

The background of the image is a dark, mottled grey surface, possibly a piece of metal or stone, showing signs of wear and some white lichen-like spots. At the top, a curved, dark metal blade, likely a scythe or sickle, is positioned horizontally. On the right side, a portion of a wooden handle is visible, attached to a metal piece. The text is centered in a white, sans-serif font.

The  
Death  
of  
Mary  
Morris  
1868

## Efail Fach near Neath

### Robert Webster and The Death of Mary Morris 1868

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#### *Getting away with murder?*

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It was said that all Robert Webster's problems started when Mary hit him over the head with an iron. But I am not so sure; to be honest, I think they started before that. You see, his domestic arrangements had always been rather too complicated. I do wonder if, as he sat with his thin beer in the Colliers Arms in Efail Fach on that life-changing Saturday night in October 1868, whether he found a moment to reflect upon the complete mess that his life had become.

He first came to notice in October 1867, when he appeared in court charged with *Neglecting to maintain a family*. He was merely a simple labourer in his late forties, who worked maintaining the roads, and it appears he was not using his earnings to support his family, which upset quite a few people.

His defence was quite straightforward. He told the court that he had always been diligent in supporting his family until his wife, Lucy, *took another man into the house*. This was a 21 year old collier, William Whitelock, who was significantly younger than Lucy and was probably in a relationship with their daughter, Mary Jane Webster. To think that he might

have been in a relationship with Lucy is just too complicated, to be honest. But whatever the circumstances, Webster was asked to leave the family home, and as a result he refused to pay maintenance. However, Lucy, who may have been his wife but might not have been since no marriage is recorded anywhere, could have thrown him out because he was already in a relationship with his landlady Mary Morris, but we will come on to that shortly.

I hope you are keeping up.

The court was not in a position to offer relationship counselling. All they could offer was to drop the charges if he paid the arrears and costs. I suspect that he wasn't too happy.

In August 1868 these domestic challenges emerged once again. By now, William was known as *The Notorious Whitelock* and had finally been arrested for a string of burglaries. He was eventually brought to court in August, though his most disturbing offence occurred when he broke into the home of Lucy Webster in Neath in April and wounded her daughter Mary Jane *with intent to do grievous bodily harm to her*. Whitelock had for a long time *been acquainted with Mary Jane Webster, and had kept company with her, but it seemed to have been broken off. He wished to renew the intimacy, to which she refused her assent.*

At some point, like Webster, he had been thrown out and in retaliation broke into the house and attacked Mary Jane with a poker. *He severely injured her about the head, and broke two of the bones of her hand as she protected her baby, who was in bed with her. He admitted the attack. I did strike her,*

*and it served her right, if you knew so much about her as I do.* Was it his child? We don't know, but it is possible. Whitelock was found guilty of assault with intent to murder and was sent to gaol for eight years.

Whilst all this was going on, Robert Webster had started another relationship, but as the year wore on it didn't seem to be working out very well. He had moved in as a lodger with Mary Morris and her husband Morris Morris and before too long, as was reported at Webster's trial, the three of them were *living together in a state of the greatest depravity.*

It had probably started when Morris was working away from home. He too worked on maintaining the roads. Perhaps he offered a room to his workmate, Webster. We don't know. Mary herself took in laundry, washing and ironing. Morris was very clear that he did not maintain her, which may have encouraged her sense of independence.

Theirs certainly wasn't the best ordered home. Morris was reasonably sure that he was married to Mary, because she had said her husband, Edward Hughes, had died and any suggestion that he was still alive was just a rumour subsequently circulated by Webster to create some mischief. As you might anticipate, things were a little tense at times, and at the beginning of 1868, Mary had fractured Webster's skull with a flat iron *which did him considerable injury and from that time, his feeling seemed to have changed towards her.* How strange.

In October, though, everything between them appeared quite amicable. But it was clear that Webster had something on his mind. In the morning he had visited Hopkin Jones'

Ironmongers in Neath and borrowed a pruning hook for twopence, something he might need for his work on the roads, asking *whether it would do to cut a person's head off*. Casual question. We've all asked that question at some time or other. Haven't we?

They went out together to the Colliers Arms in Efail Fach, Pontrhydyfen. Webster kindly arranged for the beer to be



warmed for Mary as she requested, and Webster's son bought a drink for Morris, too. They all went home for supper, after which Morris fell asleep. Webster and Mary then went out again to Jenkins the Grocer in order to redeem a shawl that Mary had pledged some months before – the shop offered a simple pawn service to customers when necessary. Webster asked Mrs Jenkins to transfer the debt of 14 shillings for the shawl to his existing bill at the shop. She gave him the shawl. As they left, Mrs Jenkins noticed that he had the pruning hook, wrapped in paper, under his arm.

According to Webster, as they walked home, despite handing the shawl over to Mary, they argued once again, as they had done so many times in recent months. He claimed that she said *You old devil, now I've got my shawl I won't wash for you, or do for you, any more*. She then hit him. In his own words, *I chopped her with the hook* and then he shouted at her, *You shall never hit me again!* When he realised what

he had done, *I rose the dear lamb's head from the ground,*  
kissed her and then surrendered himself to the police.

#### HORRIBLE MURDER OF A WOMAN AT EFAILFACH.

On Saturday last and early on Sunday morning the most extraordinary rumours were current in Neath and its neighbourhood, in reference to a murder alleged to have been committed by some person related to the girl Webster, who was so murderously attacked on the Mera by the notorious Whitelock. Subsequent enquiry proved that there was some truth in the reports in circulation, a female named Morris having been barbarously murdered by a man (the father of the girl Webster!), with whom she had been for some time cohabiting. The occurrence took place Efailfach, a small place at the foot of the Cwmavon mountain, situated about two miles from Neath, on the road to Pontrhydyfen.

The examination of Mary's body by the surgeon George Ryding from Neath however, showed that he had not told the full story.

*There was a large stab on the jaw. There was a zigzag wound in the throat. The jaw bone was laid open. An instrument like (the pruning hook) would cause such wounds as those described. The wounds were inflicted before death.*

The wounds were nasty enough, but did not cause her death, which was caused by strangulation. *Very great violence must have been used on the throat.* He must have grabbed her and squeezed very hard.

The hook, still partially wrapped in paper, and the shawl, were both soon recovered and Webster confessed to the

crime immediately, *I have murdered poor little Polly, and she's lying dead in the road*, though his statements were long and rambling. He told the constable *I was born to be hung and shall die like a lamb* and then he went on to make a strange request.

*I have one favour to ask you, and that is, I want to see a child who saved her life nine months ago. He happened to come on two occasions where we were in the hill walking and saved me from murdering her.*

He claimed that an unknown boy had turned up on two occasions, disrupting his plans to quietly murder Mary.

It was an odd thing to say and certainly not something that would help his defence. The only question was, whether he was guilty of murder or manslaughter.

### MURDER NEAR NEATH.

Great excitement was caused in the neighbourhood of Neath late on Saturday night last by the report that a murder had been committed at Pontardyfen, a retired hamlet, about four miles from Neath, situate on the high road to Maesteg. On Sunday morning all kinds of reports were current respecting the nature of the crime and the way in which it had been effected; but unfortunately the report proved too true that a most brutal murder had been perpetrated. The murderer, who immediately afterwards gave himself up, is a labouring married man, long employed on the roads, named Robert Webster, about fifty years of age, and his victim was Mary Morris, a married woman, aged forty-five with whom he had sometime previously cohabited. The crime was committed about eleven o'clock on Saturday night, and the woman must have been immediately silenced as it occurred close to some cot ages. It appears that he had cut and hacked the woman across the throat with a reaping hook, which he had purchased at Neath that evening, and that he finished his work by strangulation. The circumstances are the more peculiar, inasmuch as no quarrel took place between

In his trial at the County Assizes in Cardiff, it was the intervention of Judge Baron Bramwell that saved him. There wasn't any doubt that he had done it, that much was obvious. But what wasn't clear was whether he intended to kill her. That was the key, because, if there was intention, it would lead to conviction for murder and an inevitable execution.

Webster hadn't helped himself at all. Obtaining the hook wasn't wise and neither was this peculiar admission that he had planned to kill her previously. As Bramwell, said

*That was a remarkable thing, and if (the jury) should be of opinion that the prisoner had some homicidal propensity against that woman in particular, which he gratified upon the occasion referred to, and they attributed that fatal blow, not to the heat of blood, but to an evil disposition towards her, they must find a verdict of murder and not one of manslaughter*

In fact, telling Mary that 'she would never hit him again' could also suggest that he really did intend to kill her. And he couldn't use insanity as his defence anyway, because he knew what he had done and he admitted it. But then, you see, when he borrowed the hook, did he really say *cut a person's head off* or did he say *cut a person's hedge off*? An important difference. How could anyone really know?

One significant element of the story was not revealed in the court case, but had been raised earlier at the inquest. It was perhaps just as well for Webster that no one brought it up. Morris Morris testified at the inquest that Webster had tried to kill Mary in May 1868. He had attacked her with a hammer, cutting open her head. He testified that *She bled*



*like an ox, and screamed out. I ran into the house, and prevented him giving her another blow, or he would have killed her. He ran out of the house.* That could have made a big difference if the jury had heard about it.

But as it was, no one else saw what happened when he attacked Mary. Webster said that she had hit him and he had responded. Remember, she had hit him before and caused a serious injury. Webster obviously over-reacted on this occasion, but Mary had previous, as they say, and his evidence suggested there had been provocation. It was, the judge suggested, *a crime committed in the heat of blood caused by a blow he received*. If he had planned to kill her, surely he would have unwrapped the hook before he hit her with it. He must therefore have acted impulsively.

Their unusual domestic arrangements had created a context of immorality and chaos for which Mary, Morris and Robert were all equally responsible. Disaster was inevitable. According to the police, *it was a mere lottery as to which would be killed first*. In such depraved atmosphere, everyone was guilty, even the poor woman who was innocent. She had brought such a fate upon herself as the result of her behaviour. What could she expect? The whole story was a sad but entertaining insight into the immorality of the poor. Let this be a warning to you all.

The jury retired for only seven minutes and returned a verdict of guilty of manslaughter. Bramwell agreed with their verdict and then sentenced Webster to 20 years' penal servitude.

Perhaps he did get away with murder.

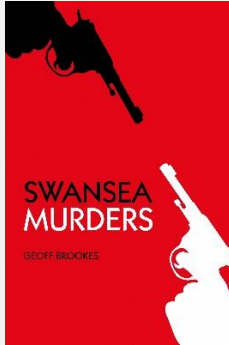
And what of poor Mary Morris?

*The body of the unfortunate woman was buried at Llantwit cemetery, the funeral itself being a fitting ending to the depraved career of such a being, two or three men only, in labourer's attire, walking smartly after the corpse, as if to hide as quickly as possible from the world the last remains of the fearful tragedy.*



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