



Murderous Assault with a Knife at Staverton

On Sunday there was some excitement in the town in consequence of a report that a serious affray had taken place at Staverton in the night, between two young men, and one had drawn a knife and stabbed the other so severely that his life was despaired of. On enquiry we found that such indeed was the case. It seems that a young man named Boaz Webb, aged 19, son of some decent labouring people at Staverton, was, on Saturday night, returning to his home from Holt, where he worked for Mr. Keevil, and at the gate of his father's house he saw his sister Caroline Webb, about 16 years of age, talking to a young man named Edward Davis, aged 17. The brother, it seems, asked his sister who it was she was talking to, as Davis was a stranger to him and it was near 12 o'clock, but she declined to satisfy him and he then asked Davis his name, but he gave an irrelevant reply, which irritated Davis [sic], and a fight ensued between them, Davis at the same time remonstrating with the brother for fighting with one less than himself. After scuffling for a few minutes, Davis withdrew a few yards off, and was observed to stoop down, and Webb and his sister heard him open a pocket knife, with which he came towards Webb, who asked him what he was going to do with it. Davis replied "I'll tell you in a minute", advanced towards Webb, seized him with his left hand by the left shoulder, and with his right hand struck the knife into his back, between his shoulders, inflicting a gash two and a half inches in length. He stabbed his victim more than once, and finally they fell to the ground. Webb was uppermost, and he struggled hard to get possession of the deadly weapon, but to no purpose, for Davis, with a ferocity and determination seldom equalled, kept changing the knife from his left hand to his right, stabbing Webb with either as he got a chance. In all six wounds were inflicted, the most deadly of which was one six inches in length, underneath one of his armpits, and which, it is supposed, slightly penetrated one of the lungs, as air emitted from the wound. Faint from loss of blood the injured man was unable to release himself from his murderous assailant, and the sister, thinking her brother was being assassinated, screamed murder, and called her mother. Some might feel disposed to censure the girl for not calling assistance before, seeing that her brother had been stabbed by his assailant so many times, and in her presence too. But no doubt she was afraid to leave the spot, lest her brother should have been murdered outright, and in her attempts to release him from the murderous grasp of Davis, she herself was stabbed in her right arm three times. Finding her efforts useless she then called for assistance, "Murder, murder! Mother, mother, my brother is being murdered!" Davis then got out from under his victim, who was so exhausted from loss of blood, as to be unable to move, threw the knife away, and made off across a field saying, "I'll make my escape while I can". The wounded man was then assisted into his house, and his under clothes, which

were soaking blood, removed. A message was despatched for the nearest surgeon, and Mr. C. Tayler, of Hilperton Road, attended as quickly as possible, and dressed the wounds of the injured man, which were found to be of a very extensive nature. Meantime P.C. Perrott, of Hilperton, arrived and went in search of the prisoner, whom he found in the house of Simeon Bull, of Hilperton Marsh, where he was laid down upon a bed made up for him on the kitchen floor. He told the constable that he knew what he had done (referring to the affray) and said he should not have done it, had not the other (meaning Boaz Webb), "gone on with him so". On their way to Staverton, Davis pointed out the spot where the affray took place, and also the place where he had thrown the knife, which the constable afterwards found, and produced, with the injured man's shirt in court. The knife is a common pocket knife, and the large blade was open and had blood upon it. The shirt presented a sickening sight, being literally soaked with blood, and exhibited several cuts, corresponding with those on the man's body. When the surgeon found that the case was likely to assume a very serious aspect, he gave directions for a magistrate to be fetched to take the man's deposition, as it was feared he would not survive the night. Mr. J. P. Stancomb, of Hilperton Road, was immediately sent for, and accompanied by Mr. Henry Clark. Magistrate's clerk, arrived at Webb's residence, between five and six o'clock on Sunday morning. With some difficulty he made a statement of the circumstances, which will be found below. The prisoner Davis, who was present, was then removed to the lock-up at Trowbridge.

Examination of the Prisoner

On Monday morning the prisoner was to be brought up for examination at the Magistrates' office. The excitement to catch a glimpse of him was immense, in fact such a scene has not been witnessed in Trowbridge since the notorious Road [sic] murder. From the Police Station to the appointed place of examination, knots of people were gathered, anxious to gain a sight of the perpetrator of this outrage. As eleven o'clock drew near, the crowd increased, the Police Station and its approaches being literally besieged. It was deemed imprudent to attempt to take the prisoner through this crowd to the Magistrates' office, and therefore it was decided that the examination should take place in the Police Station. On this being made known, the crowd around the Station increased the more, and when the doors were opened a tremendous rush took place, the sub-stratum of the population occupying every inch of ground appropriated to the public. Of course the whole who sort admission could not gain an entrance; and if those inside did manage to hear what was going on, it was not the fault of those outside, for they did their utmost to render the business of the court inaudible, by most indecorous, and we might say, indecent behaviour, in shouting, and passing jokes, which provoked coarse laughter; this was varied, occasionally by the outsiders every now and then attempting to force a passage, and it was with no slight exertion that the policeman on sentry at the door repulsed this besieging party.

The Bench was occupied by J. P. Stancomb and J. H. Webb, Esqrs. The Rev. P. B. Maddock, incumbent of Staverton was also present.

The prisoner, who is quite a youth, seemed to treat the matter very indifferently throughout, and cross-examined the witness, Caroline Webb, with much coolness.

The proceedings were commenced by the magistrates' clerk reading the injured man's deposition, which was as follows:-

Boaz Webb – I am a labourer, and live at Staverton. I work for Mr. Keevil, on his farm. I came home from Holt last evening, the 20th July instant, about eleven o'clock. When I got to the garden gate, leading from the turnpike road to our house, I saw my sister, Caroline Webb, standing in the turnpike road, talking to a young man, who I feel sure is the prisoner now before me. I had never seen him before last evening, but

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the young man who was with my sister was exactly like the prisoner in figure and dress. There was no one else there. I said to my sister "You come along in with I". She wanted to come in, but the young man did not want her to, and caught hold of her and dragged her away. I went to take her away from him. He took hold of me by my slop, I turned round and struggled with him, and we both fell down in the road together. We got up again and he took up some stones to throw at me. I then went up to him and we began fighting with our fists. After we had struck two or three blows, the young man drew back a few yards. I saw him put his hand in his pocket, and take out his knife, and heard him open it. He then drew up to me, and I said to him "What are you going to do with your knife?" He said "I'll tell you in about a minute". I caught hold of him and tried to keep him off as well as I could. Whilst we were struggling he stabbed me with the knife in ever so many places in my back. From the time I first saw my sister and the young man, to the time I was stabbed, was from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour. My sister then tried to part us, and in doing so, got a cut from the young man's knife in her arm. I got away then and went in home. I had some ale that evening, but no strong beer. I was quite sober. I know I am very ill, and it is doubtful whether I shall recover.

Cross-examined by Edward Davis – You did drag my sister away when I first wanted her to come in. You first caught hold of me by the slop when I tried to get my sister in. I saw you put your hand in your pocket and heard you open the knife. I was not drunk; I only had some three halfpenny ale. You were standing on the turnpike road when you drew your knife out of your pocket. After we struggled the first time, you did not try to get away from me. We were not three lug away all the time. When I left the public house in Holt, it was a few minutes after eleven. I came straight home. Holt is about three-quarters of a mile from my home. I asked my sister your name when I first saw you but did not speak to you. Everything I have now stated is quite true. The mark X of Boaz Webb.

The following additional evidence was given:-

Caroline Webb – I live at home with my father and mother, and with my brother Boaz Webb. On Saturday night I left Trowbridge about ten minutes to eleven with the prisoner and with Jane and Simeon Bull. When I got to my father's house at Staverton, which is about two miles from Trowbridge, I did not go in directly, and as I and the prisoner were standing there we heard my brother Boaz coming from the direction of Holt, singing. He asked me the prisoner's name and I did not answer him. He also asked the prisoner his name, and Davis kept saying "It is I". My brother said "What's your name and who beest thee?" My brother kept on asking him his name, but he would not say. I persuaded my brother to go in and the prisoner to go away. My brother caught hold of prisoner by the slop when he asked him his name, and they accidentally fell down over a stone – my brother fell first, and pulled the prisoner down on the top of him; they had no struggle previously. While on the ground the prisoner beat my brother about the head with his fists. I had hold of my brother's hand trying to part them, and he struck prisoner in the side with his other hand, whilst on the ground. They then got up and the prisoner went across the road to pick up some stones to throw at my brother. I told him to put them down and he did so. My brother was standing in the middle of the road taking off his cap, slop and waistcoat, and tucked up his shirt sleeves as if to prepare for a fighting. The prisoner was standing in the road but he made no preparation to fight. My brother said "If you want to fight, come and fight with your fists and not throw stones". Prisoner made no reply and they walked away together towards the railway bridge, on the Trowbridge road, and I followed them. My brother told me to pick up his clothes and go in home, but I did not. I persuaded him and the prisoner to go home. Davis said to my brother, "Now don't get a beating me; I'm only a little boy about sixteen years old". They then took hold of each other's hands, saying they would wish each other good night and part friendly; but they did not do so and my brother asked him his name again. Prisoner answered "I do know. It is I". They said something to each other but I did not hear what; and my brother

gave prisoner a slap in the head, with his fist. Davis then pitched into him with his fists, and they both fought and fell onto the grass. I parted them on the ground as well as I could, and got my brother up, and prisoner went on about two yards towards Staverton, by himself. My brother and I stood still. Prisoner stopped, as I thought to pick up a stone; but he drew his knife, and I heard him open it. I should think about a minute and a half elapsed between the time he went away and the time he came back. He then came towards my brother with a knife in his hand. My brother said "What are you going to do with that knife?" Prisoner said "I'll show you" and immediately took hold of my brother's left shoulder with his left hand, and with his other hand struck him with the knife between his two shoulders. My brother tried to take the knife from him, but could not do so for when he caught hold of the prisoner's hand that held the knife he changed it to the other hand. I saw prisoner strike him a second time with the knife, in the back. I saw him strike him three or four blows altogether, apparently all in the back; some of the blows were struck with the right hand and some with the left. They both fell to the ground, struggling with each other, and my brother fell on top of Davis. I saw the prisoner strike my brother several times with the knife, while they were on the ground. I then took hold of my brother's arm, to try to lift him up, and while doing so, the prisoner struck me two or three times in my right arm with the knife. (Witness exhibited her arm which was bandaged up). I could not succeed in getting my brother away, and called for my mother. When she appeared the prisoner got out from under my brother, who was unable to get up, threw the knife across the road, and said "I'll make my escape while I can" and went on along the road, got over the railing into a field and went off. My brother was still lying on the ground, unable to get up, and I and my mother lifted him and took him in home. He was very faint from loss of blood, and unable to go upstairs. Neither my brother nor Davis were drunk; my brother had enough beer to do him good. I was in Davis's company all the evening; he had paid for two pints of beer and one pint of cider, but did not drink it all. The prisoner was not so tipsy as my brother.

By the Bench – The night was sufficiently light to enable me to see the prisoner when he was two yards off, stooping to open a knife.

Cross-examined by prisoner – I did not see my brother take you by the shoulders and throw you down, nor did he say "I'll make you tell your name". When you and my brother walked up the road I did not hear you say to him "You are drunk and I am not much better".

Catherine Webb, mother of the last witness said – I am the wife of John Webb, labourer. On Saturday night last, between eleven and twelve o'clock, I and my husband were in bed. I heard my daughter screaming "Murder! Murder! Mother, mother my brother will be dead!" I went downstairs and out into the turnpike road, and saw my daughter just lifting him off the ground. He was running with blood, all his clothes were saturated with blood and he was very faint. We let him into the house. I saw my son Boaz previously at Holt, when I left work. He had but very little beer to drink. He will be twenty years of age the 23rd of next January, if he lives. I took the bloody shirt off my son and gave it to the constable.

P.C. William Perrott – On Sunday morning, at one o'clock I was on duty at Sea Corner gate, Hilperton Marsh when I first heard of this affray. I went to the residence of Boaz Webb, and from information I there received I went in search of the prisoner, and found him in the house of Simeon Bull, Hilperton Marsh, about half a mile from where the assault took place. He was lying down on the floor; he appeared to have been drinking, but was not drunk; he knew what he was about. I took him into custody and charged him with stabbing Boaz Webb. He made no reply. I took him back to Staverton. Before I took him into custody he said "We've had a fight, and I've done what I have". He had his slop on, and a good deal of blood was about him. On our return to Staverton he showed me where the struggle took place, and where he had thrown the knife. On searching there I found the knife, which I now produce. Prisoner,

when he saw it said "That's the knife". (An ordinary clasp knife, with the large blade open, and with marks of blood upon it, was produced) I went to Webb's house and took possession of the injured man's shirt. (The shirt was produced. It was completely saturated with blood, and caused a thrill of horror in court). The number of cuts in it correspond with the number of cuts in Webb's back. Prisoner said "The other came from Holt, and began the row with me first about the girl". He also said "I should not mind if it was not for the cuts on the girl's arm, as Webb began with me first." I brought the prisoner to Trowbridge and locked him up.

Mr. Christopher Tayler, surgeon - About a quarter after one on Sunday morning, the 21st of June, I was called to attend a wounded man. When I got to Staverton I saw Boaz Webb, lying on a bed in the kitchen of his father's house. His shirt was removed; he had several cuts on his back, but they had ceased bleeding and he was very weak from the loss of blood. I assisted in getting him removed to the upper room, and putting him on a bed. On examining him I found six wounds on him, one wound, about two inches and a quarter in length, just below the nape of the neck, inflicted apparently from left to right. Another wound I found on the right shoulder blade, and it was one and a half inches in length. A third wound was one inch below this, and one inch in length, and penetrated the chest. A fourth wound was situated at the back of the right armpit, three inches in length and dividing the muscle. The fifth wound was one inch below this and one inch in length. The sixth and last wound, is a slight one and below the left shoulder. The wounds were inflicted by an instrument such as the knife now produced. The man Webb is now in a most dangerous state. One of his lungs is injured, because, in breathing, the air passes under the cellular tissue of the skin. There are two wounds which might have penetrated the chest; I cannot say from which danger is to be apprehended. Webb has been under my care since the date of the assault, and I cannot say whether he will recover or not, until the fourth or fifth day from the accident.

This being the whole of the evidence.

The Bench remanded the prisoner till Thursday morning to await the issue of the surgeon's report.

Committal of the Prisoner

On Thursday morning the prisoner was brought up for further examination at the Police Station. He did not appear to comprehend the serious nature of the case, although he has expressed regret that he had not followed the advice of his Sunday school teacher.

The surgeon handed in the following certificate:- "I hereby certify that Boaz Webb continues in a dangerous state from the wounds inflicted by Edward Davis, although no unfavourable symptoms have yet appeared. I cannot at present say when he may be considered free from danger." C. Tayler, surgeon, Trowbridge 25th June 1863

The whole of the evidence taken on Monday was read over to the prisoner, who declined saying anything in reply. He was committed for trial on the charge of "unlawfully, maliciously, and feloniously wounding Boaz Webb, with intent to do him grievous bodily harm." He will take his trial at the ensuing Wilts Summer Assize, to be held at Salisbury, on the 17th July next. The magistrate, Mr. J. P. Stancomb, informed him, that if Webb died in the meantime, the charge would assume a much more serious form.

Trowbridge and North Wilts Advertiser, 27 June 1863

WILTS SUMMER ASSIZES

The commission for holding these assizes was opened at the Council House, Salisbury, on Friday, by Mr. Justin Willes, and Lord Chief Justice Erle.

Edward Davis was indicted for maliciously wounding Boaz Webb, with intent to do him grievous bodily harm, at Staverton, on the 20th of June, to which he pleaded not guilty.

Mr. H. J. F. Swayne, prosecuted; Mr. Read defended.

Mr. Read, for the defence, said he could not deny that the knife was used in this unhappy fray; neither could he attempt to justify its use. Looking, however, at the fact that there had been no previous quarrel, and that the prisoner was not the aggressor, he appealed to the jury only to convict the prisoner upon the minor count of unlawfully wounding. His Lordship, in summing up, told the jury to consider the intention of the prisoner at the time of the affray. If he intended, by the use of the knife, to inflict grievous bodily harm, it would be their duty to find him guilty on the more serious count of the indictment. The jury found the prisoner guilty of unlawfully wounding; and His Lordship ordered him to be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for six calendar months.

Trowbridge and North Wilts Advertiser 25th June 1863