



**The Murder at Scotforth
as told from the pages
of the Lancaster Guardian
and the Lancaster Gazette
during January to March 1866**

We are this week called upon in our capacity as journalist, to discharge the painful duty of recording the perpetration, in this hitherto peaceful district, of a deed of blood, which has sent a thrill of horror through the breast of every member of the community to whom the horrid details of the outrage have become known. The body of a young woman then unknown, was found on Friday morning, at a place called Green lane, a bye-way, branching off the road leading from Burrow to Hazelrigg, and situated about a mile and a half beyond Scotforth. It has transpired that a ruthless and diabolical murder, preceded by violence to the person had been committed, and that the unfortunate victim was a young woman named Elizabeth Nelson, a domestic servant in the employment of C. L. Whalley Esq. of Richmond House, Skerton.

When the report of the outrage was first circulated, few were inclined to give it credence, but when the facts connected with the dreadful affair, became fully known the public mind was filled with consternation, and the incredulity which at first prevailed gave place to gullibility. Rumours of all kinds were set afloat, and the intense anxiety which existed to obtain some information respecting the occurrence caused every report to be "swallowed" without question.

From the evidence of Ann Williamson, it will be observed that the deceased left Mr Whalley's house about half past five o'clock on Thursday evening, ostensibly for the purpose of coming on to Lancaster to post a letter. The next time she is heard of is at a quarter past six o'clock, when she called at Mrs Barrow's residence in Middle-street, with a bonnet belonging to Mrs Barrow's sister. Here she made no delay, and refused to sit down on being asked by Mrs Barrow, on the plea that she was in a hurry. This was the last time she is known to have been seen alive.

It is surmised that after leaving Middle-street she must have directed her course to Burrow farm, the property of Mr Whalley, for the purpose of seeing a young man named Miller, a farm servant, with whom it is known she carried on a courtship. It will be seen by the evidence that a note addressed to Miller was left at Mr Whalley's by the postman on the previous Sunday, and as the same letter was picked up about a couple of yards from the scene of the murder, the natural inference is that it was in the possession of the deceased at the time, and that she left Mr Whalley's with the view of taking it in person to her sweetheart.

It is remarkable that no one has, up to the present time, been found who saw her after she left Middle-

street. This is somewhat singular, when we consider how much the Greaves road is frequented.

Her body was found on Friday morning. It was first observed by a man named Thomas Wilkinson, a farm labourer, who on going through Green-lane about nine o'clock in the morning, was almost frightened out of his wits by the ghastly spectacle which was presented to him. He found the deceased lying partly on one side, her right cheek was down on the ground, and her clothes were covered with snow, of which, it will be remembered, there had been a copious fall the previous night. Upon making the horrid discovery, Wilkinson immediately went and told a fellow servant of his named John Parkinson, who went and communicated the fact to the police at Galgate, while Wilkinson, as he states, in his evidence proceeded "about his business".

Police Sergeant Harrison of Galgate, was the next to arrive on the spot, and he had the body removed to the Boot and Shoe Inn at Scotforth. Mr Holden, the coroner, was then communicated with, and by his directions a *post mortem* examination of the body was made by Dr. Hall of Lancaster, whose evidence left no doubt whatsoever that the unhappy young woman had first been brutally violated and then foully murdered by strangulation, followed by blows on the head.

No information was elicited from the evidence at the inquest which could throw any light upon the motives which prompted the crime, or give any clue as to the perpetrators. The time at which the murderous outrage was committed is pretty accurately fixed by the fact that when the body was discovered no footmarks were observable in the snow, of which there was a depth of three inches on the ground. The lane was quite untrodden when Wilkinson entered it, and it was quite clear that if the deed was done after the snow commenced to fall, some traces of the struggle which had evidently taken place between the murderer and his outraged victim would have been discernible. It is evidence that the snow began to fall about eight o'clock that evening, and it is therefore established almost beyond a doubt that the murder was perpetrated before that time.

On Thursday morning, Sergeant Wilson of the County Constabulary at Skerton, apprehended and lodged in the lock-up at Skerton two young men named John Cottam, aged 24 and Joseph Dunderdale, aged 21, both of whose parents occupy respectable positions as farmers in close proximity to the place where the body was discovered - one at Burrow and the other at Five Ashes.