



A modern hay barn fire

Arson at Worton

Christopher Nicholas, 18, and Mark Compton, 18, were indicted for setting fire to a barn and outhouse the property of Job Rose and James Rose, at Worton.

[Mr. Hodges conducted the prosecution; Mr. Slade defended the prisoner Compton.]

Mr. Job Rose -- I am a farmer in the parish of Potterne, in partnership with my brother. On the night of the 27th January, in consequence of something I heard, we kept a watch on the premises; we began to watch between 6 and 7. While I was in my house at supper (300 or 400 yards from the burnt premises) about 10 o'clock, I heard the alarm of fire. I went out and found the roof of the hay-house and of the barn on fire. In five minutes I saw Nichols (sic) coming towards the fire. I took hold of his arm and he said "What's the matter." I said "You'll find what's the matter you rascal." He said "Do you know who set fire to it." I replied, "No, but I suppose you do." He said, "Yes I do, and I'll tell you; it was Mark Compton." I asked him how he knew; he said "because I was with him, and helped him." I then gave him in charge of the police, and went in search of Compton. I met him 150 yards from the fire running towards it with a bucket and a pail. I took hold of him and charges him with setting fire to the barn; he denied it. I gave him into custody. He was taken to my house, and there searched by Buckland, the policeman, and a Lucifer match and a bit of rag found on him. The hay-house, barn, granary, hayrick, some straw, winnowing fan, &c., were destroyed. A dwelling-house was near, but was saved. I rent under Mrs. Anna Susanna Watson Taylor. Compton was kept at our house till morning, and then taken to Potterne. [Cross-examined -- He was questioned for about an hour, and I heard someone say to him, Nicholas had confessed and it was no use his denying it. No threat was used.] I asked him if his mother knew anything of his intentions; he said, "no." I then said, "how came you to be so foolish as to set the premises on fire." He said "he wanted some money to go to America, and he set fire to the premises to draw our people's attention to the fire, while he came up to rob our house." He said, "they went round Mr. Grant's premises first, and then came in front of our house and set fire to the straw on the mangel wurzel in the hay-house. "Nicholas handed the match

to him, he lit it and set fire to the straw." I had been watching till about quarter of an hour before the fire. The young men have lived all their life in the parish.

Cross Examined

Compton said he heard the cattle at Mr. Grant's and did not like to set fire to that and burn the poor things.

Mr. George Grant - I am a farmer in the parish of Potterne. I have a rick-yard, barn, &c., about 300 yards from the premises which were burnt; there is a bridle way from one to the other. On the evening of the 27th January, I watched near 2 ricks from 6 till past 9. About half-an-hour before the fire. I saw Compton and Nicholas come by and go towards my barn. They stood there a few minutes, and then disappeared. I went down to the fire. Nicholas was brought to my house. I said, "you rascal what have you been at now; why do you want to set fire to my premises." He said, "he didn't, he persuaded Compton not to do it."

Thomas Dean - I am a labourer in the employ of last witness. Previous to the 27th January I had been thrashing barley in Mr. Grant's barn with Nicholas. On the 24th Nicholas said to me that on Sunday night Compton was coming for him to go and rob Wm. Forbes's house. He also said all the premises where they were working would have to be burnt down, had it not been for him. On the Sunday evening following Compton came to Nicholas, who was at my house; they went out together. On the same evening I saw prisoners in a public house at Marston, and Compton said "how nice any might rob Wm. Forbes's house," and to me, "if there was a fire anywhere how they would bundle out of church." I informed my master what I had heard; Nicholas was to thrash with me on the following morning; a policeman was hid in the straw; I asked Nicholas how it was they did not do the robbery he spoke of; he said, because there was a light in a house adjoining. He then told me that Mark Compton promised to come tonight and go with him to set fire to master's farm or Mr. Rose's lower farm, but most likely this will go to night. He said they wished to take people's attention to these fire while they went and robbed Mr. Rose's and Mr. Forbes's houses.

Henry England, policeman - I was placed behind the straw on 27th January; I heard part of the conversation detailed by the last witness, in consequence of which I set a watch about the village. When I took charge of Nicholas, he said "he would tell who it was, it was Mark Compton; and afterwards they intended to go to Mr. Rose's house, when the servants were out, and rob it."

Thomas Buckland - I went to the fire on the night of 27th January; took Compton into custody; he had a bucket and a pail in his hand coming towards the fire. I searched him and found in one pocket a match and a piece of rag.

Col. Olivier - I am one of the county magistrates; Mr. Meek, the clerk, cautioned prisoners before they made any statement.

The examination of the prisoners was then put in and read. It amounted to a complete confession of their plans, as detailed in the conversations given in evidence.

They were both found guilty and sentenced to 15 years transportation.

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OPC Note

Both defendants were convicted at the Wilts Assizes on 5th March 1845. Christopher Nicholas and Mark Compton were both transported to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) aboard the Convict Ship Mayda which sailed on 27th August, 1845 from Woolwich and arrived on 8th January, 1846 at Norfolk Island.