



Arson at Ludgershall 1830

Committed to Fisherton Gaol

Henry Wilkins, of Chute, charged with having, in company with many others, on the 28th of November feloniously set fire to and burnt a cottage in the occupation of Robert Chandler, of Ludgershall.

Salisbury & Winchester Journal, Monday, 7 February 1831

Wilts Lent Assizes Salisbury

Henry Wilkins was indicted, for having, in company with several other persons, riotously assembled together, and feloniously set fire to, and burnt down a cottage or dwelling house, the property of William Peachey, at Ludgershall, on the 20th November last. Mr. Missing, having stated the case, proceeded to call the following witnesses.

Henry Barnes is the son of John Barnes, who lives at Choddesden farm; witness, on the 20th November, in consequence of information he received, went to South Park farm, Ludgershall, about 9 o'clock; the barn, stable, and cart-house were on fire when he arrived.

A considerable number of people were assembled, about 70 or 100; there was a cottage about 20 or 25 yards distant from the cart-house; a man named Robert Chandler, lived there; witness remained about 20 minutes; when he left, the fire had not communicated to the cottage, it was still evening; the buildings were quite destroyed; the farm is rented of William Peachey, esq. Cross-examined by Mr. Role: It was rather a dark night, the people assembled at the fire were not attempting to extinguish it - did not see them do any mischief.

Thomas Smith; I am a labourer, and live at Ludgershall. The night of the 20th November, I went to bed about 8 o'clock, was called up soon after by my father; went to South Park fire, there was about 100 people there; the barn, cart-house and stable, were burning; the cottage was not then on fire; the prisoner at the bar was there, had known him a long time, he had on a blue frock and a fur cap. I saw him take up some thatch and put upon the mud wall, which adjoins the cottage; the wall was thatched, he placed it close under the eaves of the house, he then went and got more straw, and set fire to it; I was about three yards from him; someone came and brushed the straw off; I afterwards saw the prisoner bring from the barn, the hinge of the door, and take it into the cottage; one end was red hot, the other end he twisted some straw round; I saw several other persons go in to the cottage with him; he had been in the cottage about a quarter of an hour, when I observed a fire inside the house, upstairs; the fire increased; the cottage was entirely destroyed; the fire burnt through the roof.

Robert Spicer corroborated the last witness.

Richard Hopgood - I went to South Park on the evening of the fire; I saw the prisoner at the bar there, dressed in a blue frock and a fur cap; I saw him take up a fire-brand, and take some paper from his pocket and put round it; he carried it towards the cottage; it was about two hours before the cottage was on fire.

John Baden - I went to the fire on the night in question, and assisted Chandler in removing his goods; I carried out two of his children; I saw a man in a blue frock and a furry cap there; I saw him take some straw, and lay it on the wall close to the house; I saw him take some lighted straw and lay it on the other; Robert Chandler knocked it off with a stick; saw prisoner take a bar red hot on a stick, and carry it towards the cottage; in about a quarter of an hour afterwards, I saw a light through the cottage window; I then saw smoke through the thatch, and soon after the whole house was in flames.

Harriett Gibbs - I recollect, on the 21st November last, a mob coming to my husband's house, about 9 o'clock at night, Elizabeth Hopgood was with me, my husband was from home; about twenty persons came into the house; the prisoner at the bar was amongst them; he had on a blue frock; he remained behind with another man after the rest had departed; they sat down in the chimney corner and began talking about fires; there was a fire at Chute, two and a half miles off at the time; I and Hopgood went out to look at it; I asked the men if they had fired anything before they came there; the prisoner said we had not set anything on fire then, but a fire or two didn't matter; we were at a fire last night, at Mr. Barnes's of Choddesden; I asked them what they burnt there? He said a barn, a barn full of oats, a mow wagon, a cart-house and two rollers; I asked them if they had burnt a dwelling house; he said it was not a dwelling house but a cottage; he said they flung fire brands on the house to try to catch it, but they could not; he said he went inside the cottage, pulled something down and lighted it; I am quite sure the prisoner at the bar is the man who said this; he stayed in the house about three quarters of an hour and then went away.

Thomas Gibbs, of Vernham Dean, labourer - I am the son of the last witness; I heard prisoner say, if the Vernham farmers do not lug out pretty well before morning, I will serve them the same as I did at Choddesden, I will set it all in flames; he then said, "I flung firebrand upon firebrand on the thatch of the cottage house, but I could not light it, I went indoors, and bored a hole through the ceiling, put a light through, and then it burnt away a good one."

The prisoner in his defence said, that on his examination, Sir Lucius Curtis, the magistrate, stated, that he knew North to be the man who set fire to the cottage, and that one of the witnesses gave his evidence from spite towards him; he was innocent of the charge brought against him.

Guilty. The prisoner was then removed from the bar.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, Thursday, 10 March 1831

Salisbury Assizes. Wednesday. Arson.

Henry Wilkins was indicted for having, in company with several other persons, riotously assembled together, and feloniously set fire to and burnt down a cottage or dwelling-house, the property of Wm. Peachey, at Ludgershall, on the 20th November last.

It appeared from the evidence, that a fire broke out at South Park Farm, at nine o'clock in the evening of the day above named. There was a cottage, about 25 yards distant from the conflagration, which the prisoner was seen attempting to fire. Two of the witnesses deposed, that he had confessed to the commission of the crime, saying, that, having flung firebrand upon firebrand on the thatch unsuccessfully, he had entered the cottage, and bored a hole through the ceiling, when it "burnt away a good one."

The prisoner, when called on for his defence, protested his innocence, and stated that the witnesses against him were actuated by spite.

Mr. Batchellor, with whom the prisoner had worked, and who had known him from a boy, gave him a most excellent character.

Verdict, Guilty. Death.

Wednesday - Henry Wilkins was again brought to the bar, to receive sentence of death.

His Lordship concluded an eloquent and feeling address by entreating the prisoner to dismiss from his mind all hope of mercy, and to make his peace with Heaven. The learned Judge, during the delivery of his address, was considerably affected, and it made a deep impression on all present.

Salisbury and Winchester Journal, 14 March 1831

Setting Fire to Premises

Henry Wilkins, aged 24, was indicted on having, on the night of the 20th of November last, feloniously and maliciously set fire to a cottage at South Park, the property of William Peachy, Esq. From the evidence tendered in support of the charge, it appeared the fire began in outhouses and farmhouses attached to the cottage, whereby they were all burnt to the ground, together with various implements of husbandry, and about 160 quarters of wheat. This took place before the fire broke out in the cottage, where a tenant of the prosecutor, together with his wife and seven children, lived. After the destruction of the farmhouses, the prisoner attempted to set fire to the cottage from the outside, but, not being able to accomplish that object, he threw a red-hot iron hinge torn from a burning barn-door, and went into the cottage with some other persons, all of who remained inside for a short time, and then the roof of the house became ignited, and blazed forth furiously. The prosecutor's servant and his family escaped from the cottage, when they found that the outhouses were on fire. The evidence against the prisoner was chiefly of a very strong circumstantial character, and which was greatly confirmed by his own previous declaration of his intentions, and his subsequent confession that he was not the man who set the premises on fire, but that he was one of the three who were concerned in the perpetration of the act. The jury found the prisoner guilty. Mr. Justice Park proceeded to pass sentence of death on the prisoner.

His lordship, in the most feeling manner, pointed out to the prisoner the monstrous enormity of the crime of which he had been convicted, and the utter hopelessness of that sentence being commuted from its just rigour; the law in this case would most certainly be carried into execution. His lordship, after imploring the prisoner to make the best use of his short time now left to him in acts of repentance, sentenced him to be hanged

Chester Courant, 22 March 1830

Henry Wilkins, convicted at the Wilts Assizes of setting fire to a cottage in Ludgershall, was executed in front of Fisherton Gaol on Tuesday last. During the last three years, this man has led a wicked and dissolute life; and, like most others who arrive at an ignominious end, the origin is to be found in a total neglect of the Sabbath, which, from his confession, appears to have been passed in the alehouse, instead of the church. For some days after the trial, he persisted in his declaration of innocence, observing that he was about to suffer for the act of another man. The case, however, was too clearly proved at the trial to admit of a doubt; and the pious exhortations of the Chaplain at length induced him to confess that he was the person who set fire to the cottage. After this his mind was more at ease, and he appeared penitent.

Bristol Mirror, 26 March 1831

[A report of his execution appeared as follows:-] Henry Wilkins convicted of arson at the same Assizes [Wilts], suffered on Monday last.

Worcester Herald, 26 March 1831

Henry Wilkins, convicted at the Wilts Assizes of setting fire to a cottage in Ludgershall, was executed in front of Fisherton Gaol on Tuesday last. During the last three years, this man has led a wicked and dissolute life; and, like most others who arrive at an ignominious end, the origin is to be found in a total neglect of the Sabbath, which, from his confession, appears to have been passed in the alehouse, instead of the church. For some days after the trial, he persisted in his declaration of innocence, observing that he was about to suffer for the act of another man. The case, however, was too clearly proved at the trial to admit of a doubt; and the pious exhortations of the Chaplain at length induced him to confess that he was the person who set fire to the cottage.

After this his mind was more at ease, and he appeared penitent. Being a strong muscular man, he did not die with great struggle. After hanging the usual time, his body was given to his friends.

Hampshire Chronicle, 28 March 1831

Execution

On Tuesday last, Henry Wilkins, convicted at our last Assizes of having set fire to a cottage at Shoddesden, in the parish of Ludgershall, in this county, was executed on the drop erected for that purpose over the entrance into the gaol of Fisherton. This unfortunate young man had, for some little time past, led a most wicked and dissolute life; and though, for some days after his trial, he persevered in his declaration of innocence, alleging that the crime for which he was doomed to suffer was committed by one of his associates, who has since absconded, he was induced to confess (after maturely reflecting on the awful fate that so soon awaited him) that his sentence was just, and that he was a guilty man. After this acknowledgement, he evinced marks of the deepest contrition, and his mind became more tranquil and composed. From this moment he began to prepare himself for another world, by reading and meditating on the word of God, and by fervent and persevering prayer for the forgiveness of this, and all sins of his past life. On the afternoon preceding the day on which he suffered, he took an affectionate and final farewell of his mother, his four brothers, and his uncle. The interview was truly affecting and after recommending them to take warning by his fate, to read their Bibles, to attend their Church, and to live daily in the constant exercise of prayer, from which he had, for the short time he had devoted himself to it, derived so much of his present comfort and consolation, he took his last leave of them. On the morning of his execution, he received, at his own previous request, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. After joining with the chaplain in fervent prayer, he proceeded from the chapel to the place of execution, in front of which, after taking leave of his fellow prisoners, and addressing them in a similar strain of advice to that which he had given to his relatives the day before, he ascended the fatal drop, and after the requisite preparations were adjusted, he gave the signal and was immediately launched into eternity. In consequence of being a strong, muscular man, he died with many convulsive struggles. After hanging the usual time, his body was taken down and delivered to his relatives for interment.

Salisbury and Winchester Journal, 28 March 1831

OPC Note:

Many other shorter reports were published in Newspapers around the country. Above are a selection of those found.