

A Mass Murderer in inter-war Uxbridge.

Most readers will have heard of John Reginald Halliday Christie, serial killer of 10 Rillington Place, if only from the film of 1971. Some may have read one or more of the many books on the topic. If so, there will be references to Christie being sentenced at Uxbridge Magistrates' Court in 1924 and 1933; for lesser offences; the latter being that of stealing a car from a priest who had befriended him. In my research for a forthcoming biography of John Christie I unearthed a number of additional facts about his life and criminal career. This article elaborates on these crimes and shows that at least one of the oft quoted legends about Christie lacks foundation in fact.

Christie was born in Halifax in 1899, served in the army during the Great War and married Ethel Simpson. However he was in trouble with the law on two occasions in Halifax for theft and false pretences. After the latter crime in 1923, he left his native Yorkshire never to return. One additional reason for this was that he had stolen from his parents, though they declined to press charges. He came to west London.

It was later reported that Christie was quite the pleasant young man whilst residing in Uxbridge. He was said to be 'The man who always raised his hat to women'. He was smart and suave, and lost his Yorkshire accent. He attended First Aid lectures in his evenings. This was the Jekyll in Christie. From December 1923 to August 1924 he was in the RAF, service number 35,6827, presumably based at Uxbridge, where the RAF Central Depot was located (T. E. Lawrence served at this base as a ranker in 1922). Signal units were based there in this period and given that Christie was a signaller in the army in the previous decade it is likely that he took up his previous occupation again. He later claimed he did so because he wanted to be posted abroad (the RAF was involved in putting down revolts on the fringes of the Empire in these years) so he could escape his criminal habits. Although his character was described as being very good, he claimed he was discharged due to bad health caused by his being gassed in 1918, though this may well be merely an excuse. Possibly his restless nature led him to being bored by the routine of military life in peacetime. Oddly enough, for some (20 December 1923 - 20 February 1924) of the same time, he was also employed at the Empire Cinema on Vine Street, Uxbridge, as an operator; the third time in his life he had been employed in a cinema.

Then there was Mr Hyde. Christie was once again back to his criminal habits. He was then living in Southall. On Sunday 24 August, he had gone to the cinema where he was once employed and worked on the dynamo; Mr. Needham, the assistant there needing help in its repair, though unauthorised by John Polley, the manager. When Elizabeth Miller locked up for the night, presumably Christie concealed himself inside, for on the next morning, she found the front door unbolted. Polley arrived at his office on the following afternoon and discovered a chair obstructing his office door and a pipe and RAF glove on his desk. The cash, mainly coppers, which should have been in the till waiting to be banked was missing, as was cigarettes, chocolate, glass cutters and money (worth E5 18s 2d in total). Some business cards left by salesmen were also missing.

Nor was this all. On 11 September, James Collins' 12 year old son left his bicycle (worth E3 10s) outside Hillingdon and Cowley Boys' School, Hillingdon Road, Uxbridge, in view of the road, at 1.30pm. By 3pm it had vanished. In these deeds, Christie was presumably motivated by simple financial gain, due to being unemployed.

Detective Thrusell found Christie lying on the grass at Southall Park, a few miles to the east of Uxbridge, on Monday 15 September, and asked him for his name and address. Christie replied, 'Wilson'. Thrusell went on to explain that a man of his description had been seen loitering in the vicinity of the school on the afternoon of the theft. Christie denied he was there then, but admitted that he did sell a bicycle for a friend of his in Uxbridge, but he did not know where this alleged friend lived. He was arrested and on his person were found glass cutters and business cards (identified by Polley as his). When he was charged with the theft, on 16 September, before Howard Button at Uxbridge Magistrates' Court, he persisted in his denial. He was remanded in custody until the following week.

The chief witness was Ernest Henry Elliott, of Southall, who ran a furniture business in Hayes (between Southall and Uxbridge). He had been approached by Christie who told him he was trying to sell a bicycle for a friend. Elliott agreed to sell it in his shop, and displayed it in the window, to sell for 35s. Next day Christie returned to ask if a sale had been made. It had not, but he said he needed money for a tram fare to Uxbridge where he claimed he worked. Elliott gave him the money, but Christie returned later that day to say he had lost his job due to being late and Elliott gave him 3s 6d and told him not to worry. The bicycle was sold on Saturday 13 September. Christie turned up, but said that his friend could not be with him. Elliott became suspicious and told the police, with the result that an arrest was made as related. At the trial the bicycle was identified by the boy's father.

Christie pleaded not guilty and persisted in his story about helping out a friend in need, but that the latter had not appeared at Elliott's, so 'I have to stand here and bear the brunt of the charge'. The friend was called Jack Smith, address unknown. Christie gave a description of the man but he could not be traced. He had known this man since 15 August on leaving the RAF. Christie also said that he had left the cinema with Needham. He was then (22 September) found guilty of both charges and asked to be dealt with leniently, claiming he would mend his ways.

Yet Christie was given two sentences of six and three months, with hard labour, the sentences to run consecutively. This was a harsh sentence; later sentences handed down to him in 1929 and 1933 were less so. Christie was sent to Wandsworth prison, where he was noted as being five feet eight, with brown hair and his occupation was that of a 'motor driver' (oddly enough, both Robert Black and Peter Sutcliffe - late twentieth century serial killers - were also lorry drivers; as was Timothy Evans). It was noted that he had a good education, was from Halifax and was an Anglican, though the latter was purely nominal.

Leaving gaol on remission on 11 May 1925 (the sentence expired on 21 June), Christie found various employments. Yet in 1929 he attacked Mrs. Coles, the woman he was living with in Battersea, and was sent to Wandsworth prison again; for six months this time.

Christie returned to west London in 1932. From 20 July - 17 September that year, he was employed as a lorry driver once more, this time being employed by Clifford's (Fulham) Ltd., a haulage company based at the Great West Road in Brentford. Then he switched to the employ of Sir Robert MacAlpine and Sons (London) Ltd., contractors, based in Cranford (or so he said, one record states he was not in registered employment for the following year).

On Sunday 22 October 1933, Albert Henry Thomas, a cashier MacAlpine's employ, noticed that a Morris Oxford car, to the value of £70, was missing from a garage there. The car, and Christie, were seen on the following day by Charles Albert Morton, of Calvert Brickworks, in Calvert, Buckinghamshire (near Twyford). It was 6.45 pm and Christie asked him for permission to pull inside the works, so he could sleep in the car, because he claimed he had been driving since six that morning. He told Morton, 'You know me, I used to cart bricks from here with Cliffords' lorries. I have left now and am working for MacAlpines'.

Morton remembered him and Christie reminded him, 'My name is Christie'. He said that he had become very tired by all the driving he had done and was feeling faint and giddy. He was given permission to park inside the works gates. Christie added, 'Thank you. If I had stayed along the road or in a field the police or someone will disturb me'. Christie drove through the now open gates and parked the car. Within half an hour, he was asleep within it.

However, Christie's story did not ring true. Morton contacted the police. At 8.15 pm, PC Taverner of the Buckinghamshire Police arrived and went to the brickfield, where he roused the sleeping Christie and asked what he was doing. 'Just having a sleep. Mr. Morton said that I could come in here'. The constable asked him for his licence and insurance papers, but Christie could not provide them, alleging that his driving licence had expired and that he lacked any motor insurance. He was then told that the car had been stolen. Christie feigned innocence, as ever, replying, 'I was picked up by another man, who has gone to look for lodgings, and he left me here to drive the car into the yard'.

The car was taken to Harlington Police station where it was identified by Thomas on the following day. Christie was formally charged and found himself, on 1 November, once again, at Uxbridge Magistrates' Court, where he was described as being 'a motor driver of no fixed abode'. Rowland Richard Robbins, CBE, was chairman of the court, where the charges were stealing and receiving the car, driving without a licence and lacking third party insurance. There was also the charge of breaking and entering into the garage in the pursuance of theft, but this was dropped. Christie pleaded guilty to all charges and apologised for his misdemeanours. DS Templeman told the court that the accused had four previous convictions. Christie was found guilty and sent to prison for three months, with hard labour, for the theft of the car. For the other offences, he was given the choice of either a 10s fine or seven days in prison. Choosing the latter, he was told that this sentence would run concurrently. This also meant that he would be disqualified from driving for a year. For the third and final time, he was sent to Wandsworth prison.

It will be noted that here is no reference to Christie stealing the car from a priest as has been stated by previous authors. This is because the contemporary report does not refer to it. Furthermore, such was the poverty of Catholic clergymen that very few, if any, would have owned a car at this period. One version of the story, reported in the press in 1953 is that a priest (Father Matthew Lynch of Uxbridge) employed Christie as chauffeur and his wife as housekeeper after the former was out of prison, and that he repaid his kindness by theft. Yet Christie was employed elsewhere and his wife was still in Sheffield, so this cannot have been the case. As ever history does not repeat itself but historians do!

Christie committed no further known offences until he was living at 10 Rillington Place in 1943. He killed at least six women there, but was finally apprehended and hanged at Pentonville in 1953. However at the trial of fellow lodger, Timothy Evans, for murder in 1950, Christie's previous offences including those discussed above, were brought out by the defence to use against him, who was then the prosecution's chief witness. However, Christie is the most infamous man to have appeared before Uxbridge's magistrates, a little known fact which adds a macabre footnote to local history.

Sources used

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