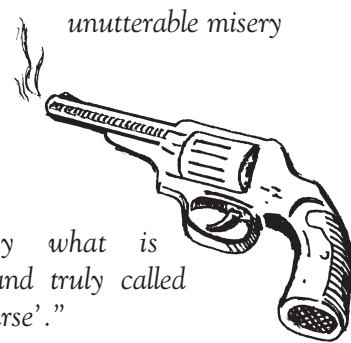


MURDERS MOST FOUL

Wear Giffard does not seem to have been a place much associated with serious crime. However, on the night of 21st December, 1897 there occurred an event which caused the “utmost consternation” in the surrounding area. The events are probably best described using the majestic and eloquent words of the North Devon Journal of 24th December, 1879.

“It would be difficult to imagine a place which could be less naturally associated with a monstrous and detestable crime than Weargifford: and if there is one spot in the village which would seem to revolt more than most others against such an association it is Hazelwood Cottage.....”

It is approached from the road by paths which wind among hedgerows of laurel etc., and it commands picturesque views of the valley through which the Torridge meanders and the hills beyond. And yet it was here, where the lovely aspects of Nature suggest the reign of Innocence and Peace, that the foul crime was committed, the murderer being Mr. Francis W. West ... while the victim of his unnatural lust for blood was his wife.... The instrument of destruction was a small rifle belonging to the unfortunate lady, and the deed must have been perpetrated soon after midnight of Saturday; but it was not discovered until about eight o'clock on Sunday morning... the motive of the murder is shrouded in mystery, but the cause is easy enough to be discovered; it is clearly traceable to the unhappy man's confirmed propensity to an immoderate use of strong drink. He appears to have been almost always more or less under the influence of strong drink... thus another case is added to the long list of those in which homes have been wrecked, life destroyed, and



wrought by what is commonly and truly called 'the drink curse'.”

They came to the neighbourhood from Hayle (in Cornwall) two years last September..... before they had been long settled in Weargifford it began to be whispered in the parish that he and his wife were not living happily together.... against his wife he frequently exhibited that strange and unaccountable antipathy which is so often the result of addiction to drink on the part of the husband... His mind evidently had a bent in the direction of mechanics...he kept a formidable assortment of fire arms, swords and knives, and it had been noticed that even when quite sober he had a strange liking for furbishing these weapons and playing with them. At one time he kept a man-servant, whom he one day considerably frightened by pinning him in a corner and pointing a pistol at him, threatening to shoot him if he moved an inch...the unfortunate lady herself has been heard to say that she expected some day to suffer death at the hands of her husband... “Some twelve months ago.....he threatened to blow out her brains.....seeing that he was in dire earnest she escaped through the window, sliding down the veranda on to the ground and fleeing to the nearest house.”

“On Saturday the nurse (Mary Knight) went to Torrington to market, and when she returned, about half past eight o'clock she found her master elevated with drink and frolicsome..A short time afterwards, on entering the kitchen, she found him there, and he remained there with her and her

about a quarter past twelve....The servants state that when in drink he would frequently go into the kitchen and stay there a long while.... A few minutes after twelve, Mrs. West went upstairs to bed.....he followed in the course of two or three minutes locking the bedroom door when he entered the room. The servants retired to bed directly afterwards. The nurse attended to the children....but before she got into bed, she heard the report of a firearm. First she heard her master and mistress talking and, she believed, laughing and then her mistress said 'O Frank, don't O Frank, don't!' the report of the rifle followed immediately..... Passing strange as it is, the nurse appears not to have been much alarmed, notwithstanding her mistress's appeal to the husband before the gun was fired; For, hearing nothing more, she shortly went to sleep....and soon everyone in the house was asleep, save, it is to be presumed, Mr. West - for by this time his wife was sleeping the sleep of death".

"The nurse.....went to sleep until half-past seven.....she lay a few minutes longer, wondering why her mistress did not call her...then got up and went down to the kitchen, her fellow servant arising about the same time. When the tea was made she took it up to the bedroom, and on opening the door and entering, she found her mistress sitting or partly reclining in a cane bottomed chair near the window with her head leaning against the window-sill..... There were some spots of blood upon her nightdress and also on the window curtain, and it was plain enough that she was dead from a bullet wound in the head. The frightened servant...started for the house of P.C. Harvey, a few hundred yards away...he sent for Supt. Rousham who lives in Torrington.... When Mr Rousham came he and the constable went to the workshop....the officers walked in, the superintendent charging Mr. West with the wilful murder of his wife to which he made no reply."

The inquest was held the following Tuesday at Hazelwood Cottage. Before beginning the evidence, the jury were

taken to view the body! The jury returned a verdict of Wilful Murder against Mr. West.

The funeral was held in Hayle, and as the body was transported through Bideford to the railway station the church bells were rung. A crowd of some 2000 people turned out for the funeral - apparently they were all very well behaved!

At the trial, on 29th January 1880, of Mr West, Sir Henry James Q.C.M.P. represented him. The defendant pleaded 'not guilty', the defence being that in his drunken state he could not have intended to commit a crime. Sir Henry put it as follows: "Of course drunkenness was no excuse for crime, but before they could excuse crime they must have crime committed. A man who consciously and intentionally committed a crime when drunk could not put forward his drunkenness as an excuse for it, but if a man's drunkenness was of such a nature that it rendered a crime that was dependent on intention to commit it, then, as there was no crime there was no need to seek for an excuse. If an act to be punishable as crime involved the necessity of an intention existing to commit it, and a knowledge of its commission, then, if the intention were absent - and therefore the knowledge were absent too- there could be no crime and no excuse was required. A man might stab another from anger produced by drink, but the drunkenness would be no excuse if he stabbed with intent to kill and knew what he was doing would produce that result. Let them take it then, that he admitted something more than mere drunkenness was required in order to show that such a man ought to be acquitted. But, if they once get drunkenness of such a kind that the prisoner was totally ignorant of what passed - drunkenness in which a person might do a foolish and dangerous act without the slightest intention of producing injury by it - then, with all deference to the learned Judge, he should say that the doctrine that drunkenness is no excuse for crime did not come into play, because the crime

producing injury by it - then, with all deference to the learned Judge, he should say that the doctrine that drunkenness is no excuse for crime did not come into play, because the crime which required intention and malice had never been committed for want of that intention and malice”.

Sir Henry obviously did a good job. The jury found Mr. West not guilty of wilful murder but guilty of manslaughter. He was committed to eight years penal servitude.

The verdict and sentence excited much comment in the local press, both in editorials and in letters to the editor. The case was compared with that of a farm labourer who received 25 years penal servitude for wounding his wife with intent to murder. The inevitable comments were made about *“one law for the rich and one for the poor”*.

That, however, was not the end of our tale. In 1888 a young German female named Evendehl applied to the Barnet magistrates for a summons against Frank West who, she alleged, had made an attempt on her life. On the strength of a promise of marriage, she had lent Mr. West various sums of money. Arriving at the conclusion that the promise would never be fulfilled she went to West to demand return, and Mr. West fired five revolver shots at her.

On hearing the allegation, West attempted to commit suicide by cutting his throat. At this, Miss Evendehl withdrew her allegations. Although at first Mr West was placed under arrest for the attempt on his own life, the Commissioners decided not to prosecute.

Some two months later Mr. West was found dead in a private room at the

Railway Hotel, New Barnet. He had committed suicide by shooting himself in the head!

HAZELWOOD OR LAUREL?

EDITORIAL NOTE:

1. Our readers will quickly link the two “F. West’s” known to them!
2. Research into the detailed references made at both the inquest and the trial, indicates that the Hazelwood Cottage of 1879 is indeed the same Hazelwood Cottage of today.
3. A mysterious quote arrived some 9 years ago on the editor’s desk which was unsigned and whose source has been untraceable, and which read:

“touched the body of Mrs West, murdered by husband”.

It was in fact this snippet which started our research. The touching of a dead person was common at one time, as it was believed that before the coffin lid was screwed down it was vital to then touch the corpse so that one would neither see nor dream about it again.

AND YET ANOTHER GHOSTAND YET ANOTHER MURDER.....

The following is extracted from the Parish Register:

“Elizabeth - servant, who was murdered by

living after the same for the space of 15 daies, he showed forth most lively fruits of true repentance”

According to The Rev. R.H. Moyses who extracted the above, the ghost of poor Elizabeth is supposed to appear in the garden of Hazel Cottage, where the murder was supposed to have taken place. We are uncertain where he gleaned this part of the story.

EDITORIAL NOTE:

1. Sharp readers of this tome will quickly ask “Hazel Cottage”? could this be the same place as Hazelwood Cottage? A coincidence or?
2. Again this came to our notice from an unnamed quote:-
“William Dillon, Hazel Cottage, murdered servant Elizabeth, who walks”
3. A further puzzle is that in the O.S. map survey of 1886, and the census return of 1881, just 7 and 2 years respectively after the murder, both show the house in question as Laurel Cottage!
4. Stranger and stranger: on the 1881 census there appears a servant girl aged 18 living at The Barton,

