

FREDERICK HICKSON BICKNELL (9666)

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Frederick Hickson Bicknell told the authorities at the Old Men's Home that he was transported for a minor offence. While the outcome of his arson attempt was minor, there was potential for considerable damage to property and his intent to defraud was clear. He appeared before the Central Criminal Courts on 17 December 1866 for a committal hearing where it was found there was reasonable ground for putting him on trial on the charge of arson.

At the same session, *The Times* reports:-

The calendar contains the names of 80 prisoners. 25 of whom have been committed from the City of London, 39 from the county of Middlesex, 3 from Essex, 3 from Kent, 9 from Surrey and 1 from the jurisdiction of the Admiralty. 1 is charged with murder, 2 with manslaughter, 1 with arson, 4 with burglary, 11 with offences against the Mint, 7 with embezzlement, 3 with forgery, 2 with horse stealing and secreting post letters, 1 with feloniously administering poison with intent to murder, 8 with robbery, 4 with receiving stolen goods feloniously and 3 with feloniously wounding with intent to murder.

On Wednesday 9 January 1867, before Mr Justice Shee at the New Court, Frederick Bicknell was indicted for setting fire to a dwelling-house with intent to defraud. *The Times* reports:-

Mr Metcalfe and Mr Straight appeared for the prosecution; Mr Ribton and Mr H Lewis for the defence.

The prisoner is a cooper, and lives at 3, Queen's-terrace, Commercial-road East, where, his wife carries on a stay and crinoline business. Shortly before 12 on the night of the 5th of December an alarm of fire was given, and the Salvage Corps and several police-officers went to the premises. They found the shop full of smoke, and a flame flickering round the gas pendant suspended from the ceiling. Under the counter, and about 9ft distant from the gas pendant in a vertical direction, was another fire, some paper, a portion of an umbrella, and the remains of some children's stays being ignited. In the front room on the first floor was found a third outbreak connected with the first, but more extensive, the bedding being also on fire. In a back room the paper was found partially stripped from the wall, and hanging in a sort of festoon near the door, so that it had to be brushed away before the officers could enter. There was no fire in this room, but one of the boards of the floor was observed to be raised about half an inch above the others. This was examined the next day, and was found to be charred, and saturated with paraffin oil, as also were the boards beside it, while underneath, and between the floor and the shop ceiling, was a quantity of rubbish likewise saturated with paraffin, as also were some crinolines in the shop. In the ceiling above the gas pendant was a patch of paraffin, 41 inches by 15 inches in size, which proved to be very inflammable. Part of the cellar door had been recently sawn off and fastened by screws over the fanlight, with the object apparently of preventing flames in the shop from being seen in the street. A bottle containing nearly a pint of paraffin was found on the premises, and it was proved that the prisoner twice on the previous day sent a bottle to be filled with paraffin, although the lamp standing on the mantelpiece in the back parlour was out of order and contained no oil. None of the inmates were in the house when the fire was discovered, but a young man who gave the alarm stated that he saw two men leave the premises by the back door, and immediately afterwards smoke issued followed by the cracking of glass. After the fire had been extinguished the prisoner returned home by the back door with his wife, children and servant, and had some conversation with Inspector Griffin. He said, "This is a mysterious matter, can you account for it? It is a bad job" Griffin said, "It is to be hoped you are insured," and the prisoner replied, "I have been to an office, but it is so recently I'm not sure they'll pay it me. If they don't I am a ruined man." It appeared that an insurance had been recently effected in the Liverpool, London, and Globe office, the furniture for £140, the stock-in-trade and utensils for £150, the business fixtures for £60 and coopers tools for £50, making a total of £400, while the value of the property did not exceed £100. On the day after the fire, Mr Rees, surveyor for the insurance company, had an interview with the prisoner at the St Katherine's Docks, where he was employed, and when asked whether he intended to make a claim, he replied "Oh! Of course, I must be recompensed for my loss." A somewhat singular incident in the case was that in November the prisoner went to the Fire Brigade station, asked to look at the steam

engine, made a number of inquiries about arrangements, referred to fire which had lately occurred at the docks and at a house near his own residence, and said he had never had a fire himself and hoped never to have one. He also made a remark "When you are out with your steamer we should have no protection if we had a fire in our neighbourhood." And it was suggested by the prosecution that, there being a fire that night on Row-common, the prisoner committed the act under the idea that the fire would extend sufficiently to conceal its origins before assistance could arrive.

For the defence, evidence was given to show that the prisoner left the house about 10 o'clock in company with a young man named Strannap, also employed at the docks, in order to join his wife and family at Weston's Music-hall, everything then being safe; that he boarded over the fanlight before leaving as a precaution against burglars; that finding his family had left Weston's he met them near the Royal Exchange, and did not return to the premises till past 1; and that when smoke was first observed issuing from the upper room, a man unknown was seen to leave the premises. The cross examination elicited that the prisoner and Strannap had been security for one another in two loan transactions.

Mr Ribton, in summing up the defence, admitted that it was hopeless to resist evidence showing the fire to have been intentional, but contended that his witness, whose testimony there was no substantial reason to discredit, had shown that the prisoner could not have committed the act.

Mr Metcalfe, in reply, urged that the case against the prisoner was conclusive, and that even Strannap's evidence was not incompatible with his guilt.

Mr Justice Shee carefully summed up, and the jury, after an hour's deliberation, convicted the prisoner.

The learned Judge expressed his concurrence in the verdict and said he was bound to pass a severe sentence, although he did not forget that no life had been endangered by the prisoner's act, and that no mischief had resulted except to himself and his family. The sentence of the Court was that he be kept in penal servitude for ten years.

References and Notes:

The Times, Tuesday 18 December 1867; Thursday 10 January 1868

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