

KILLED IN THE EXECUTION OF DUTY

THE SILEBY MURDER

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The death of W.P.C. Yvonne Fletcher at the Libyan People's Bureau in May 1984, is a pertinent reminder of the fact that in this 20th century some 75 police officers have been killed in the execution of their duty, two of which have come from Leicestershire. The unglamorous village of Sileby in that county does not very often attract the headlines of the national press but it did so on Monday, 25th May, 1903, for on that fine summer evening in the peaceful days of King Edward VII a young constable met his death. He was P.C. William Wilkinson, aged 31, a native of Glooston in Leicestershire, who had served five years at Sileby and was greatly liked by the people there.

Two villagers, however, disliked him greatly and they were shoehands, Thomas Preston and Thomas Porter. Like many countrymen throughout the county at this time, Preston and Porter were inveterate poachers and had actually been caught in their misdeeds by P.C. Wilkinson and the other Sileby policeman, P.C. Hall, and had consequently been fined. Hence they were at daggers drawn with the two Sileby policemen and were not afraid to proclaim their resentment of the constables in the many inns that Sileby boasted of at this time.

On this particular evening their enmity towards the local constables had been increased by constant tipping in several pubs so that towards 11 o'clock both men were raging with spite and indignation against P.C.'s Wilkinson and Hall. It seems that they were determined on revenge that evening. So, they took up a position in Sileby churchyard not far from its entrance to the road and awaited the arrival of the constables who always met at this point. The first to arrive was the junior policeman, P.C. Wilkinson, who as usual waited for his senior colleague just outside the churchyard. While Wilkinson was standing there, a local builder, John Middleton, came along and engaged the constable in conversation. After a few minutes a slight noise was heard from the direction of one of the gravestones and so flashing his torch into the graveyard, P.C. Wilkinson shouted out, "Who's there?" He then looked over

the gate and began to walk in the direction of the sound. But he did not get very far, for at that moment one of the two murderers jumped onto a tombstone and let fire at the approaching constable with a double-barrelled shotgun. At once the constable was halted in his steps, for he was badly wounded by the firing of the shot, since only a few yards separated the assailant from the victim. The constable now cried out, "I'm shot" and staggered some distance down the road until he dropped down dead.

Middleton, who had witnessed the shooting, at once gave the alarm and the finger of suspicion pointed immediately to Porter and Preston, whose hatred of the policemen was well-known. So, as soon as P.C. Hall learnt of the event, he made for Porter's house in Swan Street only to find that the two murderers had locked themselves in. Nevertheless, P.C. Hall managed to burst open the door, only to be met by Porter holding the double-barrelled gun and threatening to blow the constable to bits if he did not get out. So P.C. Hall, wisely, beat a retreat, whereupon Porter and Preston retreated to a bedroom and locked themselves in. P.C. Hall now thought that it was best to summon up reserves; so he telegraphed the Chief Constable of Leicestershire and Inspector Agar of Loughborough to acquaint them with the facts of the horrible affair. They made at once for Sileby and as more policeman arrived they surrounded the house. Throughout the night, Porter and Preston kept the police at bay and every time the police approached the house Porter pointed the loaded gun at them. But as the night wore on and the crowd around the house grew in numbers, their spirits drooped so that with one last final desperate fling of defiance Porter fired the gun and then threw it down to the waiting policemen. At once, Inspector Agar and other officers went up to the bedroom and arrested the two men.

Amid the excitement of the villagers, most of whom had stayed up all night, the two prisoners were taken away in a trap to Loughborough, where they were lodged in cells in the police station. On the following Wednesday at the Plough Inn, Sileby, a coroner's jury returned a verdict of Wilful murder and sent the two men for trial at the next assizes. On 3rd July, 1903, Porter and Preston appeared at Leicester Castle before Mr. Justice Ridley and after a two days' trial the jury returned a verdict of wilful murder, whereupon the judge sentenced them to death. The date of the execution

was fixed for 25th July and on that day the two criminals were hanged in Welford Road gaol at 8 a.m. A petition for a reprieve met with little success, the murder of a policeman was regarded with particular horror and revulsion in early 20th century Britain.