

Accidents, Disasters & Deaths

Swindon Advertiser, Monday 13 March 1871.

'A serious fire broke out at Watchfield, on Weds last, the dwelling house, shop and outhouse of Mr Willis, Grocer and two cottages being totally destroyed. The fire was caused by a spark from a chimney which had caught fire. The Highworth fire brigade with their fire engines were promptly on the spot and rendered valuable service in preventing a spread of the fire. We hear the premises were not insured. The occupants were enabled to save most of the goods.'

Watchfield. A Sad Death...was the headline used by the Swindon Advertiser on Saturday, 20 December 1879. It continued, *'On Thursday in last week some labourers from Coleshill, in the employ of Lord Radnor, were engaged in pulling down a barn in Watchfield. The timber had been taken off, and the men were engaged in taking down the walls. It seems that on the Weds evening the head labourer and the bailiff concluded that the way to get one of the ends down, which was twenty feet high, would be to undermine it. Accordingly on the Thurs morning the men, under the instructions of the head labourer, commenced to draw stones out from the wall, about four feet from the ground. Whilst they were thus engaged the wall fell, burying one of the men, named Binfield. Dr Parker was at once sent for and ordered the poor fellow to be moved. He was taken to the Royal Oak Inn on a stretcher, where, by permission of Mr D. Pocock, he was taken into a private room and laid on a bed, where he had every attention paid him, but all in vain, the poor fellow having expired at half-past eight the same evening in the presence of his wife and the Rev Mr Banks, vicar of Coleshill. - The inquest was held at the above-named inn, on Saturday, the Rev W.B. Humfrey being foreman of the jury. Evidence was given in accordance with the above by Greenaway, the head labourer. - Mr Knapp, mason, also gave evidence. He said he lived near where the accident happened. He watched the operations several times. He also cautioned Greenaway, and on one occasion he went, out of kindness, to assist him. He thought what the men were doing very foolish. He was present with the deceased until he died. - The jury, after some consideration, concluded that the deceased was accidentally killed by the fall of a wall, and they wished to add that the wall was being taken down in a dangerous and careless manner, and without proper superintendence. The coroner and jury thought that the work should have been stopped after the accident until the enquiry had been held.'*

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday 15 April 1882.

'An old man, named John Holyoak of Watchfield, aged 87, met with a serious accident last week. He fell into a ditch in a field through which he was passing and laid in a helpless state until found nearly half an hour afterwards. Dr Dixon of Shrivenham, was called in, and found the thigh broken and shattered. The old man is doing well, but, in consequence of his great age, it is feared the accident will prove fatal.'

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday 23 August 1884.

'Mr Jotchman, Coroner, held an inquest at the Royal Oak Inn, on Thursday afternoon, on the body of Louisa, wife of John Carter, who died the previous morning, whilst working in the fields. It appears that at about eleven o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, the poor

woman, who had been unwell for the past few weeks, felt somewhat faint, and sat down with others to partake of a little refreshment, when suddenly blood issued from her mouth and nose, and in about five minutes she was a corpse. The jury - Messrs G. Hickman, D. Pocock, W.J. Morse, E. Morse, Godwin, Noland, Titcombe, Taylor, J. Baxter, R. Baxter, W. Theobalds and G. Hickman (Foreman) - after hearing the evidence of the son of the deceased, thinking further evidence unnecessary, brought in a verdict of 'sudden death from natural causes.'

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday 4 October 1884.

'On Monday afternoon last, as Mr A.W. Boodle and two ladies were returning home from Swindon, from some unexplained cause the horse staggered into the ditch on the highway near Stratton crossroads, when the conveyance was much broken, and the occupants thrown out, one lady falling on the prostrate horse, and the other under the vehicle. Fortunately, the animal remained quiet, and no injury was sustained beyond the broken trap. A farmer passing by rendered assistance and drove the party to their residence at Watchfield House.'

In 1886, the name James Fereman, was well known in the village of Watchfield and surrounding district. He had lived at Strattonborough Castle Farm (known by many as just Castle Farm) for about 40 years, and during that time he had built up a formidable reputation as a Land and Property Valuer. His skills also extended towards local affairs being a general confidante to the local populace in general. It was something of a shock therefore, when on Monday 22 March 1886, he turned a shotgun upon himself and ended his own life. The Swindon Advertiser ran their article on Saturday 27 March, and used the wording that he had, '*Laid violent hands upon himself.*'

The newspaper gave a very full account of the incident and explained that, '*The death of his only daughter about two years ago seemed to have turned the current of his nature, and from a hale, hearty, strong, energetic, business man, his health became impaired to such an extent that he had to relinquish his accustomed avocation and seek that quietude necessary to a wounded spirit. The account of the sad affair will be best given by the details of the inquest, which was held on Monday afternoon, before I. Jotcham, Esq. The jury - Rev E. Banks, and Messrs E. Archer, J. Robertson, W. Marchant, W. Harris, E. Harris, J.T. Painton Smith, W. Deadman, J. Haines, H. Hall, T. Wallcroft and George Cox - met at the farm at half past three, and after the election of the Rev E. Banks as foreman, the following evidence was given:- The Coroner, in his opening remarks, said it was his painful duty to hold an enquiry relative to the death of a gentleman whom it had been his privilege know during a period of over thirty years, and one in whom he had always placed implicit confidence. He also alluded to the low state of mind of the deceased, which he had noticed for a long time past, and regretted that such a long and honourable life should be terminated by such a horrible death. After viewing the body, which presented a sickening spectacle, Sarah Duckett deposed: I have been housekeeper to the deceased for about six years. His health was good when I first came, and his mind sound and clear. He had been ill during the last two years, and never recovered the death of his daughter, who died about that time, he troubled a great deal about her. I never noticed anything strange in his manner or mind. He never gave me anu idea that he was suffering in his mind. He never seemed depressed or under any delusions. I saw him daily and that all day long. He never made use of language to lead me to suppose he contemplated suicide. He came downstairs yesterday (Sunday) morning about half-past seven, his usual hour. He ate his dinner and tea as usual, and seemed to enjoy it. I dined with him and he appeared cheerful and very pleasant, conversing in his accustomed manner. Three sons, a servant girl and myself lived in the house. Last night the sons and the*

girl went out a little before six with the intention of going to church, leaving only myself with the deceased. There was no one near at the time, the house being a considerable distance from any other. After tea he walked in the garden, I remaining in the sitting room reading. After leaving the garden the deceased came into the house and went down the passage leading to the kitchen, leaving the sitting room door open. He returned and said, "Oh, Mrs Duckett, I will close this door, you will feel the draught." In a few minutes I heard the report of a gun from the back kitchen. I called out, but receiving no answer I went into the room, and saw the deceased sitting in a chair near the window with a gun beside him, resting on his right arm. His head was nearly blown away and the brains scattered all over the place. I remained in the house alone for two hours until the family came home from church. I did not call for assistance, believing it useless. F.C. Spackman, Esq, surgeon, Faringdon, deposed. I have attended the family of the deceased nearly 30 years. I also attended the deceased occasionally till the year 1884, when he said he had a serious illness, suffering from heart disease and dropsy. I then attended him daily for many weeks. The illness left him weak in body and mind and he never rallied. His mind was feeble all last year, full of delusions saying that he was in a state of poverty and filth and reproached himself as being the greatest hypocrite living. I ceased to attend him at the end of 1885. His health was then improving but the mind was still feeble. He never led me to suppose that he would take his own life but his ailment was such that I should not have been surprised at his doing so, and I accordingly gave instructions that he be watched and precautions were taken, everything being done to ensure his welfare. I saw the body last night and the injuries are such as were self-inflicted. The Rev G.W. Murray (Vicar of Shrivenham), examined, said: I knew the deceased well. Up to last Michaelmas he seemed to have enjoyed good health and sound mind. I noticed a great alteration in his manner since that time, chiefly religious depression. I have had much conversation with him as a clergyman, but latterly found it useless. Last Saturday I saw him and he appeared better. He said, "I am better in health, but not in the other matter." I was of opinion his delusions were of a religious character, and that his mind was unhinged. Albert Feremen deposed: The deceased was my father. He was a farmer and land valuer with extensive practice. Till the last three years his health was very good. About the end of August last he was very desponding and suffered much from religious delusions. I produce a packet of apparently poison (the label was defaced and partly torn off) which I took from his pocket last October. About the same time I took a razor from his pocket. It was my habit to search his pockets, and guard against anything happening. At the commencement of this year he got much better and I and others relaxed the precautions we had taken. The deceased had been very desponding and under the impression he should end his days in want and in goal. He was generally worse at night. The housekeeper did not sit with us and had no opportunity of hearing conversation. The last few weeks he was a deal better and talked less delusively. I left home with the others about a quarter to six last night, returning in about two hours. My father's age was 72. I then went into the back kitchen and found the deceased in exactly the same position as now. After Mr Spackman's caution I removed the guns from the usual standing place into the back kitchen. The particular gun was put away unloaded. There was a bag of cartridges hanging up in the same room fastened, but last night found the same unfastened. All matters of business and worry were kept from his knowledge. The Coroner having summed up, the jury returned a verdict of, 'Suicide by shooting whilst in an unsound state of mind.' The remains were interred in the Longcot parish churchyard by the Rev John Hughes on Wednesday, the following gentlemen attending the funeral obsequies, in addition to the relatives of the deceased: Mr Tyrell, Mr G.J. Haines, Mr Spackman, Mr J. Heading snr, Mr J. Fairthorne, Mr R.W. Hedges, Mr Giles, Mr T. Habgood, of Faringdon, with the coffin, which was covered with black cloth and registered furniture, being made by Mr W. Chivers of Shrivenham.'

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday 28 August 1886.

'On Tuesday evening the inhabitants of this village were alarmed by the cry of fire, which had broken out on the premises occupied by Mrs Elsworth. It appears that Mr Robert Stone, the owner of the property, had stored some straw in a slated lean-to abutting a portion of the premises of Mrs Elsworth, used as a coal store. By some unknown means this straw caught fire, and before assistance could be obtained the flames had caught the thatched roof of the store, which runs in a direct line with the dwelling house of Mrs Elsworth, which is also thatched. Fortunately, the wind was not high, and thanks to a number of willing hands and a good supply of water, the fire was soon got under. If the fire had occurred during working hours, when nearly the whole population, both male and female, were employed in the harvest fields, the result must have been the total destruction of the whole block of buildings.'

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday 21 May 1887

Forester's Funeral. *'On Sunday afternoon last the remains of Bro William Godwin (Shriovenham Court) were interred in the parish churchyard. The deceased being well known, nearly 190 members, including several from the neighbouring Courts, attended as a mark of esteem. The service was impressively read by the Rev C.G. Wheeler, after which Bro David Pocock read the Forester's address appointed to be read at the grave. Several friends sent wreaths, crosses etc, including a beautiful cross from the Hon Mrs Barrington, of Beckett House.'*

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday, 27 May 1893.

Watchfield. Saturday evening the remains of the late John Simmonds (who was the oldest man in the village) were interred in the churchyard. Deceased was 96 years of age.

Swindon Advertiser, Saturday 9 February 1895.

Inquest. An inquiry was held by Mr Coroner Jotcham at the Eagle Inn, on Monday last, on the body of the infant daughter of James and Clara Titcombe. The child was found dead in bed on Saturday morning last, about half past four by the mother. Dr Nixon said that the cause of death was convulsions, and the Jury returned a verdict accordingly.

An inquest was held on 19th June 1897, at The Eagle public house at Watchfield. (BRO COR/WTI/5/15). Assembled there was a Jury of 12 people, the Rev William Barnard Humphrey, Silvester Willis, John Taylor, John Pocock, David Skinner, Thomas Knapp, David Pocock, William Godwin, Edward Moss, James Harris, Thomas Cross and Paul Taylor. They were to hear the case the death of a female child belonging to James and Ann Titcomb of Watchfield. Ann went out of the village one day with the child wrapped under her schawl and when she next looked it was found to be dead. The Jury returned a verdict of Accidentally Suffocated.

Swindon Advertiser, Friday, 11 March 1898.

'The death of Mr Alfred Manners occurred on Wednesday in last week. Deceased was a son of the late David Manners, who was tenant of Chapel Wick Farm, Shriovenham. Mr Alfred Manners was resident some time at Lambourn, where he occupied a large farm, but later came to reside at Watchfield, the original home of his wife, the daughter of the much respected Josiah Nobes. Deceased was a prominent figure in the village; his unassuming and courteous manner among his poorer neighbours won for him their esteem and respect. The funeral took place on Monday last, amidst every token of respect. He leaves a widow and five sons.'

Deceased had for a short time been under the skilful treatment of Dr Nixon of Shrivenham, but his death was somewhat sudden. The service was conducted by the Rev J. Footman. The funeral arrangements were satisfactorily carried out by Mr Rees Kent, of Shrivenham.'

'Never in the remembrance of any one in the village has so sad a spectacle been witnessed.' This sentence, used in the newspaper article, summed up the mood of those at the cemetery in Watchfield on 31st January 1899. *On Friday the 3rd February the Swindon Advertiser explained, 'On Wednesday last week Messrs J. and C. Williams, builders of Swindon, received the sad news from London, of the death of their eldest brother. Arrangements had been made for his interment in the small burying place at Watchfield, but before these arrangements were completed their grief was added to by the unexpected news of the death of their deceased brother's wife on Saturday. Both corpses were conveyed to Shrivenham station, on Tuesday, where they were met by the mourners, Mr & Mrs J. Williams, Mr & Mrs C. Williams, Mr F. Williams and Mr C. Williams, junr. They then proceeded on the Watchfield where they were met by their cousins, Messrs J, and D. Pocock and other mourners. By the permission of the Vicar, the Rev E.F. Hill, the deceased were both laid in one grave. The service of the Church of England was used, and most impressively read by the Rev J. Footman. It will be remembered that Mr James Williams was the eldest son of the late Mr C. as Mrs L. Williams, who were at one time owners and occupiers of the Eagle Tavern.'*

James Francis Williams was 60 years of age and a Carpenter by trade. His wife was Hannah, aged 45. They both lived in London with their daughter Anne Lucy, aged 15 at the time of her parents death. It was Anne who gave most of the evidence to the Coroner and Jury at the Inquiry at Chelsea Town. It was a sad tale of destitution when the family were turned out of their house. For two weeks they had lived on the streets, barely eating and both the parents were ill with chronic alcohol dependence.



Close to the boundary on the North-western side of the Parish is the oddity that is Strattonborough Castle Farm. A glance at **Picture 76**, above, will make it immediately obvious where the Castle part of the name originates. Apparently it was a Folly belonging to the Coleshill Estate and was built in 1792 as part of a romantic landscape to look out upon from the large building that was Coleshill House. (Gutted by fire & demolished in the 1950s)

The Willington map of 1758 shows nothing of buildings in this position but does show a small strip of land owned by Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell, owner of Coleshill at that time. It's quite likely that the mock castle was built on this piece of land. Close by to this, the Willington Map notes a field by the name of '*Old Hall Furlong.*' What could provoke such a name? Could it be that the field once belonged to a large house, or perhaps that once a large building stood there? Hopefully, research and archaeology might provide an answer.