

Sandbach History Society
Report of the April 2023 meeting
Paul Hurley: Cheshire Murders and Misdemeanours

The speaker at a recent meeting of Sandbach History Society was Paul Hurley. He explained that after serving in the Royal Navy he joined the police. When he retired in 2002 he started writing books and articles on the local history of Cheshire and on railways. Since then he has published 34 books and written 240 articles for a local newspaper.

He told two stories from his most recent book, *Cheshire Murders and Misdemeanours*. The first concerned the Winsford Culvert Murder. On 3rd January 1946, Bernard Phillips of Prestwich, Manchester, a money-lender, thought that George Wood, who had requested a loan of £60 (equivalent to £2,600) and who gave his address as Moss Side Farm, Tarporley, was a person of good character and responsibility.

The farm's deeds were to be passed over as security and it was arranged that Mr Phillips would drive to Tarporley on the following day and pick them up. That was the last time he was seen alive.

The car was found in Moulton, near Winsford. Mr Phillips's brief case was missing but there was a box of eggs on the seat. The egg-seller was traced to a Mr Dutton in Wellington, Shropshire, who remembered the driver of the Ford saloon car.

On 5th January two boys, who were walking along a path near the railway tunnels near Moulton, spotted a man's body at the bottom of an embankment in a culvert - only 400 yards from the abandoned car. The body was that of Bernard Phillips.

The murder weapon was a "commando" knife, later identified as belonging to a Harold Berry. Detectives commenced interviewing servicemen at a demobilisation camp at Oulton Park. The enquiries led to Harold Berry, a local man. Berry's house was searched and in a lady's handbag, on the baby's pram, the deceased's wallet was found. A witness said that he had given Berry a lift to Manchester with a workmate, Irene Wynn.

Berry, who had given the name George Wood, was a 30-year old night watchman at the CWS bacon factory in Winsford. He was having an affair with a married woman whose husband was abroad with the army.

On 5th January, after getting a lift to Manchester, Berry and Wynn had caught the train to London, staying there for two days, where money appeared to be no object.

On his return Berry was searched and found to be in possession of Mr Phillips's wallet and cigarette lighter.

On 4th February Berry was tried for murder at Chester Assize Court. He pleaded not guilty and was cross questioned for four hours. He was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging.

As for the eggs in the car, it was known where they were purchased but not what the car was doing in Wellington, Shropshire.

The other story had a royal connection and concerned one of the sons of Sir John Tomlinson Brunner who, together with Ludwig Mond, formed the Brunner Mond chemical conglomerate in 1878.

On the death of Sir John Brunner his son John assumed the baronetcy whilst another son, Harold Roscoe, became managing director of the company.

Roscoe Bunner lived with his family at Winnington Old Hall, The Woodlands at Hartford and Belmont Hall at Great Budworth. In 1898 he married a published author, Ethel Houston.

In 1925 their daughter Shelagh married Prince Ferdinand of Lichtenstein in what was described as the wedding of the year. Shelagh became Princess Shelagh of Lichtenstein. Whilst on their honeymoon, Shelagh's mother, Ethel, went house-hunting on their behalf, purchasing a house called Green Cottage near Roehampton in London.

In 1925 Roscoe asked to stand down as managing director of Brunner Mond due to ill-health. The following year the company was negotiating to become part of the new ICI. Roscoe was not offered a board position and he was pleased about that. But his wife, Ethel, was not and, against his will, she petitioned for him to have a higher position, even going to the newspapers and lobbying high-profile contacts.

On the evening of 4th November 1926, whilst staying at Green Cottage whilst the Prince and Princess of Lichtenstein were in Europe, Roscoe and his wife were planning to go out for the evening. The chauffeur arrived but had to wait for some time. When the cook became concerned she went to their room and was met by a horrific sight.

Mrs Brunner had been shot under her right ear and had fallen onto the floor. Roscoe Brunner had fallen across her and had a hole in his forehead and with a revolver in his hand.

There were various conspiracy theories at the time but the inquest found that Roscoe Brunner had shot his wife and then himself. Mr Hurley said that there was a message for wives: if your husband doesn't want a job

One of Mr Hurley's other books is *Sandbach, Wheelock and District* where he presents photographs taken in the later 19th and early 20th century and contrasts them with photos taken at the same spot 100 years later. He showed a number of such comparisons in Sandbach.

He ended by speaking about some interesting and amusing moments from his time as a police officer in Cheshire which he has written up in another book, *The Good, the Bad and the Crafty*.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be held on Tuesday 2nd May in **Sandbach Library** at the **earlier time of 7.30 pm** when Linda Clarke will talk about “The Golden Age of Picture Postcards”. The talk will be followed by the Annual General Meeting. For further details see www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk or phone 01270 760810