

Eastern Evening News Monday August 29th 1904

STOP PRESS NEWS

SPROWSTON MURDER CHARGE PRISONER IN COURT

At four o'clock this afternoon the prisoner was brought up at an Occasional Court held at the County Police-station before Mr. G. Hustler Tuck. His full name is Robert Horace Stanley Curtis, and the charge against him is that on August 27th he wilfully murdered his wife, Laura Emma, at Sprowston.

The prisoner was brought up from one of the cells in charge of a couple of officers. He is a thin, weedy looking youth, fully looking his age, 20, and his face and bearing there is a distinct suggestion of a consumptive.

Inspector Flint detailed the circumstances under which he was called to the house, and said he found the prisoner detained by Police-constable Sayer. Witness charged him with the wilful murder of his wife. Prisoner replied that it was a pure accident. The gun went off, and he lost himself. There had been quarrelling.

Prisoner – No, no; excuse me, we were not quarrelling.

Inspector Flint went on that the report of the gun was heard twice. A neighbour went and found the woman lying in a corner of the room, apparently quite dead. Blood was flowing from her face. This is all the evidence I propose to call, and I ask you to remand the prisoner to the cells till to-morrow.

The Prisoner – Can I say a word?

The Magistrate- I can only remand you till to-morrow, after that you will have an opportunity to say anything you like.

Prisoner- I would like to tell the truth, sir.

The magistrate – it is not my duty to hear anything you have to say. You will be in safe custody till to-morrow.

Prisoner was then taken back to the cells.

Eastern Evening News Wednesday August 31st 1904

THE SPROWSTON TRAGEDY

CURTIS AGAIN REMANDED

CASE TO BE HEARD ON SATURDAY

At an Occasional Court at the County Police Station this morning, before Mr. G. F. Buxton and Mr. G. H. Stracey,

Robert Horace Stanley was again brought up on remand and charged with the wilful murder of his wife, Laura Emma Curtis, at Sprowston on Saturday. Messrs. Mills & Reeve, who have been instructed to prosecute, were represented by Mr. F. W. Smith.

The Magistrates' Clerk (Mr. R. G. Steward) said the police proposed to give evidence of arrest, and then to ask for a remand until Saturday next.

Inspector Flint stated that last Saturday evening, from information he received, he went to Constitution Hill, Sprowston, where he saw the prisoner in the custody of one of the city police. Witness afterwards went into his house, and saw the deceased lying on the floor in a pool of blood. He examined the body, and after-wards brought the prisoner to the Police Station, and charged him with the wilful murder of his wife. Witness cautioned him in the usual way, and he replied, "God knows it was a pure accident. She was undressing the child, and we were going to bed. I was going out to get half-a-pint. 'She said. 'Don't act'; the gun went off, and I lost myself."

Mr. Buxton (to the accused) — Have you any reason to show why you should not be remanded till Saturday?

Curtis— It was a pure accident. She always said to me, "Don't play with the gun." I had no more intention of hurting her than I had of flying. It was a pure accident, and God knows.

Mr. Buxton — I must remand you until Saturday.

The Clerk— The case must be heard before a Bench in Court, and they will decide what is to be done. The magistrates have no power to deal with the case this morning.

Sprowston Murder Charge

CURTIS IN COURT TO- DAY

SUPPLEMENTAL EVI- DENCE

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL

At the Norwich Shirehall to-day, before E. S. Trafford (chairman), Colonel Blake Humfrey, Colonel Dawson, and Mr. F. W. Magnay.

Robert Horace Stanley Curtis (20), a labourer of Constitution Opening, Sprowston, was charged on remand with feloniously, wilfully, and of his malice aforethought killing and murdering his wife, Laura Emma Curtis, by shooting her, at Sprowston, on August 27th. Mr. E. Reeve (of Messrs Mills & Reeve) prosecuted on behalf of the Treasury.

CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION.

Mr. Reeve said he appeared there that morning as the agent for the Director of Public Prosecutions to lay the facts of this case before them. The charge was the very, very serious charge of wilful murder against the defendant Curtis, the victim being his wife. He proposed shortly to inform the Bench the circumstances which this unfortunate woman met with her death, and then he should be able to place before them certain antecedent circumstances which would enable them to form some opinion as to whether her death was caused accidentally or whether the circumstances were not such as to lead them to suppose that the charge preferred would be fully borne out. But the evidence which he should place before them would, at any rate, enable them to say that this was a case which must go for trial before another tribunal, for it was a case which ought to be fully sifted before a judge of Assize and a jury. The prisoner was a young man, and his wife, the dead woman, was only 19 years of age. He understood that they were married at the Registrar's Office in July, 1903. There was one child of the marriage in fact he believed that the prisoner had been unduly intimate with the deceased, and that was the reason which led to the marriage. On Saturday, August 27th, about 10 o'clock, a neighbour, who would be called, and who lived next door to the prisoner, heard some quarrelling going on between the

prisoner and his wife. The neighbour heard high words, and then she distinctly heard the deceased say, "You know it is wrong what you are talking about." Immediately after that the prisoner was seen to take the door key from the outside, and locked the door on the inside. The prisoner and the deceased were then in prisoner's house, and the door was shut on them. The prisoner was then heard to say "I will do it." The deceased said. "What will you do?" Prisoner said, 'I will do it.' Then the woman said, "Oh, Bob, don't; let's go to bed." Immediately after these words came the report of a gun. A neighbour of the name of Crompton managed to get into the house, and he saw the prisoner himself lying upon the floor not far away from the deceased. Crompton said to prisoner, "You have done it: you have killed her." Prisoner said, "It was a pure accident. I pointed the gun at her times before, and if she was alive she would say so." Crompton remained with the prisoner, who broke from his grasp. He rushed indoors and fastened the door, and almost directly after that there was another report of the gun, and then a click as if something were being done to the gun. Then the prisoner came to the door. When he came to the door a man of the name of Smart seized hold of him, and then picked the gun up from the floor, and he afterwards handed it over to Inspector Flint, who was quickly on the spot. Prisoner said, "I am innocent it was a pure accident." Mr. Reeve then described the position in which the body was found, and which would be of importance as bearing on the statement made by the prisoner that the deceased was sitting on a low chair at the time that the gun went off. Blood was simply pouring from the deceased's head, and it could be seen that a very violent wound, evidently a gun shot wound had been inflicted. There was also a large hole in the ceiling, caused, no doubt, by the second discharge. The prisoner was cautioned, and the [sic] again said. "It was a pure accident: I was playing with the gun." Dr. Ross was called in, and he would tell the justices that he found a very severe gun shot wound, and in his opinion that wound was caused by the discharge of a gun, the muzzle of which was from 12 to 18 inches from the deceased. The lower jaws were fractured in two places, as the result of direct violence. There was also a wound on the right check, evidently done by some sharp instrument, and in his judgement, and in the judgement of another doctor, who would be called before them, it could not have been caused by the discharge of the gun. Prisoner's statement was then put in, in which he said, among other things, that on the night of his wife's death she was sitting on a low nursing chair near the window. She said, "Come on Bob, let's go to bed, it's getting late." Prisoner said, "I think I will go out for a walk." She said, "No, you are not to." She took the key from the outside and locked the door. Prisoner again got his boots and said. "I will go out." "Let's go to bed." she said. He sat playing with the gun. The butt of the gun was against his right side, the muzzle pointing towards the window, where his wife was sitting. He put a cartridge into the gun and his wife said, "Don't do so, for acting always comes to something." He replied that it could not go off unless one pulled the trigger. He then pulled the bolt of the gun over, and it went off. A second cartridge that he put in exploded in the same way. He put a third cartridge in, and pulled the bolt over more gently. A gunsmith would be called, who would tell them that when a cartridge was inserted it was likely to go off when the bolt was closed, and that it would only go off in loading. To shoot anything the gun would have to be put in position, the cartridge put in, and at once the gun would be discharged. There was no doubt the prisoner shot the woman, for the prisoner admitted it. Prisoner said it was an accident, but it would be a grave matter whether the Bench could accept that, having regard to other facts. On the prisoner's own statement the question rose whether he was not guilty of the most culpable neglect in the way he was handling the gun. But apart from that he submitted that upon the

various statements that he should be able to call that there would be a prima facie case made out in support of the most serious charge brought against the prisoner. He thought they would find that this marriage had been a most unhappy one, and that these young people had been living a cat and dog life. In April last the deceased stated in the presence of the accused that he had drawn a hatchet across her throat, and had told her that he "would chop her ——— head off." Then, it appeared on several occasions the deceased had had a bruised face, and on one occasion she had a black eye. The prisoner sent his wife out begging, and if she was unsuccessful blows were the result. If food were brought in the prisoner satisfied himself, and the rest was locked up. One of the witnesses would tell them that he threatened to thrash the prisoner if he did not behave better to his wife, and as a result his behaviour was better for a time. On August Bank Holiday the deceased said in prisoner's presence, "I only want to get away from the prisoner; he is not going to kill me."

Robert Smith Neal identified the body as that of his daughter. He had seen her with a black eye on two occasions. The deceased and the prisoner became acquainted through working together in the same factory.

Ellen Elizabeth Neal, wife of the last witness, said this last month the deceased had a black eye and a bruised cheek. She did not know that the deceased ever went out to beg. She knew she went to the clergymen.

Mary Franklin said when the prisoner told her it was an accident she replied, "You liar: - I distinctly heard you say you would do it." She detailed the conversation she heard pass between the prisoner and the deceased.

The Chairman inquired how it was that she could hear so plainly. Were the walls so very thin.

Witness said they were, and when there was quiet she could hear the clock ticking.

Prisoner—How do you know I locked the door?

Witness—Because I saw your hand, and part of your sleeve.

The Magistrates' Clerk— I think you had better reserve your questioning. Your counsel will do it for you at the trial. It is much safer for you.

Prisoner— She is a liar.

Florence Rose said the prisoner's baby was handed to her after the death of the deceased. It was soaked in blood.

Evidence was then called.

THE EVIDENCE.

Alfred Crompton, having repeated the evidence he gave at the enquiry, said he sent a man for a policeman and remained with the prisoner, who suddenly rushed back into his house and fastened the door. Witness heard a click as if the gun was being loaded, and a second or two afterwards there was a report. Everything was quiet for half a minute, and then there was another click, as if the gun was being re-loaded. After that the prisoner opened the door and came out. A man named Betts seized the prisoner, and witness went inside and took the gun, which he subsequently handed over to Inspector Flint. Prisoner again said, 'I am innocent. I have pointed it at her scores of times before.' Witness remarked, "But you never pulled the trigger before," and prisoner said, "It was a pure accident; it went off on it's own accord."

Had you heard any quarrelling on previous occasions?—On Bank Holiday I was passing and saw the woman come from her door and go to Mrs. Franklin's with her face swelled.

Was she crying?—Yes; and had the child in her arms.

Where was the prisoner— He was indoors.

Have you seen her with black eyes at any other time?—I have seen her with black eyes once before I believe.

POSITION OF CHAIRS IN THE ROOM

Did you notice how many chairs there were in the room where you found the deceased lying?—I believe there were two.

Might she have fallen off a chair?—It was impossible for her to have fallen off a chair where she lay.

The chair might have been moved?—Of course, I cannot say.

Prisoner—What I said was I had played with the gun before, and had never had an accident.

CHILD IN HER ARMS.

Edward Rose, of 8, Constitution Place, a labourer, stated that at about a quarter-past ten he heard the report of gun in the prisoner's house. He went inside, and found the prisoner lying on the floor next to the wall. Prisoner exclaimed, "Oh, look what I have done; I never did it." Witness turned his head round, and seeing the deceased, remarked, "It looks as if you have done it." He went up to the woman, and as far as he could tell she was dead. She was lying on her left side with blood streaming from her head. There was a child in her arms, and witness took it from her and handed it to his wife.

A BLACK EYE.

On August Bank Holiday was the prisoner's wife in your house?—Yes; to dinner and tea.

Did she make a complaint?—Yes.

Did you notice that she had a black eye that her face was bruised?—Yes.

The next day did you see the prisoner?—Yes; and told him he ought to be ashamed of himself for having knocked his wife about like that on the Monday.

Did he make any reply?—No.

Did you say anything further to him?—I told him it would be either me or him if he did it any more.

What did that mean?—He would either have to give me a "soling" [?] or I should him.

Had you heard any quarrelling with the prisoner and his wife before?—Yes; it was a very frequent occurrence,

QUARRELLING ON SATURDAY NIGHT.

Had you heard quarrelling going on Saturday night?—Yes, at about a quarter to ten.

Could you hear what the prisoner was saying? - I could not hear his words. When they talk in the reasonable way you cannot hear in the next house.

When these quarrellings went on was the wife or the prisoner quarrelling?—The prisoner.

Did you notice any chairs in the room when you saw the prisoner and his wife lying there? — Yes, two.

Could the woman have been sitting on either of those chairs?—No, because one was behind the door and the other was quite the other side of the room, and her feet were near the fireplace.

Had you heard of his wife going out begging? - Yes, for food.

The Clerk—Had you seen her?—I have seen her go out frequently.

Mr. Reeve—Have you seen her bring home food?—Yes.

Have you seen the prisoner do anything when she brought it home?—No.

You don't know of your own knowledge what happened to her if she did not bring home food? — Not of my own knowledge.

Prisoner—She only went to the clergyman's twice, and asked him to help her, and the other times she went to my father's and mother's.

Witness— I don't know where she went to.

WHAT PRISONER SAID.

Ernest Edward Betts Smart, a shoe finisher, of Waterloo Road, said he was in a shed near the prisoner's house at 10.15 p.m., and heard the report of a gun. Witness went into the house, and took hold of Curtis, who was shouting. 'Oh, oh, oh.' Witness said to him. "Whatever have you done?" and he replied, "Look there."

Albert Thomas Betts Smart, of 3, Constitution Opening, also deposed to going to the house and to seeing the prisoner, who said, "Albert, it was a pure accident, I never put my finger on the trigger." Miss Franklin, who was in the house, called the prisoner a liar, and remarked "You have done it, and you said you would do it."

What did he reply?- "Yes, I know I said it but I said it in joking."

Did Miss Franklin say anything more? - Yes, she said, "You have done her one good kindness, it is better than to live with you."

What did the prisoner say?—She called him a brute, and he replied, "I know I have been a brute to her, I will never do it any more."

Prisoner—I told her I was going out. You have got it wrong.

Witness—No, I have not got it wrong.

THE FATAL WEAPON.

Harry Youngman, a carpenter, of 146, Beacons-field Road, said that on the 6th of August he exchanged the gun produced with the prisoner for some pigeons. The weapon was then in good order, and the trigger would work. He now found that the spring was broken.

Arthur Bailey, branch manager to Messrs. Darlow, Limited, gun makers, said he examined the gun on the 30th. and found it was a converted French Classepot rifle. The weapon was not in perfect order, the spring on the trigger having been weakened by usage.

What result was that likely to produce when a cartridge was put in the gun?-The striker would go down, and the cartridge might be discharged.

DOCTOR'S EVIDENCE

Dr. A. M. Ross of Magdalen Road stated that he received a message to go to the prisoner's house, and at once went. On arrival he saw the dead body of a woman, with a very deep wound on the right side of the face. The right eye and part of the nose and cheek were completely destroyed. There was a great deal of hemorrhage. On the 29th of August witness made a post-mortem examination, and he then found that the wound had been caused by a gun shot. He formed the opinion that the weapon must

have been fired from a distance of 12 in. to 18 in. in a horizontal direction. The skull at the back of the wound was fractured, and the lower jaw was fractured in two places on each side, an inch and a half in front of the angle of the jaw. The fracture on the right side was more lacerated than that on the left, and a tooth was knocked out on that side.

OTHER INJURIES.

Could you form any opinion as to how that fracture was caused?-I believe it was caused by direct violence of some kind.

Did you notice any wound on the right cheek?- Yes, an incised wound running downwards, and outwards from the gunshot wound.

Could you form any opinion as to whether that wound was caused by the gun shot?- I don't think it was.

Caused by sme [sic] sharp instrument, such as a knife -? Yes, such as a knife.

Dr. Laurence Mills said he made an examination on the 30th ult, and in addition to the gun shot wound saw an incised wound 1½ inch long and 1-16 of an inch deep below the right eye.

Was that caused by the gun shot?-No.

What kind of instrument would be required to cause that? -Very sharp instrument.

Did you notice both jaws were punctured?- Yes.

Could these fractures have been caused by the discharge of the gun? —They could, by the explosion.

With regard to the cut could you tell whether it was done before or after death – No it was either shortly before or just after.

Did you notice an old bruise on the left eye?-I did.

POLICE TESTIMONY.

Police-constable Sayer of the City police deposed to receiving a message and to going to Constitution Place. He saw Mrs. Curtis's body lying on the floor of the house face downwards. Witness at once sent for the doctor. Just above the body there was a hole in the ceiling which appeared to have been caused by a gun shot. On a shelf witness found several cartridges in a little basket. Witness told the prisoner he should arrest him for shooting his wife, and he replied, "It was a pure accident, I was playing with the gun, pulling the lever, and it went off. My wife was sitting opposite getting baby ready for bed. He added, "Poor thing, I would not hurt a hair of her head, God knows that." On the way to the police station he said, "I put another one in and was going to shoot myself, but I could not." Prisoner said he had bought the gun a few days previously from a chum for 5s., but had not paid for it. He further said he wished he had not bought it and reminded witness that he saw him shooting with it the previous day. Witness saw him shoot a skylark on the Friday and spoke to him about it. Subsequently witness handed the prisoner over to Inspector Flint.

Prisoner-I said I was pushing the lever when it went off, not pulling it.

Witness— I understood you to say the other.

THE ARREST.

Inspector Arthur Flint, of the Norfolk Constabulary, deposed to going to Constitution Hill and to finding the prisoner detained by Police-constable Sayer. Witness went into the house, and saw the deceased lying with her head towards the corner and her feet towards the fire-place. On the floor witness found two empty

cartridge cases, and took three loaded cart-ridges from a small basket. Witness received the gun, which was loaded, from the witness Crompton, and drew the charge. There was a little indentation on the cap of that cartridge. On a further examination witness found that the ceiling and the bedroom floor had been pierced by shot. When charged at the police-station and cautioned, prisoner replied. "God knows it is a pure accident; she was undressing the child, we were going to bed, and I was going out to get half-a-pint. She said, "Don't act.' the gun went off; I lost myself, poor girl."

AN APRIL INCIDENT.

John Smith, of Lower Hellesdon, said that four or five months ago he lived next door to the prisoner. One Sunday afternoon last April witness heard Mrs. Curtis scream and went to the door, which he found locked. He asked for it to be unfastened, and heard the prisoner say "Laura, shall I undo the door" and she re-plied, "You can, if you like." The door was unlocked, and witness went in. Mrs. Curtis was crying, and witness said, "Bob, what does this mean?" The deceased, referring to a hatchet, stated, "He drew this across my throat, and said he would kill me." Witness said, "Come, Bob, you must not go on like this, you must not let your temper get the better of you, or you will do something you will repent for." To that prisoner said, "I will chop her —— head off." Witness replied, "You must not, Bob, if you do I will report it to the police. I will not put up with these disturbances."

Police-constable Fuller, stationed at Trowse Newton, stated that early on the morning of Sunday, August 28th, he was watching the prisoner in his cell at the County Police-station, when he said, "Policeman, I want to speak to you. I want to tell you about this affair." Witness cautioned him, and he made a statement which witness took down in writing. It was read over to the prisoner, and he signed it.

That was the case for the prosecution.

Prisoner was then formally charged with the wilful murder of his wife, and remarked, 'It was a sad accident, God knows it was a sad accident. I had no intention of doing anything. I often played with the gun.'

The Clerk advised him to reserve his defence.

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL.

The magistrates committed the prisoner to take his trial at the Assizes on a charge of murder.