

The Life and Times of Police Sergeant John Knowles

A Victorian Police Officer in Bradford

By PAUL DIXON

Some years ago I began researching the history of Bradford's Police Stations, courts and other judicial buildings. Much like family history there were stumbling blocks along the way and the inevitable brick walls. One such wall was my inability to identify the location of the first district police station, opened in Great Horton in 1854. However, applying all my investigative skills I succeeded in resolving the conundrum and managed to place the building in Southfield Lane Court. Both the building and the street have long since disappeared.

My ultimate objective was to compile a potted history of the Officer in Charge of the station during the period 1854-1873 (Police Sergeant John Knowles), to provide an insight into the spartan conditions in which the Officer lived and worked, and furnish examples of the day-to-day incidents which fell to his lot. Sadly, save for a handful of newspaper accounts and a few locally-held records very little archive material remains for the project I had selected. However, what I did uncover was the case of a horrific murder coupled with the suicide of the assailant, which was ably and professionally dealt with by this Officer.

It would be useful here to provide an "overview" of what preceded Victorian policing in Bradford. With due deference to those more knowledgeable on the subject, I offer

my apologies for what is very much an abbreviated history. The title "Bradford City Police" was adopted in 1897, in what was Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Year, and I am proud to say that I served as an Officer in the Force from the early 1960s until its demise in 1974 when Local Government reorganization created a West Yorkshire Metropolitan area and what later came to be known as our present West Yorkshire Police.

The forerunners of the first salaried deputy constable appointed by the church vestry in Bradford in 1825 were respectively, the "watchmen" and "parish constables". The former comprised old men, who, in terms of preserving the peace, were a terror to nobody. One can picture in the mind's eye these venerable old codgers, muffled in their greatcoats and leggings, equipped with rattle and lantern patrolling with slow steps the dirty and dimly-lit streets and crying out the hour and state of the weather! (A less-than effective means of illuminating Bradford had only only materialized in 1822, with the formation of the Bradford Gas Company). Villains had little to fear from these often infirm or lame "guardians of the peace", as their cries served to acquaint thieves of their whereabouts. Moreover, it was not uncommon for watchmen to be suspended, either for being drunk on duty or for failing to discover a burglary which had occurred on their

"beat"!

During the early years of the 19th century, policing in Bradford was still based on the old "Watch and Ward" system which had been set up in the 13th century. Each parish was policed by its parish constables, the number of which depended on the size of the parish, with a minimum of two who were appointed by the parish vestry committee. The role of the parish constable was extremely unpopular since it was unpaid, so incumbents had to fit its time-consuming tasks around their usual work – the more affluent members of the parish usually managed to buy their way out of serving as a "constable". On those occasions when a nightwatchman apprehended someone he would be handed over to the parish constables, who placed him or her in a "lock-up" until he could be brought before a Justice of the Peace.

What remains of a Bradford lock-up can be found at the junction of Stoney Lane and Victoria Road at Eccleshill, in an area which hitherto was known locally as "Lock-Up Lane".

Essentially, a lock-up was an underground cell akin to a dungeon.

1831 saw the appointment of William Brigg as head deputy constable, on a salary of £150 per annum, Charles Ingham as an assistant head deputy constable at £50 per annum and John Andrews as deputy constable without pay.



Left: Bradford Police cap badge. Right: Victorian Bradford Police pocket whistle

However, in lieu of pay he was permitted to retain fees paid for serving summonses, executing warrants and conveying prisoners to Wakefield goal. Effectively, this marked the beginning of the Bradford Police Force.

1847 heralded a new era in the history of Bradford, when the corporation acquired all the statutory powers of a municipal corporation. Thereafter, on 1 January 1848 a Police Force was established and Bradford's first police station was opened in Swaine Street, in the city centre.

It is against this backdrop that I come to recount events which span the period 1816-1857 and which hopefully will provide an insight into the life and times of Police Sergeant John Steed Knowles and in particular the horrific murder of Hannah Holroyd coupled with the suicide of her murderer, Samuel Charlton. The localities featured are Great Horton, Lidget Green and Brownroyd.

John Steed Knowles was born in Fort Pitt, Chatham, Kent in 1816, the second eldest in a family of three children. His father Thomas was a native of Limerick who was from a military background and was himself a soldier, seeing service as a gunner with the 3rd Battalion Royal Artillery during the Peninsular War at the battles of Corunna and Vitoria.

We know that the family was in Bradford in August 1834, when John

Knowles married Mary Ann Harrison at Bradford Cathedral. Albeit Thomas Knowles died in December of that year, the 1841 census reflects the fact that at that time both father and son were wool combers

Quite why and when John Knowles was appointed a Police Constable cannot be determined. It might be the case that he responded to advertisements which featured in the local press inviting applications for the positions of Constable, Sergeant and Detective Officer. One such advertisement appeared in the *Bradford Observer* on 9 December 1847, where the weekly pay for a constable was 17/-s. Interestingly, the Chief Constable of the time, Mr. William Leverett, was on a salary of £200 per annum and living at 14, Fountain Street, Bradford. What is known is that in the 1851 census John Knowles was living at 40, Horton Road, Bradford along with his wife and family, and described himself as a "Police Officer".

Moving on to 1853, the Bradford Force consisted of 84 men. In those days a Constable was either always on day duty or always on night duty. Vacancies on day shift were filled by selecting from the night Constables, usually one who was conspicuous for tact or ability in discharging his duties.

The conditions of service for a Police Constable at that time were

bordering on ruthless. No provision for days off; no pay whilst off duty through illness; a requirement to check street lighting; clear blocked street gulleys; deal with stray cattle. Little wonder that officers resorted to alcohol in an effort to deal with authoritarian orders and instructions. In the latter part of 1884 five Police Constables were dismissed for being drunk on duty.

Between 1853 and 1856 the *Bradford Observer* and the *Leeds Mercury* reported on a number of criminal cases in which Sergeant Knowles had featured, involving offences of robbery, theft, desertion (armed forces), drunkenness, assaults on himself and gambling (playing "pitch & toss" in a public place on Sunday). For the most part, these offences appear to have been committed in the Great Horton area.

On 7 January 1854 the Chief Constable announced the opening of the first branch police office in Bradford. Whilst no vestige remains of the building, it is known that it comprised two cottages and is variously described as being located at; 153; 275; or 275a Southgate or Southfield Lane. In reality the buildings were situated in Southfield Lane Court, almost opposite The Fire Brigade public house. The land also served as a "pinfold" (An enclosure for stray animals).

A surviving plan from February

1881, when the Council disposed of the property by auction, shows two adjacent two-storey cottages with an outside privy, ash pit and coal house. The indications are that the sergeant's accommodation was connected to, but separate from, the police station. A sergeant's weekly wage in 1854 was £1 3s 0d; not a princely sum, but he had nothing to pay for rent, rates, coal, gas and water.

In 1854 a small manual fire engine was located at the Police Station. This was the forerunner to a steam-powered engine, the first of which was purchased in 1867. Doubtless the name of the aforementioned Fire Brigade public house derives from the proximity of the fire appliance housed at the police station.

I now turn to the events of Monday, 11 May 1857, which culminated in the murder of Hannah Holroyd, a widow, then aged 42 years, a mother of four children whose ages ranged from 9 to 19 years, then living at 9, Club Street, Lidget Green, Bradford. The cottage had been let approximately seven months earlier for and on behalf of Mrs. Holroyd by Samuel Charlton, a 54-year-old widower and father of eight, who also occupied a cottage in Club Street, almost immediately opposite that of Mrs. Holroyd.

Charlton had occasionally acted as a bailiff's assistant, but was then unemployed and of dubious character. He had served a period of imprisonment in the Wakefield House of Correction for embezzlement and other offences of dishonesty.

Charlton and Mrs. Holroyd had entered into a relationship, but it seems their courtship had latterly become less intense on account of differences which had arisen between them. In truth, a much younger local man named Luke Normington was vying for Mrs. Holroyd's attention and the appearance of a rival had angered and upset Charlton.

On the evening of the aforementioned date Charlton and Mrs. Holroyd attended a temperance meeting at Lidget Green. Whether they attended together is questionable, but at any rate at the conclusion they walked together back to Club Street. Whilst en route they encountered Luke Normington, who engaged Charlton in conversation whilst Mrs. Holroyd proceeded without him to a neighbour's house. We shall never know the nature and extent of the conversation between Charlton and Normington, but suffice to say when the former arrived at Mrs. Holroyd's house to sit and await her return, his mood was, according to Martha, the eldest daughter, described his mood as sullen, sober and quiet. When Mrs. Holroyd did arrive home Martha retired to bed, leaving her mother and Charlton together.

Between midnight and 1.00am Martha was awakened by the sound of groaning and a struggle, closely followed by the sound of the front door closing. Looking out from the bedroom window she saw Charlton crossing the road and making towards his cottage. On venturing downstairs in the light of a candle, the poor girl found her mother lying on the floor in a pool of blood with her throat most horribly cut.

Martha's screams of "murder" attracted the attention of a patrolling Police Officer, PC Reuben Binns, who, on approaching the cottage, found the front door locked from the outside. Once inside he established that Mrs. Holroyd was dead. So deep was the cut to her throat that her head had been severed almost completely from her body.

Sergeant Knowles was the Officer in Charge that night, and he was in Legrams Lane when he responded to PC Binns' whistle call for assistance. He was quickly on the scene and assessing the situation. It would be

useful at this point to remember that the sergeant would have had few, if any, resources to call upon. We know that he succeeded in calling a leet constable, PC Henry Jowett, to assist in subsequent searches, but he would not have had the luxury of today's support services such as a scenes of crime officer, coroner's officer, a dog handler, a family liaison officer to deal with distraught family members, in this case on both sides. In fact to put the matter into true perspective, the sergeant had to return to the Police Station to retrieve a lamp to enable him to conduct a search.

It emerged that immediately after the murder Charlton had intimated to his family that he intended to take his own life and the consensus was that suicide by drowning could be a likely choice. He had discarded the razor used to commit the murder, but in reality he could have taken flight literally anywhere. The nearest piece of enclosed water was New Mill Dam at Brownroyd, adjacent to the Manningham Soke Mill. Leading a search party Sergeant Knowles followed a route from Lidget Green along Thiefscore Lane (now Cemetery Road) towards Thornton Beck (Bradford Beck), continuing along a footpath beside the beck from Thiefscore Bridge via the settlement of Brownroyd to the New Mill Dam.

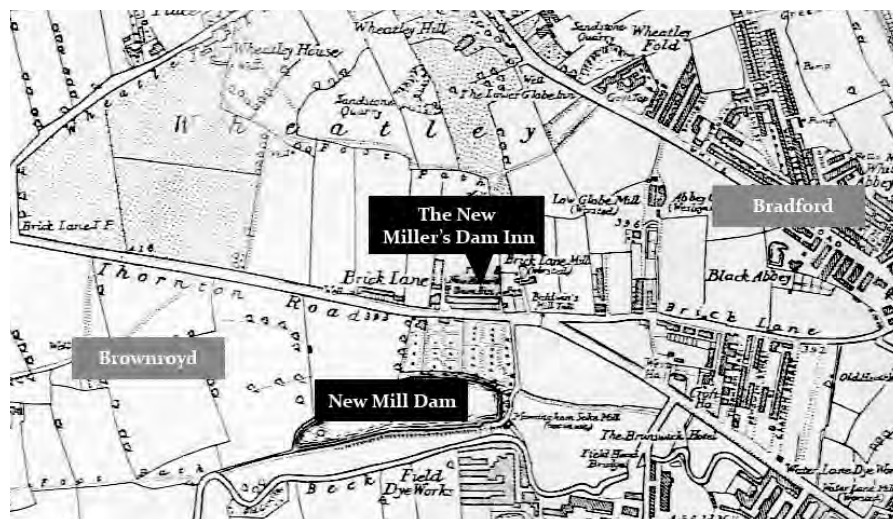
It was at this location at approximately 4.00am that the sergeant found a hat which he recognized as one worn by Charlton floating in the dam. Immediately thereafter, Charlton's body was found in the water standing perpendicularly, four or five yards from the dam side. The body was recovered using a boat hook and conveyed to the nearby New Miller's Dam public house in Thornton Road.

The inquest on Hannah Holroyd was held on 13 May 1857 at the Second West Inn at Lidget Green before the

Halifax coroner Mr. George Dyson and a jury. Evidence of identification of the deceased was provided by Martha Holroyd, the deceased's eldest daughter. She provided evidence concerning her mother's association with both Luke Normington and Samuel Charlton, and perhaps most compelling of all was her testimony of retiring to bed, leaving her mother alone with Charlton and subsequently finding her mother's body a few hours later.

Evidence was heard from Ellen Dyson, daughter of Samuel Charlton, who spoke candidly about her father's relationship with Hannah Holroyd. Concerning the night in question she said that her father had gone out in the evening to attend a teetotal meeting and had returned home at around one in the early hours of the morning. She said "he appeared in great trouble", and came to her bedside bidding her and the rest of the family farewell, adding that they would never see him again.

The landlord of the Second West Inn, David Naylor, also gave evidence concerning the movements of Luke Normington, who had been drinking in the premises and in respect of whom, notwithstanding his meetings with the deceased, was clearly innocent of any wrongdoing. Surprisingly, Luke Normington



Map showing Brownroyd, Bradford, New Mill Dam and the New Miller's Dam Inn

himself seems not to have been called to give evidence, thus leaving unanswered the question of whether Charlton had made any threat of violence towards him or the deceased.

Of course evidence was heard from the Police Officers concerning their attendance at the scene, the seizing of a bloodstained "cut throat" razor from the cellar of Charlton's home, and the ensuing search leading to the recovery of the latter's body from New Miller's Dam.

In summarizing the facts adduced in evidence, the coroner directed the jury's attention to the fact that their task was simple and clear and one which, in the normal course of events, would be sufficient to send a person to trial leading to a conviction and

death by hanging.

There was no doubt that Charlton, had he been living, would have been sent for trial on a count of murder.

The jury immediately returned a verdict of "wilful murder" against Charlton.

On that same day an inquest was held on Samuel Charlton at the New Miller's Dam Inn, again before Mr. Dyson but with a different jury. The coroner read the evidence which had been taken at the former inquest and explained to the jury the verdict which had been determined, adding that it was for them to decide whether Samuel Charlton had fallen by accident into the dam or whether he had died *felo de se*.

After hearing the evidence of Police Sergeant Knowles and PC Jowett, and following a brief deliberation, the jury returned a verdict of *felo de se*. The coroner indicated that this was the first instance of *felo de se* in more than 3,000 inquests in his district over twenty years, and that he would have to give the sergeant a warrant ordering the body to be interred between the hours of nine and twelve the same night.

Felo de se, Latin for "felon of himself", is an archaic legal term meaning suicide. In early English common law, an adult who committed



The Second West public house



The former New Miller's inn

suicide was literally a felon, and the crime was punishable by forfeiture of property to the King and what was considered a shameful burial (typically burial at a crossroads with a stake through the heart). A mentally incompetent person, however, who killed him or herself was not considered a *felo de se*, and was not punished post-mortem for his or her actions. In 1823 a new law was passed which made it illegal for coroners to issue a warrant for burial of a *felo de se* in a public highway. However, within twenty-four hours of the inquest the suicide was to be interred in a churchyard or public burial place. The new law also included other punitive clauses, namely that the burial should be without Christian rites and at night between the hours of nine and midnight, and his or her goods and chattels must still be surrendered to the Crown. It was not until the 1880s that suicides could not be buried in consecrated ground.

Murder might satisfy the Victorian sense of justice, since murderers could be caught and imprisoned or in turn be killed for their crimes, as in "an eye for an eye", but self-murder was a personal challenge to the will of God in which human justice could never really intervene. Thus, if, as in the case in question, murder caused

sensation among the Victorians, suicide was more often a source of anxiety and disgrace.

As indicated earlier, at the conclusion of the inquest into the death of Samuel Charlton the coroner issued the police with a warrant and arrangements were immediately put in hand to inter his remains at an appropriate site. It seems that the wife and other relatives of the deceased were interred at the Primitive Methodist Chapel at Great Horton, and for this reason a grave was ordered to be dug in the burial ground attached to the chapel. At approximately 11 o'clock on the night of Wednesday, 13 May 1857 the body was conveyed to Great Horton, where a crowd of approximately 2,000 people had congregated in the road outside the chapel yard. By all accounts there was considerable disturbance and uproar as the mob voiced their objection to the interment, a view also shared by the chapel authorities. Concerted efforts were made to prevent the burial, with shouts of "Throw it over the wall" and "Burn it" mingling in the uproar. It was only with the intervention of the police that the coffin was at last manoeuvred to the graveside, at which point objection was raised that the grave was not deep enough, and

also to it's being an old one. In the event the sextons dug a fresh grave in an adjoining plot of soil and the interment was completed without the usual Christian rites.

Great Horton Primitive Methodist Chapel originally built in 1825 at Town End, comprising a chapel and small burial ground, alongside which stood a row of cottages known as Sellars Fold. Nothing remains of the chapel, burial ground or cottages, the whole area now being grassed over.

The accommodation provided for Sergeant Knowles, situated as it was next to the police station, would have meant that he was constantly at everyone's 'beck and call'. Reflecting on my own days as a young constable, the sergeant where I was originally posted lived above the station and often worked split shifts to maintain overall supervision. More than likely, 12 hour shifts would have been the norm. In my own case the unforgivable sin was failure to stoke the open fire in the police office, as the fire back boiler provided hot water for the sergeant's living quarters!

Sergeant Knowles' wife bore him eight children, four boys and four girls. Save for the youngest daughter who became a milliner/dressmaker, the remaining members of the family obtained employment in the wool textile trade.

It cannot have been easy for Mrs. Knowles to bring up a large family within the confines of a small cottage. In addition to her domestic duties, I have little doubt that from time-to-time she would have been called upon to act as matron when females were in detention and to supply prisoners' meals as and when required. It is worth noting that prior to the early 20th century, policewomen were unheard of.

In June 1878, in a letter published in the *Leeds Times*, a correspondent poured scorn on Bradford Council

for its failure to build a new Police Station for Great Horton. In highlighting the wholly inadequate facilities at the existing station, the writer commented that were all 15 constables to parade for duty in a room measuring 13 feet by 10 feet, it would become a “veritable Black Hole of Calcutta” The likelihood is that rooms of a similar dimension featured in the private living quarters.

Sadly, on 3 May 1868 Mrs. Knowles passed away aged 52 years.

In December that year Sergeant Knowles married Hannah Wilson (née Ackroyd), a widow, and the family continued to live adjacent to the Police Station.

The following entry dated 13 September 1872 is taken from the Bradford Police Watch Committee Book:

“Upon the motion of his worship the mayor, seconded by Alderman Storey, that it being proved to the satisfaction of the Committee that Sergeants Joseph Jennings, John Knowles and John Walsh are worn out and disabled from infirmity of body, they be, and are hereby subject of the approval of the General Committee and the approbation of the Council, superannuated with the following allowances payable out of the Superannuation Fund, namely: fourteen shillings per week, each being one half of their pay.”

In his retirement Mr Knowles vacated his police house and took up residence at 8, Alexander Street, Great Horton. His replacement was Sergeant Isaac Burnett. 8, Alexander Street was sold at auction on 21 September 1874 and for the ensuing four years Mr. and Mrs. Knowles lived at an address in Southfield Lane.

The next we hear of the family is in 1881, when they feature in the UK Census living at “Ferncliffe”, West Lodge, Calverley. Whilst describing himself as a retired Police Officer,



“Ferncliffe” Lodge, Clara Drive

it would appear that Knowles had found employment as the estate lodge keeper, dealing with aspects of security.

Samuel Laycock Tee, who developed the Ferncliffe estate, had sold the principal house, “Ferncliffe”, in 1870 to a Mr. Briggs Priestley, a Bradford cloth manufacturer who became the first Member of Parliament for the Pudsey constituency.

In the 1960s a BBC television drama about the fictional character Joe Champion was filmed at “Ferncliffe”, and gave rise to the property being referred to locally as “Champion House”. Situated in Clara Drive, Calverley, the house is currently owned by the Leonard Cheshire Disability Charity and specializes in looking after the nursing requirements of adults with physical disability.

John Steed Knowles died on 18 June 1896 at Ferncliffe Lodge aged 79 years. The cause of death was given as cardiac failure/gout. His wife Hannah died on 13 May 1899 at an address in Dundas Street, Bradford, where it is thought she may have been living with her sister.

It might be argued that John Knowles was an unremarkable man. That said, all too often these days we read endless accounts of individuals who have reached the pinnacle of their careers but little of the many unsung heroes who work tirelessly

for Queen and country, as he clearly did. The Victorian period in which Knowles served saw rapid changes in employment, housing and social welfare which impacted on people’s lives.

As well as disease, the Victorian poor suffered starvation and destitution. In many cases their only choice was to resort to crime, and as a consequence recurring problems for the Police. Notwithstanding the pressures he must have encountered daily, the sergeant and his wife brought up a large family, each one being gainfully employed.

Sources

Bradford’s Police by Gordon Smith (1974).

Acknowledgments

Bradford Observer; Leeds Times. Thanks to staff at the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford.



PAUL DIXON Paul Dixon was formerly a sergeant with the West Yorkshire Police, retiring in 1995 with 32 years service, much of which was in the role of an investigator in Drugs Squad, CID and Discipline & Complaints. He originally joined the West Riding Constabulary subsequently transferring to the City of Bradford Police. The Force was amalgamated into what is now the West Yorkshire Police on 1 April 1974.