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TRAGEDY AT NICHOLFOREST

A FARMER SHOT BY A POACHER

SUICIDE OF THE MURDERER

The remote district of Nicholforest in this county has been the scene of a terrible tragedy, resulting in the murder of Mr. William Forster, farmer, Brown Knowe, on Saturday, and the subsequent suicide on Sunday of his assailant, a labourer named James Armstrong, who cut his throat rather than fall into the hands of the police. Mr William Forster, who was 38 years of age, was a son of Mr Forster of The Nook, a well-known judge of horse and brother of Mr Arthur Forster, horse dealer of this city. He was formerly traveller for the Longtown Brewery Company but had lately devoted himself to agriculture.

On Saturday Mr William Forster went to his father's residence, The Nook, and when he returned to Brown Knowe one of his sons informed him that he had heard a shot fired in an adjacent field forming part of the farm. Mr Forster thereupon told his son to let him have the cocker dog and to keep the pup in, and he would go on to the Knowe, the field from which the sound of the report had come, and see who was shooting. The son accompanied his father to the gate of the Knowe and then returned home. This happened about noon, the son being the last member of Mr Forster's family who saw him alive.

At Sunnyside Cottage close to the Huntsman Inn, near Penton, better known as the Corner House, on the turnpike road about three quarters of a mile from Brown Knowe, lived James Armstrong, 47, a notorious poacher. He has been twice in the asylum and until quite recently was employed by Mr Armstrong of the Kilns, Kershopefoot, but since his discharge from that place has worked as a day labourer at draining and other kinds of work at Mr James Irving of Pasture Head. On Saturday forenoon this man was seen carrying a gun in the large allotment near Greenriggs Farm, by the farmer there, Mr Kennedy who was engaged in mowing, and who knew Armstrong well, having in fact lent him a gun. Shortly afterwards, Mr Kennedy saw someone, accompanied by a small dog, advancing towards Armstrong and then when they were about 10 yards apart he heard two shots from a gun, but did not think anything of it particularly. In about ten minutes he noticed Armstrong leave the field, but did not observe that the other person left. Mr. Kennedy, suspecting at the time nothing unusual, went home about four o'clock for his tea, having mentioned the circumstances to his wife, and, after some talk with her, and suspicion becoming aroused, Mr Kennedy thought he would go into the field and look. He was horrified at finding Mr Forster lying dead, with a gunshot wound in his chest, the right side of his head battered in and his dog lying dead on the other side of the fence.

The discovery was made at five o'clock, the spot where the body lay being part of Stongarthside Fell, about a mile from Mr Forster's house. The deceased was removed to his house, and Mr. Arthur Forster of Carlisle, his brother, was telegraphed for. On his arrival at Brown Knowe, about half past eight, everything was done that could possibly lead to the arrest of the person by whom the dreadful had without doubt been committed. The police were communicated with, the result being that Police Constable Dickinson of Penton and Police Constable Bird of Longtown, arrived with all possible haste on the scene about midnight. The officers, the latter of whom had had to travel over ten miles, made inquiries into the circumstances and were not long in coming to the conclusion that that it would be necessary for them to arrest Armstrong and charge him with the wilful murder of Mr Forster. The wound in Mr. Forster's chest, the shot having passed through the right nipple, was not sufficient perhaps, to have caused immediate death, but the injury to his skull must have been the work of great violence, a hole having been knocked in behind the right ear, large enough for a man's fist to pass through. The injuries were such as might have been inflicted by some blunt instruments, such as the butt end of a gun. Dr T Taylor Creighton, of Newcastleton, who had been summoned to Brown Knowe, informed the constables that in his opinion the shot had been fired at the deceased at a distance of only about ten yards. Knowing the antecedents of the man Armstrong the constables Bird and Dickinson soon became alive to the fact that a difficult and dangerous task lay before them. He had recently been heard to threaten several people in the locality, and the fact that he was possessed of a loaded gun, added still more to the risk that would attend his capture. It was well into the small hours of Sunday morning before the police became positive that the murderer had retired to his cottage, and in their discretion it was thought best under the circumstances that they should conceal themselves in some outhouse near the place and await his coming out. or at any rate until further assistance arrived. Very wisely, a messenger was sent to Brampton to apprise Superintendent Lancaster of the affair, and the Superintendent received the news about a quarter past nine o'clock on Sunday morning. He at once set off for Nicholforest in company with Sergeant Lewis, and reached the scene of the

tragedy about noon, twenty four hours after the murder, having had to journey a distance of sixteen miles. There he found Bird and Dickinson keeping their watch over Armstrong's house—a task which had occupied them since six o'clock. It appears that they had been unable to find any outhouse or convenient ambush anywhere near the cottage, so they had taken up position on either side of the door. This watching must have seemed solemn in the extreme, the constable not knowing at what moment they might have to risk their lives in the execution of their duty. Occasionally a noise was heard inside, and but for that incident at six o'clock in the morning it seems likely that Bird would have been shot through the head. At the side of the door where Bird was standing, there happened to be an aperture filled up with loose stone. The constable heard a slight noise proceeding from this aperture close to his head and looked round only to find himself face to face with the muzzle of a gun. He also distinctly saw a pair of gleaming eyes, but at once dodged out of the way and retired with his colleague round the gable of the cottage. There they maintained their watch without for another six hours there being the slightest sign of anyone issuing from the cottage, although it was learned from the numbers of people who had begun to congregate that Armstrong had a wife and family living with him.

Superintendent Lancaster on arriving soon gathered the full meaning of what had occurred. He organised a gang of men and obtained three guns for the purpose of frightening Armstrong and securing his arrest. Captain Marley, a visitor to the district, was also present and was very active in assisting the police. The cottage was surrounded at a safe distance, and a window broken in with stones for the purpose of attracting Armstrong's attention, the superintendent informing those who were around him that the police might have to call on them for assistance, but that he did not wish any but officers of the law to expose themselves to actual danger. Mr Lancaster then saw Armstrong darting about his house like a madman, and presently his wife and five children, ranging from twelve years to three, came running down the field from the back door of the house in great fright. The woman, in answer to questions put to her by the police, was able to inform them that Armstrong was in the parlour with his gun, but having said this she immediately fell down in a fainting fit and was carried into the inn close by. The police then determined to close with their man it being known that he was alone in the cottage. The superintendent accordingly first demanded admittance and Dickinson battered in the door with an axe. An unexpected and horrific spectacle presented itself to the officers when they had gained entrance to the cottage. Armstrong was found lying on the floor of the kitchen in front of a looking glass with his throat cut ear to ear, and just about to breathe his last. Rather than suffer capture he had committed suicide with a razor. His body was carried to the inn to await the coroner's inquest and so ended the second act in a tragedy which has caused great consternation in the district. In the house was found a double barrelled gun loaded in both barrels, and one cap of which had been snapped, a circumstance which has suggested that Armstrong had attempted to shoot himself before using the razor.

Much sympathy is felt for the families of both victims. Mr Forster was well known and highly respected in Longtown and the vicinity, with which he had formerly business relations in connection with the brewery. He is survived by a widow and five children. His widow was before her marriage Miss McIlwrick, and then lived at Bush on Esk, having come with her parents from Glenluce in Wigtownshire. The man Armstrong is stated to have seen better days and to have possessed a little money at one time, but mental derangement caused him to be placed in the asylum twice. He had seven children, two of whom, the eldest, are not living at home at present.

THE INQUEST

The inquest upon the two bodies was held yesterday by Mr James B Lee, Coroner for East Cumberland at the Huntsman Inn, Nicholforest, commonly known as the "Corner House" wither the body of Armstrong had been conveyed by the police on Sunday. The following jury was sworn:-- John Holliday (foreman), John Whitfield, James Irving, James Telford, Arthur Dixon, Christopher Milligan, George White, Joseph Armstrong, Henry Ward, James Dixon, Richard Broatch and William Graham.

The jury, having been sworn, proceeded to view the bodies of the two deceased men, that of Mr Forster, who was 38 years, at his own residence, Brown Knowe, and that of Armstrong, who was 47 years of age, at the inn above named. The following evidence was adduced:--

John Forster, a little boy eight years old, son of the deceased, who was questioned by the Coroner in his father's house in the presence of the jury, said that he was in the house on Saturday, when he heard a shot fired outside. He went and told his father who was in the house, and the latter went out taking a little dog with him.

John Kennedy, farmer, Greenriggs, Bewcastle, deposed that he knew both the deceased men very well, particularly Mr Forster, having lived with his father for twenty one years. About 12 o'clock on Saturday he saw Armstrong sitting on witness's dyke side. Witness was mowing corn in the field, and when he saw Armstrong first he was about quarter of a mile off, sitting or crouching in the dyke back facing the common, apparently

watching for game. He remained in that position about ten minutes, and witness noticed that he had a gun with him. Shortly afterwards witness noticed Mr Forster coming down the field with a little dog but he did not know at the time that it was Mr Forster, going in the direction of Armstrong. When the two men came near together witness went on mowing again, thinking that there was no game coming. He had not mowed more than a sheaf when he heard a gunshot fired and then immediately afterwards another shot. Witness looked and saw that Armstrong was walking backwards and forwards a little way up as though he was still watching for game but he did not see Mr Forster or the dog again. In about twenty minutes Armstrong came away down the dyke right to the corner past the place where Forster and he had been, as though he were making for the turnpike road. Witness went down the side of the dyke, but Armstrong "shied" off, a distance of about seventy yards between them. He had doubt that it was Armstrong, who had been seen frequently at this place both last season and this. Armstrong had no liberty to shoot that witness knew of...

The Coroner—I want to know particularly what time of day it was when you first saw Armstrong.

Witness—Twelve o'clock. Witness proceeding said half an hour after Armstrong had gone away witness's wife came up to lift the corn and said "Did you see Jimmy of Sunnyside? I saw him leap the burn. Thou will certainly keep off him." Witness replied that he had seen him, but that he had lost sight of the second man. His wife remarked that his sight was not so good as it once was, and thinking that the other man might have gone away unobserved by him set to work to mow again. About three o'clock he sent his wife home as it was very windy, and witness put his scythe in the dyke and went home too. It would be about twenty minutes past four. After some talk with his wife as to what they could be shooting at, witness about ten minutes past five left the house and went straight up to where the shots were fired. He came upon the dog lying dead on witness's side of the field in the dyke seugh among some water. About a yard away, over the fence, he saw the dead body of Forster, lying face down, partly on his left side. Witness called out "William" but deceased never spoke. Witness did not go over to him but came away home and told his wife and landlady. He had known Armstrong about twenty or thirty years and did not consider him of sound mind, and people were afraid of him.

The Coroner—Were you afraid of him?

Witness I was and would not have gone near him if he had a gun in his hands.

Witness then identified the gun produced as his own, he having lent it to Armstrong.

Thomas Graham, shepherd Hill Bottom, spoke to seeing Armstrong about nine o'clock on Saturday morning, going along the bottom of Mr Whitfield's cornfield, carrying a gun below his coat. He considered him a dangerous man.

Mr. Thomas Taylor Creighton, surgeon, Newcastleton said he was called in to see the body of William Forster on Saturday evening. He found a large gunshot wound about the fifth rib on the right hand side of the chest near the nipple. A little of the shot was scattered over the chest, but the shot had entered almost like a bullet. It had penetrated the lungs, and he also found an extensive injury behind the right ear, four or five inches in length and breadth, the bone being fractured to the brain, and the brain protruding. The wound was a deep one and had evidently been done by some blunt instrument, such as the butt end of a gun. He thought it was likely deceased might have lived some time after being shot, and the real cause of death in his opinion was fracture of the skull. The wound in the deceased's head was caused after the shot. Armstrong had been considered a dangerous man in the district.

Police Constable Edward Dickinson, stationed at Penton, said that on Saturday night he received information that a murder had been committed on Stonegarthside Fell. He proceeded at once to the place and saw the deceased Mr Forster. The waistcoat (produced) he took off deceased. It showed a large hole in the right breast of the waistcoat, which was saturated with blood. In his opinion the discharge of the gun must have been quite close to deceased's breast, probably about twelve inches off. The watch chain produced was broken in three places and his watch was stopped at four o'clock.

Superintendent Lancaster said that was all the evidence he proposed to call in Forster's case and the coroner said he would take the evidence in Armstrong's case, when the jury, having all the evidence before them, could return their verdicts in both cases at the same time.

Police Constable Dickinson, the last witness, continuing, said early on Sunday morning in company with Police constable bird of Longtown, he went to Armstrong's house, arriving there about six o'clock. They concealed themselves behind a door in order to make a rush when it was opened. They saw someone inside the house in a stooping position, near a square hole in the porch facing the garden. They looked through this hole and saw Armstrong still in a stooping position pointing a gun. Witness sent word to Brampton to Superintendent

Lancaster, and he and other constable watched the house, one at either side. They spoke to Armstrong, but got no answer, and they waited until Superintendent Lancaster arrived.

Superintendent Lancaster, said that about half past nine o'clock on Sunday morning he received information from a relative of Mr Forster that a murder had been committed, and on arriving at the place about a quarter past 12 in company with Sergeant Lewis he found the constables near the door of the cottage. After enquiries he made arrangements to surround Armstrong's house to take him prisoner. About two o'clock he got three guns and posted the two constables with a gun each in front of the house, while he and Captain Marley, who is at present staying at Longtown, and who was an acquaintance of the deceased man Forster, guarded with the other gun the rear of the house. Witness gave orders to break in the window, which was done to attract Armstrong's attention to that spot, as they could see him moving up and down in the kitchen, evidently watching the police. Shortly afterwards two shots were fired, and Armstrong wife and five or six children came running out of the house down the hill over the little burn in an excited condition.. They were helped over, and shortly afterwards Mrs Armstrong fainted. Shots were fired into the broken window to attract the man's attention to them so that they might get in by the door. Witness called three times for admission, saying each time, "Are you there Armstrong?" and, receiving no reply, they broke in the door, and on proceeding to the kitchen they found Armstrong lying on the floor with his throat cut and razor (produced) lying by his side. On looking round witness found near the fireplace on top of an old chest or dresser a double barrelled gun, both barrels being loaded and on the near side nipple on cap had been snapped. Both cocks were down. The man was quite dead, but there were large drops of perspiration on his brow. When he gave orders to fire it was not with the intention of shooting the man but merely to frighten him. Witness and his officers received very valuable help from Captain Marley, who rendered every possible assistance. as did also several of the inhabitants. They took the body of the deceased man to the public house, where it was now lying.

Captain Alfred George Marley, Master Mariner of Manchester, and at present of Longtown, said he was present on Sunday afternoon and assisted superintendent Lancaster in the proceedings outside the cottage.

The Coroner—You think the precautions superintendent Lancaster were necessary and quite justifiable?

Witness—Absolutely. He told us not to use the firearms unless it was absolutely requisite, and that if they did they were to aim low. Witness fired two shots. He fired a shot through the broken window. He did so with a view to create a surprise, and to draw off Armstrong's attention, so as to give the people outside the opportunity to rush the door. Witness corroborated superintendent Lancaster's evidence, and entirely approved of the precautions and the measures adopted by him, under such circumstances of danger.

Sergeant Lewis, deposed to searching the pockets of the deceased, and finding a tobacco box containing gun caps in his breast pocket. Witness saw the deceased watching the police through the window and between the time of his wife escaping and the door being broken in a quarter of an hour might elapse.

Elizabeth Armstrong, widow of the deceased man said her husband rose about six o'clock on Sunday morning, and in a few minutes when into the entry and looked out of the bow hole facing into the garden. He barred the door behind him. Witness said "What are you doing up there James?" He was then standing looking out of this small window. He replied "keep the door shut, there's two policemen; they're coming to take me for poaching" Witness went and made the fire on and about seven o'clock she saw the policemen outside. Her husband kept going back and forward. Witness did not make anything to eat until nearly eleven o'clock. Deceased walked about from the kitchen to the parlour door nearly all day. The gun was lying on the drawer top. About two or three o'clock her husband took the gun and went into the parlour and shut the door. It was then that witness and her children escaped from the house. They had a little child which died a fortnight ago, and her husband had been very silly ever since. He would rise during the night and light his pipe. She had never heard him threaten. Her husband had been twice in the asylum, the last time about six or seven years ago. On Saturday her husband left in the forenoon and returned about two o'clock for his dinner. He had nothing but the gun when he went out but he brought back no game. He went out a second time and said he knew of a hare and he would try and get her. This was all the evidence.

The Coroner briefly summed up. He said that this was one of the most painful and melancholy cases that it had ever been his lot to investigate; but the principal point to which he wished to draw the attention in both cases was with regard to the sanity or otherwise of Armstrong. In Mr Forster's case it was either wilful murder or that he was killed by a person not responsible for his actions; in which case it could not possibly be murder, because murder implied intent to kill. The evidence all through was to the effect that the man was dreaded and was looked upon as a terror to the neighbourhood, and that he was of a passionate and savage nature. It was quite clear that he was in the habit of poaching and no doubt he had been warned off Mr Forster's land at other times; and it was said, although they had no evidence on this point, that he had threatened someone. The only

question they had to consider was this, @was he or was he not of sufficiently sound mind to be responsible for his actions? If he was then in was a case of wilful murder of William Forster but if he was not responsible for his actions then they would find that Forster died of wounds inflicted by Armstrong while in an unsound state of mind and that the latter committed suicide while in that frame of mind. The Coroner, in concluding, commented on the praiseworthy and heroic conduct of Superintendent Lancaster, Sergeant Lowis, Constables Dickinson and Bird, together with Captain Marley and others who had assisted in attempting to capture Armstrong, a man of desperate character, adding that but for the dispositions made by superintendent Lancaster further injury and death might have resulted. Superintendent Lancaster had acted in a most proper manner, and in the best way possible under the circumstances, and with justice to all concerned.

THE VERDICT

The jury then consulted together for a few minutes and returned the following verdict:-- "That the deceased William Forster died from gunshot and other wounds inflicted by one James Armstrong, the said James Armstrong not being then of sound mind; and that the deceased James Armstrong killed himself, not being then of sound mind.

Postscript

from the Carlisle Journal: 8 October 1891

Mr. William Forster, of Brown Knowe, Nicholforest, whose sad death we recorded in our issue of the 28th inst., had effected only last year a policy of assurance against accidents. It would in ordinary cases have been interesting to know if any payment would have been forthcoming, but as it seems the issuing company is the Railway Passengers Assurance Company of London, which admits unprovoked assault as an accident, and has already paid under its general accident policies for several cases of murder, the amount of the policy -- £500—will become payable to the heirs of the unfortunate gentleman, who was so brutally murdered on his own farm. The agent for Carlisle is Mr James Forbes Donald, through whom the insurance was effected—
[adv]