

The Tragedy at Tophouse

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“The Tragedy at Tophouse”¹ “The Tophouse Tragedy”² “Murder and Suicide – A Shocking Affair”³

Crowds gathered around their local Post Offices when the news that something was tragically wrong at Tophouse first broke. All they knew was that one man was confirmed missing and there were six other people still up there. It wasn't until late evening on the 5th October that the full weight of the tragedy descended on the citizens of the Nelson region. Three men were dead, the first two at the hands of the third.

People demanded to know the truth. They wanted to know what had made William Bateman snap. What had driven a man, not believed to be of a cruel disposition, to murder? To fully understand what happened that fateful day at Tophouse, the full story of its history must be told.

It began in 1865 with a man and an idea. Nathaniel Longney, a resident of Nelson, wanted to create a haven for the sheep drovers working at the station in Rotoiti. He enlisted the help of Ned James, an expert in the field of cob construction, and together they built a hotel, The Tophouse Hotel. With its large open fire, comfy beds and a flagon of grog for just six old pence it was no wonder forty-eight sheep drovers chose to stay there each night. The Tophouse Hotel soon became a very successful business but things were about to change.

Coaches drove past Tophouse everyday as the road it was on was the only link to Blenheim, Picton and the West Coast. Mr Longney soon realised that if he were to transform the hotel into a more up-market establishment then he could attract the wealthier clientele that rode in those carriages. Slowly but surely Tophouse changed from a haven to a proper coach stop for companies such as Cobb & Co and Newmans. The bar still remained at Tophouse though and the sheep drovers still found solace in that.

As the tale progresses, Mr Longney, his wife Louisa and their four children, became a very wealthy family. They were able to hire staff, including Mr John Lane, who managed the hotel and Ms. Catherine Wylie who was a governess for the children. But none of them could have predicted the devastating event that would happen in their near future.

On the 4th October 1894 William Bateman, brother of Louisa Longney, went about his day as usual. He went to see a man about a dog he was interested in buying. He ate lunch with his friends in the Wakefield Hotel. He picked up his mail from the Belgrove Postmaster and made his way to Tophouse. He made good progress on his journey and he arrived around six o'clock. Making his way to the Telegraph Office he asked to borrow a gun from the unsuspecting linesman, under the pretence that he would be using it to hunt rabbits. Within two hours he had used that gun to kill two men.

The first victim: John Lane. Lane was much liked in the community and was popular throughout the Nelson region. It is not known how Bateman persuaded Lane out of the hotel but he managed to get him to walk 200 yards down the Marlborough Road wearing his slippers. He was shot once just behind his left ear. Lane's body was found the next day by police, he had been callously dumped in the undergrowth.

The second victim: William Wallis, the linesman stationed at Tophouse Telegraph Office for the last five months. Wallis was "universally respected by all"⁴ and was well liked in the community. Bateman asked Wallis if he wanted to go rabbit shooting with him as a way to make him leave the safety of the Telegraph Office. Wallis was at first hesitant stating that it was too dark and there was no moon, but he eventually gave in to Bateman's demands. Not fifty yards from the office Wallis was shot from behind, a single wound to the neck. His body was found the next morning by one of Mr Longney's sons, it had been poorly obscured by a horse cover.

Both Catherine Wylie at the hotel and Mrs Wallis at the Telegraph Station heard the second gunshot and both became suspicious, for it was far too close to the houses. However, neither of them knew that their true turmoil was about to begin.

The hotel was deserted, save for Ms. Wylie and the Longney children. Usually at this time of night the hotel would be bustling with sheep drovers at the bar but it was off-season. After he cold-bloodedly shot William Wallis, Bateman, made his way to the hotel in search of Ms. Wylie. When he found her he demanded that she accompany him on a walk but having heard the gunshot the woman suspected that walking was not all he wished to do. Bateman however, was adamant, and Ms. Wylie reluctantly agreed to go with him. Fortunately Longney's daughter, known affectionately as Lou Lou, insisted that she be allowed to walk with them. They set off into the darkening night, the child clinging to her governess, both of them petrified of the gun-toting man striding behind them. Unbeknownst to them Bateman had already decided that no harm would come to his niece and nephews. He did not attempt to shoot Ms. Wylie, his fear of harming the child stronger than his desire to kill her.

Meanwhile, Mrs Wallis over in the Telegraph Office was becoming more and more agitated. She had heard the shot and there had been no sign of her husband since then. As panic began to set in she sent a barely legible telegraph to Nelson pleading for help. It would not be received until 2.30am and by then Bateman had cut the telegraph lines, preventing any further contact with the authorities. Mrs Wallis then decided to barricade herself into the Telegraph Office, fearing that Bateman might come for her. The woman however did not lose her head in the crisis, managing to pin a note inside the folds of her dress that said, "If Ms. Wylie and I are found dead, it will be Bateman that has killed us." [v]

But it did not come to that.

At some point in the night Ms. Wylie and the children arrived at the Telegraph Office having escaped besiegement at the hotel. They all huddled together, terrified that Bateman would show up and kill them. After a restless night the women managed to make a call to the Lake Station. After hearing their situation, Mr Robert Kerr, made the journey to Tophouse arriving an hour

later. Upon seeing Bateman, still with the gun, roaming about the hillside, Kerr thought it best to send for assistance and he rode toward the Motupiko for help.

The police, a Constable Kelly and Constable Phair, having travelled 49 miles on horseback, arrived on the evening of Friday 5th. They found Bateman.

He was dead, having shot himself on the veranda of the hotel.

What had driven Bateman to commit these heinous crimes? What had happened to him that day to push him over the edge?

“Jealousy is that pain a man feels from the apprehension that he is not equally beloved by whom he entirely loves.”⁶ William Bateman loved Catherine Wylie with all his being but on the day of the murders he had found out something that broke his heart. Catherine was in love with someone else... She was in love with John Lane.

For a year Bateman had been trying, unsuccessfully, to court Ms. Wylie. The man was besotted with her, he went out of his way to see her, sent her dozens of love letters and had planned out their future together. Everyone knew of Bateman’s infatuation, but it wasn’t until lunchtime on the 4th that he finally realised how much they all knew.

At the Wakefield Hotel that day, where Bateman ate lunch with his friends, they were all laughing about an inside joke. It didn’t take Bateman long to realise that he was the butt of that joke. All of his friends had read the love letters he had written for Ms. Wylie since the Tophouse Postmaster had shown them to everyone. He was humiliated but worse was yet to come. His ‘friends’ then informed him about Ms. Wylie’s love for John Lane.

Bateman was undoubtedly devastated and this is what pushed him over the edge. He had been jealous of Lane’s closeness to Ms. Wylie for a while but this was the first he had heard that she reciprocated the admiration. In this case the warning signs were clear. He had written a letter to his sister telling her “[he] may be dead when [she] got this” and [don’t weep for [him]; for [he was] tired of this world”.⁷ He even told his friends on the day of the murders that he had “made up [his] mind to shoot all but the children.”⁸ But the warnings were ignored. No one had dared to believe the despairing man’s murderous ramblings.

In the case of the murder of John Lane and the harassment of Catherine Wylie the motive was clear: Revenge for his broken heart. But there is still speculation about why William Wallis was gunned down...

There are two feasible theories into the incentive behind his death. The first: Bateman had borrowed the murder weapon from Wallis and resolved that he also had to die to keep his actions secret. The second: Bateman believed Wallis had to die to prevent any contact being made with the authorities in Nelson. Either way the man “universally respected by all”⁹ had done nothing to warrant being murdered. The poor man was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Many have wondered why it was just the two men murdered. Why did the Postmaster not also meet his demise? Fortunately for him, the Postmaster was away from Tophouse on the day of the murders. It did not come as a shock that he moved away shortly after the tragedy which numerous people blame him for.

In the aftermath of the incident many traumatised locals fled the area. Three to four families relocated, which, in the small hamlet was a large percentage of the population. One of the families that left were the Longneys who sold the business that they had built up from the ground within a year of the sorrowful event.

As those left in the grieving community slowly recovered from their shock they took it upon themselves to prevent anything like this from happening again. The strictest measure enforced was to prevent anyone, except the intended recipient, reading personal letters. As for gun safety, everyone still owned one, but rest assured they were more cautious of who they lent them to.

Tophouse Hotel became, and still is today, a popular tourist destination. People from all walks of life flock there driven by morbid fascination. The notorious hotel offers them the chance to hunt for bullet holes and despite it being almost 115 years later, the holes made by Bateman when he killed himself on that veranda, are still visible today.

1. Unknown Author. (1894, October 6th) The Tragedy At Tophouse. *Nelson Evening Mail*.
2. Unknown Author. (1894, October 8th) The Tophouse Tragedy. *The Colonist*.
3. Unknown Author. (1894, October 5th) Murder and Suicide. *Grey River Argus*.
4. Unknown Author. (1894, October 6th) The Tragedy At Tophouse. *Nelson Evening Mail*.
5. Unknown Author. (1894, October 8th) The Tophouse Tragedy. *The Colonist*.
6. Addison, Joseph [English Poet, Dramatist and Statesman] (1672-1719). *On Jealousy*.
7. Bateman, William (1894, September 30th) *Letter to his sister*.
8. Bateman, William (1894, October 4th) *Letter to Nathaniel Longney*.
9. Unknown Author. (1894, October 6th) The Tragedy At Tophouse. *Nelson Evening Mail*.