

A Murder in the Family

One of the few murders committed by a police officer against another fellow police officer took place at Coombe, near Netheravon, on April 1st 1913.

The victim of the murder was Sergeant William Crouch, who joined Wiltshire Constabulary in 1900. He was first stationed at Bradford-upon-Avon, moving from there to Swindon, Chilton Foliat and Ludgershall, from where he was posted to Netheravon. A married man, Crouch lived with his wife and two children at the police station. He was a strict man who nevertheless was reasonable in his attitude towards those serving below him.

Police Constable Ernest Pike had joined the Force in 1895 and was very experienced. He had served at Swindon, Burbage, Bottlesford and Enford. While he was at Bottlesford he was promoted to Sergeant and posted to Swindon. Pike, however, had a quick temper, and at Swindon he ran into difficulties. Before long he was brought before the Chief Constable, Höel Llewellyn, accused of a serious breach of discipline. He was found guilty, demoted to Second Class Constable and sent to Enford.

Pike settled down well to his new posting. Compared with Swindon, Enford was a pleasant district on the banks of the Salisbury Avon and he got to know the small valley community very well. He became a popular local policeman and it wasn't long before he won back a stripe – being promoted to Merit Class Constable.

But despite his new found happiness, Pike was soon in trouble again. This time it was more serious than before. He was reported for being in a public house while on duty and for lying to a superior officer. The evidence was submitted to Divisional Headquarters by Sergeant Crouch.

On 31st March 1913, Police Constable Pike made the trip to Amesbury Police Station to appear before the Chief Constable. As the hearing wore on, Pike got quite angry and eventually accused Sergeant Crouch of telling lies. Despite his protestations of innocence, Pike was demoted and told that he would be removed from his new found home in Enford and posted to Colerne on the Somerset border.

Pike was incensed and as he cycled back to Enford with his neighbouring colleague, Police Constable Slade, he talked about the injustice of his predicament and blamed Sergeant Crouch bitterly. As the two officers reached the police house at Enford, Pike dismounted. Slade, who still had a few miles to go, bade him goodbye. As he cycled away, Pike shouted after him: 'That's it, I've done with the Force. I'll make this County ring.'

That evening, while no-one was looking, Pike smuggled a shotgun out of his cottage. Then he returned to the family home and kissed his wife goodnight. He left the house at about 9pm taking the gun with him. He intended to meet Crouch at their usual meeting place near Coombe around 11pm that night. As he patrolled his beat Pike dwelt on the day's events. He was first to get to the regular meeting place at the road junction near Coombe. Evidence found later suggests that Pike hid behind a hedge until Crouch arrived.

No one knows precisely what happened next – but when the shotgun was discharged Crouch died instantly from a head-wound. Pike knew that he would certainly hang for the murder. He was in a hopeless position. What could have gone through his troubled mind as

he made his way from the scene of the grisly murder? About five hundred yards from the meeting place was a little wooden footbridge across the River Avon. There he placed the gun's muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Sergeant Crouch's corpse was found by farm workers at 6am the following morning. Mrs.Pike had already reported her husband missing the night before but no one could find Pike. Slade was called from the station at Upavon. He arrived with the Chief Constable's bloodhounds, Moonlight and Flair, and a search was initiated.

Slade believed Pike was probably the murderer and now on the run. The Force was put on alert. The bloodhounds led Slade up and down the water meadows, confused by the early morning dew. After two hours his body was found in the river – he had fallen off the bridge and floated some way downstream before sinking to the riverbed.

An inquest was opened that morning at Coombe Farm. The hastily convened jury returned a verdict that Police Constable Pike had 'wilfully murdered Sergeant Crouch and afterwards committed suicide.' As a gesture, the Jury donated their Jury fees to the widows of the two policemen. The funerals were a few days later. Sergeant Crouch was buried with full police honours. His funeral was attended by the Chief Constable, 160 senior officers and other ranks. A band from the Third Battalion of the Wiltshire Regiment accompanied the funeral procession.

Police Constable Pike's funeral was held at Enford – with no ceremonial. His wife and children were joined by a number of villagers, who came to mourn the loss of a popular local bobby, who had tragic life had ended in a moment of madness.

(This text was extracted from The History of The Wiltshire Constabulary 1839-2003 (2nd Edition) by Paul Sample)