



A SECTARIAN RIOT

At the Salisbury petty sessions on Tuesday last, a young man was committed to prison, for disturbing a congregation of dissenters at Alderbury. The Rev. Mr. Duke commented in strong terms on the enormity of the offence, and sentenced him to two years imprisonment.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, Thursday, 14 December 1826

On Tuesday the 5th instant, George Petty, of the parish of Alderbury, labourer, was committed by the Rev. Mr. Duke, under the directions of the 52nd of Geo III, chap 55, for trial at the ensuing quarter sessions, being charged with disturbing a dissenting congregation at Alderbury on Sunday Nov. 26, by the throwing of stones and brick-bats against the chapel, and assaulting the congregation therein; and on the following Friday, Thomas Harford, an accomplice, was committed in like manner by Edw. Baker, Esq under the like charge.

Salisbury and Winchester Journal, Monday, 18 December 1826

The defendants, George Petty and Thomas Harford, of the parish of Alderbury, Wilts. Labourers, were indicted for riotously assembling on the 26th November last in the parish of Alderbury, and disturbing a congregation of Wesleyan Methodists, the and there assembled for religious worship, against the peace of the King, and endangering the safety of certain of his Majesty's liege subjects.

The circumstances of the above riot were marked with peculiar atrocity:-

From the evidence given of the trial, it appeared that on the evening of the 26th November, the defendants, and other persons, hitherto unknown, assembled at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, at the place aforesaid, and that a few minutes after the commencement of the service they riotously assaulted the Chapel with stones and brick-bats, which continued nearly the whole of the service; by which means the door was forced off its hinges, the latch struck off, and a brick-bat was thrown into the Chapel, which struck two persons so that the service was not only interrupted, but the personal safety of the congregation greatly endangered.

The Chairman, in summing up the evidence, observed to the Jury, that, though it was evident from the effects produced, that the stones which were thrown were large, that this was no material circumstance, except to mark its atrocity, as the throwing of pebbles, accompanied with noise and tumult, was sufficient to constitute a riot; and that every person so assembled, whether they threw stones or not, was equally guilty, the act of one being considered as the act of the whole.

The Jury immediately returned a verdict of guilty against both the defendants.

In his address to the defendants, the Chairman observed, that they were both found guilty of an atrocious and heinous offence, and, but for the mercy of the prosecutors. Their punishment would have been much greater. They were, therefore, sentenced to pay a fine of forty shillings each, and to be imprisoned for three calendar months, and further till the money be paid.

The Prosecutors embrace this opportunity of stating, that they have been actuated by no vindictive feelings in the above case, that they were forced to adopt this mode of proceeding as the only alternative, for the protection of life and property, and they sincerely hope, that no occasion for a similar proceeding will ever occur. And, at the same time, they wish publicly to acknowledge their gratitude to the enlightened Magistracy of this County, for the promptness with which they have shown themselves to be a "terror to evil-doers, and a praise to them that do well."

Salisbury and Winchester Journal, Monday, 15 January 1827

A Further Account With Differing Detail

Disturbing a Dissenting Congregation

The King on the prosecution of James Dredge, against George Petty and Thomas Harford. These prisoners were indicted under the statute 52 Geo. 3, for willfully and maliciously disturbing the preacher and a congregation of persons, denominated Wesleyan Methodists, assembled for religious worship at Alderbury, in this county, on Sunday evening, the 26th November, 1826.

The prosecutor (Mr. Dredge) is a schoolmaster residing at Salisbury, and a preacher among the Wesleyan Methodists. While preaching in the above chapel on the evening of the 26th Nov. the prisoners, in company with about 20 other persons, were assembled at a short distance; who, within a few minutes after the commencement of Divine Service, threw a number of brickbats and stones at the chapel door; and with shouts and other noises frequently interrupted the prayers and the sermon. They continued their disturbance for upwards of an hour, with a cessation only sufficient to enable them to procure missiles: their violence was at length so great, that the door was struck off one of its hinges – a knot of wood knocked completely out, and a brickbat thrown into the chapel which struck two of the congregation. During this time had the preacher or any of the congregation ventured to have gone out, their lives, no doubt, would have been endangered.

The Jury without hesitation found both the prisoners guilty: and Mr. Estcourt, after dwelling on the enormity of the offence, told them, that but for the merciful intercessions of their prosecutors, he should have felt it his duty to pass upon them a very severe sentence, (which they richly merited.)

They were then sentenced to be imprisoned three months, to pay a fine of 40s. each; and to be further imprisoned until that fine be paid.

There has been preaching at Alderbury for the last 6 years, during which period the preachers and the congregation have been frequently disturbed in their devotions, by stones and other things being thrown into the chapel. Offensive and indecent observations have also been made, on the congregation going to and returning from Chapel, which have been the means of deterring several females from attending.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, Thursday, 18 January 1827