

# *Tragedy at Mildenhall*

1879

In the bank beside the Marlborough to Ramsbury road and opposite the Old Rectory stands a small stone cross erected to the memory of Alfred Henry Pounds Watts or Henry as more commonly known. The cross was erected by friends and family of Henry who was fatally injured while trying to stop a team of runaway horses.

Harry was just 14 at the time of his death and lived at Axford and worked as a ploughboy for Mr. Stephen Butler a farmer from Stitchcombe.

On Monday May 12th 1879, Henry with Mr. Henry Pett, a carter on the farm took some sacks of wheat in a cart drawn by three horses to Marlborough railway station. They returned to the farm and loaded another load of sacks and left at about 12.30 pm. On the return journey they had loaded 2 tons of coal and had left Marlborough station at about a quarter to four in the company of a second wagon loaded with coal owned by Mr. Butler. At the Bear & Castle (now the Bear Hotel) at the eastern end of Marlborough High Street they stopped to share a quart of ale (2 pints) provided by Mr. Steele from whom they had got the coal. This was shared with the other 2 carters from the other wagon. At the Queens head they halted again and shared another quart of beer between the four of them. The two wagons continued on their final leg home with Harry walking next to the first horse and Mr. Pett next to the third. They were the lead wagon.

After travelling about a mile they reached the top of the slope by Mildenhall Rectory when suddenly the leading wagons horses bolted. Mr. Pett tried to grab the third horse but was knocked to the floor by the shaft. Unhurt he scrambled to his feet to race after Harry who was a few yards further on desperately trying to hold onto the rearing and plunging horses. The horses were far too strong for Harry and Mr. Pett watched in horror as Harry slipped and fell beneath the wagon and saw one of the wheels of the wagon run over the lifeless body of Harry. The horses continued their frenzied run down the slope but came to grief when they landed in a pile amongst the debris of coal and the wagon remains. Two riders were approaching from Mildenhall as they fell, one stating that had they not been delayed they would have ended up in the pile too. The other ride a Mr. Musselwhite of Marlborough recognised that the wagon belonged to Mr. Butler and immediately rode off to fetch him.

Mrs. Brown of Mildenhall was driving not far behind the two wagons and seeing the accident and Harry's body she turned around and fetched a doctor from Marlborough. The doctor arrived to find Harry alive but thankfully unconscious since he injuries were severe. Mr. Pett carried Harry to the nearest house in Mildenhall where Harry died at five past seven not having regained consciousness. The doctor pronounced the boy extinct and arranged for the body to be returned to his home.

The inquest was held at Harry's home on Thursday 15th May 1879. Mr. Whitmarsh was the coroner and Mr. C. Mortimer lead the jury. Mr. Pett was the first witness to be called to give evidence. He told the jury that he had never known the horses to bolt before and that they were mild mannered animals and that he had no idea what made them react so out of character. Mr. Pett was commended by the coroner for the way he had presented his evidence. Next the attending doctor gave his account stating that he left for Mildenhall immediately Mrs. Brown had told him of the accident. He stated that the boy's condition was hopeless at the outset with almost every bone in his

body broken. His ribs, sternum, clavicle and shoulder joint all crushed and there was nothing the doctor could do to save the boy's life. He also stated that Mr. Pett and the other two carters were sober at the time of the accident.

Mr. Butler giving his evidence expressed much sorrow at what had happened and also stated he was mystified over the horses having bolted as they had done. He confirmed the horses to be of a mild temperament. He said when he arrived attempts were being made to clear the road as it had been almost blocked. The horses were got to their feet and on examination the lead horse was found to have a broken leg so badly crushed that the horse had to be shot later that evening. The horse had been purchased as a colt for £75 and was now worth between £90 and £100. The horse had always been a docile animal according to Mr. Butler. The wagon was considerably damaged and the wheels were broken. It took some time to finally clear the road.

The coroner in summing up praised Mr. Pett for his behaviour throughout the incident. The evidence he said was plain and conclusive and he was thankful that no blame be laid to anyone.. The jury agreed and a verdict of "Accidentally killed" was returned. The fees of the jury were given to Harry's mother whose distress was sad to see. Harry was buried the following day Friday 16th May at Axford. His memorial stone still stands in the churchyard and reads

In  
Loving Remembrance  
of  
Alfred Henry Pounds Watts  
Aged Fourteen Years  
Who was accidentally killed  
At Mildenhall May 12th  
Interred at Axford May 16th 1879  
"Weep not my parents at the doom  
Which gives you child an early tomb,  
Weep not when my grave you see,  
Prepare yourselves and follow me".

Not long afterwards the cross at the spot where Harry died was erected. The inscription reads.

A. H. P. WATTS  
MAY 12  
1879

Despite the evidence it was widely rumoured that the horses had bolted at the sound of a gun being fired nearby although in no newspaper reports nor in the coroner's report was there any mention of a gunshot by any of the witnesses.

However it leaves the question who paid for the headstone on the grave so elaborately detailed and who paid for the stone cross at the site of the accident. Was there any truth in the gunshot theory and the perpetrator remorsefully paid for their involvement. Time has erased the chance of ever knowing. But something spooked the horses that day.