



THE MURDERED CHIEF CONSTABLE

WRITTEN BY FRED FEATHER, ESSEX POLICE MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

It was on Friday, 9th November, 1849, that a jury was empanelled before W. E. Freeland, Coroner for the Borough of Saffron Walden. Its task was to enquire into the death of the High or Chief Constable, William Campling. The late Mr. Campling had died from shock, induced by the receipt of about 40 to 60 gun pellets into his left leg and above 60 into his right leg. He had been shot on Wednesday, 31st October and died some nine days later. His death certificate does not mention his police function but refers to him as the Borough Surveyor, which posts were sometimes, in those days, combined. Saffron Walden was one of four towns in Essex with a charter which was entitled under an law of 1835 to form its own police force. This was perforce small and, throughout its very short existence, never rose above a handful of regular employees.

The Inquest

Mr. Freeland heard the following evidence; Mary Brewer, daughter of the Pork butcher who lived in a house adjoining the Campling family, in Bridge Street, deposed that she was next door at about 10pm when stones were thrown at the door. Soon after, she was upstairs with Miss Campling when they saw Mr. Campling coming home. They heard a shot fired from the opposite side of the road and went downstairs to find him laying by the front door.

William Brand, foreman to a Mr. Nockold, walked with Campling to his door, then began walking up Windmill Hill Road towards North End. He heard a bang and saw smoke coming from the direction of Francis Gibson's garden wall, then heard the officer say "I'm shot. I'm shot."

Bloomfield J. Savill, clerk to solicitor Collins, lived in Castle Street, three doors from the Waggon and Horses beer-house. At

4pm on the 31st, he heard shots and then saw Thomas Porter, the landlord, drawing a bucket of water in which Benjamin Pettit was washing a gun. He had, on occasions, seen Pettit climbing on a wall abutting George Archer's garden and which gave access to Francis Gibson's property.

John Brewer, aged 15, brother to the first witness, also heard the shot and saw Campling laying by his door. He

noticed a white dog "rough headed with a short tail" with its nose under Mr. Davis's gate close by Mr. Francis Gibson's garden. He had seen Pettit and Porter rat-catching, the latter with the dog in Almshouse Lane where Pettit lived. He did not know who owned it. William Glover, painter, of Castle Street, told them that at 8pm Pettit passed two other persons, who he thought were two sawyers called Perry and Haslam. Borough Constable Wright was sent to bring them to the inquest.



The memorial plaque given to the town of Saffron Walden

Surgeon Thomas Brown and his assistant, Mr. Dickenson, attended within a few minutes of the attack and found Campling hysterical. They carried him upstairs. Next morning they extracted eight shots from the right leg and two from the left leg. Brown then found jaundice showing and the next day, gangrene. Dr. Paget, of Cambridge, also attended but the situation was hopeless and they later agreed that death was solely attributable to the effects of the shooting. Questioned by a Juror, the Surgeon said that amputation would have caused his immediate death from shock.

George Brand, apprentice to Hannibal Dunn, upholsterer and cabinet maker, saw Pettit in the Waggon and Horses at half past nine. He was smoking but was not seen to drink. Alfred Stackwood, wheelwright, of Littlebury, told the inquest that he had quarrelled with Pettit on the 19th May, in Littlebury, after which they were friendly. Pettit told him that he could not control his temper; Campling had made him cross; he had “made him pay a time or two and if he happened of him he would do for him.”

Thomas Davis, under-gardener to Mr. W. G. Gibson, lived with his father, next door to Mr. Francis Gibson. He heard the shot but had then seen a “sharp-nosed” white dog which had run between his legs.

Constable James Wright was directed to search Pettit’s house for a gun, but did not find one. He had taken Pettit’s shoes and with them checked against the three impressions found in Francis



Constable and Town Beadle James Dewberry.

Gibson’s garden and had also seized a full shot pouch. Superintendent John Timewell Clarke, of the County Constabulary, had examined the shot taken by Wright and weighed them. Three of the four types corresponded in size with those taken from Campling’s leg.

James Pettit (no relation) gave evidence relating to what Glover had said about Charles Perry and Edward Haslam. The jury were evidently much dissatisfied with his answers and conduct, though Edward Haslam then gave evidence that the jury thought fair. Perry described a game played in the beer-house, using a rifle barrel, through which darts were blown at a target. Pettit was one of the players. William Osborne, labourer, deposed that it was he that had been with Perry and Haslam, it was not Pettit. He also said that Pettit was in the bar until 11pm. The jury seemed to be quite convinced that he was not telling the truth and told him so. Robert Wren, labourer, was in the bar from 8pm to 9.30pm but did not see Pettit.

The Jury re-assembled on Monday 12th at 2.30pm to examine the evidence of Thomas Porter of the Waggon and Horses beer-house. Porter admitted to the ownership of two guns, which he had let Pettit use only when he was present. One was single-barreled, calibre about the size of a sixpenny piece. Mary and Sarah Porter, his wife and daughter, were examined. These women, like Porter, gave evidence in so unsatisfactory a manner, that the coroner and jury gave up the attempt to elicit anything further from them.

The dying declaration.

Mayor Nathaniel Catlin deposed that Pettit had been taken to the sufferers bedroom on the 8th, the day after his committal for trial. Campling, being aware that he was dying, stated that “On 31st at about 10 past 10pm I left the Eight Bells Inn, 40 yards from my house in Bridge Street.” He “walked and talked” with Brand for a moment. “I said ‘Goodnight’ then was shot in the legs.” He was carried upstairs and told those present to find Pettit (the prisoner) for “he had threatened me before. The last time was in Abbey Lane Passage, three or four months ago, when I met him on a sudden. I think his expression was in a sort of wrath ‘You old ----you, I’ll do your business for you one of these days’.”

On 14th the Jury reconvened, when Mr. Paine, clerk to solicitor Thurgood, said that he and the Excise Officer, Mr. Bedwell, were in King’s Street late on the evening in

question when they saw Pettit walking towards Almshouse Lane, with his hands in his pockets, whistling, accompanied by a white dog. Thurgood joined them but no-one spoke until the Constable came. They all went to Mr. Taylor, the Magistrate. Some days later, Thurgood went with the prisoner to Campling’s bedside and, though he denied calling Campling the name, he did not deny the attack.

The Town Beadle, James Dewberry, deposed that the prisoner was given into his custody. As ordered, he went to the beer-house after midnight and said to Porter “Tom, I want you.” The latter came without asking why, and did not reply, when in Castle Street, Dewberry told him that that it was a bad job as someone had “shot the old gentleman.”

The Verdict.

The jury concluded a verdict of “Wilful murder by some person or persons unknown,” which was strange in that

Pettit had already been charged and committed for trial on 7th November for “Shooting with intent.”

The Assize.

Benjamin Pettit, aged 21, having been in custody since November, was put up before the Judge at the next Essex Lent Assize, held at Shire Hall in the second week of March, 1850. Prosecution counsel, Russell Gurney, QC, laid out the facts and identified three inferences that could be made; one – that the shooting had not been an accident, for the stones thrown against the door were intended to get Campling to a place where he could be shot; two – that it was certain that the crime was not for plunder but was the result of ill-feeling towards the victim; three – that the assailants had concealed themselves near the bridge over a small stream (contemporary term – slade) to commit the crime. Much of the evidence given at the Inquest was repeated; William Payne, clerk to the magistrates, spoke to the deposition Campling made before his death, with the prisoner present.

Borough Constable, James Byatt, of Walden, told of a disturbance at a temporary theatre on the Common in July 1849. There was a scuffle between the prisoner and the High Constable and Pettit was injured. Superintendent Clarke and Inspector Lunn from the Detective Service of the Metropolitan Police, both gave evidence about the footmarks and the shot.

Henry Shuttleworth, ironmonger, examined the shot taken by Constable Wright from Pettit’s home. He found them to be size 3, 4 and 5 (mixed), exactly matching the three types removed by Browne from the dying Campling. Evidence given by Mr. B. Thurgood, who had arrested Pettit and handed him over to Beadle Dewberry and Constable Wright, and later taken the early depositions, was objected to by the defence and was therefore not taken. That was the case for the prosecution.

Mr. T. Chambers lead for the defence and addressed the Jury. At about 9.30pm that day, they returned a verdict of “Not Guilty.” No other person was charged with this crime, which remains unsolved. Saffron Walden police had difficulty in recruiting and in 1857, when policing all areas became compulsory, Harwich and Saffron Walden were absorbed into the Essex Constabulary.

The Eight Bells Inn still exists and some 40 yards away is Bridge End House, the likely scene of the shooting. The licence of the Waggon and Horses was transferred to another building, whilst Pettit’s home at Alms Houses (which was rebuilt a generation later) were in nearby Freshwell Lane.



The centre cottage is the scene of the murder. Today, the bridge over the stream has made the roadway higher than it was 150 years ago. The Eight Bells Inn is opposite and the road to Cambridge runs between them.

The Memorial Committee

Essex Police Memorial Committee Trustees are serving and retired employees of Essex Police Committee. They are appointed to the Charitable Trust to help preserve the memory of those who have died violently in the course of their duty or of their wartime commitments. The Trust administers funds to provide suitable memorials, particularly where there formerly was none. It has placed bronzed plaques in Colchester Police Station, in Essex Police Headquarters Reception, and now in the town of Saffron Walden. For this courtesy we thank the Mayor and Town Clerk. Two plaques at Southend Police Station are shortly to have three extra names added to them.

Another important function is the maintenance of the Roll of Honour (an oak board and a sumptuous memorial book) also located in the Reception. Members of the committee also keep a weather-eye open for the condition of graves of their colleagues throughout the county. The Trust has its own web-site: www.essex.police.uk/memorials

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ESSEX POLICE Museum



What we offer

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FAMILY ACTIVITIES

We have activities and interactives including quiz sheets, radios and a collection of police uniform and equipment to try out.

GROUP VISITS

Adult and children's groups are welcome to book daytime or evening visits. Please contact the curator for details. Group visits are free but donations are gratefully accepted.

RESEARCH

Academic and family history researchers are welcome to visit the museum in person. Alternatively, we will provide information on request for a small charge (please contact the curator or see our website for details).

SCHOOLS SERVICE

School visits are free. We provide an education service linked to the requirements of the National Curriculum and QCA Schemes of Work. We offer sessions for groups of 30 children; other activities can be arranged to accommodate larger groups. Please contact the curator or see our website for further information.

Where to Find Us

DIRECTIONS

Bus no. 47, 54 or 56 from the bus station in the town centre (opposite the train station).

PARKING

There is no parking at Headquarters. We recommend you park at the public car parks in Wharf Road or at Riverside Ice and Leisure (Victoria Road).

CONTACT US

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