Crickhowell District Archive Centre

Newsletter No. 13 December 2009

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The Crickhowell Sensation 1912 – 1913

The Tale of Irvine Blennerhassett by Maldwyn Powell

The secret world of Irvine Rowland Blennerhassett, clerk to Crickhowell Rural District Council and Board of Guardians, came tumbling down around his ears in March 1912 and set in motion an extraordinary sequence of events which made national news and involved an international police hunt.

Irvine Blennerhassett was born in London on December the 9th ,1863, the son of a doctor. He arrived in Wales from Valencia Island, County Kerry, and in 1881 he was a teacher of classics, fluent in Welsh and English, living with his widowed mother and brother in Llanfairfechan. He arrived in Crickhowell sometime later. He lived at 1, Llanbedr Road and soon became a well-known and well-liked personality in Crickhowell in the years that followed. He married a local girl, Sarah Elizabeth Williams (whose parents lived next door in Llanbedr Road in 1891) and together they had four children.

He was vice-chairman, treasurer and secretary of the newly-formed Rugby Club in 1886 and he played at least twice and officiated as umpire at several of their matches. (It was reported that Irvine was to receive 5% of the club's receipts for his trouble). Quite what an influential figure he was in rugby circles is not clear but at their annual dinner on April 20th 1887 he said, "*It is my aim not only to see football reach perfection in Crickhowell but throughout Breconshire, and I propose starting next season a county club, which, I am rejoiced to say, will be ably supported by the Brecon College and the town club, which will enable us to play against such teams as Newport and Cardiff, or, if it can be arranged, Monmouthshire.*" Later in the evening he asserted, "*....I maintain that, if a thing is to be done at all, it should be done with all one's will and not by halves and I consider that, as your secretary, I have only done what was expected of me, and also what every conscientious man in a similar position would have done.*" Those words would return to haunt him.

Irvine loved sport, in particular, billiards, and apart from the rugby club he was also an important figure in setting up association football in the town. He started business as an auctioneer and

accountant. He was something of an expert on horses and was a judge at local horse shows. He also became a familiar figure in both Newport and Cardiff and in 1901 was hotel manager at the Greyhound Hotel, Abergavenny. Irvine was a member of the Debating Society where, in December 1893, he successfully moved the following resolution "*That the English Drama of the present day has a beneficial influence upon the general public.*" He was a member of the Agricultural society, and secretary of the Abergavenny Laundry Company

The trust and confidence that Irvine inspired in the townsfolk of late Victorian Crickhowell resulted in him being appointed in 1888 as Clerk to the Board of Guardians at the "Spike" workhouse in Llangattock and Clerk to the Rural District Council. His duties involved handling the accounts of both public bodies. This task he carried out for 24 years – until March 1912 and the unexpected arrival of Mr. Robert Parr, Local Government Board Auditor.

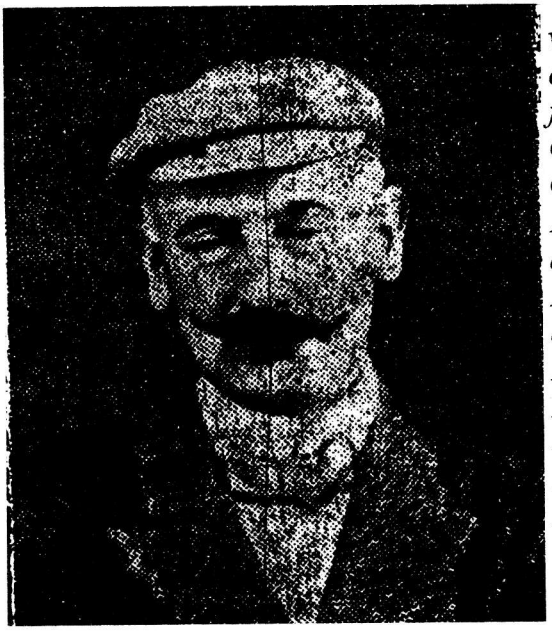
Irvine's business speculations had not gone as well as he had hoped and for several years he had been secretly abusing his position of trust. Initially, his scheme was a simple one. Once cheques had been signed (and presumably made out to "cash" with no written amount) he would enter another "1". For example, a cheque for £2 7s 6d was altered to £12 7 6d and the extra £10 went into his pocket (the equivalent today of around £500). As he had sole access to the accounting system of both organizations, it was relatively easy for him to cover his tracks.

Mr. Parr turned up unannounced to audit the books of these public bodies. Irvine had not had time to manipulate the figures and "*serious discrepancies were discovered*". Irvine was sent for to explain the anomalies and immediately knew that the game was up. He handed in his resignation in separate letters to the Rural District Council and the Board of Guardians. He also resigned the clerkship to the Pensions Committee, and the secretaryship of the Abergavenny Laundry Co.

Alarmed at the revelations, The Board of Guardians and Rural District Council held meetings from which the press was excluded. Finding the accusations hard to believe, they decided to wait for a fortnight pending further investigations before proceeding with prosecution. Their hesitation gave Irvine time and, knowing the extent

of his fraudulent activities and the penalty that awaited, he decided to save his skin and at midnight on March 20th, he took to his heels.

On Thursday March 22nd the police published the following description of him, in the hope of his speedy arrest :-



Wanted, on warrant in this county, charged with a series of forgeries, whereby the Crickhowell Board of Guardians and the Rural District Council have been defrauded of about £550, Irvine Blennerhassett, late clerk to the Crickhowell Board of Guardians and the Rural District Council, aged 47 years, height 5ft. 10 in or 5ft. 11in., build proportionate, weight about 12 ½ st., hair brown, turning grey, bald on top, no whiskers, moustache brown turning upwards, complexion fair, eyes grey or blue, receding forehead, dimple in chin, walks erect, rather swaggering in gait, left foot turns a little inward, and is carried forward with a slight circular motion, has a hacking cough, and generally applies his hand to his mouth when coughing, with a gentlemanly appearance and address, has frequently officiated as judge at carriage horses and agricultural shows, is fond of billiards, generally smokes cigars, is a fluent and cultivated speaker, frequents first-class hotels, native of Ireland, wife and family reside at Llangattock, Crickhowell; usual dress white or green Trilby hat, grey breeches, black leggings, or light suit, or silk hat and black frock-coat. In all probability will be found stylishly dressed. It is believed he left Llangattock in a motor car about midnight on the 20th. inst. He will probably try to disguise himself, and it is believed he will endeavour to

leave the country. It is earnestly requested that every possible search and inquiry for the above described man will be immediately made at hotels and shipping offices, where he may have booked or may yet book his passage abroad, and have outgoing boats watched. If found arrest and communicate with the undersigned, when an escort, with warrant, will be sent for him.

H. HAND (Deputy Chief-Constable).

Irvine did indeed head overseas. Shortly after his disappearance, on April 12th, 1912, the White Star "*Titanic*" left Southampton. When the news of its fate came through it was rumoured that Irvine had been aboard and perished. This was one of the many rumours that circulated during his disappearance. Other rumours included:- He had absconded taking with him the new Clarence Hall clock; He was variously supposed to be in France... or Chile... or Peru; He was in Pittsburgh, USA; Months after his disappearance he made a secret visit to his family (who had relocated to Abergavenny) at four in the morning.

None of these are known to be true. Very recent evidence has been found of a "Joe Benson" traveling on the R.M.S. Tunisian bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the 21st. March 1912. The passenger lists give details that "Joe Benson" was aged 48, a widower, occupation in this country "nil", seeking employment as a farmer and his destination was Kootenay, British Columbia.. It further reveals that the amount of cash he carried was £240 (roughly £13,000 by today's values). The emigrants on the same ship, for the most part, carried far less than £100. It seems that Irvine caught a train to Liverpool and boarded the first ship out. Remember, this was in the days when radio was in its infancy and passports as we know them today had not yet been issued.

The "Tunisian" docked in Halifax on 31st. March, 1912. His movements after landing are unclear but what is certain is that he ended up in the town of Field, British Columbia where, under his assumed name of Joe Benson, he took up the post of steward and accountant at the Mount Stephen Canadian Pacific Hotel near Kicking Horse Pass. Unbeknownst to Irvine, however, the authorities were on his trail and on May 19th 1913 he was taken into custody. Rather

surprisingly, he was allowed to undertake work and walk about the village. He was not under control on account of his poor health. It seems as though Irvine had had the fight knocked out of him and had resigned himself to his fate.

Two local policemen, Sergeant William Williams of Brecon (but formerly of Crickhowell), and Acting-sergeant David Williams, Gilwern, were dispatched to British Columbia to aid in identification. They took Irvine into custody on Sunday morning, 28th September. Six warrants were read out to him to which Irvine replied " *That is quite right.*" From Field they accompanied Irvine to Quebec where they boarded the SS. "Empress of Britain" bound for Liverpool, where they landed at 5p.m. on 9th October 1913. Irvine was suffering from T.B. and was coughing incessantly. He had grown a beard and this added to his bedraggled appearance. The stress of his situation did nothing to improve matters and he was losing weight rapidly. Local headlines at the time proclaimed "A Broken Man" and "Physical wreck."

Interest in the area was naturally high and crowds gathered at Abergavenny station, along the route he was expected to take, at the police station and the courtroom in Crickhowell when news of Irvine's arrival was received. Before being committed to trial at Brecon, preliminary hearings were held at Crickhowell to a packed courtroom. Details of Irvine's fraudulent activities were read out and it was revealed that he had ordered bogus letterheads and a rubber stamp similar to the one used in the Duke of Beaufort's estate office. The proceedings went on for several days and the Brecon County Times ran the headline "*Prolonged, Wearisome Hearings*". Irvine was very weak and offered to help the prosecution in order to shorten the amount of time being taken.

On Friday October 31st 1913, Irvine Blennerhassett, aged 46, was indicted on thirty-one counts of forgery, falsification and embezzlement at Brecon before an (all-male) Grand Jury presided over by Mr. Justice Bankes. The Brecon County Times wrote ; "*When the prisoner stepped into the dock a painful hush fell on the court, which was crowded to the utmost capacity, many people failing to gain admission, and it was evident that some of those present were affected*

by prisoner's wasted appearance. Mr. Ivor Bowen, K.C., and Mr. Wilfred Lewis (instructed by Messrs Lewis Morgan and Box, Cardiff), prosecuted on behalf of the Public Prosecutor, and Mr. B. Francis Williams, K.C. (instructed by Mr. D.G. Harris, Brynmawr) stood for the defence. *"The Clerk of the Assize charged the prisoner upon the 31 counts, which were set up under six heads, namely, forging and altering cheques, forging minute books, embezzlement, larceny and falsification of accounts. To all these charges prisoner replied in a weak voice, "guilty."*
For the defence Dr. P.E. Hill, Crickhowell, was called. He stated :- ..... *"He may live for possibly a year, or perhaps two; on the other hand he may die at any moment."* The newspaper reported that *"Prisoner at this point bowed his head in the dock and raised his hand to his forehead as though he had been struck by an unexpected blow."* Justice Bankes sentenced Irvine to three years imprisonment, stating, *"You have done this in a systematic and impudent fashion.....and I do not think that the prison officials are so inhuman as to keep a man in prison when they find that his state of health is such that he might immediately or very shortly die."* Irvine was removed to Cardiff Gaol and from there to Parkhurst, Isle of Wight *"that well-known convict establishment for invalids and old men.*

And what became of him? Sadly, at the time of writing, it is not known. He seems to have survived at least until 1916, as provision was made for him in his wife's will. (Incidentally, she is buried in Crickhowell Churchyard. A white cross marks the grave underneath the beech tree opposite what was, until recently, The Six Bells). Did he pass away in prison? Was he released and assumed a new life somewhere? Did he return to his family? No record has as yet been found of his death or where he is buried.

Thanks must go to Mr. Bill Jehan, whose extensive knowledge of the Blennerhassett family tree was an invaluable aid to the research and also to Paul Foley of the Archive Centre who helped fill in some pieces of the jigsaw.