Essex Police

History Notebook Number 21

THE COLCHESTER FIRE MURDER 1893

An Outstanding Reward

by Ann Turner
Shortly before 10pm on Friday 8th December 1893, Constable Charles Alexander of the Colchester Borough Police was on patrol in Short Wyre Street, when he saw flames coming from premises belonging to Alfred Welch, tailor and outfitter. Fire engines from the Essex and Suffolk Insurance and the Volunteer Fire Brigade were quickly engaged, supervised by the Head Constable and Firemaster R.O. Coombes. The seat of the fire was in a work room above Mr Welch's office. Quick work by the two fire services prevented the fire spreading, six jets of water quickly bringing the fire under control, but Welch's premises and stock were destroyed.

Following the devastation attempts were made to contact Welch who had been in the building just before 8pm, when he returned from business in London. He had sent his foreman Henry Sizzey home intending to lock up himself after he had met someone privately on the premises. Enquires at his home opposite in Queen Street were negative and a search was made amongst the fire debris. The charred remains of Mr Welch were found lying face down at the foot of the workroom stairs. A rope was wound around the neck two or three times. The arms and legs were burned away and the body was scarcely recognisable. He was identified by keys found under the body. These belonged in his deed and cash box. The body also wore the remains of an identifiable truss.

At an inquest on 9th December Sizzey gave evidence about a former employee Arthur Blatch. Welch had told Sizzey that Blatch wanted a private meeting after Sizzey left, saying “something terrible is going to happen”. As Blatch's wife had left him Welch thought he would ask for money to go after her, and that the “something dreadful” was going to happen to her. Evidence was also given that the cash box was a £100 short. The inquest was adjourned for further Enquiries.

Two local doctors, Dr. Becker and Police Surgeon, Dr. Maybury performed a post mortem, calling on the experience of Home Office Doctor Thomas Bond. Welch's skull had been fractured and a suicide theory was discounted, as the position of the rope was inconsistent, and the neck bore no rope or strangulation marks. Bond's opinion was that death followed an extensive skull fracture caused by violent blows to the head with a hammer or an axehead. Injuries were inconsistent with falling downstairs. The rope had been put around his neck after death to simulate suicide by hanging and the fire started to cover up the crime.

Sifting through the debris, Sizzey found a 6lb crowbar. Dr. Becker found traces of blood and carried out a new test for blood identification. He wrote up the experiment in the British Medical Journal of 1894. Blood was also found on the carpet in Mr Welch's office and it was concluded that he met his death there.

Sizzey had initially been suspected, but the adjoined inquest heard of efforts to find Blatch, now the main suspect. Police visited his home, where by chance a Constable Edwards lodged, but he had not seen him recently. Mrs Blatch did admit that her husband had hid in the house for a few days before the murder and had made sure that Edwards had not seen him. Officers were sent to London to make Enquires with the help of the Metropolitan Police; Enquires were also made in Liverpool, Manchester and California, U.S.A., a cablegram costing £5 being sent there.
In London officers visited an address in Bloomsbury, where Blatch, posing as the husband of Elizabeth Rash, lodged. Mrs Lincoln the landlady said she had not been there since going to Colchester in early November, but she later admitted that he had returned at mid-day on 9th December, paying her outstanding rent of £2-9-0d in gold and silver. He asked her to say that she had not seen him since November. Blatch was actually in the house on 9th December when Detective Sergeant George Alexander called to serve a summons to attend the inquest. Blatch then left as soon as he was able. Elizabeth Rash was traced to another London address and handed police property she identified as Blatch’s. She told them that when he left for Colchester in

had £80 in sovereigns and half-sovereigns but gave no explanation how he had come by them. He told her he had been in Colchester the whole time and had left on the night of Friday 8th December, walking to Witham to catch a train to London. She gave police the camera, tripod, canvas bag, cap and overcoat, together with five Trichinopoly cigars of the type Welch was known to keep in his office.

Dr. Becker found traces of blood in the coat lining. The cap belonged to an employee of Welch, it had been left in the shop on the day of the fire and had not been seen since. Other evidence included Blatch being seen in an agitated state outside the premises just before 8pm. Another witness saw Welch let him in by a side door, as a foundry whistle blew 8pm. A woman living opposite saw a man she could not identify, leave at 9.30pm. At 10.45pm the licensee of the Swan at Stanway saw a man carrying a tripod and camera, wearing the cap and coat produced to the court. He demanded brandy and tried to avoid being seen. He was blowing as if having walked fast. Two constables, making a midnight conference point at Easthorpe, spoke to a man carrying and wearing the items. Such a man caught an early train at Witham. A verdict of Wilful Murder was returned against Arthur Blatch.

The Watch Committee offered a reward of £50 for his arrest and seven-hundred handbills circulated throughout the United Kingdom and continent. Shipping offices were alerted. Details appeared in the Police Gazette; “Arthur Blatch, also known as George (may have assumed the name Jackson). Aged about thirty-six (1851 census shows him to have been forty-three), five feet eight inches, thin build, narrow chested, pale, sickly complexion, thin face, hollow cheeks, small dark eyes, dark brown hair and moustache, very prominent Adam’s apple. Heavy smoker with dis-coloured teeth. Had suffered spinal injury and stooped a little when walking. Weak on his legs and cannot perform much physical effort. Effeminate voice. Known to have a violent temper and had often beaten his wife. Enjoyed bagatelle and fishing. Employed by Welch for

November he had only three pence in his possession. He took a camera in a canvas bag and a tripod, intending to work as a photographer. When he returned he had these things with him, together with a basket which he had recovered from his wife’s house. He was wearing new clothes and she asked him if he had got them from Mr Welch, at the sound of whose name he turned pale. He wore a cap she had not seen before. When he took off his shirt, she saw the cuffs were missing. He explained that he had cut them off because they were dirty, then burned the shirt. She had not noticed any blood on it. Blatch
Some years, dismissed for too many absences and feigning illness. Later recreational ground keeper for Colchester Council, dismissed as incapable of manual work. Character was said to be good during this time. Also worked as a potman and prior to the incident, a photographer, travelling with a self-acting camera, though he knew little of photography.

Nothing was heard of Blatch for almost seven years, when in November 1900 the police in Wellington, New Zealand reported they had a man in custody answering his description, having been recognised by ex-Colchester residents living in that country. Sergeant Frost and the Town Hall Keeper Mr Marsh who both knew Blatch very well, were sent to New Zealand to collect him. At first neither were able to identify him, but they gradually became more certain, Marsh the more so. The prisoner insisted he was Charles Lillywhite born in London and had never been to Colchester. He had letters with him apparently indicating he was in Tacoma U.S.A. from 1885 to 1894. A photo was sent to that town and people who knew Lillywhite confirmed this. Blatch had a tooth worn away by smoking a pipe. Lillywhite's teeth were examined and found to be perfect with no sign of dentistry. Despite this Frost and Marsh insisted they had Blatch. Wellington magistrates were satisfied and ordered his return, refusing a defence request for a writ of habeus corpus.

Prisoner and escort sailed on 9th March 1901, arriving back on 16th June 1901. Lillywhite's brother tried to identify him but failed until he shaved off his beard. At an early hearing the prisoner maintained that he was not Blatch.

Many in the public gallery agreed. The magistrates remanded him for a week after which he was released without being charged. As a naturalised American citizen he later pursued a claim for compensation, but the result is not known.

Arthur Blatch was never traced and the case remains open, with the £50 reward still available. Why, in New Zealand, did Frost and Marsh insist that the prisoner was Blatch against all the evidence. Throughout the years of investigation many men who looked like Blatch were questioned, but none were treated like Lillywhite. Whether the latter ever returned to New Zealand is not known. Dr. Bond committed suicide shortly before Lillywhite and his captors reached this country. He jumped from a third floor window, suffering from melancholia.

The outfitters shop is now a newsagent and confectioners. The upper floor, scene of the murder and arson in 1893, is used as a store. There is nothing to indicate what happened there a century ago.

From reports in "Colchester Gazette" of 1893 to 1901 with thanks to our artist Alan Endres.

Ann Turner retired from Essex Police in 1991 with the rank of Sergeant.