

THE MURDER OF JOHN BRILL

by Celia Cartwright

In 1837, John Brill, a lad of 15 years was murdered in Ruislip. A poster and accompanying letter advertising a reward of £150 to be paid by the Government, to any person giving evidence which would lead to the discovery and conviction of the murderer/s of John Brill, were recently discovered among the Home Office Records in the National Archives at Kew.

An account of events leading up to the murder appeared in Bell's Weekly Messenger (27 February 1837) and other contemporary newspapers. On Thursday 16 February, John Brill, an employee of local tenant farmer Charles Churchill, was sent out to fill gaps in the fence around Youngwood. He was also instructed to keep an eye open for poachers. When he failed to return home in the evening a search with lanterns was begun, continuing on the Friday.

On Sunday a body was found by farm worker James Lavender in a hollow in a remote part of the wood. The clothes were in disorder and the face was covered with dirt. Blood had flowed from a severe blow under the right ear and about six yards away the boy's bill hook and cuff were found, and also his cap on a white thorn tree. There were marks in the ground as if the deceased had staggered before he fell.

Acting on information received, County Magistrate Thomas Dagnall issued warrants for the apprehension of Charles Lamb, Thomas Lavender and James Bray on suspicion of having been involved in the murder. At 12 o'clock on Monday morning at the King's Arms Hotel in Uxbridge, Mr Dagnall and Sir W.S. Wiseman examined Charles Lamb in private.

The next day Sergeant Otway of the A Division was sent down to Uxbridge by the commissioners of police at the request of Mr Shepherd of Craigs Court, Charing Cross, the owner of the wood and by Mr Lewis of the

Stamp and Tax Office, Somerset House, the renter of the game, to help Shackle the Bow Street officer and the Uxbridge constables in the collection of evidence and the discovery of the actual perpetrators of the murder. They prosecuted their inquiries until a late hour and resumed early Wednesday morning, eventually obtaining further circumstantial evidence against Charles Lamb.

Two months earlier, Thomas Lavender and James Bray had been brought before magistrates at Uxbridge petty sessions charged with poaching on the grounds of Ralph Dean Esq. of Ruislip. Young John Brill had given evidence against them, and threats of violence were uttered against him by the prisoners and their friends.

Mr Dagnall and various local dignitaries went to view the spot where the body was discovered. They found that the place in Youngwood, which 'adjoins a wood called Mad Bessy', was covered by thick underwood which was five feet high and almost pathless. Returning to the Six Bells PH, 23 gentlemen were sworn in as a jury by the Coroner Mr Stirling. They included the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor, with the Reverend Christopher Packe as their foreman. The jury examined the body and noted a severe bruise under the left ear and a mark of a heavy blow on the left temple.

Mr Charles Patten, an Uxbridge surgeon, carried out the post mortem. After dissecting the skull, he deposed that a blow to the left temple would cause an effusion of blood mostly on the right side. The deceased's death was caused by an effusion of blood on the surface of the brain (a cerebral haemorrhage in modern terms). A blow from a stick or flat instrument was more likely to have caused this than a fall, as the ground was soft and the body was not in a position which would have resulted from a fall.

The jury returned a verdict of Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown, but at the conclusion of proceedings Lamb and Bray were brought in. The Magistrate Mr Dagnall had told them that "although there was a case of strong suspicion made out against them, but more particularly against Lamb, yet the evidence was not sufficiently strong to warrant him in detaining them in custody". Bray was released but Lamb was immediately remanded on a charge of sheep stealing.

Local endeavours having failed to find sufficient evidence on which to secure a conviction for what amounted to a barbarous murder and revenge killing and having used all means at their disposal, the Churchwardens, Messrs C.K. Fountain and D.R. Matheson and one of Overseers of the Poor, Mr Thomas White, wrote to the then Home Secretary Lord John Russell seeking permission to offer a reward for the apprehension of the murderer(s) of John Brill (see later Fig.1) In a postscript to the letter they also ask for a form of the advertisement. The poster (Fig. 2) offers a reward of £100 for information and evidence and a further £50 and His Majesty's pardon for any accomplice but not the person who actually committed the murder.

This poster and accompanying letter were recently discovered among Home Office Records at the National Archives at Kew. The reward of £150 was very large for those days considering that local agricultural labourers' wages were about 12 shillings per week and even then they were not very regular.

Disappointingly, no one came forward. Perhaps this is not too surprising, as the population of the Parish in those days amounted to only about 1200 people, many of whom will have belonged to a small number of extended families.

John Brill was buried at St. Martin's, the Relieving Officer being ordered to pay for the coffin and funeral expenses. But this was not the last we hear of the murder. The matter re-surfaces in February 1845 when Charles

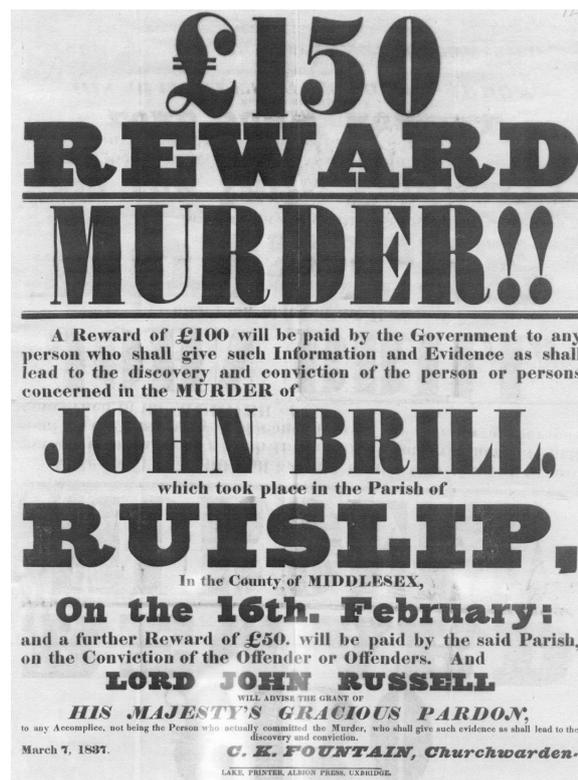


Fig. 2

Lamb - one of the suspects apprehended in 1837 but subsequently discharged - was committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court. The full indictment can be read in the National Archives. Subsequent proceedings were reported in The Times.

The case was re-opened after another local man, George Sibley, who had been with Charles Lamb in Coldbath Fields House of Correction at Mount Pleasant in London, where they were both serving six months for poaching, reported to the Governor that, about a year prior to their imprisonment, Lamb had effectively confessed to Brill's murder. Sibley said he was suffering bad dreams about the case, and now felt able to come forward since being in prison offered him some protection.

While on a joint poaching expedition near Rickmansworth, Lamb had remarked that "I had sooner be took for my murder" than go to the House of Correction. He had described to Sibley how John Brill had come up to him in Churchill's wood "and I took and knocked him down". He went on "I stood for a moment and took up his cap

and hung it up on a bough and laid his cuff and billhook by the side of him, so as if he had tumbled out of a tree". Lamb had threatened to kill Sibley if he told anyone.

Many of the witnesses heard at the original inquest were called again. It was established that, at the time of the murder, a scream had been heard, and that Lamb had been seen in the vicinity. Mr Baron Parke, one of the judges told the jury that "all the facts were consistent with the supposition that the prisoner committed the murder and none directly contradicted that supposition". If, therefore, the jury now believed Sibley, they would find the prisoner guilty.

Cross-examined by Lamb's defence counsel Mr Wilkins, George Sibley admitted that he had been in gaol for fishing three times and poaching once. He did not know that his wife was a common prostitute while he was in gaol. He was employed only intermittently doing odd jobs and could not name any of his employers. His father got 13s a week as a farmer's labourer and 12s in winter. George could not rely on him for support as he had eight other children at home. He revealed he knew that a reward had been offered and said that if he had his liberty he would tell more.

Mr Wilkins eventually convinced the jury that Sibley was motivated to speak in order to get out of prison and knew that a reward and a pardon had been offered for evidence leading to a conviction for the Brill killing. The account he attributed to Lamb could have been based on common gossip. "It was well known" he said, "that the confirmed poacher was about as depraved a character as was in existence". (We might ask why this did not apply to Lamb, who was a convicted poacher!)

The judge, Mr Justice Williams advised the jury to consider "whether the motives and reasons which Sibley gave for coming forward at all, or for coming forward at the time he did, were satisfactory or not..... If the jury had reasonable doubt whether Sibley had fabricated his evidence, they would give the prisoner the benefit of it". Not surprisingly, therefore, the jury deliberated for only half an hour and acquitted the prisoner.

I am grateful to Dr. Paul Carter of the National Archives Local History Research Group for drawing my attention to his discovery of the poster and for his and Jane Brown's help in the preparation of this article.

Sources:

National Archives :-

HO 64/7/45 Folio 125-6 (Fig. 1)

HO 64/7/45 Folio 127 (Fig. 2)

(Home Office Records (HO) has 19 boxes of similar material for 1820 - 1840);

Crim.10/21 1845; Crim.4/267 49.

Hillingdon Local Studies and Archives Service

The Times. Digital Archive :-

22 February 1837, 2 March 1837,

8 January 1845, 22 January 1845,

8 February 1845 and 10 February 1845.

Ruislip. March 5th 1837
125

To the Right Hon^{ble} Lord John Russell.

We the under signed, being Church-
wardens and Overseers, of Ruislip in the
County of Middlesex, solicit your Lordship
to offer, as reward, to apprehend the
Murderer or Murderers, of John Bwill,
which took place on the 16th February
last, in the said Parish of Ruislip.

C. H. Fountain }
J. R. Mattheson } Churchwardens

The White }
P.S. We hope you will send a } Overseer's
form of an advertisement in your letter

Fig. 1