

The Murder of Constable John Long of the New Police in 1830

By MARTIN BAGGOLEY

The debate surrounding the need or otherwise for a professional police force in London was settled, and under the guidance of Home Secretary Robert Peel, the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829 led to the ‘Bobbies’ taking to the capital’s streets in the autumn of that year.

The Death of Constable Joseph Grantham

At the time, it was thought the killing of Constable Joseph Grantham on the night of 2 June 1830 at Somers Town would prove to be the first murder of an officer of the new force. He came across a drunken Michael Galvin, who also went by the name of Duggan, but rather than arrest him, he advised him to go home. The constable continued on his beat for a few more minutes before hearing the sounds of a scuffle, and making his way to the scene, found Galvin fighting with a man and woman. He now attempted to arrest him, but Galvin resisted and knocked the officer to the ground, kicking him repeatedly to the head and body. Constable William Bennet was made aware of what was happening and was soon at the spot, and despite also suffering serious injuries at Galvin’s hands he managed to detain him. Sadly, he could not save his colleague.

Constable Grantham died where he fell, and Galvin was charged with his murder. Two days later an inquest was

held at the Boot Inn, where earlier, the police surgeon had performed a post-mortem and concluded that death was not due to the beating but to “Apoplexy brought on by the exertion and excitement of the moment”. Galvin was therefore adjudged to have merely assaulted the two officers and not to have been responsible for Constable Grantham’s death.

The accused man next appeared at the Marylebone Police Court, where an outraged Chief Magistrate, Mr Griffith, expressed his surprise and dissatisfaction with the finding of the coroner’s court and insisted on committing the prisoner to stand trial for wilful murder. Nevertheless, the murder charge was dropped prior to the hearing and at the Middlesex Sessions in July, Galvin was convicted of assaulting Constable Grantham, for which he was sentenced to six months imprisonment with an additional six weeks for his attack on Constable Bennet. However, it would not be long before the first trial of someone accused of murdering a member of the New Police took place.

The Murder of Constable John Long

It was seven weeks later, at 11.30 on the night of 16 August and 32-year-old Constable John Long, No.43 of G Division, was on duty in the vicinity of Gray’s Inn Lane when he approached three men he believed were acting

suspiciously. Despite the lateness of the hour, a number of people were nearby and witnessed the events which unfolded over the next few minutes.



Constable Long is attacked by three men

One of them was Peter Millican, who saw the three suspicious men approach the gates of St Andrew’s Burial Ground, followed by Constable Long, who asked them “What have you been after?” The men did not answer, and instead surrounded the officer and began striking him repeatedly. In common with the other witnesses, Millican did not see a weapon being used, but looked on as the officer fell to the ground, crying out “Good God, I am a dead man,” after which Peter watched the men run from the scene. Two other witnesses would prove to be extremely important, as they had

a clear view of the face of one of the men.

Mary Ann Griffiths was a prostitute who had spoken briefly to Constable Long an hour earlier, when after she complained that business was not very good he gave her a penny before wishing her goodnight. A short time later, she met a client who took her for a glass of rum, before the couple began to make their way to the Burial Ground. As they were doing so, she saw the three men attacking the officer and could see one of their faces, a man who was wearing a brown overcoat which he discarded as he fled. Mary Ann was distraught, as she regarded Constable Long almost as a friend and ran to him, hoping to offer what help she could.

The third witness was Amos Denis, who was walking towards Battle Bridge and passed within ten yards of the attack, which provided him too with an excellent view of the man in the brown overcoat. Amos took Constable Long's rattle from his hand and gave chase, crying out "Murder, murder". This alerted Thomas Prindwill, a night watchman, who detained that individual and with the help of another passer-by was able to hold him until the police arrived, at which point Mary Ann and Amos told them that he was the one who had played the leading role in the attack.

A search of the area revealed a number of items of interest, including the brown overcoat, which Mary Ann and Amos confirmed was worn by the man in custody. Also found was the handle of a knife, which would later be shown to have been used to stab the constable, and a number of tools clearly intended for use in housebreaking, among which were a bradawl, crowbar and three files.

The corpse was carried to the vault of the Church of St John, Clerkenwell, where surgeon James Holmes of Guilford Street, St Pancras, performed

a post-mortem. He confirmed that the constable had been stabbed and the blade had passed between the fifth and sixth ribs before penetrating the heart. He recovered the blade of the murder weapon, a razor-sharp shoemaker's knife, which had lodged in the victim's body, because his killer had used such force that when attempting to extract the knife, the handle had broken off.

The Inquest and an Unseemly Dispute regarding its Cost

The inquest was held two days later in the Crown Tavern, Clerkenwell Green, before Thomas Stirling, coroner for the County of Middlesex. A jury was sworn and Mr Gregory was appointed foreman. He also happened to be an overseer in the parish of Clerkenwell, and before the first witness was called he rose to his feet to address the coroner, as he wished to make a complaint. He pointed out that the murder was committed in the parish of St Pancras and contrary to all precedent, the constable's body was brought into the parish of Clerkenwell, the residents of which therefore became responsible for the cost of the inquest, whereas it should have fallen on those of St Pancras. He asked Mr Stirling to make an order that Clerkenwell should be relieved of this financial burden.

Inspector John Brusdin, speaking on behalf of the Metropolitan Police, explained that the irregularity came about because the murder took place late at night, so that by the time it came to move the body no suitable premises were open in St Pancras. This had made it necessary to take it to the church in Clerkenwell.

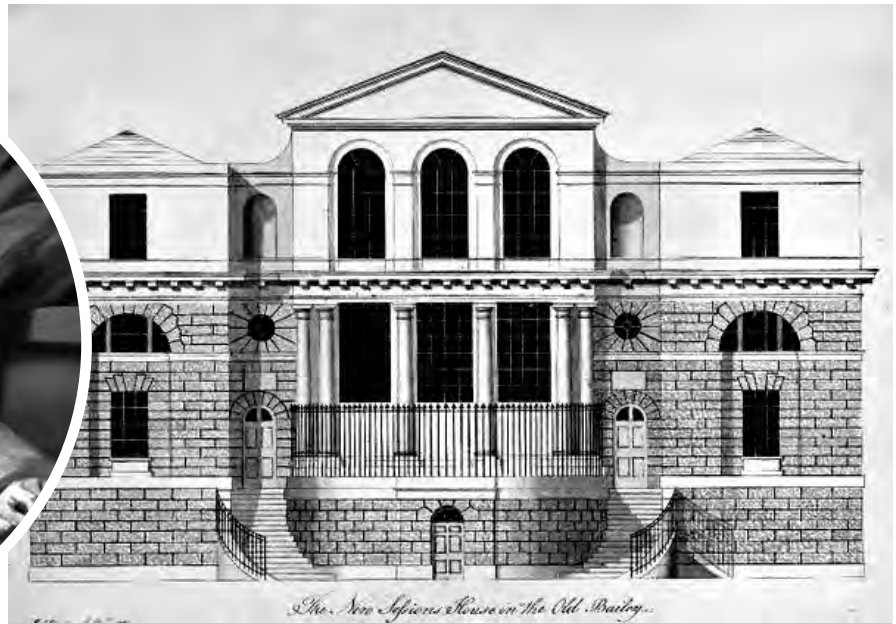
A clearly irate coroner said that given the enormity of the crime to be enquired into, and the very small cost to the parish of Clerkenwell, he believed the matter unworthy of further consideration. The inquest

began, and after all the evidence had been heard a chastened Mr Gregory announced that the jury found Constable Long had been murdered by the detained suspect and he was committed to stand trial.

Before the Magistrates

When first questioned, the arrested man gave the name John Smith, but he was soon identified as 36-year-old William Sapwell, a married man with six children. He was known to the police, as in October 1820, together with 16-year-old James Long and Henry Erratt, who was seventeen, he broke into the home of his aunt, Dinah Shepard. The three culprits were soon captured, but Sapwell turned King's evidence, thus avoiding prosecution. When his accomplices appeared at the Old Bailey they were convicted largely on Sapwell's testimony and sentenced to death. However, in view of their youth they were spared the rope and instead received lengthy prison sentences, which were served mainly in the hulks on the Thames.

The two youths behaved well and showed what was seen as genuine remorse, which persuaded the Home Secretary to order their release after eight years. Having regained his freedom, James Long renewed his friendship with the man who betrayed him and began to cohabit with a young woman believed to be Sapwell's niece. The couple lived well despite having no obvious income, and the police suspected he may have been one of the other two men who attacked their dead colleague. He was held for questioning and his rooms searched, but no evidence linking him to the crime was found and he was released without charge. However, this was not before he had agreed to formally confirm Sapwell's true identity at an appearance before the bench at Hatton Garden Police



Mr Justice Bayley and the Old Bailey

Court, when he added that he was known as 'Billy the Baker'.

The Trial

Sapwell's trial took place at the Old Bailey on 16 September before Mr Justice Bayley, and he entered a plea of Not guilty. He insisted he was returning home after visiting Bedford Tea Gardens in Camden Town, and on hearing the cry of "Murder" had given chase to the three attackers; he was not running away from the scene, nor was he the man wearing the brown overcoat. Furthermore, he suggested that the area where the stabbing took place was badly lit, so Mary Ann Griffiths and Amos Denis could not possibly have seen the faces of any of the attackers and had wrongly identified him. However, both insisted the scene was well lit by three gas lamps and they therefore had a clear view.

Attention was then drawn to the fact that there were no traces of blood on the prisoner's hands or clothes, and it was argued a large quantity would have been present if he had stabbed the officer. However, Mr Holmes testified that this was not necessarily so, as the flow of blood would have

been less than normal because of the blade remaining in the wound, and also due to a great deal having soaked into the constable's clothing.

The jury found Sapwell guilty and the death penalty was imposed; in addition he was to be dissected in public following the execution.

During his brief stay in Newgate's condemned cell, Sapwell continued to insist he was innocent. It was feared he might commit suicide, so a watch was kept on him, and on the morning of his execution, 20 September, he told the governor that to avoid the shame of a public hanging he would indeed have attempted to kill himself had the opportunity arisen.

The Execution

As he was being pinioned the Sheriff asked the condemned man if he had anything to say, and he replied "When I make my appearance in the presence of my Maker and he asks me what have you done or who has sent you here, what shall I say?" The Sheriff answered by saying "You have been tried by a jury of your country and convicted of a very serious and atrocious offence. It is for that you are condemned to die". To this, Sapwell

said "Very well, then when I appear before my Maker, he will say you have been wrongfully accused and you ought not to be here, however, walk in".

Minutes later, he stood on the gallows and died in a brave and dignified manner. The hanging was witnessed by the largest crowd gathered outside Newgate Gaol for many years, but no police officers were present. The Joint Commissioners, Sir Charles Rowan and Sir Richard Mayne, had issued an order that no officers should attend the execution, as they feared that if recognised, their presence might provoke a serious disturbance, given that the force still did not have the public's full support. Two constables from each division were placed at the approaches to Newgate, with instructions to report any of their colleagues who disobeyed the order.

A Confession

Despite his repeated claims of innocence at the trial and in the days following his conviction, Sapwell wrote a letter to his brother on the eve of his execution, which was handed to a turnkey, who in turn passed

The issue of Financial Support for Constable Long's Family

On the day after Sapwell's hanging Mr Clarkson, a barrister, was instructed by the Metropolitan Police to make an application at the Old Bailey on behalf of Constable Long's pregnant widow and their five children. Within days of the murder the government announced that Mrs Long would be awarded a pension of ten shillings weekly, and initially a number of donations to help the family were received from members of the public, but these quickly stopped. It was thought that the reason for this was because of a widespread belief that she would automatically receive a further large amount of money from official funds, given the circumstances surrounding her husband's death. However, this was not the case and Mr Clarkson was there to make a formal request that the Court make an order that such a payment should be made to her, knowing full well that this would be refused.

And indeed, that was the decision reached by Mr Justice Bayley who, after consulting with fellow judges, stated that no payment could be made as it had not been demonstrated that at the time of his murder the late constable was about to arrest an individual in the act of committing one of a number of specified offences, namely;

Murder, feloniously shooting, stabbing, cutting and maiming, poisoning, administering drugs to

procure a miscarriage, rape, burglary, arson, horse and sheep stealing and other divers crimes,

Mr Clarkson thanked the judge, and explained this was the conclusion he had anticipated, but the sole aim of the application had been to remove the erroneous impression that Mrs Long would receive a considerable sum of money. It was hoped that the public would now support the fund set up for her in greater numbers.

The Dissection of William Sapwell

Sapwell's body had been left hanging for one hour before it was cut down. Initially, it was handed to William Clift of the Hunterian Museum, who performed a preliminary dissection, before being sent to St George's Hospital, where Dr Lane completed the process. The findings of the dissection survive in the following letter, dated 30 September 1830, sent to Robert Keate, Master of the College of Surgeons:

Particular attention was paid to the examination of the basis of the brain and upper part of the spinal marrow and also to the bones and ligaments corresponding in situation to these parts, but no traces of the slightest injury could be discovered. On the Wednesday, two days after his death, on cutting across the abdominal aorta, fluid blood of a venous colour flowed spontaneously from the divided vessel. No other unusual appearance presented itself excepting perhaps the rapidity with which putrefaction proceeded. No coagulum

of any description was seen in this body during the dissection nor did the blood, removed from the body and kept in an open vessel for several days, shew any disposition to coagulate. This was another instance in which the heart was beating when the body was received and William Clift makes the following additional note on the findings; There was no crepitus felt in the os hyoides, which as usual appeared to have sustained no injury. About four hours after the body had been cut down the surface of the conjunctiva of both eyes exhibited the following appearance – from the inner to the outer canthus a linear space of about 2 lines in width, appeared as tho' denuded of the membrane – and presented a surface less smooth and glossy than the rest – as if a transverse rupture had divided it – whether this appearance, which was not in the slightest degree evident when the body was first received and while the eyes retained their lustre – might have been the product of the pressure of the tarsal cartilage against the protruded globes which would follow the state of congestion of the vessels of the head and brain, or whether it was really a division of the membrane conjunctiva itself was not to be easily distinguished at the time I observed it.



MARTIN BAGGOLEY is a retired probation officer, who has written extensively on the history of crime and punishment for magazines in the UK and USA. He is also the author of several books on historical murders and his latest, on the murder of police officers during the Victorian era, is due to be published in the near future. He and his wife Claire live in Ramsbottom.

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