

THE DEATH OF MISS MURRELL

Last March, a woman who was a 'pillar of respectability' was found murdered near Shrewsbury. No inquest has been held. Judith Cook asks whether there was a political motive

ON 24 MARCH this year the body of a 78-year old woman, Hilda Murrell, was found in a copse just outside Shrewsbury. The first information released by the police to the press was that her house had been ransacked. Later the police said she had been 'sexually assaulted.' No inquest has yet been held.

Both of these police claims turned out to be untrue. If only for lack of any other explanation, the most significant fact about her life, and possibly death, appears to be this: she has been working, up until her death, on a paper on the management of nuclear waste to be read at the Sizewell B Inquiry at the end of the summer. In the end her nephew read her paper, but by then she had been dead five months, and the police were no nearer clarifying the circumstances of her death or catching the culprit.

Miss Murrell is described by friends and family as a pillar of respectability. She was a great conservationist. Politically she supported the Liberals although she had joined TACT — Tories against Cruise and Trident. She was known to be in favour of a nuclear arms freeze though not of unilateral disarmament and to be against nuclear power. Her concern led her to educate herself in nuclear physics, and she had read widely and discussed the subject with a wide range of experts. Her paper, read posthumously, was acknowledged to be an excellent exposition of the problems of nuclear waste, without containing any new revelations.

THE FIRST SIGN that something was wrong was on the afternoon of Wednesday, 24 March, when a farmer discovered her car, slewed on a verge. He did not know it was hers, but its position worried him and he told his local policeman who duly reported it to Shrewsbury police. The car was still there on Friday and he again reported it to the policeman who again reported it to the Shrewsbury police. Had the car been promptly identified as Miss Murrell's, the murder trail could have been started at once. But the Shrewsbury police first failed to follow up the report and said later the wrong registration number had been fed into the Swansea computer.

On the morning of Saturday, 27 March, having identified the car as Miss Murrell's, police began to search the field and copse near the car with a gamekeeper's wife. She found the body, noting that the time put down for its discovery was, correctly, 10.30a.m. Yet the police told Rob Green, Miss Murrell's nephew, that his aunt's body was found much later, and then that it was found at 7 a.m.

Rob Green took voluntary redundancy from the navy a short while ago, having been a high ranking naval intelligence officer with a crucial role in the Falklands war, for which he received a special citation. He does not consider himself a fanciful person. But the series of police errors,



**Hilda Murrell:
what was her killer
looking for?**

and the contradictory information they have given him is now causing him acute concern.

The confusion really begins over the time that the police first entered Miss Murrell's house to see where she was. Shrewsbury police found out it was her car on Friday evening. They say they forced an entry into her house at 6 a.m. on Saturday. But several witnesses say they saw men in her house on Friday night, at least one of whom seemed to be in police uniform. A forced entry would anyway have been unnecessary because her back door was unlocked. The curtains had been drawn and the light left on in the kitchen since the Wednesday of her death.

Police first told the press that Miss Murrell's house had been ransacked. They later told the family this was not the case. Some drawers and cupboards were open but not disarranged. Her house had been carefully searched and her papers gone through but in an orderly manner. Her telephone had been cut off in such a way that while it was dead from inside the house, anyone calling would appear to hear it ringing out. The police agree this is a sophisticated way of doing it but that it could have been fortuitous.

Joan Tate, whose husband Clive founded the local Nature Conservation Trust with Miss Murrell, says that anyone who has mentioned to the police that the murder might possibly have something to do with the work on which Miss Murrell had been engaged has been made to feel 'excessively foolish and a number of

people who came forward with different bits of information — it's called co-operation by the public — have been treated offensively.'

It soon became apparent that two sets of police were involved, neither of which appeared to be aware of what the other side was doing as some witnesses were interviewed by both. The local police are working under Detective Chief Superintendent David Cole, brought in from Worcester, who was number 2 on the Lesley Whittle case. The other police would appear to be Special Branch who the local police agree have been involved.

MISS MURRELL appears to have been attacked in her bedroom on the Wednesday morning. She had a lunch date, which she failed to turn up to, and may have gone home unexpectedly to change on her way. She had drawn £50 from the bank and this, along with her brief-case-type handbag, were the only things stolen.

After the attack, it seems she was bundled into her car. It is unlikely that the murderer was local as he would have known he only had to drive half a mile in one direction to reach open country. As it was, he turned the other way, driving through the streets of Salisbury. A witness saw her being driven 'slumped' in the passenger seat. There is more confusion over the headlined 'sexual assault'. When the family pinned the police down for details, it appeared there had not been one. She was partially clothed but this could have been because she

was attacked while changing. The family has been refused point blank copies of the post mortem report. Rob Green says: 'They said they would answer questions about it but you can imagine our difficulties as since we had no idea what was on it, we did not know what to ask.' When he identified the body he saw a mark of a blow under her eye. There also appear to have been stab wounds but insufficient to kill her. The police say she died of hypothermia.

Rob Green contacted everyone with whom his aunt had been recently in touch. One person he spoke to was Gerard Morgan-Grenville who runs EcoRopa, an ecology research group, in Abergavenny. Mr. Morgan-Grenville made a statement to Rob Green which he later confirmed in writing to the police. He says that on a date he and his wife were pretty certain was 25 February, Miss Murrell rang him. His wife confirms this. As he was in the bath, he wanted to ring her back, but she sounded so agitated that he went to the phone, draped in a towel. Her evident worry concerned him but she would not tell him the cause. However, before she rang off she said: 'If they don't get me first I want the world to know that one old woman has seen through their lies.' He says he had never heard her speak like this before; she was a very reserved woman.

The area around where she lived is now alive with speculation and rumour. Rob Green did not want to press the point until her paper had been read on her behalf at Sizewell. He did not want to detract from its content. But a number of features disturb him. Dates for a resumed inquest have been continually postponed, and the latest, 5 December, is by no means definite. Although the family were told initially that the body would be kept until after the Inquest, in August they were suddenly told by the police they had five days in which to collect it. A second autopsy had been carried out and the Greens were refused a copy of that too. The body was returned in a zinc-lined coffin in August. Police advised her family not to look inside. They complied and it was duly

cremated.

Most recently, the owner of the land on which the body was found, a Mr Scott, has stated most emphatically both to the police and the family that he was walking in the copse on the Thursday afternoon after the murder. He had been carefully examining it as it is used as a game reserve. He would, he says have noticed the body of a rabbit, let alone of a person. He swears there was no body there. If he is correct, her body must have been moved after her death. But without accurate details from an autopsy, her family don't know.

A statement made to the *New Statesman* by a police spokesman for the Chief Constable of West Mercia says it has not been possible for the police to reveal all the facts on the case until the coroner resumes the inquest. 'The Inquiry is still alive and being worked upon by a considerable number of detectives and it is hoped that the matter will eventually be tried in a criminal court.'

The police are aware of the various theories connected with Miss Murrell's death but will, they say 'naturally give more credence to some than to others.' They have contacted a number of groups connected with Sizewell to see if they could assist.

THE MOST obvious speculation is that Miss Murrell's house was broken into by somebody who was interested in the paper on which she was working. Although it contained no new information, that was not known at the time. Perhaps someone thought she had other information (having heard of her panicky February phone call) or merely wanted to know

what her paper would say. Such a strange break-in is not unique.

In 1980 a senior consultant pathologist, Dr Jenny Martin of Chesterfield Royal Infirmary, announced in *The Lancet* that she would be publishing studies following extensive tests she had carried out on workers involved in the plant at Bolsover where 245T was being made. A report from the company doctor, much quoted by the government when refusing to ban 245T, said the men had suffered no long-term ill effects. Dr Martin's research showed the contrary. Shortly after her summary appeared in *The Lancet*, the surgery attached to her home was broken into and all her research data was stolen. The police never cleared up the case and the work was irreplaceable as she had no duplicates.

Again, did somebody somewhere think Miss Murrell had access to even more sensitive information because of her close links with her nephew in naval intelligence and the very sensitive work on which he had been engaged? Is it possible, in the current climate of paranoia, that it was thought — quite wrongly — he had passed on information to his aunt?

Rob Green admits he just does not know. 'I retain a nagging doubt that her death was connected in some way with her involvement with nuclear power although this may sound far fetched.' He feels that at the very best the way the police handled the enquiries in the early stages seems to have been inept.

Finally the police spokesman says: 'The weight of the evidence in this case appears to show that it was a burglary that went tragically wrong.' On that everybody is agreed. □

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