



Crime News Potterne 1857

DEVIZES DISTRICT PETTY SESSIONS – Monday
Before W. B. Seagram esq. The Rev. A. Smith, and Simon Watson Taylor esq.

A POTTERNE LOT

Ten of about as rough a lot of fellows as one would wish to see together were next placed before the bench, charged with having been concerned in exhibiting disgusting effigies in the streets of the notable village of Potterne on the evenings of the 10th, 11th, and 12th of Feb. last. Their names were *Alfred Wilkins, Robt. Cooksey, Robt. Marshman, George Hampton and James Burt*, who were charged with having been principals in the affair; and *James Marshman, John Willis, James Bond and George Rooke*, charged with aiding and abetting it.

On being asked whether they admitted the charge, the six principals at once replied in the affirmative, and justified the act, on the ground that breaches of morality in the immaculate village of Potterne – which the present exhibition was intended to illustrate – had from time immemorial been “celebrated”; it was in fact, they, affirmed, “a Potterne custom,” as old as the church itself, and that they had been interfered with in continuing it, was rather (in their view) an infringement of one of the ancient rights of the place, than an offence against the law.

The 4 defendants who were charged with aiding and abetting the exhibition, however, denied having taken the part imputed to them; and the evidence of the police was therefore necessary in order to bring the charge home to them.

John Major (a police constable) said he was on duty on Tuesday evening the 10th of Feb., in Potterne street, when he saw a great crowd of men, women, and children come from the direction of James Marshman's house. James Cooksey and Robert Marshman were carrying large effigies representing a male and female, hoisted on long poles. The male figure was 6 feet high, the female figure rather smaller. [The constable here gave a description of the figures, which is unfit for publication]. The figures were carried up and down Potterne Street, accompanied by the firing of guns, and beating of pots and kettles, and all sorts of discordant noises. Mr. Superintendent Wolfe happened to be in the village at the time, and attempted to take them away, but James and Robert Marshman and Cooksey resisted his doing so, and the figures continued to be carried about for an hour or more afterwards – James Willis making a very indecent observation upon Mr. Wolfe's interference. While the disturbance was going on no person could pass with safety through the street; three vehicles coming towards Devizes were obliged to go round the lane by Mr. Lye's, turning in opposite “The George” and coming out at the Butts, near the Vicarage. It was half-past 8 or 9 o'clock before the effigies were withdrawn: they were taken back to Marshman's. The same exhibition was repeated on the next night – James Burt carrying one of the figures; and on the third night the figures were again being brought out by Alfred Wilkins and Geo. Hampton, amidst a crowd

of people, when the police (which had now assembled in larger force) succeeded in taking them away, and carried them to the police station. The crowd (Major said) would, he believed, then have dispersed quietly, had not Geo. Rooke urged them to begin again – at the same time using the most foul language towards the police. They then began ringing a bell – passing it from one to the other. Major went among them to take it away, and had just caught Jas, Bond (who had it in his hand) by the collar when he received two blows in the back, and stones began to fly about in all directions. One hit his hat, and another went through the round house window.

After this, the leaders of the party went to Lawrence Belcher's yard, got some more straw, which the wrapped in a bundle to represent as well as they could a figure, and paraded the streets with it for about 2 hours – the principal leader being James Bond. Every time they passed the policeman's house, a large stone came against the door, till the door was beaten in holes; and stones were also flung at horses which passed through the street; one horse, which was being driven in a gig with two gentlemen, was struck in the head, and went off at a full gallop. The mail cart also was stop'd, and the driver was obliged to get out and lead his horse through the village. [A large basket of stones which had been thrown at the police station was produced, before the bench]. The whole affair ended by the straw effigy being taken in front of the house of a shop keeper named Warman, and there set on fire.

Other members of the Police Force gave similar evidence, implicating one or other of the defendants, as having taken part, either in promoting or in aiding and abetting the disgusting exhibition. The defendants again asserted that they could bring several respectable farmers to speak to the antiquity of the custom, and to the fact that no attempt had ever before been made to put a stop to similar demonstrations.

MR. SEAGRAM said the Bench were quite of opinion that all of them were guilty of the offence charged against them; but they did not wish to be too severe, as this was the first occasion of any complaint of the sort having been publicly made. If the defendants therefore would consent to be bound in a bond of £10 each to keep the peace for the next twelve months, they might go. If not, the Bench would proceed with the case under the Vagrant Act; and, if convicted, all of them would go to prison – as they undoubtedly would, if they were ever again brought up on a similar charge.

Two or three of the foremost of the gang at first refused to be bound – especially when informed that the process would entail an immediate payment of 10s. each, but after a little persuasion, the money was forthcoming, and the whole of them left the office with an air of triumph; - “b-a-a-h-ing” in imitation of “lambs” and making all sorts of observations upon “the wolf” (as they designated Mr. Superintendent Wolfe) who had attempted to disturb their innocent fold.

On the return of the party to Potterne, a general carousal took place and a subscription was entered into among the pot-companions of the defendants to defray the expences.

A second charge was made against one of the defendants (*James Bond*) of damaging a door and other articles to the amount of 10s., the property of Wm. Warman, on the last night of the “celebration”. Complainant stated that a great mob came to his house on the night of the 12th headed by Bond, who threatened to smash the door and windows in, if he (Warman) did not bring them out some drink; Bond, at the same time dealing some heavy blow upon the door and shutters, whereby a quantity of glass was broken, and other injury done to the amount stated.

A third charge was also made against Bond for assaulting Henry Warman (son of the previous complainant) on the same night, and which appeared to have arisen out of the same transaction. - The Bench, however, did not consider this latter case proved, but they ordered the defendant to pay 20s. (including damage and costs) in the previous case.

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