

ROSS GAZETTE – JANUARY 9 1873
THE LATE SUICIDE IN ROSS

Transcribed by John Kilpatrick from a print of a microfilm in Hereford Reference Library, May 2010.

In our last week's impression we narrated the shocking circumstances attending the suicide of Mr. John Davies, of Ashfield¹, and, in a second edition we published the details which were elicited at the Coroner's inquest; but as a large number of our readers in the neighbourhood of Ross and the district in which the paper circulates were only enabled to see our first edition, which contained but a brief notice of the occurrence, we republish the details as follows:-

The inquest on the body of the deceased was held at the Wine Vaults, St. Mary's-street, this (Thursday) afternoon, before H. Underwood, Esq., Coroner for the division, and a jury composed of the following gentlemen:- Thomas Blake, Esq., foreman; Messrs. S. Llewellyn, E. Gardner, G. Hughes, W. Locke, H. Dowle, W. Westlake, William Morris, T. Ryall, J. Ball, W. Brown, W. Ryall, and H. Goulding.

The jury having viewed the body, the following evidence was taken:-

Mrs. Maria Lewis deposed: I am wife of John Lewis, timber merchant, who keeps this inn (the Wine Vaults); I knew the deceased well; he was confidential clerk to Messrs. Collins, solicitors, of this town; he was in the habit of coming to this house every morning for threepennyworth of brandy; sometimes he would ask for a glass of beer; it was by way of lunch, as he used to say he took no breakfast; the last time I saw him alive was yesterday; he had drunk a threepennyworth of brandy, and part of another; he came about half-past 11; he had to take possession of the adjoining house; after he had the first threepennyworth, he went out; he wanted to go into the next house on business, but could not pass through, as the door was locked; he then turned into the passage leading to the water-closet, and I did not see him alive after that; I think he has been depressed in his mind for some time past; he has cried to me, and said he did not think he should live to see his children grow up²; he was low-spirited yesterday morning, and particularly so on Saturday; after the deceased had been away some time I remarked that I had not seen Mr. Davies come out of the closet; I told my husband to go and see if anything was wrong; I had no idea of anything wrong being the matter; I should think he was away 20 minutes when I bethought myself of him; my husband went to see, and came back saying Mr. Davies was sleeping; Mr. W. Mercer Hill was in the house, and he being better acquainted with the deceased, my husband asked him to go and see what was the matter with the old gentleman; he did so, and came back and said he was sleeping.

Mr W. M. Hill: I said he was dead.

Witness: I was so upset that I may have been mistaken. I did not know deceased was dead until Dr. Cocks was sent for, about a quarter-past 2 o'clock; I have several times spoken to him about his condition; he has never spoken about his circumstances, but told me he had spat up blood of a morning, and I think it affected his spirits very much; he never told me at any time that he would destroy himself; I never heard him say anything of the kind; there was nothing more strange about him this day than usual; the deceased was quite sober, in my opinion.

William Hutchinson Collins, Esq., deposed: I am a solicitor in partnership with my brother; the deceased was one of my clerks; he had been in the office about 12 years; he was a married man, with five young children³ by his second wife; he had grown-up children by his first wife; I have not found much difference in the state of the deceased for the last month, or any material change in his habits; I have always thought very highly of him as regarded his integrity and honesty; I am not aware that there has been anything wrong in his figures; I have seen him only once since the 24th December, it being holiday time; it seems that he was at the office on the day of his death, and only stayed there a few minutes; I heard of his death yesterday afternoon at 20 minutes past 2; I have been at my office to-day; when I was at the office yesterday I found his papers in the usual state, and as I should expect to find a clerk's papers; he left no paper or communication for me or my brother, and appears to have left his books just as if he intended returning; I think he has been out of spirits for some time past, but I know of nothing to account for his having destroyed himself; I believe he was 68 years of age.

W. Mercer Hill deposed: I am an accountant, and live in Ross; was on intimate terms with deceased; have occasionally met him in this house; I last met him here at half-past 10 yesterday morning; he was then perfectly sober; I had previously had some talk with him in the churchyard; at that conversation he said, "You are rather late, Mr. Hill;" I said, "Why, sir, because we shut up to-day, being New Year's day?" I asked him if his office did not close, and he said no; I replied, "Not for the half day?" he said, "No;" I then asked him how he felt, and he said, "I am not much better;" he had about a week ago told me on several occasions that he had been spitting up a good deal of blood; he seemed in very depressed spirits; after the above conversation, I met him in this house, but we had nothing to take; he was going to take possession of the house next door, on behalf of his employers, as the tenants had left; that was the last I saw of him alive; I remained in the bar a short time after he left, about a quarter of an hour; I then went for a walk, and, as I went out from here, I heard his voice next door; I did not stop; I returned here after about an hour and a half, but did not see the deceased; I was taking dinner with Mr. Lewis; just as dinner was over, Mr. Lewis said to me, "I wish you would go and see how Mr. Davies is;" I asked where he was, and Mr. Lewis replied that he was in the water-closet; I went there, and found the deceased sitting on the seat; his clothes were not undone; I took him by the shoulder and shook him; I called out, "Get up," and he made no answer; the water-closet was very dark; I shook him a second time, and, finding he made no reply, I caught hold of his left hand, which I found cold; I then put my hand on his forehead, which I also found cold; I then put my finger on his eyelid and raised it up, and found he was dead; I then came out of the closet into the light, and found blood on my hand; I told Mr. James Poole that the deceased was dead; I did not know at that time the cause of his death; I thought he might have been throwing up blood; I then told Mr. Lewis what I had seen; I thought the deceased might have died from the rupture of a blood vessel; I then went down to Mr. Cope, but did not know, nor were any of the inmates of the house aware at that time of the deceased's throat being cut; I told Mr. Cope that I had found Mr. Davies dead; I never heard the deceased say he would destroy himself; I know of no grief or trouble that may have induced him to commit suicide; I know of no cause except the complaint he made to me about the throwing up of blood.

¹ The 1871 census gives an address of Ashfield Rock House; this is not the same dwelling as Ashfield House (still standing) where Thomas Davis, confusingly also a solicitor's clerk, lived.

² By his second marriage: the youngest by his first was already married.

³ Catherine (14), John (12), Francis (10), Margaret (9), William (7)

Dr. Cambridge Cary Cocks deposed: I was called to attend the deceased at 10 minutes past 2 o'clock yesterday; the messenger asked me to go and see him; I found the deceased sitting on the seat of the water-closet leaning on his right elbow, with the hand out in front of him, and his left hand in his lap; his hand was covered with blood; I was told he had burst a blood vessel, and they were afraid he was dead; I found quantity of blood on the floor, and on the wall on the side on which his head was leaning; his coat and waistcoat were covered with blood; I satisfied myself that he was dead, and advised the sending for Supt. Cope; when he came I again got a candle and we examined the body carefully; in consequence of finding his necktie on the floor, and seeing no blood coming from his mouth, I was satisfied he had not broken a blood vessel; on moving the body, the deceased's head fell a little backward, exposing a long, deep cut, reaching from one ear to the other, quite dividing the trachea, oesophagus, the jugular vein, and two arteries; it was not so deep at the sides as the centre of the throat; he could not have lived more than a couple of minutes – or three at the outside – after inflicting the incision; I saw Mr. Cope pick up a shut razor and the deceased's collar and necktie; the deceased was then removed to the room where the jury have just seen him; two or three years ago I attended the deceased, and found his symptoms were such as would be shown by a person suffering from incipient delirium tremens; at that time he appeared to be miserable, dejected, and dissatisfied with himself; I have not attended him recently, but his symptoms at the period I refer to – two or three years ago – appeared to denote the early stages of delirium tremens, only wanting a little more to bring the attack on. – By the Foreman: I saw the deceased yesterday about a quarter to 11; he wanted me to make a business appointment; I told him I could see him in the afternoon; he seemed quite capable of transacting business, but was very irritable; it did not occur to me that he was incapable of transacting business or I should not have appointed to meet him at 3 o'clock.

Mr. Edward Davies, the eldest son of the deceased⁴, here entered the room, and asked for the medical evidence to be read over. This having been done, he put a question to Dr. Cocks, and stated that the deceased was of a very nervous temperament, and when the doctor said he was labouring under incipient delirium tremens, it was making a grave charge against his father.

The Coroner said he had a desire to allow every latitude to the last speaker, considering the feelings he was labouring under, but it must be for the jury to judge the value of Dr. Cocks's evidence.

Mr. Edward Davies, who was very much affected, and at one time burst into tears, having asked permission to make a statement, which was granted, said: My father was of a very nervous temperament, just like I am myself. He was, as all of you are probably aware, married a second time, and was labouring for his employers at a salary of £150 a year. Now I myself am getting £210, and I think that, having a young family, it perhaps acted upon his mind. I have recently received a letter from him, in which he said he was awfully depressed through having a large family and a little salary.

The Foreman: Has he ever asked you for aid?

Mr. Davies replied with some manifestation of indignation: Would a father do that? and sat down.

The Coroner then summed up the facts as given in the above evidence, and said the question for the Jury would be the state of the deceased's mind at the time he committed the act. They had it in evidence that two or three years ago, he was suffering from incipient delirium tremens; but it might not have been the case at the time of the deceased's act. It was shown that he was perfectly sober at the time, and therefore the Jury would have to well consider the circumstance. Having explained the law as affecting the commission of such deeds under a sane and insane state of mind, he said he would leave the Jury to consider the matter, they being fully competent to do so.

Supt. Cope here stated that a sum of £1 5s 9d. was found in the deceased's possession, which the Coroner directed to be handed over to the deceased's relatives.

After a few questions to the Coroner, and opinions had been passed as to the condition of the deceased's mind, the Foreman said he thought there was no evidence other than that the deceased was sane previous to the time he committed suicide. He thought they could return a verdict that the deceased cut his throat, but that there was no evidence to show what state of mind he was in at the precise moment he committed the deed.

The Coroner remarked that an open verdict of this kind would be very unsatisfactory to the deceased's friends and the public. He hoped they would consult, and return one of the two verdicts at their disposal.

Dr. Cocks explained that when he stated what he knew of the deceased's condition two or three years ago, he had no desire to make any such charge as had been mentioned by Mr. Edward Davies. It was merely done with an endeavour to put the matter more clearly, and to meet the difficulty the jury were now experiencing, because the effects at the time he referred to might have led to the unhinging of the deceased's mind, even though he might have temporarily recovered from the symptoms he (Dr. Cocks) had alluded to.

After a few words from the Coroner on the subject of suicidal mania, and the probabilities attending acts of suicides, which in this present case was shown to be without any real motive, and therefore all the more likely to result from temporary insanity,

The jury retired to consult, and after a few minutes returned the following verdict: "That the deceased committed suicide while labouring under temporary derangement of mind."

The remains of the deceased were buried on Saturday afternoon, in Ross Churchyard, when a large number of his friends and fellow-townsmen were present.

⁴ Edward Davies was 38 years old, married with 7 children, an officer of the Inland Revenue; in 1871 his family lived in Bristol (though at the census he was away from home lodging at Tower Hamlets); in 1881 they were at Swansea. He may have just arrived from Bristol.