



## *The Markinch Murder*



*The Fife Free Press* of the 8<sup>th</sup> February 1896 carried a headline in large text announcing that:-

One of the most distressing and brutal outrages that has ever occurred in Fife was that discovered on Thursday morning in Balgonie Woods in the vicinity of Markinch. The details associated with the tragedy were of such a shocking nature that, when first made known in Markinch, the inhabitants generally refused to credit them. The announcement that the body of *Miss Helen Thomson*, daughter of Mr Thomson, retired millwright, High Street, had been discovered in the shrubbery at Balgonie Dykes and had caused the most profound sensation throughout the district. The further statement that the young lady had been brutally murdered heightened the painful sensation. Confirmation was not long in being forthcoming.



The victim was a young lady aged 25 who lived with her family on Markinch's High Street. Her father had recently retired as a millwright and was a pillar of the community. Not only was he a member of the Town Council but he had been an

elder of Markinch Free Church for 30 years.

Helen was described in the newspaper article as being slightly hard of hearing and the suggestion was that she walked with a limp. She had set out in mid/late afternoon, on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 1896, to walk to Milton of Balgonie to visit female friends. She took the high road over the station bridge and into the village via Milton brae.

At that time St Drostan's cemetery was not yet constructed. While today you can walk that way without passing another soul at that time, with little or no private or public transport, the route was far busier with pedestrians.

Helen reached her destination and after spending half an hour with the McDuff sisters at Viewwood Cottage she set out for home. The sisters and Helen walked together as far as the top of the brae with Helen then setting out on the straight road towards Markinch. The three ladies were seen together by the postman, a Thomas Spittal, at 6.00pm.

Nothing more was heard from Helen and, as the hours passed, members of the family instituted a search which failed to find Helen. Enquiries made at the homes of friends and relations brought no success. There had been a suggestion that she had bought a railway ticket but this like so many other stories proved to have no basis.

By now the family were extremely anxious and the search recommenced at first light. Mr Thomson once again started out for Milton and as he came to the gate leading into the Quarry Park he saw a lady's muff lying close to the dyke along with some books and periodicals. He investigated further and some 30 yards into the



woods he came upon the lifeless body of his daughter with it being obvious that her clothing was dishevelled.

Returning to the road in a state of great shock, he, in company with another gentleman, made their way back to Markinch with the sensational and gruesome tidings. Police Constable Wright summoned Dr. McDonald and Provost Dewar. These three along with Mr Thomson, and some others, returned to the scene and after a careful survey of the surroundings the victim's body was taken to her home. There being every possibility that murder had been done, word was sent to both Cupar and Dysart and, in a short space of time, the Procurator Fiscal, Mr. R.W. Renton and Depute Chief Constable Hunter arrived from Cupar with Inspector Wyness making his way from Dysart.

The body had been found face upwards and when it was raised it was found that her hands had been restrained behind her back. A sheep "shackle" - 12/15 inches of rope with spliced loops at either end - had been used for the purpose. A post mortem examination was carried out on the evening of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the opinion of the medical man was that "the deceased had been assaulted in an outrageous manner, and had probably died from shock, aggravated by the subsequent exposure overnight".

The police acted in what was described as an "indefatigable manner" and late on the 6<sup>th</sup> they arrested 21 year old shepherd John McRae. A native of Ross-Shire McRae had been engaged as a shepherd by John Shaw, a sheep dealer, who resided at the East Meetings in Windygates. Shaw and his wife employed another shepherd, a John McKenzie, and a domestic Jemima Robertson. For two weeks before the tragedy, Shaw had been wintering 400 sheep in a park at Barnslea Farm which, at the time, was tenanted by a Mr Inglis. It was John McRae who was shepherding the flock. The fields in use were opposite the wood where the murder

took place. His proximity to the scene and the fact there was wool attached to the "shackle" saw McRae arrested, taken to Cupar, and then transferred to Dundee prison. He maintained his innocence claiming he had left the field around 5.30pm and walked home via Bellfield and Rosebank thereby avoiding Milton itself. He had met and spoken to a Mr Keddie, a carter, who was carrying goods from Cameron Bridge to Markinch and also passed time with Mr Wright, the farmer at Bellfield. It seems inconceivable that he languished in prison in Dundee until

#### M'RAE LIBERATED.

Having communicated with the Crown officials, Mr Renton wired to Mr Wm. Clarke, governor of Dundee Prison on Wednesday afternoon, ordering release of John M'Rae, the shepherd, who has been in custody since the previous Thursday night. This proceeding has been taken, we understand, by the proving of an alibi, which we have already stated had been attempted. The whole case appears to be enveloped in mystery, and speculation is rife as to the ultimate outcome of the police investigations. M'Rae arrived in Cupar at six o'clock the same night. He proceeded to the Fiscal's office, where he obtained money to pay his fare. He booked with the 8.4 p.m. train for Ladybank, where he was to stay overnight with friends.

the following Wednesday when Shaw, his wife, McKenzie and Robertson, all testified that he was home for his tea by 6.00pm. Since the postman had seen Helen alive at that time – it could hardly be McRae! He was released on the afternoon of Wednesday the 12th from Dundee, but was only given the

train fare to get him as far as Cupar. He had to pay for a journey to Ladybank where he stayed the night with friends.

The police remained very active on Saturday the 8th seeming to concentrate their attention on Milton and McRae's alibi. On the Sunday there were scenes described as chaos as thousands were said to have descended on the site of the murder with branches being torn from the spruce trees around where the body was discovered. So much damage was done that the Head Forester, a Mr Walker, had to fell some of the trees the following day.



**THE POLICE ON A NEW CLUE.  
MINER ARRESTED.**

The police continued to cast about for new clues, and the Fiscal and Deputy Chief Constable returned to Markinch on Monday afternoon, and kept up an almost uninterrupted search for twenty hours, and on Tuesday afternoon they apprehended a miner, named James Morrison, who was employed at Wellsgreen Colliery. Morrison's name had not previously been mentioned in connection with the case, but there had been rumours about an unidentified

On the Monday, which was the day of the funeral, police activity continued unabated and the following day a miner, James Morrison, who worked at Wellsgreen Colliery, was arrested. Morrison had walked, with a

lady friend and his dog, the six miles to Markinch Station as the lady intended to catch the 5.21pm train for the north. He had then set off for home arriving back in Wellsgreen at 7.00pm. It was he himself who disclosed to friends that he had been in the vicinity and this might have been the reason behind his arrest, although it later transpired that a young man named Fraser who was making his way from Milton to Markinch for medicine had passed Morrison and this was what put him at the scene of the crime. Morrison was released on the afternoon of Thursday the 13<sup>th</sup> so, in the space of 24 hours, both suspects had been released.

On the same Thursday the Fiscal issued a notice to the effect that:-

### Markinch Outrage

The Procurator Fiscal of Fife, Cupar, particularly requests that any party or parties not already examined by him, and who were on the road between Windygates and Markinch, or between Bellfield Farm and Markinch, either walking, riding or driving, on the evening of Wednesday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1896, and more particularly between the hours of 5.00pm and 8.00pm on said evening, should at once communicate with him either directly or through any local police constable in order that their evidence can be taken.

The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* of the 29<sup>th</sup> February reported that the Edinburgh Crown criminal authorities had sent a Glasgow detective to assist with the enquiry. Bar this item no further trace could be found of the detective or his enquiries.

It seems that the enquiry simply ran out of steam although in the month of March another line of enquiry looked more fruitful – or at least it did to the gentlemen of the press!

On the 12<sup>th</sup> March the *Southern Reporter* carried an article referring to an incident on the 10<sup>th</sup>. A Constable Davis had detained a man by the name of Josiah Harper Taylor, near Slamannan, on a charge of fraud. The article suggested that more serious charges might follow. It was subsequently revealed that Taylor had managed to elicit, by letter or personal approach, £1 from the Marquis of Bute on the 28<sup>th</sup> December 1895 on the grounds he needed to get to Edinburgh for an urgent eye operation. He subsequently attempted the same ruse on Neil Ballingall, the Factor of Balbirnie Estate, on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1896. These two actions resulted in the fraud charges.

It had been reported to the Chief Constable of Falkirk that this "Joe" had "been showing great interest in the murder, and when it was mentioned he seemed to become excited and ill at ease". He had told his colleagues that he had been at school with Helen Thomson and that at one time his father lived in Markinch. Taylor had only arrived at Blackbraes Colliery a few days after the murder. A little research showed that Taylor was born in Markinch in 1869, had married a Jessie Christie, and the couple had two daughters – Jessie and Agnes who were living in Star. Taylor's father Laurence had been a confectioner in Markinch but had moved to Kirkcaldy with his family.

## THE MARKINCH TRAGEDY.

Constable Davies apprehended on Tuesday morning at Redding Colliery, Slamannan, Josiah Harper Taylor, on a charge of fraud. It is believed, however, that a more serious charge will be brought against the prisoner in connection with the Markinch tragedy. On Saturday last Superintendent Gordon, Falkirk, reported to Chief-Constable Sempill that a man known to him by the name of "Joe," a surfaceman at Blackbraes, had been showing great interest in the Markinch murder,

The information was sent to Fife and as a result Deputy Chief Constable Hunter was despatched to Falkirk. However, "Joe" had disappeared from the Blackbraes's area but was traced to Redding Colliery and arrested on the charge of fraud.

At his trial it was stated that he had been in trouble with the police since he was a youth and "was described as a ne'er-do-weel that has brought disgrace on respectable parents". It was also reported that "being of a roving disposition he had left his wife some time ago. She lives in Markinch district and "never wishes to see the face of her husband again". Certainly, by 1901 the census reflected Josiah in Dysart with his wife and children in Leslie.

**JOSIAH HARPER TAYLOR,**  
from the police records and from his youth upwards, has been a ne'er-do-weel, and has brought disgrace upon respectable parents, who resided at Markinch. Two charges were preferred against him in the Sheriff Criminal Court, Cupar Fife, on Tuesday. He was accused of obtaining money by fraudulent representations in letters and otherwise. He never looked up when in the dock, and kept his eyes persistently on the floor. He appears to be about 27 years of age, is of medium height, and somewhat strong in build. His coat had been black, but is now brown and the worse of wear. The

For this crime he was sentenced to 60 days in Dundee Prison being released on Saturday, the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1896. Apparently, he had arrived at Perth from Aviemore on a goods train on the 4<sup>th</sup> February where he had been working on the railway. He seemed able to prove that same day he had left Perth for Dunning arriving there that evening. He had, as previously mentioned, turned up at Blackbraes on the 11<sup>th</sup> February. There had been intense press speculation that he would be arrested and charged with Miss Thomson's murder – but that simply did not come to pass. Taylor died in Kirkcaldy in 1901 from a blood disease. While he certainly had a criminal record and a poor reputation that did not make him a murderer and his alibi had to have been watertight not to have been even

arrested on suspicion of being the culprit.

Given his unusual christian name, the genealogy of Taylor was fairly straightforward. The other two suspects are near enough impossible tasks and would require considerable time and effort. The names John McRae, in the Highlands, and James Morrison, anywhere in Scotland, produce a formidable number of Register entries.

The situation, as it stood in 1896, has remained the same to this day. No one knows who and no one knows why. There were a few crank letters from anonymous individuals who claimed to know the name of the culprit but they were in all probability hoaxes.

In 1909, the murder of young Michael Brown created a trilogy of February murders in the Kingdom and it did not go unnoticed. Margaret Maxwell had been robbed and murdered in February 1852, with Peter and Michael Scanlan paying the penalty on the Cupar gallows. Helen Thomson was murdered in February 1896, with Michael Brown following 13 years later. Two of the crimes were solved, but Helen lies in Northhall cemetery with her killer remaining unknown.

### **Acknowledgements for Information.**

The British Newspaper Archive was the main resource with the individual newspapers credited in the article.

The Fife Free Press information was taken from two editions - the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> February 1896.

The Illustrations were taken from the Fife Free Press of the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1896. The paper gives credit for the sketch of the scene being taken from a photograph taken by Mr Terras, Markinch.

The Map is from the 1893 Ordnance Survey map of Markinch courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.