

## Chapter 8

## Oh Fatal, Cursed Jealousy: Amelia Blunt 1864

*...if you are in any part of England within a month you will see that I have had every drop of blood from her body.*

Chadwell Heath derives its name from two sources: the settlement of Chadwell, meaning 'cold spring', and the open land to the north of the High Road formerly known as Blackheath Common. By the mid-1860s, rapid changes were occurring in the area. A railway had been driven through it back in 1839, but trains did not stop there until January 1864. The opening of the station put London within easy reach, and the area inevitably began to take on the character of a suburb. The heath itself was enclosed shortly afterwards, and a large portion sold off for brick-built terraced housing. Yet there still remained a few examples of the traditional 'small log cabins, thatched, one storey high', described by John Peter Shawcross. One of these wooden cottages could be found on the northern side of the heath, near the three post mills. In

*The Old Mill Cottages on Chadwell Heath. Amelia Blunt would have lived in a similar wooden dwelling. LBBB Archives at Valence House Museum*



*A hanging above the gatehouse at Springfield Gaol, Chelmsford. Essex Record Office*



September 1864 a 43 year old woman named Amelia Blunt sat inside, sewing her wedding dress.

Born Amelia Wallis in October 1820, and known to all as Milly, she had lived in Chadwell Heath most of her life. At 19 she had married Buckinghamshire-born John Blunt, but two of their four children, Elizabeth and Henry, both sadly died in infancy. In the 1850s the family moved to North London, but John Blunt was to die there at the end of the decade. Amelia then left her surviving children, Ellen and Margaret, with relatives while she returned to Chadwell Heath and supported herself by taking in washing.

One of Amelia's friends from childhood was Francis Wane, known as Toddy, an agricultural labourer eighteen months her junior. He had never married, and lived at Wood Lane, Dagenham, with his widowed father. Wane and Amelia rekindled their friendship, and by 1861 they were living together in lodgings near the Chadwell Heath Post Office. Wane was a powerful man, over 6 feet tall, and well known to the police as a drunkard and convicted thief. He did not treat Amelia well. According to *The Times*, 'He seems to have mainly subsisted upon the produce of her labour, and when drunk was constantly in the habit of ill-using her'. Amelia remained with Wane for over three years, before finally deciding to leave him in June 1864. She then obtained the post of housekeeper to 78 year old James Warren, known by all as Old Warren, who lived with his son John, 49, in the ancient cottage on the heath. Amelia also worked part-time as a cleaner at the *White Horse* pub, on the High Road. She had known the Warren family all her life, and not long after becoming their housekeeper she and John Warren decided to marry.

Amelia's former lover took this news very badly. Towards the end of August 1864 Joseph Rogers, a dealer in government stores from Spitalfields, stopped at the *White Horse* on his way home from Romford Market. Francis Wane offered to mind his horse and trap, so Rogers brought him out some bread, cheese and a pint of porter. Something in Wane's manner made Rogers ask 'What is the matter with you? You need not be afraid of telling me, for I am a man that has seen a great deal of the world.' Wane replied 'Now Master, I will tell you. I have been looking a month for a woman as I want her blood.' Rogers replied 'For God's sake, do not think of such a deed!' Wane answered 'So help me God, I have sworn to do it, and do it I will'. Rogers urged him to reflect on what he had said, 'Perhaps in time you will think better of it'. On parting, he gave Wane three pence and pleaded 'May God turn your heart', but Wane's reply was 'No, gov'nor - if you are in any part of England within a month



*The White Horse pub. Amelia Blunt and Francis Wane drank here, and it was the scene of heated arguments between them. LBBB Archives at Valence House Museum*

you will see that I have had every drop of blood from her body'. Wane then indicated the handle of a large knife protruding from his side pocket.

About a week later, Amelia was drinking in the *White Horse* with her future father-in-law James Warren and his grandson, also named James. Wane approached her, and pleaded 'Is there any chance for you and I to come together again?' She replied 'No, there never will, Toddy. You had a chance of having me for a wife, but you didn't use me well and you broke my home up, so I shall never have anything more to do with you.' He then growled 'Milly, you will have to die', to which she answered 'If I die, Toddy, you'll have to die too'.

Charles Fitch, landlord of the *White Horse*, was well used to Wane's behaviour, but shortly after this scene he finally lost his patience. He overheard Wane swearing at Old Warren about Amelia, and said to him 'Wane, you are like the dog in the manger, you won't live with a woman and you won't let her live peaceably with anyone else'. Wane swore in reply, and threatened to punch Fitch's head, so Fitch banned him from the premises 'on account of his quarrelling with Old Warren and his abusive language generally'. Wane switched his custom to another pub, the *Cooper's Arms*, close to where he had formerly lived with Amelia.

Wane entered the *Cooper's Arms* at 7.45 a.m. on Saturday, 24 September 1864. Amelia happened to be shopping nearby, and on passing



the pub she saw a woman friend coming out. The pair stood outside chatting about Amelia's forthcoming marriage, and the jealous Wane overheard every word. Amelia then walked back to the cottage and got the dinner ready. Her next task was to do the washing. She lit a fire under the copper, a large cast-iron tub built into the corner of the lean-to washhouse, and proceeded to boil, scrub and beat the clothes by hand. It was arduous and thirsty work. After a while Amelia called out to old James Warren to go to the *White Horse* and fetch her some beer. He was happy to oblige, and left the cottage between 10.15 a.m. and 10.30 a.m. clutching the two pence halfpenny she had given him to pay for a pint of 'half and half'. Amelia's fiancé John Warren was out at work. On his way, the old man stopped at his grandson's house. They spoke of the coming marriage – the banns had now been read twice at Dagenham Parish Church – and 'how comfortable they would be'.

The beer was duly purchased, and within half an hour of leaving the cottage Old Warren was back at the front door. He called out 'Milly, here's your beer, girl, come and have it!' There was no answer. He went inside, put the beer on the table and sat down. She didn't appear, so he went to the door again and shouted 'Milly, are you coming?' Again there was silence, so he made his way towards the washhouse. On entering he saw Milly from behind, standing and leaning forwards against the copper as if in the act of taking clothes out. Her left arm lay on the copper, while the other rested on a sieve containing some potatoes. Her head was bowed over her hands. 'Milly, why won't you give me an answer?' he asked, but she said nothing and did not move.

As Warren came closer, he could see that blood was oozing from Amelia's neck and her hair was greatly disordered. He cried 'Milly, old girl, what's the matter with you?' and put his arms around her waist to try to raise her up. His hands felt wet and slippery. He managed to lift her up but she fell backwards on top of him. The old man stumbled under her weight and they both fell to the floor. He thought he heard her groan once. He fainted, and on regaining consciousness he became aware of warm blood trickling through his fingers.

Warren pulled himself up and rushed towards the home of his closest neighbours, Thomas and Frances Archer. The Archer children saw him first, and ran to their mother, crying 'Mr Warren has come down, something has happened at his house'. Mrs Archer went out to meet him, to be told 'Good God, Milly Blunt has fallen down dead!' They went to raise the alarm.

Charles Fitch, landlord of the *White Horse*, was playing with one of his children in the pub garden when he heard raised voices. His wife called out to him that 'poor old Milly' had dropped dead. Fitch immediately went to

Warren's cottage, and on seeing the body he exclaimed 'Bless me, the woman has been murdered!' Fitch sent someone to alert the police, then borrowed the local butcher's horse and cart and set out for medical help.

Before long he spotted Romford surgeon Robert Bowers, and brought him back at about 11.30 a.m. Bowers entered the washhouse and saw Amelia lying on her left side on the floor in a large pool of blood. There were three terrible wounds in her throat and on the right side of her neck, 'One transverse, another running obliquely from this one, a third just above the right collarbone. All of which were cut deeply, dividing the muscles of the carotid artery. I put my finger into the two first-named wounds and touched the vertebrae of the neck.' Amelia's left thumb was cut above the knuckle as if she had raised it to try to defend herself, and part of the brickwork surrounding the copper had been torn away by her as she tried to get away from her attacker.

PC Thomas Dunmow was already on the scene, and together with PC Thomas Cole and Old Warren's grandson James, he made a close examination of footprints in a freshly-ploughed field between about twenty to twenty-five yards from the cottage. They were unusual prints in that the right foot showed no mark of a heel and only the faint impression of a toe. Francis Wane was now the prime suspect as he had peculiar short, almost club feet, and only trod on the side of his right foot. The trio followed the prints in a northerly direction for about three quarters of a mile across freshly-ploughed land to Rose Lane, in Marks Gate. They spoke to a farm worker who told them he had seen Wane cross a meadow belonging to Warren Farm. They set off in pursuit, and the prints soon reappeared. A little further on they reached a pond, and noticed the same footprints in the clay beside it, and on the edge were marks indicating that someone wearing corduroy trousers had been kneeling down.

About a quarter of a mile further on, they spotted Wane himself about 150 or 200 yards from them. He came out of a ditch, turned round and looked at PC Dunmow, then got over the hedge and went into a wood known as Leigh's Wood, about a mile from the boundary with the parish of Romford. Dunmow followed, and about ten yards inside the wood he found Wane concealed under some blackberry bushes. Dunmow knew Wane well and greeted him familiarly. 'Hello Toddy, you must get up, I want you'. Wane wouldn't budge, so the officers pulled him up. Dunmow asked 'Do you know your old sweetheart had been murdered by someone?' Wane made no answer, and Dunmow demanded 'Were you on Chadwell Heath this morning?' Wane said he had visited the *Cooper's Arms*. Had he been to Warren's cottage that morning? Wane said he had not.

Wane was wet up to the waist, and there were spots of blood on the left shoulder of the jacket and also his plaid waistcoat. The cuffs of his jacket sleeves and part of his waistcoat had been torn off. His boots corresponded exactly with the footprints, and were filled with water. Wane had no cap, and the officers found no knife on him. PC Dunmow announced he was taking Wane into custody on suspicion of murdering Mrs Blunt. The time was now about 12.15 p.m. The policemen escorted their prisoner to Warren's cottage and showed him Amelia's body. Someone present said he 'could not touch the poor creature', to which Wane snarled 'I could touch her forty \_\_\_ times'. He was then taken to Ilford Police Station.

Later that afternoon PC Dunmow, along with Sergeant Samuel Maddison, followed the footprints again, and found a knife hidden in some grass not more than twenty yards from the cottage. It was a rather rusty pig-killing knife, with a six-inch blade and wooden handle, wet with blood and with a dark human hair stuck to it. Towards evening James Bell, a labourer at Warren Farm, was raking a pond near the cottage when he disturbed a brick, and Wane's missing cap rose to the surface. Had it been used to wipe blood off his trousers, and then thrown in the water? Two days later, on Monday morning, the cuffs of Wane's jacket were found in a meadow opposite Warren Farm. One was drenched in blood, and there were spots of blood on the other.

The inquest opened that same day, Monday, at the *White Horse*, only to be adjourned. It resumed two days later at the Petty Sessions Room at Ilford Gaol before Charles Carne Lewis, the Coroner, and a jury of local men of whom Archer Moss, miller, was foreman. The proceedings lasted over five hours. Wane was present, and described by the *Chelmsford Chronicle* as 'a tall, masculine, thick set fellow, with a large head, [and] full face'. There was damning evidence from John Turner, a Romford labourer. At a little past 10 a.m. on Saturday 24th, Turner had seen Wane in a lane leading across the heath from the High Road to Marks Gate via the three mills. 'Halloa, Toddy', he had said, 'Ain't you at work?' After a short conversation Wane had said ominously 'If you will wait a little while you will soon hear that something is up'. They were close to a field farmed by Wane's brother. Wane entered it, stooped down, then picked up something from under a hedge and put it under his jacket. He then walked off in the direction of Warren's cottage. Two children, Martha Fenn and Emma Embery, then told the Coroner they had seen Wane go along the path leading to Warren's cottage.

James Warren the younger identified the knife. He said that it belonged to Wane's brother Thomas, and that Wane himself was in the

habit of using it in trimming greens. Warren had also used it himself for this purpose when they worked alongside each other. Finally, two men named Thomas Hart and William Outtram were brought in. They shared a cell with Wane at Ilford Gaol, and told the inquest that he had confessed to the murder three or four times. He was apparently very sorry that it happened, and had wailed 'I shall be hung; I am sure to be hung... I don't think there is any chance of my getting off for they all surrounded me so I could not get away'. When asked how long Amelia had lived, he allegedly said 'She was not quite two minutes dying'.

Wane vehemently denied saying this. The inquest jury, however, did not take long to return a verdict of 'Wilful Murder' against him. Amelia was buried the same day at Dagenham Parish Church, where she had been baptized and married. On Saturday, 1 October Wane was brought before the Ilford magistrates. The *Chelmsford Chronicle* reported that he 'surveyed those present with a defiant look...leaned his arms on front of the dock, and on several occasions he asked the witnesses questions in a bullying tone'. When Joseph Rogers recounted what Wane had said to him outside the *White Horse*, we are told that Wane's face 'became black with passion, and he shouted vehemently "You are an infernal liar - you are merely giving evidence expecting to make a few shillings out of it"'. John Warren was called, and told the magistrates that he was to have been married to Amelia that very day.

Wane's trial took place two and a half months later, on 14 December 1864, at the Chelmsford Assizes. He pleaded not guilty. Joseph Rogers again told the story of his conversation with Wane. When asked why he didn't report it to the police, he replied: 'Of what use would it be? I have often told the police such things, and they have said, "Oh, don't bother us, let them do as they like"...I can assure you the police are very lazy in London.' At this, the courtroom erupted into laughter. Wane's defence counsel Mr Woollett asked the jury to consider whether Amelia may have committed suicide. He also suggested that Wane was not a rational being. 'Did anyone hear of a man intending to murder, and telling the whole world of it?'

The jury retired, and about twenty minutes later returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty. Wane seemed unconcerned, but immediately after being removed to the cells below, his indifference and apathy melted away. He was full of emotion, and told the chief warden 'I did it, and I was sure they would bring me in guilty'. Wane explained that he thought Amelia was going to be married the following day, Sunday, 25 September. He had silently entered the washhouse and put his left arm around her neck. She spun round, and with a look of horror, exclaimed 'Oh, Toddy, what do you do here?' Without a word of reply,



he had immediately cut her throat with a knife held in his right hand. Wane told the governor of Springfield Gaol that 'I had the thoughts on me for months that I must do it, and I struggled with them over and over again; but it was no use, they were too much for me'.

Wane's execution was fixed for Wednesday, 28 December. He was placed in the condemned cell and watched night and day. He complained bitterly of the cold, and the governor had two cells prepared for him, one for day and one for night, installed with a hot-water heating apparatus. On 26 December Wane's eldest brother and brother-in-law visited him, the only family members to do so. Wane asked the governor to write to his other brother, and entreat him to beware of 'the drink', declaring it had brought this terrible fate upon him. On Tuesday evening he dictated this letter:

*My dear father, I write to you bidding you goodbye, as I shall not see you again in this world, but I hope we shall meet again in Heaven. May God Almighty bless you. Dear father, I was guilty of the crime with which I am charged...Accept my kind love, and give the same to the rest of the family.*

On Tuesday evening two prisoners were ordered to dig the grave of the still-living man deep within the confines of the prison. The hangman William Calcraft, who had executed Charles Saunders at the same place eleven years before, arrived at 5 p.m. and spent the night at the gaol. Two people had contacted the governor offering to undercut Calcraft's fee. One wrote that he would carry out the execution for a mere £5 plus railway expenses. At 4 a.m. on Wednesday the carpenters started to put up the gallows over the entrance gate. The prison's passing bell tolled mournfully.

Wane had spent a very restless night, and from an early hour he knelt in prayer with the chaplain. He was very nervous and tremulous at first, throwing himself from side to side and wailing that he was going mad, but as the time advanced he grew calmer. He gave the chaplain a little book called *Cottage Hymns* to be sent to his niece. Wane dreaded the thought of being brought out before the crowd, and said he 'should not have thought so much of it if it had been private'. He complained that 'the punishment is too great, it is too hard'.

A few minutes before 9 a.m. Wane was escorted across the yard and up the steps into a room where the hangman waited. Here, however, his courage seemed to fail him, and he became very agitated. He was offered a glass of brandy – the final tippie of a lifetime of drinking – which was gratefully accepted. Calcraft then proceeded to pinion Wane's arms, and he winced as this was being done, exclaiming 'Don't hurt me!' The chief warden then helped Wane ascend the steps leading to the scaffold, while

the chaplain read out the burial service. Standing on the trapdoor, the condemned man trembled very much and looked ghastly pale. After Calcraft had placed the noose around his neck, and drawn the cap over his face, the crowd fell silent. People directly in front of the gaol could clearly hear Wane cry out 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me! Oh Lord, have mercy on my soul!' In a few moments the drop fell, and he appeared to die almost immediately.

About 1,500 spectators had come to witness the execution, which was to be the penultimate public hanging at Chelmsford. According to the *Chelmsford Chronicle* the atmosphere resembled a country fair, with people smoking, laughing and chatting. Immediately the drop fell, 'a decent-looking countryman was heard to declare, with a fearful oath, that he wouldn't mind seeing a thousand of 'em hung, or hanging them himself for that matter'. Groups of open-air preachers and Temperance Society tract distributors were at the scene, lecturing the crowd 'to take warning by the fate of the wretched criminal, to beware of drink and put a curb upon their passions'.

The murder of Amelia Blunt was the subject of a popular ballad, beginning:

*Behold a sad and wretched man,  
On Springfield's gallows high,  
I a murder did on Chadwell Heath,  
And for the same I die...*

*Oh! Fatal, cursed jealousy,  
'Tis then that was the cause,  
Of this most dreadful tragedy.*

The writer, of course, correctly gives jealousy as Wane's motivating factor, but it also seems clear that poor Amelia was tragically let down by people's failure to take seriously Wane's repeated threats against her life.

#### Sources

- Depositions (National Archives, ASS1 36/11)  
 The *Chelmsford Chronicle*  
 The *Essex Standard*  
 The ballad is quoted in an article by Roly Brown, *Glimpses into the 19th century broadside ballad trade* at [http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/bballs\\_14.htm](http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/bballs_14.htm)