

Tragedy at Whitwell

William Frost, a respected and honest journeyman tanner living on Whitwell Common in a neatly furnished cottage, standing in an interesting situation, having two families under the same roof and at some distance from any other dwelling, murdered his four young daughters on Monday morning, 8 April 1844.

Harriet was 5, Charlotte 3, Elisa 18 months and the baby Louisa was only ten weeks old. By all accounts he was a kind husband and affectionate father. He was 35 years old and had worked for Mr. Leamon at Whitwell Tannery for 13 years.

He had been a member of a religious fraternity known as 'Ranters' and later he joined the 'Revivalists' or primitive Methodists. He began preaching, unschooled, as a very young man and was well regarded by his brethren. However about ten years later he was dismissed from his religious society. Possibly led astray by wicked associates but more likely under the influence of a gloomy sort of fanaticism. He had become a laughing stock with his fellows for preaching sobriety and religion while being a drunkard himself.

According to all reports he was liked and normally of good character but prone to mania and depression. He had been seriously ill three years previously. Neighbours felt this affected his brain for they had witnessed instances of strange behaviour and incoherent speech. He had not worked four days during the week before the murder. His employer, Mr. Leamon, had visited him and given him medicines. He had stopped attending services and this was thought to be a cause of his changed behaviour though the Reverend Blyth felt it was due to a fear of unemployment and not being able to provide for his family.

On the fateful Monday morning his wife Martha called on a neighbour, Mrs. Wilkins, to collect a shilling owed to her, she was gone hardly 15 minutes and when she returned she found her husband by the fire and her four children dead, the youngest drowned and the other three little girls battered with a heavy hammer.

The house soon filled with neighbours and officials, Sarah Allen from next door, a policeman named Parker, Messrs Balding and Savary from Reepham, Mr. Leamon, The Rev Blyth, Walter Harsant, the surgeon, Elizabeth Yarham, Mary Allen and Mary and Robert Bye. Everyone was shocked, no one could imagine him doing such a thing. On being questioned by Mr. Leamon he said he thought that the children would go to heaven.

The Coroner held an inquest at The Foldgate Inn the next day. Evidence was taken from everyone who had been to the house and Frost admitted that he had killed his children. The jury returned a verdict of WILFUL MURDER, Frost was committed to the County Goal in Norwich Castle to await his trial at the August Assizes. Mr Leamon was so upset he required medical attention while the prisoner seemed unaffected.

At his trial the defence lawyer pleaded insanity. He argued that although Frost appeared calm and rational he was actually under a delusion believing that what he had done was right. Three Norwich doctors gave evidence stating that they found him to be insane. The prosecution objected because 'it would be a dangerous doctrine to assume that a man was insane because he had committed a horrible crime.' The jury were in no doubt that he had killed his children but that he was not guilty because the act was done while he was in a state of insanity.