

THE MURDER OF A LINCOLNSHIRE POLICEMAN

Michael Matsell

The year is 1860. Policing in Lincolnshire previous to 1857, the year when the Lincolnshire Police was formed, was done by Parish Constables, appointed annually by Magistrates. Usually they were recruited from small farmers and yeomen who combined their police duties with their normal work. The formation of paid police forces in this country was first authorised by the County Police Act of 1839. Following the passing of the County and Borough Police Act 1856 the Lord Lieutenant of the County called a meeting of the Magistrates of the Parts of Lindsey, Kesteven and Holland to take the Act into consideration, particularly the provision enabling two or more Counties or Divisions of a County to unite in appointing the same Chief Constable. The meeting was held at the Castle at Lincoln on 9th October 1856, when it was agreed that one Chief Constable should be appointed for the whole County of Lincolnshire at a salary of £500 a year and that £200 should be allowed to him to cover all expenses, except those incurred by the use of the Electric Telegraph. The Committee met on the 6th November 1856 and the post was widely advertised a few days later. The response was excellent for no less than 102 applications were received whose ages ranged from 23 to 45 years of age. Three candidates were subsequently interviewed for the position on 19th December 1856. They were the following candidates: Major John Chester, son of a Major General, Major McKinstry, at one time a Chief Constable of Ireland, Captain P.B. Bicknell. Captain Bicknell was appointed.

It should be noted there was only one Chief Constable for the three Parts of Lincolnshire but there was no intention that there should be only one Police Force. Each of the three Parts was to have its own. In effect therefore Captain Bicknell had to establish three Forces, although they were known from the start as the Lincolnshire Constabulary. From his appointment as Chief Constable of Lincolnshire, Captain Bicknell displayed a special aptitude in all matters of police administration. The energetic way in which he set about the task of organising the Force was the subject of the most favourable comment by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary in 1859. I now return to the year 1860. Shortly after 1.00 am on the 25th October 1860, Constable Alexander McBrian was patrolling from Frampton towards Boston and when he was near Wyberton Churchyard he met a man who went off the footpath into a field. Constable McBrian spoke to him and followed him into the field. The man pulled his hat down over his face, and turning partly round fired a shot at the Constable from close range, causing a severe wound in the upper right arm of the police officer. Constable McBrian managed to get to the home of John

King. He knocked on the door and his wife answered the door. McBrian was asked to come in but he declined the invitation. It was later stated that the man King was too drunk to help. McBrian then went to Wyberton Rectory. The Rev. Moore sent him in his cart to the lock-up at Skirbeck Quarter where Superintendent Manton was informed at 2.00 am. McBrian did not know his assailant but it was no doubt from information which he supplied that on the following morning Superintendent Manton went to interview Thomas Richardson, a farm labourer at Wyberton.

Richardson had on two occasions threatened the lives of police officers with a gun.

Richardson was known to be fond of going out at night with a gun, and had on two occasions threatened the lives of police officers. In Richardson's house the Superintendent found a double barrelled shot gun with one barrel loaded and the other appearing to have been fired recently. He was unable to unload the gun so he fired it off. The superintendent took possession of a piece of The Times newspaper which had been used as a wadding and found that it corresponded with another piece of the same newspaper which he found at the scene of the crime and which, from the smell of it, had also been used as wadding in a gun. He also took possession of a billycock hat, similar to the one McBrian's attacker had been wearing, and a quantity of mixed shot sizes 3, 4, and 6. A Billy Cock hat was a stiff felt hat perhaps from William (Billy) Coke, an 1840 sportsman for whom such a hat was made. Richardson was arrested and was identified by Constable McBrian when he made a deposition on 31st October 1860. On the 1st November 1860 PC McBrian died as a result of the gun shot wound. At about two hours prior to his death, he was told by Superintendent Manton that he was dying and he repeated his identification of Richardson as the man who had shot him. This dying declaration was subsequently admitted as evidence at Richardson's trial at Lincolnshire Assizes on the 8th December 1860. An inquest was held on the following Friday before Mr Little, Coroner, at the Ship Inn Skirbeck Quarter. The Stamford Mercury reported on the incident at Wyberton near Boston.

"The dastardly deed of shooting a policeman at Wyberton a fortnight ago has now assumed the serious phase of murder for the poor fellow who was the unfortunate victim of the foul and unprovoked deed has breathed his last and now lies in his grave. Only faint hopes were entertained of his recovery from the very first, still all was done for his restoration that medical skill could devise. At the trial, evidence was given by the publisher of The Times newspaper that the two pieces of

the paper seized by Superintendent Manton when placed together, was made up a part of a copy of the issue for the 27th March 1854. Captain Bicknell also gave evidence of fitting the two pieces of paper together, and Superintendent Manton gave evidence regarding the shot which he had recovered from Richardson's house. He said that shot of similar sizes and in similar proportions had been recovered from Constable McBrian's clothing and his wound. A gunsmith from Boston gave evidence that shot 3 and 4 was commonly mixed together, but that it was most unusual to mix it with shot 6."

The defence was that owing to the darkness McBrian had made a mistake in his identification of Richardson and evidence was called to try to prove that the latter had been drinking at the Crown and Anchor in Skirbeck Quarter. A James Burrell was called into the witness box who stated he resided in Wyberton next door to Richardson. He went on to say the Wednesday night of 24th October he was at the Crown and Anchor Public House at Skirbeck Quarter in company with the prisoner and two other men named Wright and King and his son. *"We drank some beer and were a little fresh. We left together, Wright and King parted from us a short distance from where Richardson and I live."*

He stated that he saw the prisoner go into his house and heard him fasten the door.

"Richardson had not a Billycock hat on. He wore a cap with a peak on it!"

Evidence was also given by John King, a farmer, Richardson's brother in law John Wright another drinker and Rev Charles Moore, rector of Wyberton, Superintendent Thomas Manton, in charge of the County Police at Boston. Dr Young and Doctors Adam and Dr Broadbent (Lincoln) who were doctors in the case also gave evidence, as too did Sergeant John Coddington, Superintendent Manton's assistant and also the Coroner Mr Little. PC Crawford was sworn and deposed.

"On the night of the murder, October 24th, I visited the Crown and Anchor Public House, Skirbeck Quarter. The landlord and his wife (Mr and Mrs Wood) told me that the prisoner Richardson and Burrell had just gone out with King who was very drunk. They tried to persuade King to remain all night but he refused. I am certain as to the time because I had parted from PC Bradley a few yards off only 4 minutes to 12.00 o'clock. One of the Jurymen was struck off (Mr J. Oldham) as he stated he was in the Crown and Anchor on the night of the murder and said that PC Crawford entered the Public House as I was leaving at 12.00 am."

John Burrell said in evidence that on the night of the murder,

"Richardson had not a Billycock hat on. He wore a cap with a peak on it. He said I had a black billycock on which I now produce. The night was dull and foggy."

John King substantiated this. The defence was that owing to the darkness PC McBrian had made a mistake

in his identification of Richardson, and evidence was called to try to prove that the latter had been drinking at the Crown and Anchor, Skirbeck Quarter until mid-night and he could not have got to Wyberton Church in the time. The jury took 10 minutes to find Richardson guilty of murder.

"Richardson continues to express his gratitude for the clemency extended to him."

The prisoner heard the verdict without betraying the slightest symptom of uneasiness, and stood firm and composed while the following solemn warning and sentence were pronounced by the Judge (who put on his black cap). In a voice trembling with emotion the judge said that he agreed with the verdict. Richardson who later admitted his guilt was sentenced to death but the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life and petitions to the Home Secretary had been submitted from inhabitants of Boston and Lincoln who described Richardson as an industrious and inoffensive man. The memorialists numbered between 1,100 and 1,200. A Mr Norton forwarded it by Monday evening's post with the following note-

"To the Right Honourable Sir G. C. Lewis, Bart, Home Secretary London. Sir, I have the honour of forwarding the enclosed memorial from Magistrates, Clergy, Gentry, Householders and Inhabitants generally of the City of Lincoln, praying for commutation of the sentence of death passed on Thomas Richardson at the last Assizes for the County of Lincoln by Baron Bramwell, for the murder of Alexander McBrian on the 25th October (the actual letter gave the date as 26th) last and also praying that you will give the same your most serious consideration. The grounds of the application are stated in the memorial but it may be added that although the criminal himself admits that he shot the unfortunate man who lost his life therefrom, that it was done on the impulse of the moment and not with intention of killing him. I have the honour to be Sir, Your most obedient servant, John Norton, Sheriff for the City of Lincoln."

A note from Rev. Wright Shovelton, Wesleyan Minister, also accompanied the memorial.

"On 19th December 1860, Convict Richardson was visited by his wife, child, mother, brother and nephew at 2.00pm until 3.40pm, it being understood to be the last visit the convict would be allowed by his friends. It was a very painful one. Also the Reverend Mr Randerson visited him at 4.00pm until 4.30pm."

The following telegraph message was received from the Secretary of State at 3.00pm.

"A respite during Her Majesty's pleasure will be forwarded by this night's post for Thomas Richardson."

On 20th December 1860 from Whitehall the following message was received.

"Sir, I am to signify to you the Queen commends that the execution of the sentence of death passed upon Thomas Richardson now in Lincoln County Goal be respited until further signification of Her Majesty's pleasure."

Signed G.C. Lewis."

The Governor said that the Reverend Mr Shovelton, Wesleyan Minister, visited Richardson at 4.00pm until 4.30pm.


"Richardson was very cheerful and continues to express his gratitude for the clemency extended to him."

On January 17th 1861, Convict Richardson was transferred to the House of Correction at Wakefield. Superintendent Thomas Manton and PC McBrian are buried in Skirbeck Church Yard. Unfortunately PC McBrian's grave has not been found.

POLICING DENBIGHSHIRE 1800-1850

Dr F. Clements

QUALIFICATIONS FOR CONSTABLES, 1841



County of Denbigh Constabulary Force.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR CONSTABLES.

To be under Forty Years of Age.
 To stand Five Feet Seven Inches without Shoes.
 To read and write, and keep Accounts.
 To be free from any bodily Complaint, of a strong
 Constitution, and generally intelligent.

No Person shall be appointed a Constable, who shall be a Gamekeeper, Wood Ranger, Bailiff, Sheriff's Bailiff, or Parish Clerk, or who shall be a hired-Servant in the employment of any Person, or who shall keep or have any Interest in any House for the Sale of Beer, Wine, or Spirituous Liquors by Retail; and if any Person who shall be appointed a Constable shall, at any Time after such his Appointment, become a Gamekeeper, Wood Ranger, Bailiff, Sheriff's Bailiff, or Parish Clerk, or shall act in any of the said capacities, or shall sell or have any Interest in the Sale of any Beer, Wine, or Spirituous Liquors by Retail, such Person shall thereupon become and be incapable of acting as such Constable, and shall forfeit his appointment of Constable, and also all Salary payable to him as such Constable.

The annexed Certificate of Character is to be signed by One or more respectable Persons who have had personal knowledge of the Candidate during the last Five Years at least, either singly or collectively.

Source: DRO. QSD/AP/1/1. General Administration of the Constabulary, 1840.

Before the onset of industrialisation, policing in much of Wales was a matter for the whole community. Often victims of crime took it upon themselves to search out offenders making use of neighbours, fellow-workers, tradesmen, publicans and even tollgate keepers. If they could afford it victims would publish details of crimes in local newspapers and on notice boards in rural areas, especially in closed communities, strangers were more

easily traced and brought to justice. Offenders who lived within such communities, however, were often dealt with locally and informally by recourse to arbitration, reparation and shaming, measures which were seen to be less expensive and more effective than official justice provided in local courts. Formal policing was then in the hands of parish constables who were appointed annually. They were mainly rate-paying farmers in rural areas and