



Dartmoor Prison

Eli English – The Story of a “Very Bad Boy”

Eli English was born in the March Quarter of 1855 in the Malmesbury Registration District

The 1861 census at Charlton Road, Malmesbury records, Parents Joseph English, 29, an agricultural worker, and Ellen, 30, and their children, Eli, 6, James, 4 and Lucy, 2. The children were born at Milbourne, Malmesbury.

Malmesbury magistrate's Clerk's Office, Monday. A lad named Eli English was charged with sleeping in a barn belonging to Mr. Beak, of Milbourn. Sergeant Hobbs stated that complaints had been made to him that the prisoner was in the habit of sleeping out, and about half-past twelve on Sunday morning he found English in a barn at Winyard Mill. The lad's father attended and said his boy was hired to Mr. Haines, of Shortwood, near Bristol, and left without his master's knowledge. He was a very bad boy. The lad said his master's son beat him, and that made him leave. Mr. Thomas Luce, the magistrate, said he could not deal with the case as a vagrancy one. He should order the lad to be kept at the police station for three days, in order that his father might take him back to his situation.

Western Daily Press, Wednesday, 13 January 1869.

Eli English, 15, labourer, stealing a linen jacket, collar, and necktie, the property of James Webb, at Marksbury, on the 17th August. Prisoner had escaped from the Wilts Reformatory. He was sentenced to a month's imprisonment, and then to be sent back to the Reformatory for two years extra.

Bristol Mercury, Saturday, 22 October 1870

1871 Census: Warminster Reform School, inmate, Eli English, 16, born Malmesbury

Eli English, labourer, was charged with stealing a silver guard chain, the property of William Scott, at Lea, Malmesbury, on the 30th May. Mr. Lopes prosecuted and Mr. Camplin defended. Sentenced to 12 months' hard labour, previous convictions being recorded against him.

Western Daily Press, Thursday, 3 July 1879

Murderous Assault in Devizes Prison

Penal Servitude for Life

At the Winchester Assizes, on Wednesday, before Lord Justice Cotton. Eli English, a prisoner undergoing a term of imprisonment at Her Majesty's Prison at Devizes, was charged with attempting to murder a warder employed therein named Sydney Smith on the 13th of October. Mr. W. Ravenhill (instructed by Mr. T.C. Hopkins, of Devizes) prosecuted: the prisoner was undefended.

The prosecutor, a powerfully-built man, suffering from the very same severe injuries he received, and scarcely able to walk without assistance, said on the 13th of October the prisoner, Eli English, was confined in one of the cells. At about twenty minutes to nine o'clock that morning, the prisoner's bell rang and witness went to the cell and asked him what he wanted. He said "If you please, sir, will you come and read this letter for me?" Witness did so, and then handed the letter back to him and turned to leave the cell. He had, however, only just turned his back when he received a blow on the left side of his head which knocked him down. On his attempting to get up, the prisoner, with a mallet which he used in binding mats, struck him on the forehead and knocked him back against the wall. Witness then closed with him, threw him onto the bedstead, and after a struggle succeeded in taking the mallet away from him; and was about to strike him with it when he sprung up and threw him (the witness) off him. He then seized a knife which was lying on the table, and which he also used in mat binding, and began stabbing him in the neck. Witness cried out "Murder" as loud as he could, but the prisoner continued sticking the knife into his neck, and tried to cut his throat. Witness managed to get out of the cell, followed by the prisoner, and opened the door to a prisoner named Edward Marsh, when English again ferociously attacked him and again cut him with the knife. Witness became exhausted and fell down, and the last thing he recollected was receiving a cut across the left eye. The prisoner did not speak during the whole of the attack, which lasted some five or ten minutes. He gave him no provocation whatever, and the prisoner had never threatened him or given him any misword.

The next witness was Edward Marsh, who said he was a prisoner confined in Her Majesty's prison at Devizes. About half-past eight o'clock on the morning of the 13th of October, he heard a man cry out "Oh dear!" two or three times. Directly after his cell door was opened, and Smith and English came in. English had hold of Smith by the collar with the left hand, in which he held a knife, and he struck him on the head with a mallet, which he held in his right hand. Smith's face and whiskers were covered with blood, but witness did not see the knife used. He ran for assistance, and gave information to Warder Rowles. English did not speak a word when he came into his cell.

Richard Frederick Rowles said he was a warder in Her Majesty's prison at Devizes, and on the 13th of October, whilst he was in the lodge in the prison at breakfast, he heard cries of "Murder" in the prison and went in the direction of the sound. He found the prisoner's cell open and saw the floor and wall smeared with blood. He met the witness Marsh, and from what he told him he went to the cell and there saw the warder Smith lying at the feet of the prisoner English, with his face and head covered in blood. English had a knife in his hand, and appeared as if he had just risen up. Witness caught hold of English by the arm and said to him, "For God's sake, English, what have you been doing?" He replied, "I've done it now." He then took the knife, which was wet with blood, out of his hand, and he made no resistance. Outside the cell door he found a mallet, which was also wet with blood.

Dr. Clapham, surgeon to the prison, gave evidence as to the wounds which the warder had received. He said on the 13th October last he was called to see him and found him severely wounded about the head. One wound inflicted by a knife extended from the inner angle of the left eyelid across the temple as far as, and including, the ear; two parallel cuts about four inches long across the back of the neck, a cut an inch long on the right side of the neck, a continued and lacerated wound extending to the bone over the right temple, and a cut between the ring and little finger. The blow on the right temple might have been caused by the mallet (produced), and the cuts by the knife (produced). Smith was very faint from loss of blood

and the shock of the assault, and his life was in danger for three or four days. He was now convalescent, but was still under his care.

The prisoner, who offered no defence or explanation of his unprovoked brutality, was found guilty, and his lordship, in passing sentence, said the prisoner had been found guilty of a most serious offence. If the prosecutor had died he would have stood there on a different charge, and if the evidence had been the same he would have been found guilty of murder. He entirely agreed with the verdict of the jury, and his duty was to visit the offence with the utmost rigour of the law. He would be kept in penal servitude for life. A recommendation has been forwarded to the proper quarter for the remission of the remainder of the term of imprisonment which the witness Marsh is undergoing, as a reward for the assistance which he rendered.

Swindon Chronicle, Monday, 17 November 1879

1881 Census: Eli English, 24, thief, inmate at prison in Dartmoor.

1891 Census, at Dartmoor Prison: Eli English, inmate, convict, 34, general labourer, born Malmesbury, Wiltshire.