



The White Family Vault, St. Margaret Churchyard, Stratton St. Margaret

Violation of Coffin at Funeral

Swindon Police Court

Monday, July 8.

Before David Archer, Esq., H. Tucker, Esq., and W. W. Codrington Esq.

Thomas Watkins, of Stratton St. Margaret was brought up in custody, charged by the churchwardens of Stratton with having been guilty of violent and indecent behaviour in the churchyard of the parish church at Stratton St. Margaret, on the 14th April last. From the evidence of several witnesses it appeared that the offence with which Watkins stood charged was one of the most coldblooded and devilish character of which a human being could be guilty. It appears that between two and three years since Mrs. White, the widow of Mr. Richard White, of Stratton St. Margaret, brewer, in consequence of giving up the business carried on by her late husband to her son, built a dwelling house in the village not far from the brewery, in which to spend the remainder of her days. Mr. Habgood, of Stratton, builder, was employed by Mrs. White to sink a well for the use of the new house, and he employed Watkins to do the work under his directions. Although Mrs. White had nothing to do directly with Watkins, she gave him occasionally some beer whilst engaged in digging the well, but the quantity so given does not seem to have come up to Watkins' expectation, for he was subsequently heard to declare, in the most obscene and filthy language, that he would be revenged upon Mrs. White for not having given him more beer. Among other indignities he swore he would offer to Mrs. White was the extraordinary one of dancing on her coffin. Two years, however, after this diabolical threat was uttered he actually carried it out. In April last Mrs. White died at Bath, to which place she had gone to attend the death-bed of a daughter just returned from Australia. The body was in due course removed to Stratton for interment in the family vault, the funeral taking place on the 24th of April. Directly after the coffin had been placed in the open vault a storm of rain came on, and the workmen whose business it was to cover the vault over took shelter under the church porch. Watkins, who had been lurking in the churchyard during the interment, now came forward, and jumping on the coffin, tried, by stamping on it with all his force, to break it open, at the time making use of such expressions as "Wake up you old _____" "Bist asleep?" "I said I'd do it, and now I done

it," and the like. When he was tired of stamping on the coffin he made water on it, and then left the grave.

Several witnesses deposed to having witnessed the diabolical outrage. No effort appears to have been made to interfere with Watkins whilst committing the outrage, but immediate information was given to the churchwardens, who at once took out a summons. Watkins, hearing what had been done, absconded, and was not heard of until the other day, when he was apprehended at Gloucester. Watkins, who is a married man and the father of a family, and about 50 years of age, declined to cross-examine either of the witnesses, simply remarking it was no use his saying anything, for they would swear anything.

The magistrates having retired, Mr. Archer, on their return into court, said this was the most revolting and disgusting case that had ever been brought before him as a magistrate, or, indeed, that he had ever heard of. Feeling assured that any remarks he might make would be thrown away upon such a fellow, he should simply pronounce the decision of the court. The magistrates had unanimously decided to inflict upon him the utmost punishment in their power, namely two months imprisonment, the first 14 days of which would be spent in solitary confinement, and the remainder of the term with hard labour.

Addressing Mr. Blunsdon, one of the churchwardens, Mr. Archer said the magistrates could not help expressing their opinion publicly that the sexton appeared to have neglected his duty in a most shameful manner. Had he attended to the covering of the vault as he ought to have done this revolting and disgusting outrage could not have been perpetrated.

Mr. Blunsdon said he fully agreed with Mr. Archer as to the sexton's neglect, and he and his brother churchwarden had severely reprimanded him and cautioned him as to his future conduct.

Swindon Advertiser, 15 July 1867