

Benjamin Wood

Committed For Manslaughter A Dead Child Kept For Five Weeks May 1880

An unusual amount of excitement was created in Bacup, on Monday afternoon last by a discovery the sickening details of which could scarcely be believed, were there not the horrible proofs of all the circumstances brought strongly to light. A carter named Benjamin Wood resides with his wife at No 45 Lanehead lane and the people have been for a considerable time in a very destitute condition. It is evident that the greatest difficulty was experienced by Wood and his wife in making ends meet. It is said that the landlady of the premises in which the Woods lived called at the house some days ago for the rent, which had been considerably in arrears. On entering the house she was met with a terrible stench, which she said pervaded the whole house. She asked what was wrong and the evasive answers which she received aroused her suspicions that something was wrong. After some further talk Emma Wood, the mother said " that her child had died, that she had washed it every morning, that there it was on the chair \ (uncovering the body as she spoke) that she couldn't help it and might god help her. The landlady kept the secret and no one was any the wiser until the following Monday morning, when she told another woman of the circumstances and the informant seeing that all was not right and thinking that the case called for the interference of the proper authorities, communicated with the sanitary inspector who visited the house and found the dead child there in an advanced state of decomposition. Police Sergeant Jones visited the house, where he found the body of the child, as had been described. It appeared to have been about eighteen months old. The child was named John Henry Wood, and it appears he had died about five weeks previous. The cause of death appears to have been for want of medical attention and not being supplied with proper food. The body lay on a chair, dead and dressed in its nightgown,. It was quite black in the face. Jones had it removed without further delay to the police station.

The mother told the Sergeant the child had been ill about four months previous to its death but no medical man had been called to attend it. She obtained from Mrs Dyson the druggist some powders. The last bottle was finished two days before the child's death. When the child died they had placed it on the chair in the kitchen where it had lain until taken away to the police station. They could not bury the boy, because they were too poor, and none of the neighbours knew of the child's illness and death.

The following day a post mortem was carried out on the child and the father Benjamin Wood was arrested and taken into custody charged with causing the child's death. Benjamin was brought before the Magistrate the following Wednesday morning. The landlady Mrs Lord said she had known the child was ill and asked the mother how the child was and when told it was dead asked if they had buried it when she got no response she pressed the questioning and was told the child was laid in the chair.

On the day the child was found the father was working as a carter for Mrs Shepherd landlady of the Golden Lion. The house in which the family lived has only one room for sleeping in and living in and measured about 18ft by 13foot. They have one more child about seven years old.

The inquest was held at the Market Hotel on the Wednesday evening before the district coroner H Robinson Esq. Ann Lord the landlady of Newchurch Road gave her evidence as

did Jane Ann Shepherd landlady of the Golden Lion beerhouse. She stated she had employed Benjamin Wood since the middle of January at a weekly rate of 16s with his dinner thrown in. He was fond of his beer and would draw off a few shillings each day so that by the end of the week there was little left. Mr Alfred Dyson druggist gave his evidence next stating that the mother visited him in early March and asked him if swyrup of violets, squills, and oil of almonds were good for a cough and a cold. I said the were and supplied her with some. She also asked if borax and honey were suitable for a sore mouth for a child, and I said they were commonly used for that purpose. I supplied her with some and recommended she see a doctor if the child was no better in a few days. She made reference to the high charges.

John Pote Brow said, I am a medical man and practise in Bacup. On Monday last, I inspected the body of the deceased, and today made a fuller examination. The body was in a state of putrifaction especially at the back of the legs, back of thighs and head, back, groin, neck and face and the upper chest. There was no sign of injury or wounds. The limbs were perfect and unbroken. The skin was peeled off in many places and was in a state of putrifaction. There were no signs of vaccination marks. There were four teeth, two in the upper jaw and two in the lower jaw. Th3e child was suffering from water on the brain and disease of the glands of the mesentery. In my opinion death was attributable to these diseases. The child would have lived a little longer had medical attention been sought but would have eventually died. Dr Brown stated that had the child had well off parents the chid would probably not have had these diseases. These diseases are often brought on through ignorance of people and through the place in which they live.

The coroner in summing up the evidence for the jury stated the child seemed to be backward has it only had four teeth and the lack of vaccination marks pointed to the fact the child had not been registered. The father Benjamin Wood appeared to like his ale for which the mother seemed to not object. After taking the verdict f the jury the coroner committed Wood for trial, on a charge of manslaughter at the next Liverpool Assizes. He allowed him to be liberated on bail. Wood was unable to pay the surety for bail and was remanded in custody until his trial.

At his trial in July 1880 Benjamin was released without charge when the evidence given against him by the coroner was thrown out.