

Love, Jealousy, Murder and Betrayal. The Top House Tragedy

The Top House was a rural settlement of sheep farming out of Nelson on the way to Christchurch and Blenheim. It was a quiet, tight-knit, close community. Until the day of October 5th where the quiet was shattered by the sound of surprise.¹



Top House 18th Century, the Nelson Provincial Museum, Nelson Historical Society Collection, C18

William Bateman, known as 'Bill' was a station hand that worked on the land around the Top House, with the sheep. Bill's sister is Mrs Longley. She was married to Nathaniel Longley who in 1894 owned the Top House. He had a wife Louisa and four children. On the morning of October 5th they left their children in the care of their governess/house keeper Catherine Wiley and the house with Nathaniel's cousin John Lane and went on holiday.²

Bill was interested in Miss Wiley and had written her multiple secret love letters. However Miss Wiley was interested Mr John Lane a Young wealthy man with a stable and reliable job. Bill believed that no one knew about his secret love for Miss Wiley but what he didn't know was that the whole town knew thanks to the local postman who had been showing the letters around for entertainment.³

Bill was down at the Wakefield pub having a few beers with his mates when his close friends were whispering, laughing and gossiping all night behind his back. Bill went and confronted his friends to see what the big commotion was; he had had enough with all the secrets. He asked them bluntly. What was going on? They responded just as blunt "Bill we know about your love for Miss Wiley and the love letters you write". Bill was shocked surprised and confused. But they kept going, you have no chance mate she has her eye on the manager there, John Lane, he has a good job.⁴

Bill took the news hard and turned back to his drinking, having another beer, and another. He then turned to his friends and said "I'm sick of those people up there at Top House, I'm going to shoot them all!". The response from his friends treated it as drunken talk and did not think anything serious of it.⁵

Bill began to plan out his moves. It would take place the following day. In preparation Bill equipped himself with gunpowder and set off towards the telegraph office to pay a visit to Mr William Wallis. Bill asked to borrow his gun as he told William he was going rabbit shooting that afternoon. Mr Wallis was used to loaning Bill his gun so saw no reason why this time would be different. But this time it was. Mr Wallis did not know the real motivation or intentions Bill had prepared for. Bill set out once again for the Top House. This trip being like no other.⁶

Bill arrived at the Top House and invited John Lane to come rabbit shooting with him. Bill took John out to the paddock, walked behind him, aimed, and shot him in the back of the head. Bill dragged the body behind a log on the side of the road, in a pool of his blood. Bill returned to the Top House, poured himself a glass of whiskey and paused to think about what he had just done. Replaying his actions over, he realised that Mr Wallis would know it was him, since he borrowed his gun. But what was Bill to do now? Mr Wallis was his friend. But their friendship⁷

Had changed Bill had to do what he thought was right.

Bill took Mr Wallis out to the paddock and shot Mr Wallis in the back of the head. He disposed of the body face down covered in a horse cover. So far Bill's total body count was two. He was going for a third with the intention of shooting Miss Wiley. These plans were re-arranged when in his absence

from the house she had caught on that something was not right, in fact it was very wrong.⁸

She fled down to Mrs Wallis at the telegraph office and explained her suspicious feeling. They boarded themselves in the office and rang through an SOS to the Nelson police. They said; "Mr Wallis has not turned up yet. Something terrible has happened! My poor Willie! With little help from the station, with the time it would take for help to reach them. The lady's frantic pleas for help, stayed with some of the operators back in Nelson.⁹

The telegraph station in Nelson closed at 4:30pm. One of the operators returned at 7:30pm with the hopes of hearing from the frightened Mrs Wallis again. They succeeded, with Mrs Wallis saying "Something terrible has happened come at once! No one comes! My poor Willies! Goodbye! I must go and hide!¹⁰

While Mrs Wallis and Miss Wiley where boarded up in safety, Bill was at the Top House having yet another drink, after cutting the telegraph wires. After being refused entry to the Wallis home. Although he was aware that a message had already been sent through to the Nelson, lake and Blenheim stations. Bill new the fate of what was going to happen next.¹¹

The next evening around 6pm help had arrived. The airy silence was disrupted with the loud bang of a gun. Constable Knapp and Phair went up to the Top House to evaluate. The scene that presented them was disturbing. Bill Bateman was found dead. Slumped up against a post with the gun resting between his legs. Bill had shot himself with the gun, pulling the trigger with his toe with a whiskey bottle beside him.¹²

When the news of the murders and suicide spread into town people's reactions were between, shock, horror and confusion. They just could not believe that it happened and that three members of their community were dead. A member of the community described him as a "Quiet, inoffensive, harmless, good natured individual".¹³

Bill left his sister Mrs McLeod a suicide note telling her not to weep for him, and to give his love to his mother and that he will "Meet her in the next world where there is no trouble and worry"¹⁴

When Miss Wiley returned home to the Top House, she was looking over Nathaniel's diary when she stumbled across a message from Bill, it read "Dear Nat.,-Just a few lines for the last. I went to Wakefield, and saw Mac. I had a good talk with him. I told him this would, but he would not believe me. Well, I made my mind to shoot all but the children. Goodbye. "W. Bateman.¹⁵

The Top House tragedy stirred up the community when the trial begun with witness accounts and jury's perspectives and medical reports. When the investigation came to a close it gave the town a sense of closure. And hope of new beginning.¹⁶

The Top House fate was decided when the owner Nathaniel Longley put the house up for sale as the tragedy shocker was not good for business, no one was coming to stay or visit. The house sold in 1899 to the Tomlinson Family in who ran the house for a good 20 years.¹⁷

Today the Top House is owned privately and being run as a historical hotel, attracting tourists from all

over to come and take a look at the bullet holes which still remain in the veranda from the 1940's. ¹⁸

The Top House is also home to a ghost. Sidney Smith had no connection to the Top House tragedy he was described as a very well-liked man. He went around on his horse and cart selling pots, and pans to those who needed them. Until one day when he was tying his horse up against a tree his horse got spooked and kicked Sidney in the head. Sidney ran inside and collapsed in the hallway. ¹⁹

Three years ago a psychic medium went to the Top House and made contact with Sidney. The medium stated that Sidney just loves the Top House and the cosy fire. Tourists who have visited the hotel say that they can sense his presence. ²⁰

As far as the owners are concerned Sidney is welcome to stay, looking after the Top House.

Laura Wilkinson, Nayland College, 2011



The Top House Today as a historic hotel

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