

THE POLICEMAN DIED ONE FEBRUARY NIGHT

Reprinted from the Sunday Mercury, 19th February, 1961 having been submitted by Mr. A. Trevener.

If you follow the footsteps of the Romans down the Icknield Street from the Peacock Inn at Forhill (seven miles to the south of Birmingham) you pass the Coach and Horses at the foot of Weatheroak Hill. In a further half-mile you come to a gate on the right marked 'Alcott'.

Immediately ahead the Roman road rises sharply uphill between steep grass banks. In the hedge on the right stands a holly bush and beyond it an oak. Search low on the left immediately opposite this tree and you find a stone inscribed "J.D. 1885."

In that year, at 2.15 on the dark morning of Saturday, 28th February, Police Constable James Davies, of Beoley, a married man of 33 with four small children and Police Constable Whitehouse of Wythall, making a routine contact on their beats, compared watches and parted. Said Whitehouse, "Take care of yourself, chappie. I shall, see you tomorrow night."

But though Whitehouse was not to know, that was his last nocturnal rendezvous with his colleague. At 8.30 a.m. John Twigg of Rowney Green on his way to work at a Weatheroak Hill farm, found Davies lying face down in a pool of blood, foully murdered, with many terrible knife wounds.

The exact spot on that narrow hill in Icknield Street, known locally as Eagle Street Lane is marked by that stone with the unfortunate policeman's initials and the year - "J.D. 1885."

Discovery Delayed

Twigg notified the police of his discovery, and in the afternoon the corpse was conveyed to a wheelwright's shed nearby to await the inquest. Superintendent Jeffrey of Bromsgrove notified all local police officers of murder and the investigation was afoot,

When Davies left Whitehouse he was making for Stecham Farm, his 4 a.m. checkpoint with P.C. Shepherd of Alvechurch. But Shepherd was at home ill so Davies was not missed as early as normally he would have been.

During the fatal night a fowlhouse in a farm nearby had been entered and six fowls stolen. It was thought that Davies had come upon the thief as he was making for Redditch station, As the constable's whistle and oak stick were found 200 yards from the body, and as his handcuffs were still in his pocket, it was assumed that the thief had gone quietly for 200 yards before turning on his captor with a knife.

A Notorious Poacher

Davies' hands were severely cut as he defended himself, but he had finally succumbed to a gash across the throat. No cries were heard at Newbold's Farm, the nearest dwelling, though the dog had barked furiously between 3.30 and 4 a.m.

Among the police notified of the crime, Superintendent Tyler of Kings Heath at once suspected a notorious poacher, one Moses Shrimpton, the terror of East Worcestershire despite his 65 years, who had already committed a brutal assault on a gamekeeper and done seven years' penal servitude for attacking a policeman.

Recently released from gaol, Shrimpton was co-habiting with a woman named Mary Morton, at 9 Bartholomew Street, Birmingham. and here, on Saturday night Tyler found him in bed with cuts on his face and asked him, "Moses, how did you get those scars on your forehead?"

"I got them a week ago, falling down drunk in Ludgate Hill" was Shrimpton's reply.

His woman friend was ordered to dress, each garment being searched beforehand - and in her skirt pocket was found a large knife with two blades sharply pointed. It had been newly washed and cleaned in earth but still it bore traces of blood, as did Shrimpton's clothing. Inquiries proved him to have been out all the previous night.

Shrimpton and Mary Morton were taken to Moore Street police station, where he was charged on suspicion of murdering Davies and she as an accessory after the fact. They were then taken respectively to Kings' Heath and Balsall Heath police stations, which in those days were both in Worcestershire.

Semi-Military Funeral

The pair came up before the magistrates at Kings Heath and were ultimately committed for trial at Worcester Assizes. Meanwhile Davies had been buried - on Thursday, 5th March - in Beoley churchyard, on a hillside overlooking the countryside he had tramped on his beat.

In the fine rounded prose of those days, the 'Birmingham Daily Post' reported: "The funeral was made the occasion of a demonstration highly creditable to the force to which the deceased belonged, and the semi-military pomp with which the obsequies were conducted was not unbecoming in the case of a man who fell while bravely doing his duty."

Birmingham Police Band led the cortege from the wheelwright's shop at Beoley to the church three-quarters of a mile away. Eighty members of the Worcestershire Constabulary and many from Birmingham were in the sad procession. Crowds flocked in from far afield, many brewers' drays having been chartered by parties.

Shrimpton and Mary Morton were tried before Baron Huddleston at Worcester Assizes on 6th and 7th May. His lordship grumbled that his slumbers in Worcester were disturbed by the crowing of a bantam cock.

Mary Morton was acquitted and discharged, but the case against Shrimpton was incontrovertible. His boots corresponded with footprints beside Davies' body; the policeman's watch was traced to him: George Parsons, a carter, of Summer Lane, Birmingham, deposed that Shrimpton told him on 27th February, "I'm going round Beoley tonight."

An Alleged Threat

John Whitehouse, of Hay Mills, licensee of the White Lion, Portway, from 1879 to 1883, gave evidence that Shrimpton, a frequent customer there, once said as Davies passed: "There goes that ----- teetotal-----If ever I was to meet him I'd be a match for him."

Shrimpton stoutly protested his innocence - but he was sentenced to death, and was hanged at Worcester Jail on Whit Monday, 25th May. The last execution at Worcester previously had been years before; there have not been any since. A story goes that a confession was found in Shrimpton's snuffbox.

Davies' widow was granted the maximum gratuity allowed by law - £60.18s. 8d, but the public were more generous and subscribed £1,408.1s.8d to a fund for the murdered constable's dependents.