

## ***Suspect device at Salisbury***

by John Tompkins

On the evening of Tuesday 18 April 1883, Police Constable S11 James Tompkins of the Salisbury City Police was patrolling his beat around The Close at Salisbury Cathedral. Salisbury Cathedral was built between 1220 and 1258 and is a magnificent example of English Gothic architecture. The iconic tower and spire are the tallest of any cathedral in Britain

It is not certain whether PC Tompkins was carrying out a routine check of the Cathedral, or he had received information when parading for duty, but earlier that day the Bishop of Salisbury had received a threatening letter<sup>1</sup>. Although the exact contents had not been disclosed, it was signed “A Free Thinking Invincible” and warning of an attack

In the 1880s, there were terrorists operating in Great Britain, The Irish potato famine of 1846-1851 had caused huge resentment to British rule in Ireland. As a result the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) had been formed. There had been several “Fenian” assassination attempts, including attempts on the life of H M Queen Victoria

One of the groups associated with the IRB were the “Irish National Invincibles”, more frequently simply called “Invincibles”<sup>2</sup>. They had a policy of assassination and on 6 May 1882, several members had murdered Frederick Cavendish (Chief Secretary of Ireland) and Henry Burke (Under Secretary of Ireland) in Phoenix Park, Dublin, using surgical knives. The men responsible had been captured and, having been tried, were awaiting execution. As a result of all this terrorist activity, the Metropolitan Police had formed the “Special Irish Branch” (Special Branch) a month earlier in March 1883. The threat was real!

According to the Census taken in 1881, James Tompkins was a Police Constable serving with Salisbury City Police, his collar number being S11. He was recently married, the ceremony taking place on 18 January 1881, to Eliza Burden at Bradford Peverell, Dorset. It is highly likely that James had previously served in the Metropolitan Police<sup>3</sup> starting his career about 1876 at Bow Street, C Division, before transferring to Salisbury City Police. His brother Charles Tompkins<sup>4</sup> aged 24 years, was also a Police Officer, serving on A Division, having joined in 1882. There was a third brother Henry Tompkins<sup>5</sup> who probably also started in the Metropolitan Police. He is shown as joining the Chard Borough Police (now Avon and Somerset) in March 1886 aged 34 years, a late age for a raw recruit

By the time of this incident, James was aged 30 years with a young son, Frederick, aged about 15 months, whilst his wife was 4 months pregnant carrying my grandfather William. The family were living in police lodgings situated at 22 College Street, Salisbury. This street is still standing (although the houses have been re-numbered) and consists of neat red-brick terraced houses

According to the newspapers<sup>6</sup>, PC Tompkins discovered the *package* some time between 10pm and 11pm, whilst making a careful examination of the exterior of the Cathedral. He was checking the area of the Lady Chapel located on the North side of the Cathedral, almost directly under the spire, when he *kicked against a wooden box with a suspicious appearance*

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<sup>1</sup> *Devizes and Wiltshire gazette*, 19 April 1883

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> Information supplied by the late Maggie Bird (PHS member) at Metropolitan Police Archives

<sup>4</sup> Maggie Bird

<sup>5</sup> Service record of Henry Tompkins, Chard Police

<sup>6</sup> *Devizes and Wiltshire gazette*, 19 April, 1883

The box was about 14 inches by 10½ inches in size, secured by both a length of string and metal bands, the weight being about 25lb. Cut into the box was a small slot and protruding from this slot was a paper fuse that appeared to have been soaked in an unknown fluid

There was very little direction or policy at the time regarding actions to be carried out upon discovering a suspect package. (The *Four Cs - Confirm, Clear, Cordon, Control* were not in place). The package was moved to the Police Station for further examination by Superintendent Matthews and Inspector Ainsworth. There was found to be a bag of white powder connected to the paper fuse. A few grains of this white powder were tested by placing them onto the hearth of the fire and when a naked flame was applied, they exploded

Subsequently, the suspect package was moved to the military magazine in the City and Scotland Yard were informed. It appears that Inspector Lansdowne of the Yard was appointed as the Investigating Officer. It is not known if he was part of the newly formed Special Branch. Along with several other detectives, he travelled to Salisbury to assist local Police

Meanwhile a thorough search of the Cathedral was carried out to look for other suspect packages and enquiries were made regarding any suspects. The results were negative: *No stranger had been seen in the Close to attract peculiar attention*. The box was dismantled and, according to the local newspaper, was found to contain a bottle marked *Nitro-glycerine - to be kept in a cool place and do not take out the cork* and a larger bag of powder

The same newspaper finally concludes the report as being a *gigantic hoax*. It states that the bottle contained nothing but gum, whilst the large bag of powder was earth and sawdust. Now, 130 years later and with a more cynical attitude towards government and its dis-information to the public, it would be interesting to know the real truth. Was it an elaborate hoax with no purpose? Or, was the incident reported as a hoax to reduce panic? We will never know

### ***Postscript***

Between May and June 1883, five members of the Invincibles who were involved in the murders in Phoenix Park were hanged

PC Tompkins continued to serve with Salisbury City Police, retiring between 1901 and 1911. He moved to the village of Gomeldon on the outskirts of Salisbury until his death in 1926, aged 74 years. He had a third son, Alfred<sup>7</sup>, who joined the Metropolitan Police in 1913. James Tompkins is buried at St Nicholas Church in Porton, Wiltshire. His grave has a Policeman's helmet carved into it

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<sup>7</sup> Maggie Bird