DEATH OF A VILLAGE POLICEMAN
BY MARTYN LOCKWOOD

Shortly before six o’clock on Tuesday, 27 September 1927, Bill Ward, a motor engineer was driving from Romford to Abridge, delivering mail. As he approached Howe Green, he saw the huddled figure of a man at the side of the road with his legs sticking out into the road. Stopping his vehicle Ward recognised the body of PC George Gutteridge, the village constable from Stapleford Abbots. His helmet lay near him, as did a pocket-book. A pencil was still gripped in his right hand. His truncheon was in its place at his side; his torch was in a pocket. His whistle hung loose. There was no sign that a struggle had taken place. Nearby however there were marks thought to be caused by a vehicle that had struck the bank.

Ward ran up the road to Rose Cottage where he told Alfred Perritt of his discovery and whilst Perritt guarded the body, Ward drove on to Stapleford Tawney, from where he telephoned the police at Romford. By 8am Detective Inspector Crockford was at the scene and saw that PC Gutteridge had been shot in the face. Dr Robert Woodhouse from Romford was called out to the scene and from his observations thought that the officer had been dead for four or five hours. The body was removed to the nearby Royal Oak PH and the following morning to Romford mortuary, where Dr. Woodhouse carried out a post-mortem examination. He found that PC Gutteridge had been shot four times at close range, twice through the left cheek, and once in each eye. Two .45 bullets were prized out of the road surface at the scene and during the post mortem a further bullet was recovered. These were to prove vital pieces of evidence.
The events leading to the murder were pieced together. PC Gutteridge had been the village constable at Stapleford Abbotts since 1924 and lived there with his wife and 2 children. On the night of 26 September he had been on patrol, covering his beat on foot. As was his custom, he had made a conference point with PC Sidney Taylor the neighbouring village constable at 3 am outside Grove House, Howe Green. The two men stood chatting until 3:25 am, when they parted, Gutteridge setting off homewards.

What happened next concerned those investigating the murder. What was known was that PC Gutteridge had only walked a few hundred yards before meeting his death. Some 10 miles away police at Billericay had been alerted to the theft of a Morris Cowley motor car belonging to Dr. Edward Lovell from his garage in London Road. Some of his medical instruments and some drugs were in the car. But by the time the theft was reported, the car had already been found abandoned some 37 miles away in a narrow passage in Brixton by a man on his way to work. On his return after work seeing the car still there he reported his discovery to the Metropolitan Police. When the vehicle was examined a spent cartridge shell, marked RLIV was found on the floor on the passenger side of the vehicle. There were also blood splashes near the steering wheel, and the front nearside wing was damaged. Could this vehicle have been involved in the murder?

Dr Lovell was in the habit of noting down his daily mileage and armed with this piece of information the police drove the car from Brixton to the scene of the murder and then on to Billericay. The mileage was 43 and it looked as if the murder was linked with the theft of the car.

The Chief Constable, Captain Unett asked for the assistance of the Metropolitan Police who sent one of their most experienced detectives, Chief Inspector James Berrett to oversee the enquiry. However there were no further developments for four
months, although hundreds of policemen were employed on the case.

The horrific details of the crime were featured in the newspapers. Rewards were offered for information leading to an arrest, including the ‘News of the World’ who offered £2,000. The search for the persons responsible for the crime extended over the whole country and even abroad. At one point Berrett and his assistant Sergeant Harris worked 130 out of 160 consecutive hours.

The cartridge case found in the car had markings on it which indicated that it was an old Mark IV type made at the Royal Laboratory in Woolwich Arsenal for troops in the First World War. The bullets and the cartridge case were handed to the ballistics expert Robert Churchill for examination. Although deformed the bullets retained sufficient rifling characteristics for Churchill to establish they had been fired from a Webley revolver.

Meanwhile, a watchful eye was kept on known car thieves in South London. One of these suspects was Leo Brown, also known as Frederick Guy Browne. A very capable mechanic, a teetotaller, a non-smoker he was described as a man who was easily provoked to anger and suffered from complex feelings of resentment against society and the law, perhaps not surprisingly, as he had been in and out of jail since the age of 29. His first conviction was in 1910 for carrying firearms. In 1915 he had married, had a daughter, and settled in Clapham. “With all his faults,” said Mrs Browne, “my husband has been decent to me.” In March 1917 he joined the Royal Engineers, serving in the Railway Operating Department.

In 1921 Browne and his wife moved to Eastwood, Southend, but in February 1924 he was sentenced to four years penal servitude at the Old Bailey. However because of his violent behaviour in Parkhurst prison he was moved to Dartmoor to serve out his sentence.

On his release Browne rented premises in Lavender Hill and turned it into a garage/repair-yard. There was a primitive office at the back in which there was a bed. Here slept a man employed to keep the books and do odd jobs, of whom Browne said: “I got him from the Salvation Army to give him a start.” This was forty-two-year-old Pat Kennedy.

The two men had probably met in Dartmoor prison. Kennedy, whose Christian names were either Patrick Michael or William Henry, was born in 1895. His parents were Irish and he
retained an Irish accent all his life. Trained as a compositor, he worked mainly in Liverpool, where in 1911 his first conviction for indecent exposure earned him two months’ hard labour. Following a spell in the Army other fines and convictions soon followed, for theft, being drunk and disorderly, loitering, housebreaking and larceny. For this last offence he was sentenced to three years’ penal servitude. On his release in April 1916 he enlisted in the Hussars, deserted, enlisted in the King’s Liverpool Regiment, deserted, rejoined the King’s under a different name and was discharged with ignominy. His criminal career continued and from 1920 to 1927 he was hardly out of prison.

Browne continued with his life of crime. Robbing railway station offices became his speciality. He stole, a Vauxhall car which was sold a few days later in Sheffield, to a Benjamin Stow, who parted with £100 and a Angus-Sanderson car, CW 3291, in part exchange. In January 1928 the car was involved in a non-stop accident in Sheffield and as a result of police enquiries Frederick Guy Browne was named.

The police had the evidence they needed and obtained a search warrant to search the garage. As Browne returned to the premises, driving the Angus Sanderson, the police moved in and arrested him. A search revealed a Webley revolver, (which would later be shown to have fired at least one of the fatal shots); a quantity of ammunition, a stockinette mask and a number of medical items which Dr Lovell would identify as his property. A further search of the car revealed another fully loaded Webley revolver in a secret recess behind the driver’s seat. In Browne’s home police recovered more medical items, a small nickel-plated revolver and a fully loaded Smith and Wesson revolver and a quantity of ammunition.

Kennedy, ignorant of Browne’s arrest, visited the garage, but finding it locked and two men who he thought were detectives inside, he hurried back to his wife. The pair travelled to Liverpool on the midnight train from Euston.

On Wednesday the 25th Kennedy was arrested. That night he was spotted by Sergeant Bill Mattinson of the Liverpool City Police, who knew Kennedy of old. He approached Kennedy from behind and said: “Come on, Bill.” Kennedy stopped dead in his tracks, spun around. Recognising the policeman, he said: “Stand back, Bill or I’ll shoot you!” Kennedy produced a gun, thrust its muzzle into the officer’s ribs and squeezed the trigger. There was a click and
Mattinson wrenched the pistol from Kennedy’s grasp. Shouting for assistance Kennedy was taken into custody. Fortunately the safety catch was found to be on, but Mattinson, realizing how close he had been to being shot, collapsed.

Taken to Warren Street Police Station, Kennedy was charged with being concerned with Browne in stealing a Vauxhall motor car. He said to Mattinson: “I’m sorry. I’ve no grudge against the police, but you should be in heaven now.”

Kennedy was taken to London where he was interviewed by Berrett. Asked if he had any information to give about the murder of PC Gutteridge, Kennedy asked to be allowed to think, and did so for several minutes. “Can I see my wife?” he asked. Mrs Kennedy was fetched.

Kennedy said: “Well, my dear these officers are making enquiries about that policeman murdered in Essex.” She exclaimed “Why you didn’t murder him, did you?” “No,” he replied “I didn’t, but I was there, and know who did. If I’m charged with murder and found guilty I shall be hanged, and you will be a widow. If I’m charged and found guilty of being an accessory I shall receive a long sentence and be a long time away from you. Will you wait for me?” She replied, “Tell these gentlemen the truth of what took place,” Kennedy then told Berrett, “You can take down what I want to say and I will sign it.”

It took him over three hours to dictate his statement. In it he said that he and Browne had gone to Billericay to steal a motor-car. As they were driving back to London via Stapleford Abbotts they were stopped and questioned by PC Gutteridge. It was then Kennedy alleged that Browne shot the officer four times. After the shooting Browne had handed the gun back to Kennedy and told him to reload it. They continued their journey to Brixton where they abandoned the car, taking the medical instruments with them.

Questioned about the murder, Browne could make no counter-allegations, as his defence was that he was never in Essex that night. He claimed he was in bed with his wife. Both men were charged with the murder of PC Gutteridge. “It’s absurd,” said Browne. “I know nothing about it.”

Both men were charged with murder. Their trial began at the Old Bailey on Monday, 23 April before Mr Justice Avory. The Solicitor-General, Sir Boyd Merriman, led for the Crown. Over the five days of the trial over 40 prosecution witnesses gave evidence.

The ballistics evidence, concerning the bullets, the cartridges, and the gun-prints made by the breech of the Webley, was
damning, the first time such evidence had been used to such effect in a murder trial. Four firearms experts were called, including Robert Churchill, the Crown’s chief expert, who testified at great length, demonstrating in detail how the Webley found in Browne’s possession when he was arrested was matched to the cartridge and bullets that killed PC Gutteridge.

The Jury took two hours to return a verdict of guilty against both men. A subsequent appeal was dismissed and on the 31st May, Browne, maintaining his innocence to the end was hanged at Pentonville prison whilst Kennedy suffered the same fate at Wandsworth prison.

PC Gutteridge is buried in Warley Cemetery, Brentwood and a memorial indicates the spot where he was murdered.