

around the immediate affected area with Officers in pairs but each pair monitored from a visible distance by a Task Force Unit of a Sergeant and five or six Constables. A few days working in that way to safeguard the patrolling Officers soon enabled us to reduce the back-up.

An aside – a comment on the evening of Operation Delivery demonstrated to me that it is never safe to speak too soon.

With the small control room at Trinity Road monitoring a successful operation as we reached teatime on that Thursday, I went into the side

office in which the Logistics Office Inspectors were ready for what may come next. At the time there was a popular programme on television called *The 'A' Team* and I quoted one of the common sayings from it, "I do like to see a good plan coming together!" Almost immediately from behind me the noise level in the little control room grew louder as the follow-up disturbances started.



DAVID EDWARD (DAVE) LEACH joined the Somerset Constabulary in 1965 and served through the amalgamation with Bath in 1967, and that with Bristol &

South Gloucestershire to form the Avon and Somerset Force, from 1974 until his retirement as Superintendent in charge of the Communications Department in 1996.

An Ordinary Copper is the story through that progression of Police Service and includes his attendance at the Police College at Bramshill, brief attachment to Notting Hill in London and much longer involvement in the National Reporting Centre at New Scotland Yard before and during the 1984/85 National Union of Mineworkers Dispute.

For anyone who would like to get the full story, the cost of the book is £10.00 + £4.00 post & packing. Please contact Dave at dleachcmc@blueyonder.co.uk or consult the PHS Directory of Members (member number 1195). Cheques for £14.00 to be made out to D. E. Leach.

Murder at The Knoll

The Fatal Shooting of PC Frederick Atkins

By ADAM WOOD

Although fatal shootings of policemen in the Victorian era were rare - in fact, since the formation of the Metropolitan Police only two London-based officers had been killed through gunfire up to 1881 - the carrying of firearms by burglars was becoming alarmingly more frequent. The notorious criminal Charles Peace had shot and killed PC Nicholas Cock at Manchester in 1876, and two years later injured PC Robinson when firing five shots at the officer who had disturbed the burglar at Blackheath.

Those constables patrolling remote, outlying locations were becoming increasingly at risk. And so it proved when, in the early hours of Thursday, 22nd September 1881, PC Frederick Atkins approached The Knoll, a large house on Kingston Hill in the Met's V Division.

Mr. Short, the butler, was woken by the sound of a pistol firing and got up to search the house, on his rounds meeting the housekeeper, who had also heard the shot. Each door proved to be secure, but as they approached the front entrance they heard a groan coming from outside. On opening the door they found PC Atkins, unconscious on the ground and bleeding profusely.

The two members of staff immediately alerted their employer, Mr. Powyskecki, who telephoned the police station on London Road, Kingston. Several local inspectors, along with Divisional Surgeon Dr. Roots, attended The Knoll, where they found PC Atkins in a perilous condition, unable to be taken to hospital. He was, however, moved to Kingston police station, where he was examined by Dr. Roots. It was

discovered that the constable had been shot three times, once in the chest, with the bullet entering a lung, and also in the abdomen and left thigh.

The 22-year-old Atkins, who had been transferred to V Division just two months earlier, was gently questioned by Inspector Bond and Dr. Roots as to the attack, and, with great difficulty, was able to make a statement:

I did not see anybody or hear anything which should cause me to imagine there were burglars at work. I went along the avenue slowly, accordingly to my usual custom when on duty there, but there was no-one about. Before I was aware of anything I saw something like the gleam of a lantern, and then whispers, after which there was a report, and then I felt I was struck by something sharp in the chest. I turned to one side quickly,

when another shot was fired, and that's all I can remember.

Inspector Bond, with colleagues Crowther and Rushbridge, examined the grounds of The Knoll and a lantern and a jemmy were found underneath some bushes. An iron bar had been removed from the window of a lavatory at the side of the house, and it was here that the officers suspected the burglars were about to enter the house when they were disturbed by PC Atkins.² With that window sitting in a dark recess, it would have been impossible for the constable to see his assailants.

The young officer survived for another twenty-four hours before succumbing to his wounds. The primary cause had been the bullet which passed through his lung, it still being lodged in his back. A second bullet had been found near the lantern and jemmy, with the third and final dropping from Atkins' clothing as he was undressed at the station.³

Reporting his passing, the newspapers commented on a similar case which had also occurred at Kingston Hill, when a PC Kerrison was shot by burglars, although thankfully not fatally.⁴

Although the Kingston police diligently searched the grounds of The Knoll and investigated their usual suspects, no clue was found as to the killer or killers, and Scotland Yard was called in. Howard Vincent wasted no time in sending Det. Inspectors Swanson, Andrews and Shaw to Kingston.⁵ A local blacksmith named Brockwell was soon arrested, and interviewed at Kingston police station. His boots were found to match footprints found in the grounds of The Knoll, but, despite being questioned for over five hours, no evidence could be found against him and he was released.⁶

Despite a Government reward of £100, which was added to by a



The murder and funeral of P.C. Frederick Atkins from The Penny Illustrated Paper, 8th October 1881

consortium of Kingston businessmen,⁷ no clue was found as to those responsible for PC Atkins' death. His killer was never identified.⁸

When the funeral of the tragic constable took place a week after his death, nearly two thousand policemen from all divisions attended, most travelling by special train from Waterloo to Walton-on-Thames, where Atkins' family lived.⁹

As the funeral procession made its way to Walton parish church, every shop in Kingston was closed as a mark of respect, with blinds drawn on the windows along the route.¹⁰ As they marched along, the band of the V Division played the 'Dead March' from Handel's *Saul*, with Frederick Atkins' former colleagues acting as pall bearers.¹¹

As PC Atkins was laid to rest, perhaps inevitably calls came to arm the police:

A few weeks ago we called attention to the perils of the policeman's vocation, and to the courage which they need to possess while doing the work which nightly devolves them. The soldier has few dangers to encounter in comparison with those which many of our policemen are exposed in their nightly rounds. Soldiers are

not always on the field of war or threatened by a sudden attack from ruthless foes; but policemen have very often to face lawless men who seem to set little value upon human life. The question has, therefore, very naturally been raised, can we do nothing by way of enabling policemen to defend themselves against the species of ruffianism which revels in outrage and blood? Ought we not to be able to protect them from the attacks of cowardly wretches who, protected by darkness, will shoot down an unfortunate policemen before he has had a moment's warning?

...The Standard suggests that we

¹ PCs Timothy Daly in 1842 and William Davey in 1863.

² *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 8th Oct. 1881.

³ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 26th Sept. 1881.

⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23rd Sept. 1881.

⁵ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 26th Sept. 1881.

⁶ *The Daily News*, 24th Sept. 1881.

⁷ *Morning Post*, 27th Sept. 1881.

⁸ The case of PC Frederick Atkins was only second instance of an unsolved murder of a Metropolitan Police officer, after that of PC George Clark in 1846, and the last until 1991. A plaque was erected in Kingston's Police Memorial Garden in Atkins' memory in 1996, and a replica erected in the Watchman public house, on the site of the former New Malden police station.

⁹ *Gloucester Citizen*, 30th Sept. 1881.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 30th Sept. 1881.

should arm the police on night duty. A policeman on dangerous duty, it argues, carries his life in his hand, and we ought to afford him the opportunity of protecting himself. But what would be the effect of such an arrangement as this? Would it tend to the security of human life or the reverse? Would it, in short, be the means of saving the lives of the police, or of endangering the life of everyone who goes out at night? A revolver is an exceedingly dangerous weapon, but nowhere is it so dangerous as in the hands of an easily startled or nervous person.

A policeman deficient in nerve and coolness might fire in hot haste without pausing to consider what he was about. He might suspect

where there was no real ground for suspicion. He might mistake for a burglar some stupefied drunken fellow trying to force open the wrong door or to get into his neighbour's house.¹²

While attitudes ran high in the wake of Atkins' murder, it took the fatal shooting of PC George Cole by a burglar the following year and the attempted murder of PC Patrick Boans in 1883 to force the authorities to seriously consider arming their officers. It was decided to give Superintendents of the outer-lying divisions the opportunity to arm their constables on night duty, an option which received mixed reactions from within the force.

Despite this availability, it wasn't until four years later that the first revolver was fired by a Metropolitan policeman while on duty, when, on 18th February 1887, PC Henry Owen fired six shots into the air in an attempt to wake the residents of a burning house after his shouts had failed to rouse them.¹³

¹² *South Wales Daily News*, 24th Sept. 1881.

¹³ *The Official Encyclopedia of Scotland Yard* by Martin Fido and Keith Skinner (2000 revised edition).

◆
This is an edited extract from ADAM WOOD's forthcoming book *Swanson: The Life and Times of a Victorian Detective*, due out later this year.

