

The Murder
of
Alice Gertrude Pountney
at the
Pheasant Inn, Bilston

April 16th 1922

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“All Bilston district was horrified on Sunday evening when it became rumoured that a woman had been murdered in Broad Street, Bilston, in the early part of the afternoon. The news, unfortunately, afterwards received what appeared to be convincing affirmation. In a small, unattractive licensed house [Pheasant, Broad Street, Bilston], there had lived, for the past six years a man named Pountney, manager, aged 50; his wife Alice Gertrude Pountney, aged 47; their only son, John Henry Pountney, aged about 20 years, and one or two other persons. Previous to going to Broad Street, Mr. and Mrs. Pountney lived at the RAILWAY INN, Wellbrook, Coseley, where both of them were well known. Pountney at one time also worked as a blacksmith at Bradley. More recently, in addition to having the management of the PHEASANT INN, he had been employed as a labourer at the Tarmac Works, Ettingshall. The actual facts of the terrible affair could not be disclosed until the inquest has been completed, or full magisterial proceedings had been taken, but from communications made to the police, and statements made by people who saw most of what transpired at the time of the alleged crime, a dispute of some description arose between Pountney and his wife at mid-day on Sunday, but nothing unusual was observed by the few customers present until shortly before two o'clock, the time for closing. Mrs. Pountney was then in the back kitchen, peeling potatoes for dinner. With her was her only son, John Henry Pountney. As a customer, named Joseph Henry Norton, of 5, Sankey Street, Bilston, was about to leave the house, the others in the kitchen were joined by Elijah Pountney himself, Norton called and asked the latter what time he proposed closing, but he made not reply. It was stated that Mrs. Pountney herself then called out ‘Come here, Joe,’ and when Norton got to the kitchen, she said: ‘He (her husband) has accused me that I am going to have a baby.’ She added: ‘If he don’t know, who should know. That’s why he has been so sulky with me for a long while.’ Norton asserted that the woman had a knife in her hand with which she had been peeling potatoes, and that she said; ‘If it wasn’t for this lad (meaning her son), I’d _____’ but the sentence remained unfinished. Pountney turned away, and walked a few yards, but turning about, so it is alleged, he put his arm around his wife’s shoulders in a caressing manner (as Norton thought), and said, ‘Come here,’ exactly as though he was about to kiss her. Norton, however, alleges that he had then perceived a razor in Pountney’s other hand, and although he sprang forward and tried to seize it, he was not quick enough to prevent Pountney from drawing the blade across his wife’s throat. It was afterwards noticed that the arteries and the windpipe had been severed, and a stream of blood gushed from the wound. Norton saw the woman stumble for several yards into a verandah and the fall to the ground. He rushed off to the nearest surgery, and on the way he saw PC’s Piddock and Maw at the corner of Broad Street and Church Street. He quickly related what had occurred and the police officers went to the house. Dr. Mathews following within a few minutes. The woman however was then dead. The police finding her lying face downwards on the verandah floor in a pool of blood. Maw was at once dispatched to the police station, and Superintendent Higgs and Sergeants Cartwright and Daniels joined Piddock at the PHEASANT. It was ascertained that Pountney had left the house immediately after the tragedy, and had been seen to go in the direction of Bradley. The police therefore took up pursuit. At Bankfield, midway between Bilston and Bradley, they learned that a lad named William Doughty, of 5 court, Wolverhampton St., Bilston, had been proceeding along the road with friends named Jesse and Leonard Hamblett, and that on arriving at the canal bridge the former’s attention was called to a bottle floating on the water. He went to the parapet intending to throw at it when he perceived a man in the water apparently wedged between two boats alongside Mr. J. Toole’s coal wharf. He was then up to the armpits in water. The boys called the attention of two youths to the man’s position, and together they succeeded in getting him out. Doughty states that Pountney – for it was he – wanted them to leave him on the wharf, but they led him on to the road. They asked where he lived, but he is stated to have replied: ‘I don’t know; but I can find my way.’

He walked a few yards, and the youths then saw him go down the other side of the bridge, but before he reached the water he collapsed, apparently from exhaustion.

The police arrived almost immediately, and PCs Piddock and Royce resorted to artificial respiration, which they afterwards carried on under the superintendence of Drs. Waddell and Acheson, who had been summoned. At length the man showed signs of consciousness, and a motor belonging to Mr. F. W. Collins, which was passing, was requisitioned to convey him to the police station. Upon arrival there was found necessity to continue artificial respiration for a period.

Some time later he was formally charged by PS Cartwright with causing the death of his wife, and acting on medical advice, the man was afterwards removed the infirmary at New Cross, Wednesfield, to be kept under observation until brought before the magistrate.

There were two other persons living at the PHEASANT INN, in addition to Pountney and his wife and son. These included a man who was stated to have been in bed at the time and a brother of the woman – Arthur Cornelius Reynolds.

In a statement made by the latter he asserted that soon after he got up he heard his sister to say to her husband, ‘You are opening your mouth too wide.’ He did not hear anything else until the son called him, and he saw the latter with his mother in his arms and blood streaming profusely from her throat.

Reynolds also alleged that he heard Pountney, when in drink, make use of threats concerning himself and his wife.

It was expected that the husband would be brought up at Bilston Police Court on Tuesday morning and charged with the wilful murder of his wife, but Supt. Higgs stated that he had an intimation that owing to his physical condition it had been deemed advisable to detain him in the infirmary a little longer.

THE INQUEST

The inquest on the deceased was formally opened by Mr. J. T. Higgs at Bilston Police Court, on Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Hewitt being foreman of the jury.

The coroner said he did not intend to proceed with the inquiry that afternoon, but to take evidence of identification only, and then adjourn the enquiry till Friday, to enable the husband to be present.

John Henry Pountney, framemaker, only son of deceased, said he saw his mother alive and well on Sunday morning, and saw her dead a little after two o'clock. She was 47 years of age.

The inquest was then adjourned.

Continuing his evidence at the adjourned inquest last evening [Friday], John Edward Pountney said that at 1.40pm on the 16th inst., he was in the back kitchen of the house. Deceased was there paring potatoes for dinner. His father came in and said something to his mother, but witness could not hear what it was. His mother said, ‘What?’ In front of my son?’ and he said, ‘Yes; in front of him.’ His father then left the kitchen and went to another part of the house. About 1.55 his father returned to the back kitchen. Joseph Norton followed him in. His father then pushed his (witness’s) mother towards Norton, and said, ‘Kiss her Joe; it might be the last time.’ Norton replied. ‘If that’s it, I’m going home.’ His father then said, ‘Don’t take offence, I don’t mean anything,’ and walked toward the door, but he soon came back, and sat on a chair. A few moments afterwards he got up, put his arms round his wife’s neck, as if he were going to kiss her, and witness heard Norton say, ‘Oh!’ and he then noticed blood flowing from his mother’s neck. Witness caught hold of her, and walked with her to the verandah. She then fell down, and he saw a terrible wound in her throat.

He saw his father standing in the passage, wiping his hands on a piece of newspaper which he threw down. He then said to witness, ‘Do you want any money, or do you want the bank book?’ His father then left the house by the front door. Witness handed the newspaper to PC Piddock. His mother died in a few seconds.

Joseph Henry Norton said he was a bedstead caster, and lived at 5, Sankey Street, Bilston. He went to the PHEASANT INN about 12.25, and sat down in the kitchen, where Pountney was sitting. Pountney

served him with a drink. Witness remained there till about half-past one and then went into the back yard. Mrs. Pountney was in and out of the kitchen all the time. Witness returned to the same room and had another drink, remaining there till about three minutes to two. Then he got up to leave, and at the door, he said to Elijah Pountney, 'Elijah, what time are you shutting up?' Pountney was then in the big kitchen with his wife and son. Pountney and his wife were arguing about something, but what it was he could say, as he was 'hard-hearing.' Pountney did not answer witness's question, but Mrs. Pountney called, 'Come here Joe.' Witness then went toward her, and put his hand on her shoulder, and said, 'He has accused me that I am going to have a baby. If he didn't know, why should I know? That's why he has been sulky with me a long time.' She was paring potatoes at the time. With the knife in her hand, she pointed to Pountney and said, 'If it wasn't for the lad I would.' She did not say what. Pountney moved a bit away, and the turned back and caught hold of her round the neck with one hand, and said, 'Come here,' as though to kiss her. Witness then saw a razor in his other hand, and jumped up to grab hold of it, but he had drawn it across her throat. She did not speak after he had done that.

When she was talking to witness she was speaking close to his ear, because of his deafness. Pountney and the son could hear every word she was saying. She staggered out to the verandah, her son having held her all the time. Then she fell down, slipping from the arms of her son. Witness went for a doctor, but his opinion was that Mrs. Pountney was dead before witness had left the house. The blood was gushing from her throat. Witness and Mrs. Pountney as children were brought up together. It was why he used to go there. They were friends and nothing more. That was the only suggestion he could offer why she called to tell him of her trouble.

Edmund McCann, bricklayer, who had his lodging at the PHEASANT INN for about six months, said that about November last Pountney and his wife were quarrelling in the ___ room. He heard Pountney say 'I shall do you in, before the night is out.' Witness did not know the cause of the quarrel. On many occasions since he had heard them quarrelling. On the Saturday night previous to the tragedy witness went to sleep in the kitchen and did not go to bed with the other residents. He could not say what time he went to bed. He did not get up on Sunday until he was called, after the tragedy.

Replying to further questions by the Coroner, witness said he had rarely ever seen Pountney sober, and he was under the influence of drink on Sunday morning.

The other witnesses, recalled, also spoke of Pountney's intemperate habits, but said that on Sunday morning he was well able to serve customers, although he had had drink.

PS George Cartwright said that at 2pm on the 16th inst., he went to Bradley in search of Elijah Pountney. Arriving at the canal bridge, he saw him there, and assisted in the artificial respiration. Pountney was afterwards removed to Bilston Police Station and Dr. Waddell examined him. Witness afterwards accompanied the doctor to the PHEASANT INN, and was present when he made an external examination of the deceased. Later the same day witness charged Pountney with murdering his wife, by cutting her throat with a razor. He cautioned Pountney and he replied, 'It's correct, I have had cause for it.' Owing to his physical condition Pountney was removed to the New Cross Infirmary, and witness went with him.

Dr. Charles Hope Waddell said that at the PHEASANT INN he examined the body of Mrs. Pountney. He found an incised wound four inches long, extending right across the front of the neck. All structures lying in front of the vertebral column, including the trachea, were severed. In his opinion death would take place in a few moments from hemorrhage and shock. On the 17th inst., he made a post-mortem examination, in order to ascertain if there was any foundation for the statement that she was pregnant, and the result was that he found she was not. Pountney was found guilty of wilful murder.

POUNTNEY BEFORE THE MAGISTRATES.

Pountney was brought before Messrs. B. Adams and J. A. Jordan yesterday morning, charged with the wilful murder of his wife.

Prisoner, whose appearance would suggest that he is one of the most harmless men alive, was perfectly composed, and on being asked if

would have any objection to remand he said he had not, as 'it would have to be gone into later on.'

PS Cartwright said that at Bilston Police Station he charged prisoner with the murder of his wife, and he replied, 'Quite correct I had cause for it.'

On the application of Superintendent Higgs prisoner was then remanded for a week.

THE PHEASANT INN LICENSE.

Mr. T. R. J. Tildesley, representing the owners of the PHEASANT INN, asked for the license to be temporarily transferred to Mr. Edward Pountney (son of prisoner). He said arrangements had been made for him to carry on the business, and he would have the assistance of an uncle who had been living at the house.

The application was granted.

FUNERAL OF THE VICTIM.

The funeral of the deceased woman took place Coseley early yesterday afternoon and a large crowd assembled to witness the interment."

South Staffordshire Times 22/4/1922

"At Bilston Police Court, yesterday, before Messrs. J. A. Jordan and G. H. Sankey, Elijah Pountney, 48, formerly licensee of the PHEASANT INN, Broad Street, Bilston was brought up on remand, charged with the wilful murder of his wife, Alice Gertrude Pountney.

Mr. Paling represented the Director of Public Prosecutions, and Mr. J. A. Sharpe represented the prisoner, who seemed to have recovered from his immersion in the canal, and was perfectly composed in appearance. Mr. Paling said he did not propose to make an opening statement but would at once call evidence.

John Edward Pountney, son of prisoner, said that about 1.10pm, on the 16th inst., he was in the back kitchen of the house. Deceased was there preparing potatoes for dinner. His father came in and said something to his mother, but witness could not hear what it was. His mother said, 'What? In front of my son?' and he said, 'Yes in front of him.' His mother then left the kitchen and went into another part of the house. About 1.55 his father entered the back kitchen, Joseph Norton followed him in. His father then pushed the witness's mother toward Norton, and said, 'Kiss her, Joe, it might be the last time,' Norton replied, 'If that's it, I'm going home.' His father then said, 'don't take offence,' and walked towards the door, but he soon came back, and sat on a chair. A few moments afterwards he got up, put his arms round his wife's neck, as if he were going to kiss her, and witness heard Norton say, 'Oh!' and he then noticed blood flowing from his mother's throat. Witness caught hold of her, and walked with her to the verandah. She then fell down, and he saw a terrible wound in her throat.

He afterwards saw his father standing in the passage, wiping his hands on a piece of newspaper, which he threw down. Witness went upstairs and called a lodger named McCann, his father then left the house by the front door. Witness afterwards saw a razor on the floor.

Cross-examined by Mr. Sharpe:

Was Norton a relative of yours? - No he was an old friend of the family, and very often came to the house.

Who is McCann? - He was a lodger, and had been there about six months.

Where was he when the tragedy occurred? - In bed.

Had your father been drinking a good deal? - Yes.

Did he that morning appear very strange in his manner? - No.

Did he appear to be suffering from the effects of drink? - Yes.

Norton was in the kitchen all the time when this happened? - Yes.

He would see everything that took place as well as you? - I cannot say.

Was your mother peeling potatoes at the time? - Yes.

And she had a knife in her hand? - Yes.

Did your hear her threaten your father? - No.

Did you see her raise the knife? – No.
Was there any unpleasantness at all, leading up to this occurrence? – No, nothing at all.
But there had been unpleasantness between them, before that morning? – Yes.

Over a lodger? – Not that I am aware of.
Did you know that there had been quarrelling that morning over money? – No.

Examined by Mr. Paling:
I think your mother lent some money to somebody. – Yes.
Was it not to McCann? – No, somebody else.
And your father appeared to be suffering from the effects of drink. Had he been serving in the bar that morning? – Yes.

And he could walk and talk all right? – I think so.
Would you say he was drunk or sober? – I would say he was drunk
You have been asked about the lodger, McCann. As far as you have seen has McCann's conduct in the house been everything that could be desired? – Yes.

Have you seen the slightest thing to cause your father to be jealous regarding your lodger and mother? – No.
Has your father ever shown the slightest sign of insanity? – No.
Would you describe him as a perfectly sound man? – Yes.
As well as being licensee of the house he went to work regularly? – Yes.

By Mr. Sharpe:
Did your father meet with an accident about twelve months ago at the works? – Yes.

His head was cut? – Yes.
Was he at home about two months? – I forget the length of time. I do not think he had to stay at home.

Joseph Henry Norton said he was a bedstead caster, and lived at 5, Sankey Street, Bilston. On Sunday the 16th inst., he went to the PHEASANT INN about half-past one, and there he went into a back yard. Mrs. Pountney was in and out of the kitchen all the time. Shortly before two o'clock Mrs. Pountney called, 'Come here Joe.' Witness then went towards her and she put her hand on his shoulder and said, 'He has accused me that I am going to have a baby. If he don't know, who should know. That's why he has been so sulky with me for a long time.' She was peeling potatoes at the time. With the knife in her hand she pointed to Pountney and said, 'If it wasn't for the lad I would ____.' She did not say what. Pountney moved a bit away. He turned back and caught hold of her round the neck with one arm and said, 'Come here,' as though to kiss her. Witness then saw a razor in his hand, and jumped up to catch hold of it, but he had drawn it across her throat.

She did not speak after he had done that. Pountney was not quite sober then, but witness could not say he was drunk. He could walk and talk all right. Witness had not seen any signs of insanity in the prisoner. He remembered prisoner meeting with an accident around twelve months ago, but did not notice any strangeness in him after that. Witness ____ pointed the knife at the prisoner __ in a threatening attitude.

Cross-examined by Mr. Sharpe:
Your expression before the Coroner was that prisoner that morning seemed to be 'dosi__'? – Yes.

So he did not appear to be quite in his right mind at the time? Evidently he had been drinking? – But I had not seen him having any.

Edward McCann, bricklayer, said he had been lodging at the PHEASANT INN for about six months. He had heard the prisoner threaten his wife. That was about the second week after he went there. He struck her, and knocked her down, saying, 'That is not all you will have. I shall do you in before the night is out.' Witness did know the cause of the quarrel. On many occasions he had heard them quarrelling. On the Saturday night previous to the tragedy witness went to sleep in the kitchen, and did not go to bed with the other residents. He could not say what time he went to bed. He did not get up on the Sunday until he was called, after the tragedy

Cross-examined by Mr. Sharpe:
Were you on friendly terms with both Mr. and Mrs. Pountney? – Yes, we had been drinking together on Saturday night.
The Prisoner had been drinking heavily? – I have never seen him sober since I have been there.

When he was drinking like that was __ in his manner? – I could not answer that.

Did you tell the Coroner anything about the prisoner knocking his wife down? – He did not ask me that.

Did you tell him you heard him threaten his wife the first fortnight you were there? – Yes.

Had she lent you any money? – No.

None at all? – No, never.

I understand she had lent money to someone else, and there had been a lot of 'tiffs' about it.

Do you know that was partly the cause of the quarrels? – No. I think drink was the cause of it all.

Do you say both of them were quarrelsome? – Yes. Six of one and half-a dozen of the other.

There was not much difference, so far as their quarrelling went. Have you ever seen her assault him? – On occasion, with cause.

When there was any cause she would not be backward in assaulting him? – She always took her own part.

Re-examined by Mr. Paling:

Was she a very hard working woman? – Yes.

You have never seen her drunk? – No.

William Doughty, 5, court, 26 house, Wolverhampton Street, Bilston, gave evidence as to seeing the prisoner in the canal near Bradley, and calling for assistance.

PS Piddock sated that having received information of the tragedy, he went to the PHEASANT INN, and there he found deceased lying on her face in a pool of blood. She was quite dead.

PS George Cartwright said at 2.30pm on the 16th inst. he went to Bradley in search of the prisoner. Arriving at the canal bridge, he saw him there, and assisted in the artificial respiration. Pountney was afterwards removed to Bilston Police Station, and Dr. Waddell examined him. Witness afterwards accompanied the doctor to the PHEASANT INN, and was present when he made an external examination of the deceased. Later the same day witness charged Pountney with murdering his wife, by cutting her throat with a razor. He cautioned Pountney and he replied; 'It's correct. I have had cause for it.' Owing to his physical condition Pountney was removed to the New Cross Infirmary, and witness went with him. On the way to the Infirmary: 'They had been up before me, having oysters and drinking beer and stout, and when I got up and asked for my breakfast she said the bacon was in the kitchen and I could go and get my own. There is a bank-book in the house and when I was going down the cellar for some beer, I heard her and McCann arranging to go away together. If she ain't in trouble, a post-mortem will prove it.'

PS Westbury said that on Friday, March 3rd, prisoner went into the police station and said, 'Do you mind sending an officer up to my place, the PHEASANT INN, I have got a lodger I want putting out.' Witness asked: 'Cannot you put him out?' and prisoner replied: 'No, he's too big for me. My wife encourages him there. I'm not going to be dominated over by them any longer. If he stays any longer I shall do her in. I'm sure to kill her.' Witness told him he must not talk like that. As prisoner walked away he said, 'Well, you'll see, I shall find you a job.' He then left the place. Witness sent two constables to the inn, and they afterwards reported on their visit.

Dr. Charles Hope Waddell said that at the PHEASANT INN he examined the body of Mrs. Pountney. He found an incised wound, four inches long, extending right across the front of the neck. All structures lying in front of the vertebral column, including the trachea, were severed. In his opinion death would take place in a few moments, from hemorrhage and shock. On the 17th inst. he made a post-mortem examination, in order to ascertain if there was any foundation for the statement that she was pregnant, and the result was that he found she was not.

This concluded the evidence, and prisoner, who reserved his defence, was committed to take his trial at the next Assizes."

South Staffordshire Times 8/7/1922

“The trial of Elijah Pountney (48), labourer, indicted for the wilful murder of his wife Alice Gertrude Pountney, at Bilston, on April 16th, opened at Stafford Assizes on Friday morning before Mr. Justice Shearman.

Mr. Graham Milward and Mr. Vachell prosecuted, and Mr. A. J. Long defended.

‘I don’t remember anything,’ said prisoner, in pleading not guilty to the indictment.

In opening Mr. Graham Milward said the case was not a long one; it was quite a short and simple tale. Prisoner and his wife kept the PHEASANT INN at Bilston, and prisoner also worked at the Tarmac Works. A man named McCann came to lodge at the house in the early part of the year and there was trouble between prisoner and his wife.

He knocked her down, McCann was present and took the woman’s part, and from that time prisoner felt anger against McCann.

As time went on prisoner got into his mind that there was a wrong relationship between the lodger and his wife, and he remarked to a police officer, ‘If the lodger stays much longer, I shall do her in.’

On the day of the alleged crime prisoner came home having apparently had some drink and he said to a man named Norton who was in the house, ‘Kiss her Joe; it may be for the last time.’ Subsequently he put his arm round her neck and cut her throat with such violence with a razor that she died almost immediately. Prisoner afterwards attempted to commit suicide by throwing himself into the canal.

John Edward Pountney, son of prisoner, first gave evidence, and said after committing the crime his father wiped his hands on a piece of paper. Witness afterwards saw a razor on the floor.

Mr. Long: While your father was at work something like twelve months ago, did something happen to him? – Yes, a piece of cinder fell on his head.

Since that time he has been continually drinking more than was good for him? – Yes.

Have you observed any changes in his manner since he had this blow? – Yes. He said things to mother, and when asked what he meant, he has turned round and said he never said anything.

Since the accident a very little drink has a great deal of effect on him? – Yes.

Did he suggest sometimes that there was improper relationship between McCann and your mother? – Yes. Witness added that his father had never suggested it to him, but he had overheard him say to his mother that she had kissed McCann or that McCann had kissed her.

Counsel: Was there the slightest foundation for such a suggestion? – No. McCann, the lodger, said in his opinion drink was the cause of all this trouble. There was no truth in the suggestion that there was any impropriety between prisoners’ wife and witness.

William Doughty, a boy, of Bilston, spoke of seeing prisoner in the canal. He was got out, and he asked them not to make any bother about it.

PS Cartwright said when he charged the prisoner with murdering his wife he replied, ‘It’s correct, I have cause for it.’

Dr. C. H. Waddell, in reply to Mr. Long, said when he saw prisoner he formed the conclusion that he had taken a considerable quantity of alcohol.

Sentence of death was passed.”

Elija Pountney was hung at Winson Green Prison, Birmingham, on 11th August 1922