th June, 1829

The Watchfield Murder of 1829

(Murder took place in the evening of Mon 1st June, 1829)

After reading an article in the newspaper, The Reading Mercury, one of the Coroners for Berkshire, Mr J. Slade, felt obliged to write to the Editor in order that he might present the accurate facts instead of what he described as a, 'very incorrect and garbled statement.' The Editor printed the letter in full as follows:-

The Watchfield Murder!

For the Berkshire Chronicle and Bucks and Windsor Herald.

Mr Editor - The very incorrect and garbled statement given in last week's Reading Mercury, relative to the murder of Thomas Midwinter Bliss, induces me to hand you the full particulars; for it must be admitted, that an Editor of a paper is extremely culpable in giving publicity to hearsay reports in cases of so much importance, inasmuch as it not only prejudices the minds of the ignorant, but may hereafter be attended with serious consequences to the party, who in all probability, will, at no remote period, have to appear at the bar of justice, to answer the serious charge against him. From the account given by the Reading Mercury, handbills have been printed, and bawled about in many market-towns and villages; but I am happy to find, that, in my own immediate neighbourhood, the Magistrates have been active in checking the progress of the circulation of those infamous bills, and many of the venders of them were roughly handled. I hope the Editor will disclose in his next week's paper the name of the party from whom he received his information, and satisfactorily contradict the gross misrepresentation.

The following are the particulars of the evidence taken before me, as one of the Coroners for this county, on Tuesday and Wednesday, the 2nd and 3rd days of June instant:-

John Lawrence sworn - I live at Shrivenham, and was drinking at the Barrington on Monday evening, the 1st, in company with deceased, Henry Pocock, Edward Higgins, Thomas Darling, Joseph Lawrence, Thomas Jones, Thomas Webb, Samuel Atherall and Joseph Giles, until ten o'clock, at which time the landlord gave us notice to leave the house, it being accustomed time

to close the doors. We all went out together. The deceased, Henry Pocock, and Edward Higgins, resided at Watchfield; all the rest at Shrivenham. Higgins asked the deceased to go home with him; he replied, "I will not go home with you, because Pocock is here." Deceased then went up the village the contrary road from Watchfield. I followed him, Jones, Giles and Atherall. When we got some distance up the street, we all stopped and talked together for about half an hour. No angry words were passed. Giles and I remained half an hour with the deceased after the others left. We then went to our homes which are close together, and left the deceased standing in the road, first persuading him to go home. Deceased was a little in liquor, but not so much so as I have seen him. In the course of the evening Pocock and Higgins had been joking him, and he appeared to be angry at what they said.

Edward Higgins sworn - I am a tailor, living at Watchfield. I was in company with Henry Pocock, the deceased, and others, at the Barrington Arms, on Monday evening, until ten o'clock, when we all left together. I asked the deceased, before we left the public-house, to go home with me, and he said he would. When we got into the street, deceased said, 'I shall not go home with Harry Pocock, - and he immediately ran up the street, and several men who had been drinking at the public-house followed him. The way he went was a contrary way to Watchfield. I and Harry Pocock proceeded towards Watchfield on the carriage-road. I left Pocock at his gate, close to his house, which is about 100 yards from the place where the deceased was found this morning, and I then went to my own house. I saw no person whatever in Watchfield-street. We had no conversation about the deceased on our way home, except when we parted with him at the public-house door, when Pocock said, as he was running up the street, "Don't let us go after that old fool," meaning the deceased, "for he will be three or four hours pottering home." I saw nothing of the deceased afterwards. We got home about half past ten, or, it may be, nearly eleven. Deceased was a little in liquor when we left him, but I have seen him at times more so. All the rest who left the room were sober. I have frequently within these four months heard the deceased speak against Pocock - that he (Pocock) had at one time used him ill, and he would have murdered him, had he not run away, and called "Murder." In the course of the evening we had been joking the deceased, which is a very common thing with the neighbours; but no angry words passed between us, so as to induce any one to use him ill.

Martha Nicholls sworn - I live at Watchfield, in the parish of Shrivenham. On Monday night, the 1st instant, I went to bed about ten o'clock. At half-past twelve, or thereabouts, I heard a noise in the street, near my house, like the

rattling of stones. It continued about five minutes. I then heard a voice faintly exclaim, "Don't, don't." Afterwards something struck against the doors as though stones were being thrown against them. There is a barn and stable near where the deceased was found. I also heard a great trampling about. The footway from Shrivenham to the house where the deceased lived, passes by my house. I cannot say whose voice it was I heard in the night.

Elizabeth Stevens sworn - I live at Watchfield. I went to bed before 11 o'clock on Monday evening. Soon after eleven I got out of bed again to attend to my children, who are ill; I got into bed again, and afterwards, but I cannot say what time, I heard a noise in the street, near my house, like persons running about. At last some one said, "go along." The noise continued for some minutes. I cannot say I knew the voice. I never heard the deceased speak ill of any person, although he was in the daily habit almost of calling at my house.

William Gardner sworn - I live at Watchfield in the parish of Shrivenham; I have known the deceased many years. I found him, this morning about a quarter before four, lying on the ground in Watchfield-street, on his left side. I went up to him, thinking he was asleep, and said, "What makes you be here sleeping." On touching his face I found he was dead. There were marks of blood on the road near. His hat was firm on his head over his eye-brows, and he had been bleeding at the nose and ears. On examining the ground about him it appeared as if he had been dragged along on his back by the collar of his coat for three or four yards. His clothes were very dusty, but his hat was not, nor did it appear to have been bent in or beat about. Martha Nicholl's house is about fifteen yards from the place where I found him. There is no thoroughfare for carriages or horses, except for the farmers to go to their fields. There are several other cottages near. I called others to assist, and from the appearance of the deceased altogether, and the manner in which he had been dragged about, I have every reason to believe he came by a violent death.

John Rickards sworn - I am a farmer living at Watchfield. I have known the deceased many years as a poor inoffensive man. I was called up this morning at a little after four, and informed of his death. I went to the place and found the deceased lying on the left side, and had apparently been dragged by the collar of his coat on his back for four or five yards. The hat was on his head, and of such a thickness that no ordinary blow would have caused death; it must have been a very severe one. Blood had been issuing from the ears and nose; and about 6 yards from the deceased I found some hair, which corresponded with that upon the head of the deceased. The hat was taken off, and I observed a blow upon the crown of the head, and the hair off about the

size of half-a-crown. The place where the deceased was found is in Watchfield-street, and the footway leading from Shrivenham to the house of the deceased.

Martha Pocock sworn – I live with my father at Watchfield, who is a carrier; and on Monday night about 12 o'clock, my father returned home from Cirencester market very ill, in consequence of which, I went after my brother Henry, and called him up; his door was locked; I heard either my brother or his wife strike a light; he came down stairs, and opened the door, and then accompanied me to my father's house; my brother went back to his own home about one o'clock by himself. I have frequently called my brother Henry up to assist my father on his return from or going to the different markets at that time of night. I saw no person in the street when I went after my brother, nor had we to pass the place where the deceased was found. He came down stairs in his usual dress. I cannot say whether he had his shoes on or not.

Mr Charles Smith, Surgeon and Apothecary, of Highworth, examined the head of the deceased, and after describing the various wounds and the extent of the fracture, arising from the blow on the crown of the head, was of the opinion that the blow was the cause of death, and doubtless done by some blunt instrument or substance and with very great violence.

Having read over the above evidence to the jury and made such remarks thereon as I considered necessary, the jury returned a verdict of, "Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown." During the investigation, Pocock was shown the body, but there was nothing in his appearance or behaviour to indicate the least guilt. The day after my inquiring (Thursday,) further evidence was obtained from a man of the name of New, who casually heard a private conversation between Pocock's wife and his sister, in consequence of which, a warrant was obtained against Pocock and Higgins, one of the witnesses on my inquiry, and they were taken into custody on the following day, (Friday.) I met the magistrates at Shrivenham, to investigate further into this mysterious case, and after hearing the additional evidence, they were of opinion that Higgins was in no way implicated in the murder, and he was honourably acquitted – but the circumstantial evidence as far as regarded Pocock, was considered sufficiently strong to induce them to commit Pocock on suspicion of the Murder.

I am, Mr Editor, Your most obedient servant. J. Slade, Coroner. Wantage, June 11, 1829.

The article below is what the Coroner, Mr Slade, was objecting to and described it as, '*Very incorrect and garbled.*'

Murder. On Tuesday morning se'nnight, the body of Mr Thomas Midwinter Bliss, who resided at Watchfield, near Faringdon, Berks, and who possessed a little independent property, was found dead by the road-side, within a short distance of his own house, his skull being dreadfully fractured. Bliss was about fifty years of age, and rather weak in his intellects, but particularly good-natured and inoffensive in his manners, and it was supposed that he had not an enemy in the world. On Monday he had been taking his evening glass of beer at the Barrington Arms, in Shrivenham; a man named Pocock, and several others, were in the house, and on the company being about to depart, Bliss was asked if he was not going home; he replied, he should stay a little longer, as he feared, if he went with them, Pocock would play off some trick upon him. He, however, soon went out, and it is supposed passed the party. A coroner's inquest was held on the body, but, though the jury deliberated two days, nothing decisive could be made out, and they returned a verdict of, "wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." On Thursday, J. Hughes, Esq; the Rev T.F. Cleaver, and the Rev E. Bouverie, three magistrates of the county, summoned all the suspected parties before them, and, after a long investigation, it came out in evidence that the deceased was sitting in the hedge, and as two of the men who had before been his companions passed, one of them threw a large stone at him, which knocked him down. The other, seeing the deceased fall, exclaimed, "You have killed old Elias!" to which the fellow who flung the stone replied, "If I have not I will do it," and immediately went back and finished the bloody deed! After a full examination of all the witnesses, there being strong reason to believe that Henry Pocock, the man before alluded to, was the murderer, he was, after being strictly interrogated, fully committed to take his trial for the offence. Pocock is a stout young man, and well known in this town, where he has frequently been with a carrier's cart. He has lately been carrier between Watchfield and Henley. On his arrival at our gaol this afternoon (Saturday) he appeared to be very sullen and restless.