



Murder on the Beat

Imagine discovering that one of your ancestors came to an untimely and violent end. Judy Rouse uncovered one such murder that shocked a whole community, says Orla Thomas.

Enos Molden was the perfect village bobby. Good-tempered and fair, the father-of-four was liked and respected by the people he had policed for three decades. But on 9 April 1892, just months before his retirement and on the day he was due to be feted by the Wiltshire community he had long served, a sequence of events began to unfold that would end in tragedy.

‘Enos was in his 50th year and had been due to receive a testimonial and marble clock in Shrewton, near Amesbury, as a token of the village’s appreciation’, says his relative, Judy Rouse. ‘But in the meantime, a man called John Gurd, an attendant at the Devizes lunatic asylum, had shot dead a man named Henry Richards’. Henry’s niece, Florence Adams, a housemaid at the asylum, had just broken off her engagement to John at her uncle’s insistence. John, Henry had warned her, was heavily in debt and could not afford the marriage he had promised her.

It was a classic crime of passion. ‘It [Florence’s rejection] literally sent John mad’, says Judy. ‘He flipped, tracked down Henry in Melksham, shot and killed him, then disappeared’. Three days later, the police received a tip-off and the Superintendent of Police at Warminster took Enos and two other constables to search for John Gurd. As they neared the old turnpike house in the village of Corsley, they saw a man coming towards them and challenged him.

It was John. ‘Realising he was recognised, he ran. As he did so, he took his revolver from his pocket. The Superintendent of Police tried to disarm him but John fired one shot, which didn’t hit anyone. But as they got him down on the bank the pistol went off again, catching Enos in the side. He cried out: ‘Oh dear, I’m shot... do take hold of me, I’m dying’. The constables moved their injured comrade to a nearby house and summoned a doctor, but by the time he arrived, Enos had died from loss of blood’. Enos was Judy’s first cousin, three times removed (her grandmother’s cousin), and more than a century later she is philosophical about his untimely end. ‘I feel desperately sorry for Enos, but I also feel sorry for John, because I think he was thrown off balance’, she says. ‘He was such a young man and he obviously thought a lot of this lady’.

Until she came across a reference to his murder, Judy admits Enos Molden was ‘just another name on a list of ancestors’. Born in Lydiard Millicent, Wiltshire, on 22 January 1843 to a baker and his wife, Enos was 21 when he joined the police. He is recorded in the entry ledger for Wiltshire Constabulary as ‘single, height 5ft 10ins’. He married Jane Tanner, the daughter of an agricultural labourer from Cricklade, ten years later.

While reading up on her relative’s occupation in a history of the Wiltshire Constabulary found in her local studies library, Judy was surprised to find a reference to him in the text – Enos had the unfortunate distinction of being the first officer in the force to have been murdered on duty. Intrigued, she spent over a year visiting various archives to piece together his story. Contemporary newspapers – giving detailed summaries of the murder, inquest and subsequent trial – and assize court records revealed a blow-by-blow account of the dramatic events. ‘It’s like a jigsaw’, she says. ‘You do a bit here and that gives you a clue to move on to the next part, and gradually it all comes together’.

A big piece of the jigsaw was records of the Salisbury assize court for John Gurd's trial, now at the National Archives. 'It was a most amazing trial. The proceedings began by asking John whether he pleaded guilty or not guilty to the charges and – to the consternation of his defence lawyers – he pleaded guilty!' says Judy. 'The judge said to him: 'You must stand your trial', and he replied: 'I wish to say I am guilty and I am willing to die for what I have done''. John was eventually persuaded to change his plea and the trial continued but, unsurprisingly, he was convicted of his crime.

In his defence, John claimed he was depressed and had been drinking heavily on the day of the murder. 'The other interesting mitigation they brought in was that he was employed as an attendant at a lunatic asylum, and that this had affected the balance of his mind', says Judy. 'I don't think you'd be able to use that as a defence these days'!

Though unrepentant for murdering the man who had turned his sweetheart against him, John did express regret for taking Enos' life. 'I am sorry now for killing the policeman, but not the other man', he said at the trial. 'It was all through him the match was broken off'.

As John was first tried and convicted for killing Henry, the courts deemed it pointless to proceed with a secondary indictment for Enos' murder. 'They were going to hang John for Henry anyway', says Judy. 'So Enos' murder was left 'on file', you could say'. John was sentenced to death and hanged at Devizes Gaol on 26 July 1892.

Enos received a more distinguished farewell, fitting of his standing in the community. 'It was an enormous public funeral, with a large contingent of policemen from all over the county, including the Chief Constable', says Judy, who has studied newspaper reports of the event. 'They had the town band preceding the cortege, six constables and six sergeants as pallbearers, and wreaths from many local magistrates and dignitaries'. A collection in Enos' name raised £900; some of the money went to his bereaved family, the rest was spent on a memorial stone, which can still be seen in the cemetery at St Denys church in Warminster.

The vicar of Shrewton later wrote a letter about Enos to the local newspaper; it evokes a man cherished by his community. 'He was stationed here over ten years', wrote the vicar. 'I knew him well and had great regard for him. He was in his 50th year and had he been spared he would have retired next year on a well-earned pension after 29 good years service in the Wiltshire Constabulary. 'He was a very tall and powerful man, of unflinching courage and unfailing patience and good temper. Civil and obliging, always diligent in his work, and had a certain quiet and fatherly way about him that did more than any ostentatious energy to maintain peace and good order in his district. 'The Sergeant' was everybody's friend and all sorts and conditions of men rallied in raising money for a testimonial to him'. Judy was fascinated by this insight into her forebear's character. 'He sounds like a good, solid country bobby – in fact, the ideal village policeman of the sort we all wish we had these days'!

A keen member of Wiltshire Family History Society, Judy volunteered to write an article about her research project for the organisation's journal. Shortly after it was published, she was amazed to receive a letter from a fellow society member for whom her piece had particular resonance – a relation of John Gurd.

'It was a sad affair for both families', the woman wrote, 'but I really feel for Enos' wife being left to bring up her children alone. My family's thoughts are that maybe John was mentally ill – his actions were certainly not those of a rational person'. She also told Judy that one branch of John's family – deeply religious members of the Salvation Army movement – moved from Salisbury to London to escape the shame he, and the murder, had brought upon them.

But does Judy feel any lingering hostility towards the relative of the man who murdered her ancestor? 'No. It's history, isn't it? It's what happens to people's families. I guess you'd feel differently if it was 30 or 40 years ago – but 110 years later, you have a sense of detachment from it'.

Her investigations helped her to understand better the experiences of all those involved, she says. 'That's the interesting thing about this kind of research – you put the flesh on the bones and bring these people back to life; give them a sort of immortality. It certainly makes things a lot more interesting than just gathering together strings of names and dates'.