

John Nuttall

Another murder known as the Dean Sweetheart murder was committed on Sunday June 21st 1817 at a lonely farm called Sunnyfield on the eastern slope of the Dean valley. The farm was occupied by a farmer named William White and his family. One of the daughters, Ann White, was reputed to be one of the smartest and handsomest lasses in Rossendale with plenty of admirers. She was wooed and won by a young man in her position in life John Nuttall 20 the son of the the then occupant of Hollows Hill farm, situated on the hill side near the Deerplay, about half a mile north of Sunnyfield. The fact that the two young people kept company was known not only to the two families but to all the neighbours around, and no obstacle seemed to be thrown in the way of the match by the parents on either side. The marriage bells however never rang out a joyous peal for the ill-fated bride, who was doomed to an untimely death at the hands of her sweetheart.

It was another version of the old, story of woman's trust and mans perfidy. The unfortunate young woman "loved not wisely but too well" and the finger of scorn was being pointed at her that she was about to become a mother before she was a wife. This event seemed to have turned her sweethearts love to hate, and the unhappy man appears to have become imbued with the terrible idea that her death would at once conceal her fragility and his own baseness. That the deed had been mediated some time previous to its commission was evident from several incidents which occurred prior to the murder, but which were recalled to mind afterwards. On the Sunday before he imbrued his hands in the blood of his victim, he was sitting on a turf wall near to his father's house talking to several companions. Some of them thoughtlessly jeered him about his sweetheart, enquiring when the wedding was to come off. He became angry at this, and lifting up a sharp stone said he would knock his sweethearts brains out with it if she was present. His comrades of course looked upon this as a mere idle threat, but the sequel showed that he was at least capable of taking her life.

On the following Saturday night, the 20th June 1817, Nuttall retired to bed in his fathers house, where he apparently remained till the ensuing morning, when the whole neighbourhood was aroused by the startling rumour that Ann White had been murdered and her body thrown into the well near her fathers house. When the body of the unfortunate young woman was found in the well it was a remarkably beautiful morning. The news spread like wildfire, and in a brief space of time crowds of people were streaming over the hills from Bacup to the scene of the murder at Sunnyfield. The dreadful news had already spread down the valley, and crowds from Water, Newchurch and Waterfoot also made their way to the scene. A cursory examination of the body showed that the girl had not committed suicide, but had been brutally murdered and thrown partly into the well, a square sunk trough partly sunk into the ground. No doubt to induce belief that she had lain violent hands on herself to escape her shame. There was a large wound on her head, and an examination of the ground showed that the murder had been perpetrated in the barn, where a large hedgestake was found covered with blood and hair. The poor girl had therefore been killed in the barn, and the murderer had partially carried, partially dragged the body and flung it into the well. When the news of the murder reached the house of the prisoner's father, the family was at breakfast. The father looking sternly at his son asked " Jock ", what has to been doing to th' lass? The son made no reply, but immediately left the house. He made his way to Deerplay toolbar, where he was in the habit of going to have a gossip with the old mad who kept the bar. When Nuttall arrived the keeper had heard of the murder. He at once charged Nuttall with the crime, saying. " Jock, thou hast murdered th' poor lass. Ah can see it i'th face!" Seizing the poker in a rage, he made

at Nuttall exclaiming, " Get out of the house, tha cut throat wastrel or aw'l brain tha wi th ' fire poker!. Nuttall was speedily apprehended on suspicion and after a examination was committed to Lancaster Castle, to stand trial on the charge of murdering his sweetheart, Ann White. He stoutly maintained his innocence even after he was condemned. The evidence was purely of a circumstantial character, and Nuttall seems to have been convicted on testimony that would not be tolerated today. He was imprisoned in the same cell with a man charged with horse stealing, a capital offence at the time. He confessed the crime to the horse stealer, detailing the whole of the circumstances. His confession was to the effect that he remained in bed on the Saturday night referred to till the family were all asleep. He then left his bedroom, easily descended by the old fashioned stone porch. He then crossed the fields to the residence of his ill fated sweetheart at Sunnyfield, and awakened her by tapping at her window, as he had no doubt done previously. They then went into the barn together, where he killed or stunned the ill fated girl with the hedgestake then putting her body in the well where it was found by her family in the morning. Nuttall the young murderer ended his days on the scaffold at Lancaster on September 16th 1817.