



Mill Fire at Trowbridge 1862

Serious Charge Of Arson At Trowbridge

Salisbury, Crown Court, Monday, (Before Mr. Justice Denman)

James Adey, (the younger), a manufacturer, 40 years of age, was charged with setting fire to a cloth mill owned by him and his brother at Trowbridge, on the 18th of April.

Mr. Collins, Q.C., with Mr. Lopes, were for the prosecution, and the prisoner was defended by Mr. Norris and Mr. Lush. In opening the case, Mr. Collins said that prior to April last the prisoner and his brother were the owners and occupiers of a woollen mill at Trowbridge, and that they had been in business about two years. The mill was an old one, and a large portion of the machinery with which it was fitted was old-fashioned, and to a considerable degree worn out. In July 1876, the prisoner insured the building in the Sun Fire Office for £1,500; on the 21st September, 1877, he insured the stock and machinery for yet another £2,000; and on 29th January, 1878, he insured the stock, gear, and machinery in the Mutual for another £2,000; and on the 8th April 1878 (only a week before the fire), he insured the stock and machinery for yet another £2,000; Therefore the insurance in force at the time of the fire amounted to £7,500. Nearly all the cloth that had been manufactured was removed in the first week in April, and consigned to a carrier in London, and at the time of the fire very little stock remained in the mill. Traces of only 15 bales could be discovered.

All the workpeople left the factory at two o'clock on the day of the fire, and at that time everything appeared to be safe. The prisoner left the mill with his brother at half-past two, and locked the door with his own hands. Within a few minutes of half-past three the prisoner was seen to re-enter the mill, and about five minutes after he left smoke was seen issuing from one of the windows. On an entrance being effected, it was found that the mill must have been fired at three or four different points. One of the witnesses went to the iron safe in the counting-house and found the door open, so that if the books had not been rescued at that moment, every vestige of them would have disappeared. The prisoner was seen at the New Bear Inn, Bradford, at six o'clock, and was heard enquiring about the trains for Bristol. He

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asked two men who came in if they had heard of a fire at Trowbridge or Bradford, and they said they had not. On Sunday morning, the prisoner was seen at the Bristol Railway station, and was there told that his mill had been burnt down. He expressed great surprise, and took the train for Trowbridge the same evening.

On the following morning Mr. Daniels, of Bristol, who had taken possession of the premises on behalf of the Insurance Companies, asked the prisoner what he knew about the fire; and he replied, "I and my brother locked up the mill at half-past two on Saturday. Everything was safe then. I took the keys home. I walked through the town at a quarter to three. I then walked through Bradford to Freshford, where I took the train at 7.45 for Bristol. I first heard of the fire at the railway-station at Bristol. I was not at the mill after I left with my brother at half-past two. The next time I saw the mill was on Sunday evening, when I returned." Prisoner was asked why he was not telegraphed for from Bristol, and he said he supposed it was because he left no address, he being in the habit of staying at so many different places at Bristol. On the 25th April the prisoner sent in his claim against the Insurance Companies. He claimed £5,997 5s 6d in respect of the machinery and building, and £3, 106 18s in respect of the stock-in-trade – claims which the witnesses for the prosecution were prepared to show were, if not fraudulent, enormously excessive. If the claim was fraudulent, then the prisoner's motive for setting fire to the mill was perfectly clear.

A large number of witnesses were called to support the charge, amongst them being Samuel Litman, the station-master at Freshford (who stated that he did not book any passenger to Bristol by the train the prisoner said he went by), and R.E. Lister, an engineer and machinist, who expressed an opinion that at the time of the fire the value of the plant in the mill was only £1,510, and he considered that the damage done only reached £768 10s.

Mr. Norris, after consultation with his client, decided not to call witnesses for the defence, but made a very clever speech to the jury, in which he endeavoured to show that the fire might have been accidentally caused.

After His Lordships' summing up, which lasted about an hour and three-quarters, the jury retired to consider their verdict. They returned into Court in about 12 minutes, with a verdict of guilty, but recommended the prisoner to mercy on account of the good character given him by Mr. Marling, M.P. for Stroud, who stated that prisoner has been in their employment for 20 years. His Lordship sentenced the prisoner to 10 years' penal servitude and told him that a person committing the crime of arson could be punished by penal servitude for life. The case lasted the whole of Monday, and till after four o'clock on Tuesday, the end of the case being also the end of the Assizes."

Western Gazette, Friday 19 July 1878