

The Epsom Riots

On the night of 17th June 1919 a knock came on the door of 92 Lower Court Road Epsom. A messenger spoke and left. Thomas Green, Station Sergeant at Epsom police station, hurriedly put on his coat. Asked by his daughter Lily where he was going, he explained that he had just been told that Canadian soldiers were going to attack the police station. She told him to be careful and to be sure to wear his helmet, but he replied that he would go in his own clothes as that would be safer going through the streets. He put on his cap and left the house, never to return alive.

During both world wars Canadian soldiers were stationed in camps around Surrey. In 1919 one of these was a convalescent camp, located in the grounds of Woodcote Park, Epsom, now and the RAC Club. The Metropolitan Police had policed Epsom since about 1839. At the time of the riots the police station was located at the corner of Ashley Road and what was then Ashley Avenue, having been erected in 1855. The establishment was one Inspector, a Station Sergeant, three Sergeants and 21 Constables.

Prior to the 17th June, 1919, there had been sporadic clashes between some of the soldiers and elements of the town's younger men, but nothing of a serious nature. On the evening of 17 June however there was more than the usual number of soldiers presents on the streets and the authorities were concerned that this suggested they could expect an increase in trouble. During the evening a disturbance erupted in one of the town's public houses, The Rifleman, located in East Street. The police were called and they cleared the premises, with the exception of one Canadian soldier who persisted in causing trouble. He was arrested and conveyed to Epsom police station to await an escort to the camp. In those days the police establishment did not have the luxury of a Ford transit and so he was taken on foot, a distance of about half a mile. A number of soldiers followed the prisoner and the arresting officers, being particularly vociferous in their threats that they would soon release the prisoner.

As the party turned from the High Street into Ashley Road they were joined by more police officers who dispersed the group of soldiers, except for one private who persisted in attempting to effect the release of his comrade and continued making threats of violence. He too was arrested for obstructing the police. The other soldiers made off in the direction of the High Street where they began to gather more soldiers together.

In the meantime the police and their prisoners had reached the police station where the two arrested soldiers were placed in confinement. The group that had run off earlier, their numbers now having been increased to about twenty, assembled outside the police station loudly demanding the release of the two prisoners. A number of Police officers went into the road to disperse this crowd who, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, ran away through the adjacent Rosebery Park in the direction of their camp. Quiet being restored, it was now hoped the trouble was at an end.

The soldiers however had returned to their camp to gather up a larger number of men. This group, now several hundred strong and ignoring all orders and advice, formed up in

a semblance of a military formation and marched to the Police Station at about 11.30 pm. A number possessed sticks and those who had not the foresight to equip themselves with such weapons tore off fencing from a nearby cottage. Several of the soldiers had bugles which they sounded from time to time. When this group, variously estimated at 400 to 700 strong, arrived outside the police station they tore to pieces a wooden fence separating the station from the adjacent private houses and armed themselves with the pieces.

Hearing the shouting and the bugles. Inspector Pawley called together all his men present - three sergeants, and seven constables - and they formed a line across the front of the station. He then went to the gate and attempted to get the soldiers to disperse, warning them not to do anything they would later regret, telling them that an ambulance had been summoned to take the soldier prisoners back to their camp. He was shouted down by the soldiers, yelling for the prisoners to be released. A Major Ross arrived from the camp and added his voice to the Inspector's saying that he personally would escort the prisoners back to the camp. The mob were not disposed to listen to reason. Their mood turned uglier and a barrage of bricks, stones and pieces of wood rained down on the police line and the mob surged toward the Police Station.

Realising the vulnerability of the Officers in the open. Inspector Pawley sensibly withdrew his men into the station, closing the doors and posting officers at the windows to prevent entry. A number of the soldiers now tore rails off a fence outside the Wesleyan Soldier's Institute on the opposite side of the road. A number of others pulled out the iron railings from the front of the Police Station forecourt. The mob having smashed down the larger of the two garden gates, then attempted to enter the garden fronting the station building, presumably with the intention of storming the building to release the prisoners. Due to their large numbers this proved a difficult manoeuvre but some did get into the garden, the flagstone path providing the rioters with even further missiles.

Every window in the front of the building by now had been broken and Inspector Pawley's family, who had been asleep in the Inspector's quarters on the first floor, had been moved to the rear of the building. The temper of the mob turned even uglier, threatening to burn the building down and continuing to shower it with various missiles. The officers inside the station had by now received some reinforcements, as summoned by telephone - one station sergeant, two sergeants, and ten constables from other stations, as well as some of the off-duty Epsom officers who had arrived and had managed to enter the building through the rear windows.

Deciding that offence was the best means of defense, Inspector Pawley, Station Sergeant Green and seven or eight other officers charged into the crowd and succeeded in clearing the garden temporarily of the mob. Regretfully during this charge Sergeant Green was felled by a blow from some heavy object to the side of the head. He was carried unconscious to a house at the other side of the road until after the affray.

Some of the soldiers had by this time managed to enter the police station and effect the release of one of the prisoners. Inspector Pawley then released the other one. The two

prisoners having been released, the soldiers again formed themselves into a semblance of military formation and marched back to the camp. The tumult subsided. Sergeant Green was then moved to the infirmary where he died at 7.10am the following day without regaining consciousness.

The police station had suffered considerable damage during the disturbance and in addition to Sergeant Green, the Inspector, four sergeants and eight constables' sustained injuries. The following day the police made an application to the local magistrates under the "Closing in Time of Riot" clause of the "Intoxicating Liquors Act", that all the public houses in the parishes of Epsom and Ewell be closed for the sale of intoxicating drink until the following Monday. This was granted and in addition all the clubs in the District were also closed. The order remained in force until the Thursday when it was confirmed that the military authorities had placed the town out of bounds.

The inquest into Sergeant Green's death was held in the Court House opposite the police station, a building that had also received some damage during the riot. The chairman of the jury was James Chuter Ede, who was to become Home Secretary in the 1945 Labour Government. The jury returned a verdict of Manslaughter against seven Canadian soldiers and added a rider commending Inspector Pawley and the officers acting under him for their valour and discretion during the riot. These sentiments that were echoed to the Commissioner by the local magistrates.

As a result of investigations by Divisional Inspector Ferrier into Sergeant Green's death, eight of the rioters were charged with manslaughter. Following the committal proceedings at Bow Street, two were discharged and six remanded in custody. At their eventual trial at the Surrey Assizes on 22/23 July 1919 in front of Mr. Justice Darling verdicts of "not guilty" were returned on two of them. The remainder were found "not guilty" of manslaughter but "guilty" of rioting and were sentenced to 12 months imprisonment. A later appeal was dismissed.

Remarkable scenes were witnessed at the funeral of Station Sergeant Thomas Green. The whole route from Lower Court Road, where he had lived, to the Ashley Road cemetery was lined with rows of people. The High Street was crowded - rarely had so many people assembled in Epsom before.

The procession, in which over a thousand men took part, included eight hundred police officers and river police, sixty special constables, the local fire brigade, postmen, most of the local council, officers from the Canadian army, comrades of the Great War and patients from the Horton War Hospital. Every shop on the route was closed and most of the houses had their blinds drawn. The funeral service took place across the road from the police station in Ashley Road in the Wesleyan church (now Epsom Methodist Church) to which Thomas Green belonged. The church had also been damaged in the riot.

The procession arrived at the Ashley Road police station lead by V Division Band playing Chopin's Funeral March. The number of flowers sent was huge. They filled the front room of Thomas Green's home in Lower Court Road, where he had lain the night before his funeral, and spilled out across the front garden. There was a tribute from Lord

Rosebery marked 'Honour and Regret'. On the head of the coffin was a beautiful wreath of roses, lilies, carnations and stocks from his invalid widow - her writing could only just be deciphered as she was recovering from a stroke. "With deepest love to my dear noble husband who was killed doing his duty from his broken-hearted wife and daughters Lily and Nellie".

The coffin was followed by four sergeants of V Division and four members of the Epsom force. Three of the sergeants - Kersey, Greenfield and Blaydon - had been injured in the riot. They acted as bearers at the chapel and cemetery. At the cemetery the coffin had a Guard of Honour of 12 Barnado boys from their home in East Street.

The funeral arrangements were very kindly carried out free by Messrs. G. and J. Furniss. Ex-sergeant Alf Furniss and ex-sergeant Bradley Furniss were friends and fellow veterans of the Great War. Carriages for the mourners were also supplied without charge and the Council decided unanimously not to charge for the grave space.

Thomas Green was a very popular local man with two girls, Lily and Nellie. He came from Billingshurst near Horsham and was one of a family of nine. He was a keen gardener, a member of the Allotment Association, and had done much for allotment holders locally. He was greatly loved by local children who took up a collection of pennies to buy him flowers. Local girls carried handfuls of flowers that they had picked themselves.

A ceremony was held at Epsom Court House to make presentations to the police officers who had taken part in the defence of the police station. The 24 presentations were made by Lord Rosebery. Some of the officers were in mufti having retired from the force since the riot. Lord Rosebery gave each a gold watch or gold chain with medallions inscribed "As a token of public appreciation of the gallant fight by the Epsom Police 17th. June 1919." Inspector Pawley was presented with a clock and his son Harry Pawley with a silver cigarette case given by Sir Roland Blade MP for the help he gave that night. A cheque for £310 was also given for Mrs. Green who was unable to attend because she was in hospital.

Lord Rosebery was deeply moved by the ceremony and speaking with emotion while seated he said "I wish with all my heart that I could express all that I feel on this occasion but I cannot." He later wrote the words on Station Sergeant Green's memorial.