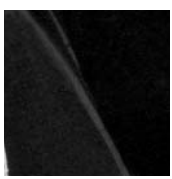

One Cyanide in the salts

One
Cyanide in the salts

As I sat in the ordered quiet of the reading room I wondered what the file on the table in front of me would tell me about William Murfitt. It was a question that had been with me since that day more than 60 years ago when my father, his face covered in worry, came home unexpectedly in mid-morning and told my mother, 'The boss is dead'.

I was coming up for six at the time and off from school with a cold. My mother told me to go and play in the front room while she made a cup of tea. I heard them talking in undertones, disbelief in their voices, anxiety in their tone. My father was Murfitt's foreman and his sudden death made them worry about the future, particularly whether Dad's job would still be safe. In the following weeks it seemed as though the farmer's death was the only subject of conversation for our family and everyone else we knew. With the other children in the village I watched excitedly as policemen searched barns and ditches, as reporters and photographers knocked on people's doors and gathered outside the village pub, always asking questions about my Dad's boss.

Those memories, still crystal clear, were perhaps the first full ones in my life. Now, as I sat in the Public Record Office with the large cardboard folder bulging with papers in front of me, I skimmed through the pages. I had feared that the file might be just a few cuttings and some sparse notes written in frustration by the two Scotland Yard detectives who came to our village to search for a poisoner and failed. Instead there was

a long and detailed report of some 40,000 words containing vital evidence which could not be revealed at the time. As I turned the last few pages I knew that at last I had the answer to the mystery that remained when the detectives and the reporters left our village in the autumn of 1938. I now knew who murdered William Murfitt.

Bill Murfitt had woken up at 5.30am in his Tudor farmhouse at Quays Farm in the quiet, ancient Suffolk village of Risby just outside Bury St Edmunds. The air was still moist from overnight rain, something he welcomed because there had been little in the previous few weeks and the drought was affecting the spring crops. In the farmyard he eased his 17-stone bulk into his Ford Eight, leaving his favourite car, the bulbous black American Buick, parked beside the barn and drove off into the village and to his fields just beyond. Everything looked and smelled fresher than it had done for a long time and the prospects for the summer were good. Later, back at the farm, he went about the normal business of the day, discussing the coming day's work with his foreman Syd Williams, working in his outside office until going into the house for breakfast just before 8.30. His wife Gertrude was in the dining room with his secretary Mollie Targett, who lived in during the week. As she did every morning Gertrude went to the sideboard and picked up a tin of Fynnon Salts, put a teaspoonful of the white powder in a glass and poured in hot water from a jug before putting the glass down in Bill's place.

'Aren't you having any salts this morning?' Murfitt asked his wife. 'No, I just don't fancy any today,' she replied.

Gertrude Murfitt, William Murfitt's wife

William Murfitt

Murfitt picked up the glass, took a large swig and immediately pulled a face. 'These taste a bit nasty, are you sure you didn't give me your dose as well?' he asked. She assured him it was the usual dose. A minute or so later he got up, clutched at his stomach and gasped, 'My God Gertie! I've got a terrible pain, I feel really ill. Get the doctor.' With that he stumbled round the table, his face reddening by the second, and slumped into another chair, from which he fell with a thud on to the polished wooden floor. At 8.30 am on Tuesday, May 17, 1938, after 56 years of life always active but not always good, Bill Murfitt lay dying in front of the wife he had both loved and cheated on, his face contorted from pain and fear, feeling as if a thousand devils were trying to tear his body apart.

Doctor Hubert Ware was getting ready for morning surgery in Bury St Edmunds when the telephone rang. It was Mollie Target, asking him to go out to Risby immediately as her boss had been taken very ill. He picked up his bag and as he drove the four miles to Risby he checked in his mind what he knew about Murfitt… very active… diabetes… overweight. But he knew his patient had lately been sticking to his diet and he had seen him only a month ago, when there was no sign of impending trouble. At the farmhouse Dr Ware saw Murfitt on the floor, propped up by cushions under his back, where he had been left by two farmhands who had come running in after a maid called to them for help. He was still breathing but unconscious, his face still red, his eyes staring and his body trembling. Then, 40 minutes after taking the salts, Murfitt emitted a last throaty gurgle and died.

Dr Ware broke the news to Mrs Murfitt, who at first appeared quite calm. She handed him the tin of Fynnon Salts and pointed out that the salts and the paper in which they were contained were brownish in colour. Ware smelt the salts. 'Bitter almonds,' he said, and he was immediately suspicious. He was a keen gardener and always associated that smell with potassium cyanide which was used widely to destroy wasps' and hornets' nests. He asked if he could use the telephone and dialled the police station in Bury.

The Murfitt's housemaid Doris Howard looked out and saw Syd Williams in the farmyard as he returned from breakfast. She called out to him and as he came to the door she asked him to help lift Murfitt's body on to a camp bed. As he half carried and half pulled his boss's body across the dining room floor the foreman, who had become well acquainted with death in the horror of the trenches at Ypres, knew the worst had happened.

The first policeman to arrive was Constable Ernest Carrington, who had cycled from his house two miles away after a call from Bury St Edmunds police station. He was joined soon afterwards by his sergeant, Clifford Bigmore, who supervised the district covering Risby and other villages to the west of Bury. He went in and saw Murfitt's body on the camp bed. By now Mrs Murfitt was crying and almost hysterical. 'I wish I had taken a dose as well,' she called out. The sergeant told PC Carrington to arrange to have the body removed to the West Suffolk Hospital in Bury.

As Sergeant Bigmore looked around the dining room it occurred to him that for a room where a man had collapsed and died in agony while at breakfast it was very neat and tidy.

There was no cloth or dishes on the table, only a tumbler containing clear liquid and a spoon covered in a white powder. All the chairs were arranged neatly round the table. He asked Mrs Murfitt if anything had been moved since her husband died.

Mrs Murfitt, still in a state of hysteria, told him rather huffily that she had asked the maids to tidy up the room before the doctor arrived. The sergeant was kind and tried to placate her, but he knew it was a question that would have to be raised later because there had been interference with some of the evidence. He locked the door to the dining room with Murfitt's body still inside it and began to interview the staff. His task was not easy because Mrs Murfitt was still hysterical and crying and the maids kept going off to try to calm her down.

Sergeant Bigmore was joined soon afterwards by Sergeant George Willis, one of the West Suffolk force's only two detectives, and they began taking statements from the domestic staff and from friends and relatives of the Murfitt family who arrived after hearing of his death. The police enquiries went on for the rest of the day.

A hearse arrived at Quays Farm and Murfitt's body was taken to the West Suffolk General Hospital in Bury St Edmunds where that afternoon Dr Ware carried out a post mortem examination. He took out the stomach and carefully extracted the contents before putting the lot into two jars. Then he took out the kidneys and the liver and put them into separate jars. He sealed the jars and handed them to Detective Sergeant Willis who was waiting to take them to London for analysis. The room reeked of the stench of human remains combined with the bitter smell of cyanide.

It was a smell that was also well-known to Humphrey Walrond, Deputy Coroner for Bury St Edmunds, and he recognised it at once when a policeman walked into his office in Guildhall Street carrying a brown paper bag from which he took a tin of Fynnon Salts. He opened the tin and sniffed and was the second person that day to associate the acrid smell with wasps' nests. He returned the tin to the policeman and asked him to have the salts analysed and then began to write some notes on Murfitt's death to leave for the Coroner, Thomas Wilson, who was his brother-in-law. It was going to be an interesting case, from what he had heard of it so far.

Later that evening Humphrey Walrond drove the seven miles home to the village of Shimpling, where he found his wife in bed, looking tired but happy. As he walked into the bedroom he was already speaking, 'Something very exciting happened to me today, dear…' he began. Before he could explain further his wife smiled and said, 'You're not the only one, my darling, something very exciting happened to me as well.' And from the bedclothes she lifted up the baby son she had given birth to earlier that day at her parents' home a short distance away while her husband was confined to his office awaiting developments over Murfitt's death.

Walrond picked up his son, feeling guilty because he had not been at the house when he was born but exhilarated at the thought of being a father for the second time. What a day, he thought, one man dead and a new life born. That was how life went on.