

The Murders Near Swansea

A narrative reconstruction based on the 1848 reports

At an early hour on a Tuesday morning in the spring of 1848, a rumour swept through Swansea with the cold bite of a sea wind. Five Irish excavators — “navvies,” as the townsfolk called them — were said to have committed a murder of the most diabolical character. The tale grew heavier with each retelling: two unoffending Welshmen, family men, had been struck down in the night near the Marquess’s Arms on the road to Loughor.

By the time the first curious onlookers reached the cottages, the truth proved worse than the whispers.

Inside those humble dwellings lay the bodies of John Williams, about fifty, a sub-contractor on the South Wales Railway, and Jenkin Evan, aged fifty-two, who lived near the Beaufort Arms on the Loughor road and occasionally worked for J. Llewelyn, Esq. Their families stood around them in a state of stunned grief — not only stricken by the suddenness of their loss, but labouring under a kind of credulous stupor at the dreadful manner in which the men had been deprived of life.

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Williams had suffered a deep wound on the left side of the chest, just beneath the nipple, the blade driven with such force that it penetrated the heart. Evan’s fatal wound was similar but narrower, as though inflicted with a dagger or long, slender blade. Other marks were found upon both bodies — cuts and blows — but none so grave as the wounds to the breast that had ended their lives.

Yet even as the surgeon’s evidence made the manner of death plain, the cause and origin of the outrage remained shrouded in uncertainty. It proved extremely difficult to obtain any definite or conclusive account of how the violence had begun, or under what precise circumstances the two men had been so barbarously murdered.

Terror had seized the minds of those present; the melancholy character of the affair had left them shaken and confused. The murders had been committed during the darkest hour of the night, outside a cottage door, while many who might have witnessed the first blows were still inside. Worse still, several of the parties were in a state of inebriety, and their recollections were clouded by drink, fear, and the suddenness of the violence.

The circumstances, as one reporter put it, were “involved in far greater obscurity than they otherwise would be.”

The Cwrw Bach

The trouble began the previous evening at a cwrw bach — a small beer-gathering, the kind of nightly assembly often held in cottages not licensed for the sale of drink, yet well-known throughout the district as places where neighbours met to warm themselves with ale and talk. On that Monday night, a man named William Davies held such a gathering in a small cottage adjoining the road, only a few yards from the Marquess’s Arms — the house kept by David Evan, son of Jenkin Evan, one of the murdered men. About twenty people, more or less, crowded into the low room, drinking until one o’clock.

Around half-past twelve, a party of Irish navvies entered. They remained for twenty minutes, perhaps half an hour, during which they drank several pints of beer and spoke with John Williams and others. They said they had been discharged by a contractor at Loughor and were now in search of work. Williams, who had some authority on the railway line, was said to have promised them employment and asked them to visit his section of the works the next morning.

Soon afterwards, however, words arose — sharp, heated, and likely fuelled by the long-standing jealousy and antipathy between the Irish and Welsh labourers. One of the navvies exchanged insults with a Welshman named Edward Morgan, who was eventually knocked to the floor. When one or

two others stepped in to defend him, they received blows to the head from spades and other implements the Irishmen carried. The injuries were not serious, but the sudden violence shocked the room.

The scuffle ended as abruptly as it had begun. The Irishmen left the cottage — some said they were forced out, others that they went willingly, perhaps hoping to draw their opponents into the darkness outside, where any further violence would be easier to carry out unseen. Whatever the truth, they offered little resistance to leaving. No further struggle took place inside the cottage. A number of those present, including John Williams, followed them out into the night, though most soon returned indoors. Williams and one or two others — it was never entirely clear how many — remained outside.

Inside the cottage, confusion reigned. Men shouted over one another, some urging caution, others insisting they must go out and help. A few had seen the Irishmen carrying spades and shovels earlier in the evening; others remembered the boulders they had brought in from the road. No one knew what was happening in the darkness beyond the door.

One witness later recalled:

“I heard a noise outside — a scuffling, like feet on gravel — and then a heavy fall, as though someone had been struck down. I could not tell who it was.” Another man, David Williams, said he heard voices raised in anger, then a sudden cry, sharp and desperate, cut short almost as soon as it began.

Then Edward Morgan burst back in, breathless. Don’t go out,” he warned. “The Irishmen are using knives.”

Before anyone could react, Daniel Williams of Cwmbech shouted from the doorway that John Williams had been killed.

The room erupted. Several men rushed outside into the court-yard. One of the witnesses later recalled:

“I went out and saw John Williams lying on his back, quite dead. We turned him on his side, and blood issued from his left breast. We called him by name, but he said nothing.” Further along the road, Jenkin Evan lay dying, his son supporting his head. Blood stained the front of his breast. Unlike the others, he had not been at the cwrw bach at all. After leaving his club at Cade’s, he had stopped at the Marquess’s Arms — the house kept by his son — while one or more of his family visited the gathering. In a short time, concerned that they had not returned, he walked toward the cottage to fetch them home. He never reached the door. Before he could enter, he encountered the Irishmen in the road, and they murdered him there, in the darkness, in the manner later described by the surgeons.

The Irishmen vanished into the night. Pursuit was attempted, but the darkness swallowed them.

The Aftermath and Inquest:

By morning, the Irishmen were gone. Their spades and bundles remained in the cottage where they had been drinking.

A post-mortem examination was conducted by John Michael, Esq., surgeon of Swansea, together with Dr. Bird. Their evidence was unequivocal: the deaths of the murdered men had been caused by wounds inflicted with sharp weapons.

The inquest was adjourned to Friday, when it was confidently anticipated that the prisoners would be committed to stand trial before a jury on the capital charge of murder. At the adjourned inquest on Monday, the proceedings resumed. The Coroner summed up the evidence, directing the jury’s attention to the portions most affecting the several prisoners. If they believed the testimony before them, there could be no question that Thomas Martin had caused the death of John Williams. As for Michael Leary, the jury must weigh carefully the circumstances spoken to in the evidence. And it was perfectly competent for them to consider the testimony relating to John Norris, as given by one of the witnesses.

He then explained the distinction in law between murder and manslaughter. The room was cleared. The jury deliberated for several hours. At last they returned. Their verdict, in the case of John Williams, was:

WILFUL MURDER

— against Thomas Martin, as principal;

— and against Michael Leary and John Norris, for aiding and abetting. In the case of Jenkin Evan, they returned a verdict of:

WILFUL MURDER

— against Michael Leary, as principal;

— and against Thomas Martin and John Norris, as accessories.

The prisoners were committed under the coroner's warrant to the house of correction, there to await their trial at the next assizes. The witnesses were bound over to prosecute.

And the cottages near the Marquess's Arms remained quiet once more, though the earth outside their doors had not yet forgotten.