



Crime and Punishment

Manningford Bruce

William Amor – Trial and Execution for Murder – 1773

The Parish Register for Manningford Bruce records the burial of John Dyke on 27 November 1772, against which the reference 'murdered' has been added. The murder was committed by William Amor who, once arrested, voluntarily confessed to the crime.

William Amor, the son of John and Elizabeth Amor, was born in Pewsey and baptised on 7 September 1740.

On the night in question, William Amor and John Dyke had been drinking in the Swan public house where it appears the latter had been boasting about, and showing, money. This proved too much temptation for William Amor, who followed him home with the intention of robbery but, in the attack, dealt him a fatal blow.

Contemporary newspaper reports provide a little detail of the trial and execution. However, a more detailed account of the circumstances of the attack was to be provided 52 years later when the nephew of William Amor (Edward Amor) was convicted and sentenced to death for a similar crime. On the night before the execution of Edward Amor in 1824, the prisoner was interviewed and asked about his uncle in an attempt to elicit a confession (contrasting the voluntary confession of William with the repeated protests of innocence by Edward Amor and his friend John Goodman). Although Edward Amor spoke openly of his uncle's crime, no confession was forthcoming.

William Amor was hanged from a gibbet on Pewsey Down on Tuesday, 16 March 1773 and his body was left hanging in chains.

The following are extracts of newspaper reports covering the trial, execution and recollections of his nephew Edward Amor.

On Friday last one William Amor, of Pewsey, in Hampshire, was committed to Fisherton Gaol, charged with the willful murder of John Dyke, Taylor, of Manningford Bruce, on the 23rd of November last [1772]. It

seems his Wife and Family, wondering how the prisoner came by an unusual Quantity of money, spoke of it in Public, and several other Circumstances concurring to throw a Suspicion of his having committed the murder, he was taken up; when he confessed, that he waited under a hedge by the side of a Road, and when Mr. Dyke came by, he knocked him down with a large Fold-stake; though he declared he meant only to rob him, and struck him that he might not recover his Senses, so as to recollect who attacked him; but that he believes the first blow was the Cause of his Death. He directed them where to find the Fold-Stake; which was produced, very bloody, and tho' of an uncommon thickness, was broke towards the largest End in the Struggle between the Prisoner and the deceased.

Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette – 11 March 1773

SALISBURY, March 5

At our Assizes, which began this day, the following prisoners are to take their trials, viz. William Amer, for the murder of John Dyke, late of Manningford-Bruce, Wilts, Taylor, and robbing him of 5l. 2s. in money, and also of a silver watch, which he hath voluntarily confessed; ... Monday evening last, the felons confined in Fisherton gaol, were very riotous, they had began to undermine the wall, in order to make their escape; which being observed, proper assistance was called in, and they were all chained to the floor; but before they could be properly secured, there was a smart skirmish, in which a man who assisted the keeper, had a terrible cut in his head with a brickbat.

Hampshire Chronicle – 8 March 1773

Last week the assizes for Wiltshire ended at Salisbury, when the eight following prisoners received sentence of death, viz. William Amor, for the wilful murder of Mr. John Dyke, of Manningford Bruce; Robert Long, George Ridgeley, John White, Simon Draper, and Joseph Cook, for house-breaking; Thomas Jordan, for sheep-stealing; and Wm. Moss Pitt, for stealing a mare. Four were ordered to be transported for 7 years; one burnt in the hand; one imprisoned one month; and fifteen acquitted.

All the capital convicts were reprieved, except Amor, Long, and Ridgeley; the former of whom was executed on Tuesday on Pewsy-down, about a mile from the place where the murder was committed, and afterwards hung in chains. ... Amor confessed every particular of the murder, and was perfectly resigned to his unhappy fate; but the two others are hardened beyond conception.

Derby Mercury – 19 March 1773

Last Tuesday Morning early, William Amor, capitally convicted at Salisbury Assizes, for the Murder of Mr. Dyke, of Manningford, was taken from Fisherton Goal in a Post-Chaise, and carried to Pewsey-Down, where he was executed pursuant to his Sentence, and afterwards hanged in Chains on the same Gibbet.

Oxford Journal – 27 March 1773

To the Editor of the Devizes Gazette.

SIR – It is an error that all kinds of ministers visited Goodman and Amor; the clergymen alone of the parishes where they had lived or where they were confined, called on them with the Chaplain appointed by the Magistrates. Neither were they buoyed up by spiritual excitements to conceal, nor induced by any deceptions to confess their guilt. The truth indeed by all fair means was endeavoured to be elicited; and, at one time, it was asked Amor (on purpose to see if the similarity of the circumstances, with the awful horror attending thereon, would bring his own mind into a confidential confession of his offence), if it was true that his uncle had untimely suffered for a robbery and murder? – “Yes Sir, (said he, with perfect calmness, and as answering a solemn question) so I have been told.” – “You do not remember any thing of the affair?” “Oh! No, Sir, it was long before I was born. It was fifty-two years ago. My father was only a boy at plough.” “Then you know nothing of that sad business?” “I have often heard of it from others.” – [He seemed by no means disposed to conceal what he had heard, or to avoid talking upon the subject.] “How did it happen?” “They had been drinking at a public-house, Sir.” - “Who?” “My uncle and a tailor that lived at Shercott, named Dike.” “Where were they drinking?” “At the Swan, as it was called then, at Pewsey.”

“And what tempted your uncle to commit the deed?” “The lust of money, Sir. The tailor, so they told me, had been boasting and showing his money at the Swan, and late at night sallied forth to go to Shercott; my uncle, who was very poor, soon afterwards went away, and followed him. He said his heart failed him once, and he turned back again; but there, he overtook him at last, and robbed and killed him.”

“Whereabout was it?” – “Do you know the road, Sir, from Pewsey to Shercott?” – “Very well, indeed, I have travelled it often.”

“It is about half-way; there are very plain marls now.” “How marks?” – “There are two great holes, just as you get over a stile.” “What, the foot-way? I don’t know the footway.”

“It is a very remarkable spot, Sir.”

“How was it discovered?” - “His conscience, I have heard, was never at rest; and some suspected and watched him, and saw him throw the watch into a pond; and then he was taken up.”

A gentleman, who had not yet spoken, here slowly said to him, “Did your uncle confess, Amor?” “Oh! Yes, Sir; I have always heard there was no doubt of that, and he told himself, they say, all the particulars.”

This is related as near as possible, verbatim, and the manner in which Amor answered the questions, and narrated so trying a story, proved that he did not want understanding, or a conscientious sense of right and wrong; and he spoke with that firmness, which is equally removed from whining and canting, as from daringness and indifference.

This conversation took place on the night before he suffered.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette – 6 May 1824
