

CASTLE RISING MURDER

Lynn Advertiser and West Norfolk Herald 17TH APRIL 1852

APPALLING TRAGEDY.

MURDERS and SUICIDE at CASTLE RISING.

The pleasant and hitherto peaceful village of Castle Rising, about 4½ miles from Lynn, was on Sunday morning last thrown into a state of the greatest excitement and consternation, in consequence of the perpetration, by one of its inhabitants, of a series of crimes so horrible as to be scarcely within the bounds of credibility, and so complete as to have left no living evidence of their transaction. The circumstances which it is our painful duty to record consisted in murder “strange and unnatural”, committed under the shade of night upon the innocent wife and child of the destroyer, and followed by a most fearful suicide on his own part. Indeed the whole of the tragedy though previously un contemplated by the principal actors, was committed under such circumstances and with such an amount of determination and desperation as could leave no alternative but to suppose that it was perpetrated under the impulse of a blind and insane frenzy. The circumstances connected with the case are briefly as follows:- The author of the triple crime was a man named John Daw (son of a nurseryman in a small way of business at Syderstone, in this county) age 49, who had for the last two or three years, acted in the capacity of head gardener to J. T. Ayre Esq., of Rising Mill [*This is the Lower Mill*]. The other sufferers were his wife, Honor Daw, aged 43, to whom he had been married for many years, and their child, Martin, of the age of 7 years. They one or two other children, of whom one, aged about 19 and named William Daw, is now a gardener at Lynn. No disagreement whatever appears to have occurred between the parties; though at times when labouring under attacks of mental aberration, to which he has for years been subject, Daw has exhibited an unkind state of feeling towards his wife, and even is stated on one occasion, so long ago as 1847, to have attempted or threatened to destroy her life, by means similar to those which he has at length carried into effect. On previous occasions also, the first dating in 1846, he has attempted suicide by taking laudanum and by other means. Everything connected with the history of the man proved him to have been of a desponding and irritable temperament, and subject to fits of deep dejection or feverish excitement, on account of causes which to one of more cheerful constitution would have been trifling and inefficient. He had for many years followed his profession, in which he had been enthusiastic, clever and generally successful. A productive season would raise him to the extreme of exultation; while on the contrary a comparative failure would sink him into a state of the most profound gloom; and this state of his mind had formerly been so painfully perceptible as to cause his removal from the service of one of his employers. Nothing, however, had transpired to cast the slightest shade on his moral character; and his present master had entertained no suspicion of the dangerous character of his malady, but always had considered him to be a faithful servant, and a kind husband and father. Indeed he and his wife are said to have been models of good conduct and integrity; and for their child they had both evinced the greatest fondness. The cottage in which the tragedy took place is situated at the back entrance

into Mr Ayre's garden, and consists of two rooms, both of which are on the ground floor. The situation of the cottage is not only pleasant but romantic, and strangely discordant with a deed of so fearful a character. It stands at the bottom of a long range of hills, which bound the horizon on the south and east. We do not know in this locality a more charming prospect than that which meets the eye in the direction stated, whilst on the west are seen the remains of the ancient Castle, so celebrated in the page of history; and peeping through a group of trees, the beautiful village Church forms an object of the most lively interest, from its age and style – being perhaps one of most ancient in the county. The stream which runs along the grounds of Mr Ayre, and with which the mill is supplied, meanders through some luxuriant meadows, at a distance of some 300 or 400 yards from the cottage. But notwithstanding all these beauties, together with a bright spring sun shining around at the time we visited the spot, the melancholy event had spread over the mind such a gloom that nature herself seemed to participate in the general depression. Having endeavoured to make our readers acquainted with the locality and with the actors, we proceed to detail, as far as the means within our reach will enable us, the catastrophe itself, in which all who took a part have been hurried to their last account. For a few days past Daw seems to have been labouring under a state of depression, owing to some fancy on his part (of which the beautiful and orderly state of his grounds and hothouses was a perfect contradiction) that he was not successful in his labours. He complained that some grapevines had not got so far forward as he wished or expected; but his employer was so perfectly satisfied with his efforts that he even told him to cut the vines entirely down if they did not please him. Indeed, he seems to have met with the kindest treatment from Mr and Mrs Ayre, who went so far as to request their own medical attendant, Mr Cotton, to visit him thinking he might be ill in health; but neither they nor Mr Cotton himself expected that the disorder would arrive at so terrible a climax. On the evening of Saturday last, Mr Cotton accordingly visited him and found him in what is termed “a low way” and prevailed upon him after some difficulty, to promise adherence to the treatment described for what appeared to be a disorder arising perhaps from irregularity of the liver, and resulting, as such disorders do, in a hypochondriacal state of mind. After that night, the unfortunate man was no more seen alive. The deed of blood must have been committed at an early hour on Sunday morning; for the men employed at the mill who were passing and re-passing his house until a late hour, heard no noise calculated to attract attention; and moreover, the body of Daw when found as afterwards described, at half past five on Sunday morning, was still warm. At that time a young man, named Haverson, whilst walking through some fields which skirt the river, saw the dead body of a man, clothed only in a shirt, lying in the stream, near a foot bridge by it is crossed. He instantly gave the alarm; and assistance having been procured, the body was hauled out, and at once identified as John Daw. That he had committed suicide was also evident from the fact of the stream being only about 1½ feet deep, and the deceased's arms being folded as to keep his body immersed. Further examination revealed some cuts on the throat and other parts of the body; and in the river near the place where from the marks of naked feet on its banks and bed, he had evidently entered the water, was found a clasp knife (such as those used for pruning) about 4 inches long, the blade *closed*, but having on it marks of blood, which gave evidence of its having been the instrument with which the wounds were made. The body was at first removed to the Black Horse Inn, kept by Mr Green, but on its being suggested that the wife

of the deceased would prefer that it should be taken home, its was accordingly moved thither. On arriving at the house, the front door was found to be secured from within (though, as it afterward proved, the back door, through which Daw must have left the house, was unfastened). No person appearing to be stirring, Mr Wilkinson (Mr Ayre's foreman) entered by the back door, when a horrible spectacle presented itself. On the floor in the front room lay, in their night clothes, the lifeless bodies of Mrs Daw and her child, their throats frightfully gashed, and other parts of their bodies cut and injured; whilst the disordered state of the furniture, a large pool of blood on the floor, and marks of blood on the doors and furniture, told what a desperate struggle had taken place, ere life had departed. It would seem from marks of blood on the bedclothes, that the murderer had at first attempted to perpetrate the deed while his wife lay in bed; that she had escaped from the bedroom and made towards the front door, on the bar of which were also found marks of blood; but that he had followed her and completed his purpose so effectually that she had not even had opportunity or presence of mind to raise an alarm. The poor little child following his mother, had met his fate in the same room; and his night clothes being much torn proved that he, too, had not died without a struggle. The whole of the tragedy must have occupied far less time in transaction, than is required in its narration. That it was enacted in the dark seems probable from the finding of a match or tinderbox, marked with blood, as though Daw had afterwards tried to strike a light. Having completed the double murder, he seems to have left the house determined on self-destruction, but irresolute as to the mode of its execution. Whether the cuts on his own throat were inflicted in the house or after he had left, it is uncertain; but there is little doubt that previous to drowning himself, he had sought his death by strangulation, for in one of the greenhouses (on the door of which were marks of blood) was found a piece of clothes-line, which had been cut from the trees on it which it was usually fixed, the ends remaining being also bloody, as though the same knife formerly mentioned had been employed in severing it. The line was too rotten and weak to support the weight of a man's body, but a weaver's knot tied in it seemed to indicate an attempt to strengthen it for the purpose. The track of footsteps in an irregular direction over the lawn and flowerbeds proved that the man had wandered about for some time, and had at last made for the river, in which, as described, he ultimately perished; and with him perished the only certain means of arriving, at least in this world, at the causes that led to, and the real mode of consummation of, the fatal deed.

Intelligence of the facts was communicated with all promptness to the proper authorities, the constable riding to Hingham, a distance of nearly 40 miles, to appraise the coroner; and on Monday at noon, inquests were held at the Black Horse Inn, on the bodies of the deceased, before E Press Esq. Coroner for the district, and a jury consisting of the following individuals:-

John Bunton (Foreman), William Crayston, Thomas Pidgeon, James Drew, Robert Chapman, Samuel Marsters, John Wilcox, Matthew Haverson, Thomas Plowright, William Green, Joshua Kirby, Charles Kent.

The jury having been sworn, were briefly addressed by the Coroner, who observed that it would be expedient to make separate inquiries as to each of the deaths, and first of all to that

of John Daw, for until they had ascertained the facts relative to his decease, they could not well inquire into all the circumstances connected with the deaths of the other two persons, which appeared to have been caused by him. Coroner and Jury then viewed the bodies, which lay at the cottage, about a mile distant from the inn, and presented the appearances which we have before described. On their return, the Coroner said that after the very frightful wounds which the jury had witnessed on the bodies of two of the deceased, they could not but be of opinion that the wounds must have been inflicted by some other person – it was quite clear that they could not have caused such wounds of themselves. The wound on the man did not appear to be very large, but the Jury would hear what medical testimony was given as to whether he died from its effect or from drowning, his body having been found in the river. They would first direct their attention to the man, and if they found him to be an accountable person, supposing the wounds on the others to have been inflicted on him, they would, notwithstanding he was since dead, return a verdict of wilful murder against him; but if they ascertained, on inquiry, that his mind at the time incapable of knowing right from wrong and conclusive testimony given to that effect, then they would find that he was not accountable for the actions he had committed, and that he had done those acts while in a state of insanity.

The following evidence was then taken;-

Matthew Haveson Jun. of Lynn, Carpenter, sworn:- I was going down yesterday morning at 5 o'clock towards my father's field past the river, and found in the river the dead body of a man which I did not know, but which I have since ascertained to be that of John Daw. He had nothing on but a shirt and lay on his back. After he was got out, I saw a mark of a cut across his throat. I did not(*small section of newspaper missed in photocopying*).....knife which I now produce. It has been out of my possession, but I can swear to its being the same. The knife was *shut*. A boy got it out and opened it, and I examined it particularly. I did not take it into my hands, but I know it to be the same knife. There was some clay on it, which still remains: and there was also some blood, but it has come off. There are other marks which are quite sufficient for me to identify it. I did not know the deceased. I saw marks where he had gone into the river, which is only about 18 inches deep at that place. The knife was found at that spot. The body was taken out of the river about 100 yards further down the stream, where the depth is about the same. I looked very carefully, but could not find any blood on the banks of the river. The spot where the deceased first went in is in the nearest direction from his own cottage, within a yard or two. From the way in which the body was found and the marks of his bare feet on the bank, I have no doubt that deceased got in the river of his own accord. The distance of the cottage from the river is between two and three hundred yards.

Jeremiah Wilkinson, miller, Rising Mill, sworn – I heard of the report of the body being found, and therefore went to the cottage. The outer back door was shut, but not locked. I went through into the back room. The second door was open. The first thing I saw was a little table turned over, and on the floor I found the bodies of Honor Daw and Martin Daw, with both their throats cut a great deal. They were both quite dead. I did not touch them, and do not know whether they were cold or not. The room was in a state of great confusion, the table upset, and one chair turned over. There were marks of blood on the door and on the

drawers, and a large quantity on the floor, and it appeared as if there had been a struggle. After that I went into the bedroom and saw blood on the bedclothes. There was a little also on the dresses both of the boy and of the woman, who had only their night clothes on. I had know John Daw from two to three years – during which he had been the gardener of Mr Ayre, by whom I am employed as miller. I have known the deceased to be low spirited during the last week. I was there on Tuesday, and he wished me to bring some seeds to Mr Freestone, the husband of Mrs Daw's sister. His wife asked if he had said anything in his note to Mr Freestone about being poorly. He said he had not. Mrs Daw told me to let Mr Freestone know that her husband was in a low way again as he had been before. I did not rightly know what this meant till afterwards.

Mr. Robert Freestone of Lynn, seed-merchant, sworn – I am a relation by marriage to the deceased, Honor Daw, my wife being her own sister. I've known John Daw about 25 years. I cannot speak from personal observation, but from the report that I have received from his wife I believe that twice before he has been in a state of aberration. I knew him to be a very irritable man, and I believe that to have been the cause of his leaving a former situation. I have always noticed that any little defect in his crops or other trifling matters would cause in him great sullenness and depression of spirits and sometimes excitability. Occasionally he was so moody that you could not get any answer from him. I recollect on one occasion twenty years back going to see him when he lived with the Reverend Mr. Sparke of Gunthorpe. He had been very prosperous in his crops; and on visiting him, he flew over the garden as if to show me the whole at once, and appeared in that excited wild state that when I left him and got home, I said to my wife I was sure there was some defect in his brain, from the very excited state I had found him. I know from reports that he left his situation with the Rev. Mr Sparke of Feltwell on account of his state of mind.

Jas. Fuller Sydestone, Blacksmith, sworn – I have know the deceased John Daw 20 years. About 6 years ago he lived with Mr Sparke of Feltwell. His wife communicated with me that there was something the matter with him; and I therefore went to see him, and found him lying on the bed undressed and in a very distressed state. His bodily health seemed to be very good, and I did not at first see that he ailed much. I began to talk to him about his lying in bed. I said "Don't lie here;" to which he answered "It's of no use my getting up, I am ruined". He rambled and talked such nonsense that I was fully impressed with the notion that he was deranged. I advised him to come over to stay at Sydestone about a fortnight, thinking that some change might take place. I went to a medical man, Mr Archer of Feltwell, whom Mr Sparke had employed and who had attended to Daw; and he told me the man was in an unsound state of mind. I was confirmed by this in my belief that he was in that state. Daw came afterwards to live with me. He showed symptoms of excitement on many occasions; so much so that I used to watch him for fear that he should make off with himself. Whenever I have seen him in that way, he showed a great dislike to his wife, but he seemed greatly attached to his child. During his residence with me, which lasted about 6 weeks, I never saw him in what I consider to be a perfectly sound state of mind. His wife and child were with him at that time as much as they could be, except that they did not sleep there. I have only seen him occasionally, as he has lived at a distance from me. My deliberate opinion is that he

was not a sane man. When he was living with me I conserved that at times he did not know what he was about. He frequently used to carry knives in his pocket and would not put them away, although requested to do so by his wife. He used to talk but very little.

Mr. C. Cotton, Surgeon, Lynn, sworn – I have made a *post mortem* examination of John Daw's body. I found externally no less than 8 small cuts below the chin, in front, and to the left; a deep triangular cut upon the top joint of the right thumb; the knuckles of the 3 inner fingers of the left hand abraded and bruised and the nails of the fingers ingrained with sand or soil. The shins and knees were also bruised and abraded. The wounds externally were so very slight as not to be sufficient to cause death. On opening the body I found the lungs and air passages deeply congested and filled with frothy mucus, and presenting the usual signs of drowning, which was the cause of death. I found the other organs generally healthy, excepting a slight opacity of the membrane of the brain and effusion of the brain itself – possibly indicating cerebral irritation, but from which I could draw no positive conclusion as to the state of his mind. As far as my opinion is concerned, from the state of his body there is no doubt of his having been drowned, and that there was no previous injury to cause death. On Monday last I was at the house of Mr. Ayre at Rising, and in conversation, Mrs Ayre hinted with evident concern, at being unable to prevail upon her gardener (the deceased John Daw) to see a medical man, as he was in a low spirited state. This induced me to proceed to his house, where I found myself at first a very unwilling guest to him, though evidently to his wife my presence was very acceptable. Upon conversing with him as to the cause of his being low, he merely replied that there was not much the matter, that he saw no use in taking medicine, and that he should soon be well. Seeing the turn of his mind, I proceeded to discuss with him the weather, the state of his garden etc., and he was evidently dissatisfied on these points. By further conversation, I afterwards got his confidence, so much so that he promised me that he would take anything I would send him to do him good. He told me he had been in a low way once before. His poor wife was evidently in great distress and anxiety about him. They did not appear to be much the matter with his health, except that he was in a very desponding state of mind for which I saw no cause. His pulse was feeble: his tongue clean. I looked upon the case as one of a torpidity of the liver and I ordered the usual medicine in such cases. On the following morning Mr Ayre told me Daw was still desponding, which caused me to form an opinion that his illness was of that character which does not disappear readily and I recommended that the man should have a change of air and scene. From that time I heard nothing more of him. The hypochondriacal state in which he was when I saw him was such as in a short time degenerate into frenzy or insanity. From what has occurred since, coupled with the state of mind in which I saw him on Monday last, together with the predisposition which I am informed excited, I have not the least doubt that in an act of frenzied excitement, he proceeded to the destruction of his wife and child and afterwards of himself. I think it very probable that the knife produced might be that in which he inflicted the wounds on himself. – I have made an external examination of the wounds of Honor Daw. There is a very deep incision on the neck, extending obliquely from the right side, across the throat to the back of the neck on the right side, dividing the muscles, vessels, windpipe and gullet, notching the front of the spine and completely severing one or two lateral bony processes. There is a double cut – one superior and superficial, and the other deep and

upwards of 6 inches in length. 3 other cuts about 3 or 4 “ in length, down to the muscles existed commencing on the right shoulder and extending across the collar bone. There was another cut immediately under the chin; a large bruise and considerable ecchymosis upon the left temple, the left side of the nose and chin; marks of violence on the left elbow; cuts upon the fingers of both hands and several bruises on the extremities. The loss of blood from the division of the vessels and the violence generally was sufficient to cause death. The injury might have been inflicted by the knife produced. The deceased must have struggled very much. – On the body of the boy, Martin Daw, I found a very deep gash, confined principally to the right side of the neck, dividing the muscles and vessels, penetrating between the 5th and 6th bones of the spine of the neck, and partially severing the head from the body. The cut was evidently a repeated one, commencing from the back of the neck and extending obliquely downwards towards the top of the breastbone. There are bruises on the left elbow and right shoulder, but they are of no material consequence. The gums in front are lacerated, the lower lip cut in two pieces and the chin cut across. I should think death in both instances was immediately owing to the complete division of the larger vessels.

Mr. Thos. Jas. Ayre of Rising, examined – deceased had been with me as gardener three years and in that time I have never had anything to complain of him. He has been a faithful servant, and, as far as I know, an affectionate husband and I have never heard of any disagreement between himself and his wife.

The Coroner then addressed the Jury. They had now satisfied themselves that the deceased John Daw had destroyed himself by drowning, after having cut the throat of his wife and child; and the only question for consideration was, as to the state of mind in which he was at the time. He (the Coroner) would go through the whole of the evidence if it were wished, but the facts were so simple that they required but little observation. The verdict as to the state of mind in which the man was at the time when he drowned himself, would therefore probably govern that which the Jury would return in the other two cases.

A conversation here took place as to the previous state of mind of the deceased, John Daw, and a statement was made by his son William Daw, to the effect that he (the father) had twice previously attempted to destroy himself; that on the first of these occasions when living in Brinton in 1846, he had taken a quantity of laudanum, from the effects of which he was sick, but did not receive any other injury; that about the same time the fears of his wife were excited by his having taken some razors with him when he went out, but that on his return he gave them up to her on her requesting him to do so. It was also stated that while living at Feltwell, in 1847, he had, when in a low state of mind, threatened to kill Mre Daw with a knife, whilst she was in the house of convenience but had been prevented from effecting his purpose. All these statements, however, as they rested entirely on hearsay could not be received as legal evidence. It is, moreover, but justice to the last employer and the medical advisor to the deceased, to add that they were entirely unaware of any circumstances of this kind having occurred; as otherwise they would undoubtedly have been on the alert, and would have taken such measures as might probably have prevented the catastrophe.

After a short consultation the Jury returned the only verdict that the facts of the case could support – viz:- *Temporary Insanity*. Separate verdicts to this effect were recorded in each case.

A deep gloom is cast over the minds of those who were connected with the unfortunate deceased and indeed over the whole neighbourhood of their late residence. Mr Ayre and his family are amongst those who most sincerely deplore the event. On Sunday evening, the Rev. Edward Pinder of Roydon, curate of the parish, preached at Rising Church a deeply affecting sermon appropriate to the occasion, from the text “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke xiii,3). A deathlike stillness pervaded the congregation only broken by the sobs of those connected with the deceased rendering the reverend gentleman’s appeal more deeply moving. The bodies of the deceased were interred Wednesday last.