

This policeman's lot was a happy one

MY NAME is Lawrence (Laurie) Bovey now living back in my birth-city, Exeter.

I have been asked to fill a few gaps as regard the Police Station in South Street, which I am honoured to try and do, with acknowledgements to the book "*Out of the Blue*" by the late Chief Superintendent Walter J Hutchings whom I last met when I was on duty in Hatherleigh Square not long before his passing.

BACKGROUND.

As PC 234 I was stationed at Hatherleigh as the town's Constable, following Constable the late Arthur Jordan who became an Inspector in Camborne. My family Sheila, baby Angela and I as a 25 year-old constable arrived at 2 Claremont Place (now the home of Mandy Hill, a little girl in my days and not related to the Sergeant Hill in the following story. She is now Mrs Robin Wonnacott). We arrived on the day of the ManU air crash on 6th February in 1958. When we left on the 5th July 1962 to live in Plymstock our family by now included babies Janice and Richard. Our bedroom was the other side of the partition wall of District Nurse Joan Burdge's house in our semi-detached pair – and we believed in supporting local industry!

Hatherleigh was the section station responsible for other Constables in the four outlying villages of Meeth (Pc Gerald Folland), Black Torrington (Maurice Kettle), Halwill Junction (Phil Brodie), and Northlew (Derek Davie). My patch was Hatherleigh itself, with Iddesleigh, Monkokehampton, Ingleigh Green and Broadwoodkelly. We five PCs were responsible to the sergeant who lived in one half of the South Street house. In my time I had in succession Sergeants George Baverstock, Gordon Willis, and Russell Carter. The other half of the building was the Police station with two cells. Upstairs was the local Magistrates' Courtroom, possibly used as the Coroner's Courtroom in the following tale. Which neatly brings me to the subject matter of drama in a cell.

THE STORY

Come back with me, dear reader if you will, to May 1905. Nearly 53 years before

I arrived with my bike, boots and button-to-the-neck tunic. Oh, and beautiful family.

Miss Ida Mary Breton was spending a holiday with her uncle Mr Isbell at Claremont Villa as she had done for several years. She was 33 years old and due to her regular visits to the town was well known and highly respected. She was a talented artist and during her visits spent much of her time sketching and painting. Her favourite haunt was along the path-field below Strawbridge to a spot near the river Lew, where cattle came to drink and in so doing provided her with a subject which had a particular appeal to her artistic instincts.

THE DRAMA BEGINS.

On Monday evening the 15th May, she leaves Claremont Villa to visit the usual spot to complete a sketch she has been working on, but as she is not back by the usual time, Mr Isbell and a Mr Veale go to look for her. They find her easel in its normal position and a few yards away they find her body with her head lying in an extensive pool of blood. She is dead and a subsequent medical examination would reveal that her jaw was fractured and her head and face severely battered by some blunt instrument. When found, her wet skirt indicates that she has been in the river ...

RUSHED INQUEST – POOR RESULT

Evidently, Her Majesty's Coroners did not permit much time for inquiries in those days because we find that the inquest proceedings were concluded the following day, Tuesday. It was not possible to obtain much evidence but a theory was put forward, and appears to have been accepted, that whilst sitting at her easel the unfortunate young woman had been charged in the back by a cow or bullock and that injuries had been caused by the animal's horns. The jury returned a verdict that "deceased died from haemorrhage occasioned by injuries to the head, there being no evidence to show how such injuries were caused."

By now, however, ugly rumours were being circulated around the town. John Ware, 25 years old, had been back in his

native Hatherleigh some three weeks after several years' absence. He had an unenviable reputation and it was known that he had recently been discharged from Exeter Prison after serving 12 months for indecently assaulting a woman at Doddiscombsleigh. The bullock theory was not accepted by the general public

SERGEANT'S ENQUIRIES

Sergeant Hill, the officer then in charge at Hatherleigh, soon discovered that Ware had been employed with other men ripping bark at Brimridge, and that on their way to and from their work they used the Strawbridge footpath from where they had on more than one occasion seen Miss Breton working at her easel. Furthermore, he ascertained that on the evening of Miss Breton's death Ware made an excuse to leave his workmates at Lewer Bridge, which is near one entrance to the Strawbridge pathfields, and they went on without him.

They left work at 6.15 but Ware did not reach Hatherleigh until 8.30. He called at the "London Hotel" where he had a pint of beer and it was noticed that he appeared nervous and shaky and that his trousers were very wet from his boots almost to his knees.

He had been seen to pass through the churchyard, having approached by way of a lane leading from the road to Meeth and not by way of the Strawbridge pathfields. In the churchyard he met a man to whom he was well known but he passed with his head down and failed to acknowledge the other's greetings. He acted in a strange manner at his lodgings and said he was leaving for Plymouth the next day. Up to 1.30 in the morning he was still in the kitchen and his landlady then went down and ordered him to bed. He did not go to work that day, Tuesday, which was the day of the inquest.

WARE'S ANSWERS

On Wednesday the 17th (two days after Miss Breton's death) he changed his employment and started work at Hannaborough Quarry and Sergeant Hill saw him there soon after work had commenced. The sergeant asked Ware to

come with him to the police station, as he wanted to check on his movements during the Monday evening. Ware's answers to the sergeant's questions were most unsatisfactory and were known to be untrue.

SUPERINTENDENT AT THE SCENE

Superintendent Bond arrived from Holsworthy about noon and on his instructions Ware was placed in a cell and Constable Smith was left in charge whilst he and the sergeant visited the scene of Miss Breton's demise. At the river there they found blood-covered stones and evidence of a struggle. They concluded that the unfortunate woman had met her fate on the river bed and that a heavy stone or stones had been used to cause her injuries.

BACK AT THE LOCK-UP

In the meantime Ware had been in the cell about 45 minutes when Constable Smith, on paying him a visit, found him lying on the floor with a scarf tied tightly around his neck, blood running from his ears and a wound in his head. Apparently he had stood on the cell bed, tied the scarf tightly around his neck and as he lost consciousness he had fallen, the back of his head striking the floor. He was dead and the doctor certified that death had been due to strangulation.

AN INQUEST THAT GETS IT RIGHT

At the inquest on Ware the jury passed the verdict that "the deceased, John Ware, died from strangulation, self-inflicted, whilst in a sound state of mind. That he killed himself from fear of punishment. That the jury are of the opinion that the action of the police in detaining the deceased was fully justified and that no blame in any way was attached to Constable Smith, or anyone else, on account of the death of the deceased."

POSTSCRIPT

Constable Smith rose to become a superintendent in the force. He retired from Plympton during the 1939 – 45 war and was residing at Bishopsteignton at about the time I myself took the same Hatherleigh position as he did. Circle completed.

EDITORIAL NOTES.

I've today seen in the Devon Records Office at Exeter a copy of the Hatherleigh Deaths register for 1905 which shows: ~

Entry 45 Ida Mary Breton, at Claremont, buried on Thursday 18th May, 33 years old

Entry 46 John Ware of Buddle Lane, H'leigh, buried on 19th May, 25 years.

Entered and signed by Vicar I.W. Banke

So I have corrected her name which the book shows as "J. Mary Breton", and entered his age as shown in the Burial register. The book I have omits that detail.

Note that his lodgings where he had his last night's sleep (if any) seem to have been in Buddle Lane.

As for Strawbridge – in my time it was farmed by a Mr Bennett and his son Michael, a very pleasant young Methodist man who died early.

This has been an interesting exercise for me. Most unexpected when I wrote to you first. We rarely have occ to go thru H'leigh but next time we do, we shall stop.

Laurie.