

Lawbreakers

From the middle of the 19th century the local newspaper is a great source of information. The Swindon Advertiser, still running today, began in 1854, and recorded in great detail, much of what went on the Courts of Law. The following is some of the cases where the miscreant either came from Watchfield or the offence happened there.

On **16 January 1865** the Swindon Advertiser reported the case of Richard Carter of Watchfield, described as a Dealer. He was charged at the Swindon Police Court, with stealing a silver Albert chain, the property of Joseph Mapson, from his shop at Highworth. After touting the chain for sale at the Blue Boar at Wantage, he was soon arrested at his father's house in Watchfield. Carter tried several explanations as to how he came by the chain, but having previous convictions, he was committed to stand trial at the following Quarter Sessions.

Edition 15 Aug 1870. In the Swindon Police Court, held on Thurs 11th Aug, Ambrose Ford, William Crew, Thomas Goddard, William Gearing and Alfred Bullock, all of Watchfield, were summoned for wilful damage to growing wheat, the property of Mr Chas Edmonds of Highworth. They were further charged with damaging barley the property of Mr William Yells, and also damaging a fence, the property of E.Hanbury Esq. Mr Hanbury retired during the hearing of this case (he was on the bench). Ford and Crew were each fined 37s 6d and the others 15s 8d each.

Edition 20 Feb 1871. At Faringdon Court, Petty Sessions. George Pike of Childrey, Baker, was summoned on the information of Supt Reece, for allowing his horse and cart to remain on the public highway, at Watchfield, for an unreasonable time. PC Borlace proved that the horse and cart were standing opposite the Eagle beerhouse for 20 minutes. The Defendant had before been convicted of a similar offence and was now fined £1 and 14s 6d costs.

Edition Mon 27 Nov 1871. Henry Povey of Watchfield, Labourer, was charged with stealing a horse-rug, value 10s, the property of George Westall of Bishopstone, Innkeeper. The prosecutor had left the rug on his horse outside the Victoria Tavern, Shrivenham Station, and on coming out of the house, it had disappeared. On the next day Police Constable Winchcomb, who had received information on the theft saw the prisoner with his brother's cart, in the street at Shrivenham, and the rug, which he identified by the description given, lying on the seat. He took the rug, and prisoner - who at first stated that he had found the rug between the Station and Ashbury, and afterwards that he had bought it for half a crown - to the prosecutor at Bishopstone, who at once identified the rug. On

the road to the Police Station the prisoner endeavoured to make the matter up by offering the policeman some money. He was sentenced to two months imprisonment with hard labour.

Edition 19th Aug 1872. Faringdon Court House. Thomas Baxter of Watchfield, Labourer, charged with assaulting Sarah, the wife of John Day, of Watchfield, labourer. Her face was much disfigured, said she was working in the harvest field on Sat last for Mr Fereman with the prisoner, George Rogers (who is not yet in custody) and others, and was commencing to tie up a hand of wheat, when the prisoner and Rogers came up and ordered her away. She refused to leave when Rogers struck her three times and knocked her down, and the prisoner gave her a push, and called her offensive names. They claimed the land on which she was working was theirs. The prisoner called two witnesses, his son and Roger's brother, to prove that he had merely pushed her out of the way to prevent Rogers striking her. He was fined £1.3s including costs, or a months imprisonment. The money was paid.

Edition 16 Dec 1872. Faringdon Petty Sessions. Alex McKensie of Oxford, draper, was summoned for leaving his cart on the highway at Watchfield for half an hour whilst he was in the Royal Oak beer house. The offence was proved by PC Borlace, who stated he had once before cautioned him against it. The Defendant who conducted himself in a most disrespectful manner to the bench was fined £1.10s including costs and on payment of the amount asked to be furnished with a receipt.

The **Edition dated Saturday, January 6 1883** displayed the heading '*A Serious Charge.*' It explained, '*At the Berks quarter sessions at Reading, on Tues, William Tucker, 17, dealer of Watchfield, was charged with an indecent assault on Fanny Wheeler, aged 11, at Shrivenham, on the 28th ult. (December 82). Three witnesses proved the case; the prisoner had nothing to say in his defence. The jury found him guilty and recommended him to mercy on account of his youth. The Vice-Chairman said the prisoner had rendered himself liable to two years imprisonment; and but for his youth he could not sentence him to less than twelve months hard labour. The court would take into consideration the recommendation to mercy and he would be sentenced to six months hard labour.*'

In October 1883 Charles and James Williams of Watchfield, had boarded a train from Shrivenham Station bound to London. On an inspection of their tickets, it was found that they did not have the correct ones and were consequently charged by the train company with theft. At the subsequent court hearing they were both found guilty and, much to the amazement of many, were given 6-month prison sentences.

Such was the hue and cry of the local people a committee was formed with the aim of getting the two brothers released as soon as possible. The Swindon Advertiser reported on Saturday, November 24th, 'On Weds morning a telegram was received from Reading, stating that the above-named gentlemen were released, and would be in the village by two o'clock. It will be remembered that a petition signed by about 5000 persons was presented to the Home Secretary for a commutation of the sentence of six months, and that gentleman, after mature consideration, used his prerogative, and released the Messrs Williams at the expiration of a month. Upon the receipt of the news, which rapidly spread, the Shrivenham committee proceeded to the station to welcome them, but it was found that Charles Williams had gone on to Swindon. James alighted at the station and received hearty congratulations. The committee then went to Swindon, and together with the friends there, met Mr Charles Williams at the Great Western Hotel, where he received quite an ovation. A large concourse of people had assembled, and a section of the rifle Volunteer band played right merrily until nearly four o'clock, when brakes hansoms, traps, etc, were called into requisition, and preceded by the band, a large number of persons escorted Mr Williams to his home at Watchfield (halting some little time at Shrivenham) with flying colours. Great excitement prevailed, and many were the hearty cheers. The committees worked most strenuously, and great pleasure is felt at the result of their united action.'

An unusual case was reported in the Swindon Advertiser on **Saturday, 12 April 1884** whereby Percival Spencer Hunt, a Farmer of Watchfield, sued Charles Kent, a Baker of the same village. The case was heard before Mr Fitzroy Cooper at the Faringdon County Court. The report stated that, 'The plaintiff (Mr Hunt) had supplied the defendant with hay and milk, etc, and the defendant had sold bread, flour etc, to the plaintiff. When each had sent in his account to the other, the plaintiff, after deducting the account due from him to defendant from the amount owing by defendant to him, found that there was a balance of £3.1s.11d in his (plaintiff's) favour, which sum he now sued for. The defendant, however, disputed the value of the hay supplied to him by the plaintiff, and in consequence put in a set off of £4.17s4d. The plaintiff not disputing the defendant's account against him, the only question in dispute was the value of the hay. Mr A. Haines appeared for the plaintiff, and Mr A.I. Bristow for defendant. A number of witnesses were examined on each side, and at the close of the case his Honour said the opinion he had formed was that the plaintiff's charge was excessive, according to the evidence of defendant's witnesses. The prices put upon the hay by the witnesses did not correspond, but he took the evidence of the last witness, who put the highest price upon the hay, viz :- the hay charged at 80s would be reduced to 60s a ton; that at 100s to 75s ; and that at 60s to 25s . The result of his Honour's decision was that the total amount reduced in the value of the hay supplied to defendant was £5.19s4d, so that besides satisfying the plaintiff's claim for £3.1s11d, he had in addition to pay defendant £2.17s5d, and also defray the costs of the proceedings. The plaintiff did not appear satisfied with this decision and said he should like to appeal. His Honour told him he could do so if he liked, but he would have to bring forward very strong evidence to alter the decision.'

One could be forgiven on reading the above cases for thinking that some are of a petty nature, but they reflect the issues and pace of life at the time. However, towards the close of the 19th century a case was to become notorious in Watchfield history, and one that can only be described as '*Murder most Foul.*'

The summer of 1893 turned out to be one of the most exciting in the history of the little village of Watchfield. The tragic events all revolved around a particularly ill-tempered man called John Carter, who, in a fit of jealous rage, had killed his wife, Rhoda. As if this wasn't bad enough, he then expended much effort to conceal her body. From July to December of 1893, the local Swindon Advertiser reported the events in great detail, the articles consequently contained the names of many Watchfield inhabitants who were involved and called as witnesses at the subsequent Inquests and Trial.

The Swindon Advertiser dated Saturday, 29 July, describes the events in the first paragraph, '*The usually quiet little hamlet of Watchfield, about a mile from Shrivenham has been thrown into a state of unusual excitement by a terrible murder which has been committed by a man named John Carter, a Cowman in the employ of Mr. W.H. Hedges, farmer, of Watchfield. It appears that the man's wife, Rhoda Carter, aged 32 years, disappeared quite suddenly last Friday the 21st instant. Suspicion was aroused by the fact that passers-by had noticed on Thursday night a large fire in Carter's cottage although the weather was quite warm. Carter was questioned as to what had become of his wife and he stated that he believed she had gone to see her sister, who lived at Eastleach Downs, near Lechlade. The statement was found, upon enquiry, to be untrue and after further investigation by PC Benning, PC Sparkes and PC Hussey, John Carter was taken into custody. On Tuesday last the police continued their search for the missing woman, but without success that day. However, on Wednesday PC Sparkes removed the floor of an outhouse and discovered the woman's body in a dreadful condition. It was lying at a depth of a few inches and was pressed into a hole about two feet square, the head and knees being squeezed together. On the top of the hole was an old tub and barrow. There was a deep wound across the face and the limbs appeared as if they had been scorched. It is said that Carter had only been married to the woman three years, and it is further stated that this was his third wife. Upon the first an inquest was held, at which a verdict of accidental death was returned; she having been killed by a fall downstairs. The second woman disappeared from the village and has not been heard of.*'

John Carter was subsequently found guilty of wilful murder and none of the circumstances could persuade the Judge towards any kind of leniency. Passing sentence he stated, "*I have nothing to do but to pass upon you the sentence of the law, and that sentence is, that you be taken to the place from whence you came, and thence to the place of execution, there to be hanged by the neck till you be dead, and may the Lord have mercy on your soul.*" Carter was executed at Reading Gaol on Tues 5th December 1893. Before he died, he confided in the Chaplain that he had killed his second wife, Elizabeth, and told him where the body might be found so she

could have a decent burial. The Swindon Advertiser reported on 9th December 1893, that, *'Digging was carried on at several places, and after about two hours a perfect skeleton was discovered buried about a foot below the surface of the ground in the rickyard of Broad Lease Farm, Shrivenham, where Carter was employed, and about 160 yards from the cottage where he then lived.'*

The following Watchfield inhabitants, mainly relatives of John Carter or Rhoda, gave evidence at the Inquests and Trial:

Ann Titcombe, wife of James Titcombe, a Roadman, Rhoda's Mother.

Thomas Carter, aged 9, son.

Ann Butler, wife of Edwin Butler, a Farm Labourer, living opposite Carter's house.

David Henry Titcombe, Labourer, Rhoda's Brother

Lucy Carter, wife of Thomas Carter, Farm Labourer, First Cousin to Rhoda.

James Carter, Farm Labourer, employed at Pennyhooks Farm, Brother.



Above. The Cottage where John Carter murdered his wife Rhoda
Below. Broad Lease Farm, where John Carter worked and murdered his second wife, Elizabeth. Her body was found here after his Execution

