

Ansty Farmer Attacked in Court 1937

Fighting with Police during Assault Hearing

There was a remarkable scene in Tisbury Police-court on Thursday afternoon when a young Irishman made a violent attack on an elderly farmer.

There was a cross summons between Lemmel John Stokes, a labourer of Ansty Combe, Ansty, and Chas Edgar Lever, a farmer of the same place. Each accused the other of assault.

Earlier in the day the Bench had been engaged in hearing an application for a maintenance and separation order in which the parties were tenants of Lever, and Stokes was a lodger in the house.

When the assault case opened, the two men were placed side by side between the solicitors' table and the Press seats.

Violent struggle with Police

Mr W Farley Rutter, of Shaftesbury, who was representing Lever, had just commenced his opening address when Stokes swung round and struck Lever a heavy blow in the face, felling him like a log. He lay motionless and while members of the public rushed to his assistance, there commenced a violent struggle between Stokes and police officers. Stokes kicked and struggled, but the police over powered him and forced him back against the wall of the Court.

For some minutes Mr Lever lay motionless, but he was eventually raised to a seat and given a glass of water. It was evident that he was badly shaken.

Meanwhile, Stokes had continued to struggle to free himself from his captors and the Court presented a scene of confusion.

Removed to Cells

The chairman of the Bench, Captain J Hastings, ordered Stokes to be taken to the cells and he struggled more violently than ever. Eventually, four police officers got him into the passage leading to the cells and there were sounds of violent struggling. After some ten minutes, officers returned to the Court, their uniforms covered with dust and whitewash. Meanwhile, Mr Lever had been taken from the Court.

Forty minutes later, Stokes was again brought into the Court. He was without his coat and waistcoat.

Lever, describing the alleged assault in respect of which the summons had been issued, said he was 65 years of age. Stokes came into his premises and attacked him with a fork. PC Matthews, who was called to Lever's house, said he was shown grazes on the right bottom rib. There were three marks about an eighth of an inch apart. He accompanied Lever to see Stokes and get his name and Stokes then threatened to strike Lever.

Denial of Assault

Stokes told the Bench that there had been so many rumours going about the village that he went to tackle Lever about it. Lever was the landlord of the house where he lodged. He accused him of spying. Lever broke the stick when he struck him (Stokes) on the left arm and he picked up a fork to frighten him, but dropped it again as his left arm was useless. He was still receiving medical treatment for it.

"It was I who was assaulted" declared Stokes. "I apologise for the scene today but when I heard so many lies I could not help it. He is a terrible man" declared Stokes, who was crying. "I swear my dying oath I never touched him".

The chairman: "Did you push the fork at him and graze his side?"

"No, sir, I take my dying oath and it is a wrong thing for an Irishman to say."

Replying to Mr Rutter, Stokes said he would not touch Lever because he was an old man. "If he had been a young man, I would have" he added.

Mr Rutter: Yet you had the audacity here today to go and hit him down in front of the Bench.

Stokes: "I am very sorry. I apologise for it. When I heard falsehoods being told and my life sworn away in front of the Bench, I could not help it."

Mr Rutter: "But I was the only one who had spoken."

The Bench said they considered the assault, the subject of the charge, to be a very serious matter. Lever was struck by the fork and might have been seriously injured. Stokes would go to prison for two months' with hard labour, and would be bound over to be of good behaviour for two years. The summons against Lever would be dismissed.

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