The Rayleigh Bath-chair Murder

Residents of Hockley Road were not unused to enemy action during World War II, but although there were aircraft in the vicinity during the afternoon of 23rd July 1943, there had been no prior warning of enemy action. There was a lunchtime explosion, near a house called "Gattens" less than a half-mile from Rayleigh town centre. Bombs were soon ruled out as the cause of the incident, though there was a devastating tangle of metal and human remains in the road. The left leg of a victim was hanging 15 feet high in a nearby tree, the right was found 48 feet away in a front garden. It was soon obvious that there was a fatality and nothing could be done for the man concerned. A woman lay screaming and barely conscious in the road nearby.

Experts were called and soon discounted the possibility of a bomb and it was eventually decided that the detonation had been that of a British anti-tank mine known as the number 75 Hawkins Grenade. The wreckage was found to be that of a wheelchair and the woman identified as Mrs Doris Irene Mitchell of Hillview Road. She was one of three private nurses who had looked after a 47-year-old invalid, Archibald Brown of "Summerfield", 19, London Hill in Rayleigh. This is a very steep incline, between London Road and Hockley Road. Brown belonged to a family that had long owned Rayleigh Mill, T.J. Brown & Son.

Under the aegis of Assistant Chief Constable Crockford the investigation was initially put in the hands of Chief Inspector Draper, then, on his return from leave, passed to Superintendent George H.Totterdell, the head of Essex C.I.D.

The story that emerged was that Archibald Brown, after three years service as a soldier of the Great War, had become a successful miller. He had been seriously injured in a motor cycle accident at the age of 24, had become bitter and was speedily deteriorating. Twenty-three years later, he was crippled, pain-ridden and unable to walk. His will power was undiminished and he ruled his wife and elder son with a rod of iron. His wife was not allowed to visit her mother in nearby Rochford. One example of his style was the bell that he rang constantly to get his wife's attention, even if he perceived that a single
A Hawkins No. 75
Grenade Mine - the
kind used in the
Bath-chair Murder

flower was out of place in a vase. His elder son
was constantly beaten and humiliated in what
would now be considered a classic pattern of
child abuse, though to be fair, in 1943 their
relationship appeared better. It was soon
discovered that this nineteen-year-old son was
currently serving as Private Eric James Brown of
the Suffolk Regiment, but was presently at home
on compassionate leave. Also, Private Brown had
been trained in the use of the Hawkins Grenade
that was designed for use by infantrymen to
blow the tracks from tanks.

Archibald Brown was identified as having
been sitting in the wheelchair as nurse
Mitchell pushed him past Rayleigh Church
towards Hockley, down a road that is still hilly
and bumpy.

Author's Note: Totterdell in his autobiography
had given their home as London Road, which
was at the bottom of a considerable slope. I
found this difficult to understand and had
never previously been clear as to why she
walked him up the steep hill from London
Road or chose the Hockley Road route. I have
concluded that Totterdell was mistaken.

The Essex Constabulary considered it quite
feasible that such a mine had been fitted
under the seat of the bath chair. How was it
detonated and why had it not gone off
previously was a question which
vexed them. Nurse Mitchell was
interviewed when she had recovered.
It was miraculous that she had not
been killed. She was but a few feet
from the explosion, which was
calculated as being about two feet in
the air, and had actually heard the
sound of her employer's body parts
falling around her. The victim had
taken the full force but the frame
and cushions had shielded her.

The chair was normally kept in the
air-raid shelter beside the invalid's
home and at 1.45pm on 23rd July the
nurse had gone to get it. She had found the
shelter door locked from the inside, and
returning with Mrs Brown, had met Eric coming
out. He was irritated and evasive. Both women
had wheeled the chair to the house then helped
Archibald to get in. He was wearing pyjamas and
a dressing gown and they covered him with a
plaid travelling rug. Finally they adjusted two
pillows and a blanket around him, tucking the
rug under the cushion of his chair. One mile
down the Hockley Road the patient wanted a cigarette and fumbled in his dressing gown pocket. The nurse went to the front of the chair to light his cigarette, after which she went back behind the chair and pushed him forward. Within half a dozen paces there was the tremendous explosion.

The widow, Doris Lucy Brown, in the course of a five-hour interview at Rayleigh Police Station, stated that her husband had increasingly appeared to take a dislike to her. Eric too, had noticed the deterioration in Archibald's behaviour. His father had taken a liking to his new nurse and their walks together. There was no suggestion of impropriety or jealousy. She had considered her son Eric to be mechanically minded, he was capable of repairing their radio. Eric Brown himself suffered mood swings and the relationship with his family was such that he had been moved from his school at Rayleigh to a boarding school near Walthamstow. From 1940 to 1942 he had worked at Barclays Bank in Rochford, until a period of bizarre behaviour had caused the manager to seek his resignation. On 1st October 1942 he was called up for the army and posted to Spilsby in Lincolnshire. In his camp was a store of about 200 Hawkins Grenades, at least 144 of which were operational. The explosive device was about 7" x 4" and looked rather like a large cycle lamp.

Before Eric Brown was interviewed the police held a conference at Headquarters. Tests were carried out on similar chairs. It was decided that it was reasonable to assume that a pressure plate had been adapted to lessen the weight required to explode the mine. There was considerable difference between pressure from a tank and that of a human body. At Rayleigh Police Station the young soldier was interviewed by Totterdell, in the presence of Detective Chief Inspector Draper and Detective Inspector Jack "Trapper" Barkway. The latter then wrote down...
Brown’s confession, which asserted that his mother had been made a drudge and was living a completely intolerable life. “I decided that the only real way in which my mother could lead a normal life and my father to be released from his sufferings was for him to die mercifully.” He said that he had brought the grenade home from the army and put it under his father’s seat, having adjusted the top plate. He was arrested and charged with murder, which was then a capital offence. (Southend Standard).

At Southend County Petty Sessions on 21st September 1943 he was committed for trial at Essex Assizes. On 4th November that year he appeared before Judge Atkinson at Chelmsford and pleaded “not guilty.” Most of the facts were undisputed, although a suggestion was made to Detective Inspector Barkway that Chief Inspector Draper had intimated that “if Brown did not confess, things could be worse for his mother.” This was strenuously denied. But, the prisoner’s main defence rested on the question of his sanity. Barkway gave evidence of previous family background and behaviour. One defence doctor diagnosed Eric as “schizophrenic”. The prison doctor gave his opinion that Brown was sane, but reported that, whilst in custody, he had attempted to cut his own throat. The jury found him “guilty - but insane” and he was sentenced to be detained during “His Majesty’s pleasure.”

Totterdell’s biography was published by Harrap in 1956 with the title “Country Copper.” His supposition was that Archibald Brown shifted his weight after the nurse lit his cigarette and that, Eric Brown having altered the pressure plate, this triggered the explosion. His conclusion was that the mystery remained - and still remains - why the explosion did not occur when the victim was first lowered onto the chair at the back of “Summerfield”? Perhaps that was what Eric intended, but at that location he might also have killed his mother as well as his father and the nurse. There was no apparent financial reason for his action and he must have known that he would be a prime suspect. Did he not consider the possibility of the death or serious injury of Nurse Mitchell? He must also have been certain of their route. Had the nurse chosen to make a right turn into the High Street there could have been many more casualties.

Some years ago, when giving a talk at Rayleigh, someone in the audience informed me that Nurse Mitchell had nursed members of their family after the explosion. She had partially recovered but was left with a limp and permanent injury to her arm. The subsequent life of Mrs Brown is not known. Eric Brown was released in 1975 after 32 years in the asylum and still only 51 years old. “Trapper” Barkway was later to become the head of Essex CID.

The mill is no longer working, though it was skilfully rebuilt and dominates the sky line from Rayleigh Mount. The sails, removed in 1906, were re-fitted some 20 years ago.