

Crime on the Shrewsbury & Newport

On looking through the Times Online recently for any items relating to our canals, I was only able to identify a number of court cases spread over more than a hundred years.

The first was reported on August 1 1831, whilst the Newport Branch was still under construction. It reads: *“Robert Bales was convicted of an assault upon his employer, Mr. Robert Hill, in a riot which took place between him (Bates) and the rest of the gang of workmen in his (the prosecutor's) service, in June last. It appeared that Mr. Hill was one of the contractors for executing some of the works connected with the new canal in the neighbourhood of Newport. On Sunday, the 24th of June last, the men were assembled at a public house, for the purpose of receiving their wages; but Mr. Hill conceiving that he had already overpaid them, refused to advance any more money, upon which they became furious and went upstairs after Mr. Hill, who had secreted himself under a bed, and some of them beat him violently. The defendant was one who had taken an active part in these proceedings.*

It came out in the course of the evidence that the prosecutor was in the habit of assembling his gang of workmen at the public-house on a Sunday, when they received money on account of their wages, or were sent to what is called a tommyshop, where they received goods in lieu of money. The learned judge, in his observations to the jury, deprecated this mode of paying workmen, and remarked, at the same time, upon the impropriety of assembling the men at a public on a Sunday to take their wages.

The defendant having received a good character, and the prosecutor having consented to employ him again, he was sentenced to only a fortnight's imprisonment.”

He appears to have got off lightly compared with another case reported in the same article. A James Morris “was convicted of entering a piece of enclosed ground with intent to destroy game” and sentenced to 14 years” transportation!

The second was reported on 30th December 1841 and cited the Shrewsbury News: *“One of the most daring cases of hoccussing and robbery which has been heard of in this neighbourhood for many years occurred on Christmas night close to the town. A farmer's servant who had come to town to enjoy the festivities of the season was inveigled on board a boat lying in the canal near the bridge close to the gas-works by the captain and another boatman, and after having had a glass of some deleterious drug given to him, was brutally pushed out of the boat and robbed of his money, shoes, and other articles. An alarm was given, and some young men ran to the spot, but were driven back by the ruffians who made use of a formidable weapon used for propelling the boat, and one of the young men was seriously injured and*

robbed by them. The two ruffians were ultimately captured by Thomas, the policeman, and the watchmen, and safely lodged in the watch-room.

The names of the villains who committed this outrageous succession of crimes, are William Oakes (Captain of the boat Wellington), and David Jones, a boatman. The unfortunate sufferer is a farmer's servant, in the service of Mr Leighton, a respectable farmer, residing at Sugden, near Rodington, a distance of seven miles from Shrewsbury.

The second person who was assaulted and robbed was a respectable young man, a dyer, residing in the town.

On Monday morning the prisoners were brought before the mayor, Mr. Badger, and the other sitting magistrates, and the following evidence was given :-

George Jones, the prosecutor, was in Shrewsbury on Christmas-day, and met with an old acquaintance named William Furber, a boatman. They went into the Canal Tavern, near the gas-works, Castle Forgate, and had several pints of ale. While they were drinking together, the prisoner Oakes came in, and they were very friendly. Witness and Furber stopped drinking together till it was rather late, and Furber told him he might as well come in his boat and sleep till morning. Witness said he would do so, and Furber went out desiring him to follow. Witness went out directly after, having 9s. in his pocket and a clasp knife, and a pair of quarter boots on his feet, which were laced. He was a little the worse for liquor, but knew very well what he was doing. The boat of which Oakes was captain was moored near to the Canal Tavern, and when witness passed, Oakes (who was standing on the top of the cabin) asked him to come on board. There was on board, sitting in the cabin, a man named John Gough, and the females. Oakes asked witness to drink, and gave him a glass of liquor, which he drank, but could not tell whether it was rum or brandy. Immediately after drinking it he fell asleep, and when he awoke found himself on the towing-path, with his boots taken from his feet, and the money gone from his pockets. It was nearly 12 o'clock when he went into the boat, but could not tell what time it was when he awoke.

Roger Bradshaw, a labourer, was at the gas-works all night. There is a door opens from the works to the canal, for the convenience of unloading coals; and about half past 1 o'clock on Sunday morning witness heard the boat Wellington, moving in the canal. Witness went to work about 12 o'clock on Saturday night, and the boat was then lying on the side of the canal next the gas-works. On hearing the boat move he went to the door which opens to the canal, and saw the prisoner Oakes standing on the deck, and pushing the boat towards the towing-path. When he had got the boat on that side witness saw the prisoner Jones shove a man out of the boat on the towing-path. The man said, "Give me my money," and Jones said, "Yes, you -----, I'll give

you your money.” Jones then jumped out of the boat and kicked the man several times. The man was lying on the towing-path, apparently senseless, and Oakes jumped out of the boat, and began kicking him, as well as Jones. Witness had a companion with him, and they both called out to the prisoners to desist. Oakes then picked up a stone, and throwing, hit the companion of witness a violent blow on the forehead, which stunned him. As soon as he recovered, he ran into the town to procure assistance, and witness stood at the door till the watchmen came and took the prisoners into custody. The man lay on the towing-path all the time, and witness was sure no person was near him but the prisoners. It was a moonlight night, and he could distinguish them both clearly.

Anne Teague, landlady of the Canal Tavern, remembered the prosecutor coming into her house in company with another man, about 11 o'clock in the morning. The two prisoners were in the house during the evening two or three times, and appeared friendly with the others. During the evening the prosecutor asked if he could have a bed, and she told him he could, and he gave her his money to keep. After some time he said he should not sleep there, and she gave him back his money, 9s. Furber left the house a little before 12 o'clock, the two prisoners going next, and the prosecutor following shortly after. The prosecutor was rather fresh, but appeared to know what he was doing.

The two girls, who are prostitutes, named Catherine Davies and Maria Griffiths, were then brought up and examined, after being cautioned by the magistrates. They were both much frightened, and made very rambling statements, with an evident reluctance of saying anything against the prisoners, and the companion of Bradshaw being absent, and William Furber having gone on with his boat, the magistrates adjourned the hearing till Saturday, and both prisoners were remanded till that day.”

Unfortunately, no further report could be found, so, for now, the outcome remains a mystery.

It was nearly a hundred years before the next case, reported on November 8 1935: *“Charles Carver, 60, an agricultural labourer, was found Not Guilty at the Shropshire Assizes yesterday of murdering his wife, and was discharged. Carver had been accused of the murder of his wife, Caroline Carver, of Newport, Salop, by pushing or throwing her into the canal near their home on a Saturday night in August. Mr. Justice Hawke, in summing up, said that the evidence showed no motive, and after the verdict had been returned expressed his agreement with it.”* The most recent case reported is the most tragic and was carried over a number of months. Firstly on September 3rd 1953 it was reported that: *“Desmond Donald Hooper, aged 27, a gardener, of Brown Ditch, Atcham Camp, near Shrewsbury, appeared on remand before the magistrates at Shrewsbury yesterday on a charge of murdering Betty*

Selina Smith, aged 12, also of Atcham Camp, whose body was found on July 24 at the bottom of a 44ft. air shaft near a disused portion of a canal. [This refers to Berwick Tunnel].

In his opening statement Mr. William Lewis, for the prosecution, said that the child's body was found fully clothed at the bottom of the air shaft of an underground section of the canal. She had serious injuries, and a man's tie was tied around her throat.

Evidence would be given that among the injuries was a pressure mark on her body and the Bench might come to the conclusion that before she was thrown down the shaft she was held firmly by somebody and then thrown down the airshaft head first while she was still alive, although partly strangled. A few hours before the girl's body was discovered a man's jacket was found at the top of the airshaft in some long grass. They might think there was a prima facie case to show that particular jacket belonged to the accused man.

While on remand in Shrewsbury, continued counsel, Hooper was in conversation with a person serving a sentence. In a conversation he was alleged to have admitted that he did it."

However, a month later it was reported on October 2nd 1953 that: *"At a previous hearing Frank Baker, a prisoner in Shrewsbury gaol, alleged that Hooper said to him in prison: ",,I did it."" At the end of the case for the Crown yesterday Mr. W. Lewis, for the prosecution, said that as a result of information which had come to the knowledge of the Director of Public Prosecutions since the last hearing, the Director did not propose to call at the trial the witness Frank Baker. Counsel asked, therefore, that the evidence Baker had given be completely disregarded.*

Mr D. Harris said that the defence had concluded that it would be a matter of great simplicity to satisfy a court that the evidence given by Baker was a complete falsehood.

Hooper pleaded Not Guilty and reserved his defence" The criminal justice system seems to have worked much quicker 50 years ago for it was only on November 24th 1953 that it was reported that *"the trial opened at the Assizes at Shrewsbury yesterday"*.

"Mr. E. Ryder Richardson, Q.C., for the prosecution, alleged that on July 21 or 22 at about midnight the girl was murdered. Her assailant, he said, treated her with some roughness and the evidence would be that she was held down by some means: a tie was tied tightly around her neck, nearly killing her, and she was then thrown still alive down an air shaft on the Shropshire Union Canal. On the lip of the shaft was found a jacket which had apparently been worn by the girl before she was killed, and her attacker might have intended it to follow the girl down the shaft. The case for the prosecution was that the girl

was a friend of Hooper and that she went to his house on the night in question.

At about 9 p.m., continued counsel, she left the house with Hooper wearing the jacket, which was his, and went with him for a walk of several miles. They came upon the air shaft and there, alleged counsel, he killed her. It was not for the prosecution to establish a motive. There was no evidence that the girl had been interfered with sexually.

Hooper's alibi was that he had been to a farm to get some pigeons, but the farmer, who knew Hooper, had been at home that night with his dogs and had heard nothing. Hooper had agreed that the girl had been to his house that night but said that the last he saw of her was when she was running towards her home.

In a statement, counsel went on, Hooper had said that the girl was not wearing a jacket when she arrived or left. He had owned a blue jacket but had given it to his father-in-law. It had now been used in making a rug. Shown the jacket found in the shaft, he had said that he never had one like it.

Counsel said that there were aerial photographs of the camp area to be produced. So far as he knew this was the first time that aerial photographs had been used in a murder trial in this country.

Bernard George Hooper, of Arscott, Pontesford, said in evidence that the accused man was his brother. He was handed a blue serge jacket. He said that he had a similar one which he sold to his brother. He had doubts that the coat produced in court was the one he had sold.

Clive Albert Lloyd, aged 17, storeman, of Deer Park, Atcham Camp, said in cross-examination by Mr. G. G. Baker, Q.C., for the defence, that Hooper had lent him a jacket similar to exhibit 7, the one alleged to have been found at the top of the shaft. He later returned the jacket to Hooper.

The witness said that he and Hooper, when looking for beet hoeing work, had passed near the shaft but Hooper did not look down it. The witness looked down and could hear running water. He denied he had arranged to meet Hooper to look for pigeons on the night the girl was reported missing. The witness said that he would describe Hooper as a friend. He denied that he went up one night after Hooper had been arrested and suggested to his wife that she should have sexual intercourse with him. He agreed that after a complaint about his conduct he was warned by the police the following day not to go near her.

In reply to counsel's question: "You did not like Betty Smith, did you?" he replied: "Yes, I saw nothing wrong with the girl."

The witness said that he knew that Betty Smith had hit one of his younger sisters, but denied that he told Hooper about the middle of July that he was

going to do something to Betty Smith for hitting her, or that he threatened Betty Smith. He was not angry about it and it was not his intention to “get even” with Betty Smith.

The witness agreed that on a cycle ride with Hooper at the beginning of June they stopped and looked at the canal water but denied that he talked to Hooper about the case of Christie. He denied saying to Hooper that if anyone did anyone in and threw them down one of the pits on the canal no one would find them.

Lloyd, in answer to counsel for the prosecution, said that he never had any reason to dislike Hooper and had no reason to say anything untrue about him. On the night the girl was thought to have been murdered he arrived home at 9.30 p.m. and did not leave he house again.”

There then appears a break in reporting until November 28 1953 when it was reported that Hooper “*was sentenced to death at the Assizes at Shrewsbury yesterday*”.

On January 12th 1954 it was further reported that “*the Court of Criminal Appeal yesterday dismissed the appeal*”. Hooper was executed at Shrewsbury on January 26th 1954.

Steve Bean