

A shocking tale of Mary Agnes O'Hara, Tuesday 22nd May 1900. Father Hangs Daughter

The town of Burnley was shocked and startled on a night in May 1900, in the Meadow Bridge area of town by the reports that an Irishman named Dennis O'Hara who worked at Keighley's Iron Foundry had murdered his daughter. The statements in connection with the crime represent one of the most cold-blooded murders in the history of the Borough. Some ten weeks earlier, O'Hara who was forty years old, gave way to drink, with the result that his wife decided to leave him. She went to live with her sister at Patten Street, and took her two children with her, a boy of eighteen and Mary Agnes aged six years. One of the children worked at the same foundry as his father who lived at 18, George Street. Rumour had it that he threatened to take revenge on his wife for leaving him. He had not done any work for about two weeks and had called at the foundry to see what his position with his employer was, and to resume work if he was allowed to do so. He found that the works were about to close for the day, so O'Hara went to the Corporation Arms where he was joined by some of his fellow workmen. He then went to the Calderdale Inn, and afterwards to the Hope and Anchor, where he was in a jovial mood singing several songs. Suddenly he went missing and it would appear that he visited the school where his daughter attended. O'Hara collected her from school and took her to his house at George St, where he committed this terrible crime. It is recorded that that he procured a piece of rope, probably a length of washing line and after hanging the girl, cut her down and placed her in a chair. Upon the police being alerted of the crime PC Spence ordered an ambulance to the property, he was first to enter the house, opening the door with a key given to him by O'Hara himself. Almost the first thing that met the officer's gaze was the body of the girl, and as he lifted her up, he could see black marks on her neck which had been made by the rope. Her body was still warm when she was placed in the ambulance and taken to the mortuary at the Town Hall, still with the rope attached to her neck.

When the murder was committed a man named Isaac Brooks a grinder at Keighley's Foundry was asleep in the upstairs bedroom, and found later by the police when they entered the property.

Mrs O'Hara who had been maintaining herself by working at the mill since she left her husband was dreadfully shocked and in a distressed state when she was informed of her daughters tragic end. She immediately left the mill and drove to the police station in a cab, and when for the purpose of identification, she was taken to the mortuary, she collapsed. O'Hara, an Irishman, was well known among the working classes, particularly among his fellow countrymen. He had taken a great interest in politics, and at times been very active in local election campaigns. When sober he was described as a quiet and genial man, his fault being a weakness for drink.

No place was the crime more discussed than at Bank Hall Iron works where O'Hara worked. His long connections with the firm had made him known to every workman and the local community, and it was the general opinion that he was the last person in the world they thought would have been capable of committing such a deed.

Whilst in the cell awaiting his trial, he was said to have fully realized the serious position in which he was in, and never denied the charge against him. Both his brother and son visited him, where there was heart-rending scenes all weeping bitterly.

The verdict at the inquest: The jury found O'Hara to be guilty of committing the crime, but of unsound mind at the time. The judge ordered him to be detained at Broadmoor at her majesty's pleasure.

Mary Agnes O'Hara was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in Burnley cemetery on 25th May 1900