

AN EXECUTION IN HAVERFORDWEST

74 YEARS AGO.

On April 13, 1811, a man named John Griffith, a native of the upper part of the county of Pembroke, was executed at Haverfordwest for the murder of his wife by the administration of poison. The murderer had been married twice and after his conviction confessed that he had poisoned both wives. The circumstances attending his conviction have been frequently narrated by the older inhabitants of Haverfordwest, but recently a detailed statement of the case has been placed in our hands which we now publish. The account, which is entitled "The confession of John Griffiths, who was executed Haverfordwest, April 13, 1811, for the murder of his wife," is as follows:—

John Griffiths was a native of the parish of Moat, in the county of Pembroke, and not long known in this neighbourhood. He married his first wife about two years ago, who did not live ten weeks, but died in a similar manner (by his own account) to that in which his second wife afterwards died. He then courted Mary Thomas who, being with child by him, he was obliged by the parish to marry about eight months ago: they lived together at Cuckow, in half of a house, the other part being inhabited by an elderly man and his wife. It appears that he constantly regretted his marriage, and harboured revenge and malice against his wife, who was far from deserving ill-treatment: she was quiet, domestic saving, had a good disposition, and agreeable person: he allowed her no butter; bread and cheese and herrings were her common food. His extraordinary conduct previous to the decease of his wife, and the circumstances attending her death, excited the suspicion of those around. He filled the neighbourhood with the accounts of the fetchcandles and lights at Cuckow, invented by him, and his conversation upon all occasions tended to impress those with whom he held any converse, that his wife would die suddenly and soon; when he was questioned concerning it he said he had seen a fetchcandle carried by a woman's hand, and he knew that to be his wife's from a mark she had on her arm: he also declared he had seen her laid out, and a light hopping on her; this conduct it seems he pursued preceding the death of his first wife; he said she was unwell, her legs and stomach swelling, when at the same time no woman ever had better health, and she seemed much surprised when informed of those reports. He appeared very indifferent and unconcerned at his wife's illness, which was as severe as human nature could endure or human feelings witness, and he was very reluctant to admit the services of any neighbour. The offers of Dinah Estance, who lived in the other part of the house, and heard the groans of the sufferer, were in a great measure rejected. About six weeks before the commission of the crime he joined the said Dinah Estance near Haverfordwest, and in the course of conversation complained greatly of his wife's conduct, and after swearing that she should not live with him long, he added that he had bought a thing that day he had long wished for, that he had it with him, that he would take care of it, and that she (meaning his wife) should surely go before that day week; she heard the prisoner quarrel violently with his wife that night, who endeavoured to soothe and pacify him: the next morning she saw them together, and enquired if he had heard anything more of the spirits he had talked about? He said, Yes. She replied 'Take care, John, if there is any spirit here, it is the evil spirit, and if anything happens more than is right I shall appear against you.' The conversation of the day before had dwelt heavily on her mind, and she felt what she spoke, and it is presumed that to this solemn warning may be attributed the delay in the execution of his murderous design. He was confused, and for a fortnight after both he and his wife were cool to their neighbour, who had thus acted so plainly and candidly. From this time he neglected work, and spent his time in going from house to house, talking of spirits, of his wife's death, that by marrying her he had brought himself to beggary, that when she was gone he could get another with plenty of money, and the like. It is unnecessary to repeat more of the circumstances which led to the discovery of this murder, than that the rumour reached the mayor and magistrates of the town, who instituted very active enquiries, which satisfied them of the necessity of having the body of the deceased taken up, and upon the examination of the contents of the stomach by medical men, they found themselves fully justified. An inquest was held, a verdict of "wilful murder" was returned against him, and he was apprehended accordingly.

On his trial, it was proved so clearly that he administered the poison to her, that the jury with little hesitation pronounced him "guilty." The learned judge then pronounced the awful sentence of death.

* * The public may depend that the following is his real Confession, taken by W. Jones, the day before his execution, and it is published by the authority of the sheriff.

He acknowledges that he sent Jane Hughes for 6d. of arsenic, and kept it for some length of time in his possession before he gave it to his first wife, Sarah Evans, to whom he was married about ten weeks. After her decease he remained single about twelve months, and then married Mary Thomas, with whom he lived about eight months: he bought one shilling's worth of white arsenic, consisting of four packets, at the shop of Mr Grafton, of Haverfordwest, which he had in his possession about six weeks before he administered any part of it; he deposited this arsenic in an old lumber box in his house; he gave her half a packet on Monday morning, February 25, 1811, about 10 o'clock, in budram (or water-gruel) and on the Tuesday morning following, she wanted a little treacle to soften her throat, he gave her a tea-spoon full, into which he put the remaining half of the packet. He also told where William Jones would find the remains of the one shilling's worth of arsenic; he immediately went to the place where he described, and found a large quantity concealed under some stones, in a ruin at Cuckow, which W. Jones delivered to H. Mathias, Esq.

At the place of execution, after the chaplain had prayed with him, he requested silence from the spectators, and desired them all, old and young, rich and poor, to take warning by him, and declared that he had poisoned his both wives, that he was about to suffer justly for his horrid crimes, and prayed that God would have mercy on his soul.