



Crime & Punishment

Codford

ARSON

SALISBURY, Saturday, July 16. (*In the CROWN COURT. –Before Mr. Justice TAUNTON.*)

ARSON

Sarah Wheeler, the wife of James Wheeler, was indicted for having maliciously and feloniously set fire to certain outbuildings belonging to the premises in which she resided. The offence was charged to have been committed with intent to injure the overseers of the parish of Codford St. Peter, in this county. The evidence was very plain and direct against the prisoner; the principal witnesses deposing that they saw her in the open day carry a lighted stick in her hand from the house to the outhouse, and set the latter on fire. The person who first observed her, having put the fire out, gave directions that her subsequent conduct should be observed, and she was soon after seen to carry a light to the place which she had previously set on fire, and which was found to be on fire a second time, immediately after she had gone there.

One of the witnesses deposed that the prisoner, when placed in custody after the second attempt, expressed her determination to set fire to the house again as soon as she should have an opportunity.

It appeared from the answers to some questions put by Mr MAYNE to the witnesses for the prosecution as well as by the evidence of witnesses whom the learned gentleman called, that the prisoner had been extremely ill-treated by her husband, with whom she had lived a miserable life for many years; that at the period of the commission of the offence, she and her husband were living as parish paupers in the workhouse in question, and that she had set fire to the out-house in the hope that the fire might reach that part of the dwelling-house in which the husband was lodged. The jury found her *Guilty*, but her sentence is adjourned for the present.

(*The Times*, Monday, 18th July, 1831)

Sarah Wheeler, aged 44, was indicted for setting fire to an out-house, on the 2nd April last, the property of James Slade, at Codford St. Peter.

The prisoner and her husband are paupers, and lived in a house provided by the overseers. On the day above mentioned, the prisoner was observed by two witnesses to leave her house, in the middle of the day, with a fiery brand, and repair to an out-house, which was soon after discovered to be on fire and was with some difficulty extinguished. On seeing that her efforts were rendered abortive, she declared that she would "try it again," and the neighbours were soon after once more summoned to extinguish the flames, which they were providentially enabled to accomplish. The prisoner avowed, that she had committed the offence on account of the sulky temper of her husband and because the overseers would not see her righted. She received an excellent character. – The jury returned a verdict of guilty. The prisoner, who appeared much affected at the awful situation in which she was placed was ordered to be removed and brought up for judgment on Monday; his Lordship observing, that her case required serious consideration before he passed sentence.

(Salisbury and Winchester Journal, Monday 18th July, 1831)

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Sarah Wheeler, a decent looking woman, aged forty-four, was charged with having, on the second of April last, maliciously and feloniously set fire to certain out-buildings, belonging to the premises in which she resided, the same being the property of James Slade, at Codford St. Peter and rented of him by the overseers of the poor.

The prisoner and her husband, with other paupers, inhabited the premises provided for them by the parish authorities. On the day in question, about eleven o'clock in the morning, she was observed to carry a flaming stick from the house to the outbuildings and return without it. This, however, did not appear to have taken effect, for in a few minutes she was seen again to pass from the house to the outbuildings, bearing a similar fiery brand and exclaiming that she would try it again and in about five minutes after she left the place, flames were observed to break through the thatch. By the prompt interference of Ambrose Head, a pauper, assisted by the prisoner's husband, the flames were shortly extinguished. Head and the husband then went to their dinners, leaving word with a lad (brother to Head) to call them if any thing should occur. Shortly after their departure, the prisoner again issued forth with a lighted stick and carried it into the outhouse, which in a few minutes was again on fire. The lad instantly summoned his brother and the husband and by their timely assistance the flames were again happily put out, without doing further injury than consuming part of the thatch. – The prisoner, when apprehended, said to the constable who had her in charge, that he had better keep her fast, for if she was at liberty she would attempt it again and that if she did it on account of the sulky disposition of her husband and because the overseers would not see her righted. The prisoner, previous to this unfortunate transaction, had invariably borne a most excellent character and it was stated that her husband's conduct towards her was such as to drive her to acts of reckless desperation. His Lordship said, that such a plea was not the least excuse for her committing the crime with which she was charged, if she and her husband lived unhappily together, it was no reason that she should wantonly set fire to other people's property. – The learned judge having summed up, the jury returned a verdict of *Guilty*. On hearing the sentence, the prisoner fell upon her knees and bursting into tears, prayed for mercy. The witnesses for the prosecution, including the overseers of the parish, were about to speak in her behalf, stating that the unfortunate woman had been grossly ill-treated by her husband, when his Lordship interfered and told them that circumstances had nothing to do with a case like the present. The prisoner had been convicted of a most atrocious offence; he must pause before he passed sentence, as her case required his most serious consideration. His Lordship then ordered her to be brought up for judgment on Monday. – The prisoner was removed from the bar, apparently greatly affected by her awful situation.

When brought up, on Monday, for judgment, his Lordship observed, he had but few words to say to her; she had been convicted of a capital offence, in expiation of which it was usual (and public justice required it) that the law should be allowed to take its full course. He had maturely deliberated on her case and had come to the conclusion that the circumstances urged in mitigation of it had not the least weight; there was nothing extenuating in them. However, the offence of which she had been guilty was not attended with any aggravating circumstances; it was not committed in the dead of night, the time generally selected for the perpetration of this crime and it did not appear that she entertained any malice against the owners of the property. From the frequent attempts she made to commit the crime, when she must have been well aware she was observed, he was induced to suppose that she must have acted from a naturally perverse temper. Taking these circumstances into consideration, he thought he was justified in saying that her life would be spared, but on what conditions he was not at present at liberty to declare; thought the probability was, from the dangerous and wicked disposition she had evinced, that she would be sent out of the kingdom for her life.

(Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, Thursday 21st July, 1831)

Three of the prisoners, who received sentence of death at our assizes, have had their sentence commuted to imprisonment in the Devizes House of Corrections, viz. George Waldron (two years) for sheep-stealing; Sarah Wheeler (twelve months) for arson; and George Meek (six months) for house breaking.

(Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, Thursday 22nd September, 1831)