

SHOCKING MURDER AT PRISTON

Priston may now seem a calm and peaceful village, but in December 1851 the village was rocked by a shocking murder. The following account has been pieced together from the extensive national and local newspaper reports of the time.

On Mon 1 December 1851 George Bush, 36, a milkman living in Timsbury, left his lodgings in Timsbury at about 1pm to attend an auction in Priston for the purpose of buying a cow, in which endeavour he was unsuccessful. He had told his landlady Eliza Flowers that he would return early that evening. He had £4-£5 in his pocket. After the sale he went to the Ring of Bells public house. Between 8-9pm a dispute arose between him and a group of friends. Bush then left to go home, taking a path “which was extremely lonely, leading through a field called Cow Lees” [the stretch of the Priston valley from the standing stone to just before the far end of Priston Wood].

Early on Tuesday morning Eliza Flower sent two of her children to look for Bush. They were very much frightened to find him lying near the footpath in the middle of the field with his throat cut in a most shocking manner. The children told their mother and soon several men were on the spot. The throat had been cut from ear to ear and the wound stuffed with grass. The trouser pockets had been rifled of their contents and turned inside out. At 4pm the body was conveyed to the porch of Priston church with the permission of the clergyman. Two sixpences were found on the grass under the deceased and in his waistcoat a few pence. He was “short in stature and an inoffensive man”.

On the Wednesday an inquest was held, but little evidence was taken other than to identify the body. Suspicions initially fell on George Bush’s landlady Eliza Flower, her family and a Stephen Box, who were all arrested on the basis of evidence that they had been discussing Bush and his money and planning to meet him on his way back to Timsbury. However, subsequently the police also arrested James Evans, a butcher from Farmborough.

At an initial hearing on Tuesday 9 Dec evidence was given that at 7-8pm on the Monday evening George Bush had left the pub, shortly after which Evans had asked for the bill. Bush had not paid his share and Evans said to a man called Ricketts that “Bush was a **** mean fellow and ought to have his head chopped off”. He then left the pub with Ricketts but they returned after about 20mins. On Evan’s arrest half a sovereign and some silver was found on him, together with a phleme, a blade used for bleeding cattle, which had some blood on it. Blood was also found on Evans’ clothes, although this was not necessarily suspicious, as he was a butcher.

At a hearing on Friday 13 December evidence was given that a man called Downey had been in the Ring of Bells and fired a gun off at a candle and had won a pint of beer from Bush as a result. Bush had then left, followed by Evans, who had returned shortly afterwards. Downey had the next Sunday found blood down the left side of his jacket, the side on which Evans had been standing with him at the pub. Evans’ lawyer then spoke at length about Evans’ good character. He said that if the Court were to remand Evans he would call witnesses to show that no threats had been made against Bush and that Evans had only been away from the pub for a few minutes. The Court remanded Evans and discharged Mrs. Flower and her family who had been arrested previously.

At a further hearing on Wednesday 18 December, the police offered no further evidence against Evans. It was stated that the distance between the pub and the site of the murder was a 10-minute walk. Evans had only been absent from the pub for 15 mins and so could not have committed the murder. There was insufficient blood on Evan's clothes to determine if it was of human or animal origin. Evans was discharged but was told he would be re-apprehended if further evidence was found.

There were then no further developments until July 1852, when an Irishman known as John *alias* Christopher Smith *alias* Hasley who was being held in Dorset County Gaol for vagrancy confessed to the murder. At the initial hearing he said that he was in the Ring of Bells pub selling lucifers (matches) and other items. He had seen Bush pull out a purse which had tempted him. He had followed Bush out of the pub for two or three fields. He stated "I tripped him up with my foot. He fell on the back of his head and called out murder very loudly, and said to me, do you want to murder me? I replied to him, yes. I was then much stronger and active than I am now, and I held him for a few minutes and drew my knife across his throat two or three times, and he never moved afterwards. There was not much struggling as it was soon over . . . I tore up some grass and stuffed it into the cut. I then took his purse and did not get more than 7 or 8 shillings . . . I am sorry for it, it was a cold-blooded deed . . . I am perfectly prepared to die for it". On being offered food Smith said "it is no use giving food to a man like me, I am a murderer, I committed the deed and a blood-thirsty fellow like me ought to be quartered alive".

At a further hearing before the County Magistrates, evidence was given that Smith had been seen in and around Priston on the day of the murder. Fanny Knowles, was a servant to Farmer Keeling of Rock Hill, only a short distance from where the body was found. She identified Smith as the man who had come to the house selling lucifers, needles and pins. A Priscilla Lambert had seen him the next day, with blood spots on his clothes. The Surgeon testified that there was damage to the back of Bush's skull which could have been caused by him falling backwards on to a sharp stone. Wounds on Smith's hand were said to have been accidentally incurred during the murder. Smith was committed to trial at the Somerset Assizes.

At the trial in August 1852 Smith pleaded guilty to the crime. The Judge then said "this man does not know what he is about, is the surgeon of the gaol here". On being told there was only a certificate the Judge insisted "that won't do, surgeons appear to think their certificates are all-powerful. I want to examine this gentleman [the surgeon] under oath". Medical evidence was then taken as to the state of Smith's mind. The surgeon of Shepton Mallet Gaol had observed him frequently and conversed with him. His view was that Smith was definitely insane. The surgeon of Dorchester Gaol contradicted this, saying there was nothing to show that Smith was not perfectly sane. The superintendent of the County Lunatic Asylum said that based on his extensive experience Smith was definitely insane – during his conversations Smith had confessed to a number of other murders and said he had made a vow against the use of tobacco which he had subsequently broken, and attributed the death of thousands in the Irish Potato Famine to this sin.

The jury found that Smith was of unsound mind, and he was ordered to be detained at her majesty's pleasure (an indeterminate sentence sometimes used in cases of insanity to allow people to be detained until they can be declared safe to release). Smith's subsequent fate is unknown.

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