

MASSACRE ON THE BANBURY BUS

**Victims
Ambushed
In Shooting
Drama**



The Cross in the Oxfordshire town of Banbury. Tragedy awaited the last bus to leave on that warm summer's evening

On Saturday, August 10th, 1935, the last bus from Banbury pulled into Shutford. The first passenger was about to get off when there was a loud crack and a bullet slammed into her chest...

Country lad Wilfred Sidney Gibbs went to town to do his courting. Every evening in 1930, the young driver left his home in the Oxfordshire village of Shutford and boarded the bus for Banbury, to meet his sweetheart, Hilda May Goode. He was 23 years old, she a year younger, and they appeared ideally suited. The course of true love, though later to be tragically disrupted, ran smoothly at first and in May, 1932, they became husband and wife.

They began married life without having to get themselves into the situation that blighted so many newlyweds at that time, the necessity to share the home of one or the other's parents. Wilf and Hilda moved straight into a cottage of their own in Shutford. That, in retrospect, was a mistake, as the cottage stood opposite the home of Wilfred's parents, blacksmith Sidney Gibbs and his wife.

It was after the birth of their first child that things began to go wrong. There were faults on both sides, no doubt, and it is impossible to say whether it was Wilfred or Hilda who was the initial cause of the problem.

What couldn't be denied was that Hilda started taking her infant son to Banbury, leaving her husband at home. At the outset, she spent most of these trips at her parental home in King's Road, Banbury. There, she confided

to her father, Walter Goode, a carriage cleaner with the Great Western Railway, and to her unmarried sister, Ivy — who was employed at the Switchgear Works in the town — that all was not well with her marriage.

As the trips increased in both duration and frequency, Hilda spent less time with her father and took to visiting public houses with her sister. This was something that was bound to upset Wilfred, who was a strict teetotaler.

When he heard the tales about his wife's drinking habits and the stories that she left the baby crying outside while she enjoyed herself, he confronted her angrily. Hilda, for her part, denied the rumours vehemently.

"And you'd believe that of me? Not only that I go drinking, but that I'd treat our son like that?"

Though he didn't want to believe it, Wilfred was concerned by the fact that she often did not return from Banbury until the last bus, which reached Shutford just before midnight. He pointed this out, noting that it made the rumours easy to accept.

"And what about you?" replied Hilda, rounding on him angrily. "I don't need to

He twisted away from her to deflect the knife, but it still sliced his arm open

listen to rumours, Wilf, I can deal with the truth. But how are you going to be able to keep me and the baby when you have to pay that girl who's taking you to court over her illegitimate child?"

Wilfred rocked back as his wife turned the tables on him. Her accusation was fair enough, for a village girl was pregnant and there was little doubt that he was the father, although the court action was still a threat rather than a reality. In any event, he told himself, none of it would have happened if Hilda had not started to neglect him.

"Do you deny it?" she screamed at him.

He couldn't. It would be pointless to do so. But his silence was all the proof Hilda needed to confirm the awful truth. Instantly, she was seized by a terrible rage and snatched a knife from the kitchen drawer. She sprang forward to attack Wilfred and he twisted away to deflect the knife. Even so, it sliced open

his arm, and the gush of blood brought Hilda to her senses.

Both suddenly contrite, they clung to each other after Hilda had bound up his wound, swearing the sort of rash promises that lovers are free with when making up after a row.

It seemed that the crisis had passed when, shortly afterwards, the pregnant village girl gave up her claim that Wilfred was the father. The reason for this change of heart was not known then, and has remained a mystery ever since.

If this good news meant anything at all to Hilda, then she was careful not to show it, for her visits to Banbury increased, as did the gossip about her behaviour while she was there.

She wasn't, it would appear, taking much of a risk, as Wilfred had the reputation of being a quiet, mild-mannered husband. But Hilda must have seen him as some kind of a threat for in August, 1935, she brought her sister Ivy Goode to live with her in the Shutford cottage, apparently for her own protection.

All of this was confusing for Mr. and Mrs. Goode in Banbury, for their daughter was far from consistent in her reports about her marriage.

"If Wilf treats you that badly, Hilda," said her mother during one of her visits, "why don't you leave him? There's still a home here for you, you know that."

"I couldn't leave Wilf, mum. He cares so much for me and I am very fond of him. He's a good husband in most ways. I don't want for anything."

"Then why is all this happening?" asked her mother, but Hilda just shrugged her shoulders.

Inevitably, the quarrels did not subside and a new crisis point was reached one Friday evening when Ivy was out, and Hilda and Wilfred were arguing about the usual topic — her trips to Banbury. As the row approached its climax, Wilfred grabbed a

● *continued over page*

*Case recalled by
Theresa Murphy*

shotgun, which he kept for clay-pigeon shooting, and pointed it at Hilda.

"I'll put an end to your games," he hissed, his rare display of temper proving almost as much of a shock to her as the gun that he was levelling at her chest. "I am going to shoot you."

"Wilf," she cried, "don't be a fool."

The terror in her eyes took the heat out of his anger. Slowly, he lowered the shotgun, horrified at his own loss of control.

"Forgive me, Hilda," he cried.

"Now we are even," she said, taking her distraught husband in her arms. "We have both learned our lesson."

But she hadn't. Next Saturday evening she was in Banbury once more, relating to her father the dramatic events of the previous night.

"You can't stay with him. There's nothing to stop him using that gun to carry out his threat next time."

"There is. I made him promise to destroy the gun."

"Did he?"

"Yes."

"You saw him destroy it?" her father pressed.

"No. But he said that he did."

"He can't be trusted. I'll

come to your place tomorrow and we'll make sure that he has kept his word."

So, next day, an angry Walter Goode arrived at the Shutford cottage. He had no time for any man who would threaten a woman, particularly his daughter, and he didn't beat about the bush.

"Our Hilda told me what

In the turmoil and confusion some of the people on the bus thought they had heard further shots

happened here last night. Now, young fellow, what have you done with that shotgun?"

Wilting before the wrath of the old man, Wilfred slunk out into the kitchen, dashed through the back door, and ran off into the night, with Walter Goode's insults flying behind him.

"I don't think that damn coward will cause you any more trouble," said Goode, slipping an arm round the shoulders of his daughter. It seemed that he was right, for Wilfred did not return home that evening.

Instead, he went to his grandparents' farm and bedded down for the night in the stables when he was discovered by his father, Sidney.

"What on earth are you doing here, son?"

"I was sleeping. I'm staying here tonight, dad. I've had enough. I can't go back there again."

"More rows with Hilda?"

Wilfred nodded. "Worse than that, dad. Her father came over and started on me earlier this evening."

"Walter Goode?" Sidney shook his head. "What's he doing interfering between man and wife?"

"I don't know. I just got out of it."

"You didn't run away from him?" Sidney asked sharply.

"What do you think?"

Wilfred scoffed. "Of course I didn't. I came away so as not to cause any more trouble."

"Very wise, lad," his father commended him. "Now, we can't have you staying here all night, so you come on home with me. Your mother will be pleased to see you."

She was, and when she'd made him a hot supper, she stared at her son and said:

"What are you going to do about it all, Wilfred?"

"I haven't made up my

mind. I don't know what to do."

"One thing you can do right now is tell me if there is any truth in those stories about Hilda drinking in Banbury at all hours, leaving that dear little boy of yours outside."

Wilfred nodded miserably. "Then you must get that baby away from her."

"That won't do any good," Wilfred wailed in despair.

"The only place I could bring him is across here. She'd be over for him right away."

"Just let the little minx try it," Mrs. Gibbs muttered defiantly.

In fact, this was precisely what happened, just minutes after Wilfred had taken his parent's advice and snatched the baby while his wife was hanging up washing in the back garden. It was a blazing row that swept through the Gibbs' house and out into the back yard, with Hilda shrieking wildly at her mother-in-law.

"Let me have my baby!" she shouted, lunging at the older woman. Mrs. Gibbs managed to sidestep the furious onslaught, but this evasion only served to enrage Hilda still further and she began punching her husband in the face.

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Story of Jealousy and Domestic Differences

FULL REPORT OF INQUEST

A PATHETIC story of a jealousy-maddened husband, overwrought by anguish as the result of differences with his wife, to whom he was passionately attached, has behind the grim shooting tragedy which claimed four lives as

Sidney Gibbs, alarmed at this violent behaviour, went to fetch a pail of cold water to cool her down. When he returned to the yard, Hilda had slumped exhausted against a wall, tears streaming down her face. But Sidney threw the bucket of water over her anyway, and the girl let out a howl of anger and despair as she fled back to her own cottage.

Once she had calmed down, Hilda realised she'd have to choose her strategy carefully if she was going to retrieve her child. So, she kept a covert watch on the Gibbs' house across the road. From this she learned that Wilfred had definitely moved back home, but there was still no sign of her baby.

In her anguish, Hilda went to the only place where she knew that comfort and advice would be available, King's Road in Banbury. She had already consulted a solicitor about her marriage, and had discovered that Wilfred too had instructed a lawyer. It seemed that some kind of legal separation would be the next move, but to have the law return her child, she was told, could take a very long time indeed. It had been too long already, and she moaned to her father.

"It's been three weeks now, dad, since I even saw my baby."

"You're sure that Sidney Gibbs and his missus ain't got him?"

"Absolutely certain. I believe that they've got him out at Milcombe."

"You mean the farm belonging to your husband's grandparents?"

"Yes."

It made sense to Walter Goode, and he wasted no time in accompanying his daughter out to the farm. But the old folk strenuously denied all knowledge of the baby and were so upset at hearing all the troubles of the young couple that Walter and Hilda soon regretted their visit and hurriedly left.

"It will sort itself out, you'll see," Goode said trying to console his daughter. "Our Ivy will be staying with you to keep you company, and we'll do what has to be done."

In the meantime, Wilfred was back living with his parents and seemed to be settling down quite nicely. However, he was busy forming his own ideas on what had to be done, and was making a plan.

While these two young people were wrapped up in their private griefs, the local community carried on with its own affairs. As the long, hot summer days went by, the

villagers of Shutford were absorbed with the preparations for their annual fête. This was one of the high spots of village life and the event was to take place, as always, at the Old Manor House.

On the Saturday of the gala, Wilfred joined in the sports side of things by taking part in the clay-pigeon shoot. He had borrowed a weapon for the occasion, as Hilda had confiscated his shotgun, after discovering that he hadn't kept his promise about destroying it.

Still passionately attached to his estranged wife, Wilfred visited the fête in the afternoon and then again in the evening, spending just long enough each time to ascertain that Hilda wasn't there. It is possible that he was hoping that a chance encounter could be the start

With the fatally injured passengers still on board, the bus turned round and headed for Horton General Hospital

of a reconciliation between them. At about 9 o'clock that evening, Mr. Gibbs spotted Wilfred walking in the garden, apparently in good spirits and showing no sign of disappointment at not seeing his wife at the fête.

Two things had kept Hilda away from the event she usually enjoyed so much. Firstly, it was a family occasion, and she felt that she had ceased to be part of a family. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, she was becoming afraid of her husband, having caught him in the furtive act of crouching outside her window and

eavesdropping on her. After reporting this disturbing discovery to her father, Hilda went to see Police Sergeant Bliss, who listened to the story of Wilfred's odd behaviour and promised to caution him.

Not surprisingly in the circumstances, Hilda decided to give the fête a miss, choosing instead to spend that Saturday in Banbury with her sister, Ivy.

As usual, the two women caught the last bus back to Shutford, which on this occasion was driven by Archibald Hancock of Kineton. Among the other passengers, and in no way connected with Hilda or Ivy, were two unmarried brothers William and Joseph Messenger, aged 40 and 36 respectively.

Though it was well past 11 p.m. when the bus reached Shutford there were still sounds of revelry coming from the grounds of the Old Manor House as Hancock brought his vehicle to a stop outside it, opposite the old Forge that had once been part of a monastery.

Climbing to her feet, Hilda was about to alight when there was a loud bang. One of the passengers, William Fenemore, took this to be a tyre bursting, but Hilda fell

backwards, and both the driver and the conductor of the bus, Ernest Kempson, heard her groan "I've been shot." Fenemore, being closer to Hilda, caught the words: "My husband has shot me."

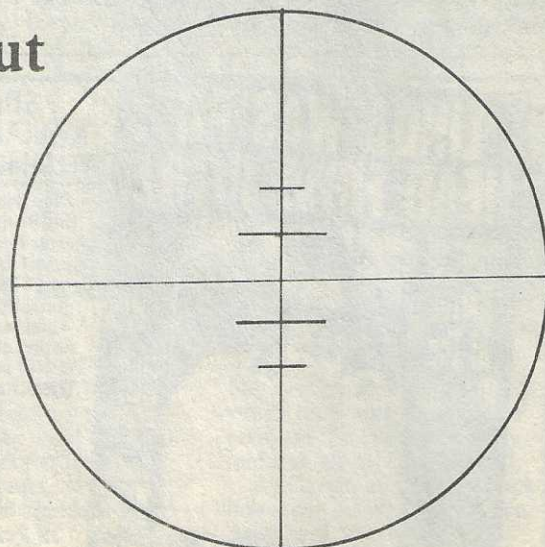
Alarmed, Ivy came running down the aisle to tend to her stricken sister. A second bang rang out and Ivy cried, "I've been hurt," before she too collapsed.

"I'm going to fetch the police," shouted Hancock. Meanwhile in the turmoil and confusion that followed, some of those present believed that they heard further shots.

Not far away, keeping an eye on the festivities, was Police Constable Rand. He responded immediately to Hancock's call for help. A quick thinker, the policeman stepped inside the bus, made a rapid appraisal of the scene, and instructed Hancock to turn the bus around and take it straight to Horton General Hospital. The driver instantly obeyed this order, unaware that the keen-eyed copper had failed to notice a third injured person.

It was conductor Ernest Kempson, who spotted something strange about the Messenger brothers. They

More shots rang out and the victims collapsed, dying. But where was the rifleman firing from? He was certainly not on the bus!



The horrified bus conductor realised he had skidded in a pool of blood, oozing out onto the floor!

were sitting together near the front, but Joseph appeared to be leaning against his brother at a very curious angle.

As the conductor stepped forward to investigate, his foot slipped and he almost overbalanced. Then he recoiled in horror, as he saw that his heel had skidded in the thick blood that was oozing out onto the floor from the leg of Joseph Messenger.

Neither of the brothers had complained. They had not even mentioned that Joseph had been hit during the shooting at Shutford, but when the bus reached the hospital, the medical staff realised that he was severely injured.

"He's dying," said the doctor, as he applied a tourniquet to Messenger's leg, and administered an infusion. It was a lost cause, however, for Joseph died as this aid was being applied.

Dr. Briggs now turned his attention to Ivy, who was also critically ill. She was suffering from a bullet that had punctured her left groin and entered her abdomen. Blood was seeping steadily from this wound. The same bullet had also shattered the base of her spine. A trio of doctors worked hard in an attempt to

stop the haemorrhage, knowing it was impossible to operate. Everything possible was done to save her, but the doctors were convinced from the outset that Ivy's case was hopeless.

Even so, the girl was interviewed in her hospital bed by Banbury's Police Constable Benham, who asked, "Do you know how you received your injuries?"

"I was about to get off the bus," Ivy replied weakly "when I heard my sister shout 'I am shot.' Then I was hit myself."

"Do you know if anybody has threatened your sister?"

"Yes, my sister's husband threatened to shoot her two or three days ago."

As the girl's voice grew weaker, a doctor beckoned the policeman away from her. At 2.30 a.m. that Sunday, Ivy breathed her last.

The same constable also spoke to Hilda, receiving similar answers to his enquiries. She confirmed that Wilfred had threatened her recently, although she admitted that she had not seen him fire the shots. Like her sister, Hilda was fighting a losing battle against her injuries — in her case, a chest wound that had punctured a lung and caused

haemorrhaging — and she eventually succumbed at 4.55 on Sunday morning.

Communications were primitive in those days, and while P.C. Benham was questioning the dying women in the hospital at Banbury, forming the obvious conclusion that Wilfred Gibbs was the prime suspect, he had no idea of the progress being made by P.C. Rand back at Shutford.

After searching the murder site, Rand decided that the shots had been fired at the bus from a slit in a window of the Forge. The next step was obvious, for as a good country copper, he was aware that all was not well between Hilda and Wilfred Gibbs, and in the wake of the shooting he was most anxious to have a word with the latter.

It didn't take long to find him. Wilfred was lying on the floor of his grandfather's cowshed, with blood oozing from a bullet-wound in his right temple. By his side, a rifle with a single spent cartridge in the breech told the rest of the story.

That, it would seem was it — all over bar the inquiries. Wilfred had been devastated by the break-up of his marriage and had suffered a further blow, three weeks before the shooting, when he had lost his job. Something inside him had snapped; he had taken what he saw as his revenge, and then his own life. Though he may have intended to include his wife's sister in the killings, it looked as if poor Joseph Messenger was nothing more than an innocent bystander.

The murder weapon was not Wilfred's shotgun but a service rifle, which, it transpired, Sidney Gibbs had purchased soon after the Great War. As Wilfred knew the location of this gun, his wife's removal of the shotgun had been a pointless precaution.

By a cruel irony, the inquest was held in a rose-covered harness house that stood in the picturesque Manor grounds where carefree villagers had so recently enjoyed all the fun of the fair.

There was little dispute over the facts of the case and the coroner's main concern was to establish Wilfred's state of mind at the time of the shootings.

Dr. Alexander, who had examined Wilfred, gave evidence of the injuries, adding, "I knew the deceased, though not professionally, and always regarded him as a quiet lad."

Mr. James Walsh, the solicitor from Oxford who

was representing the Gibbs family, agreed with this and then asked, "Given his recent problems, could he possibly have suffered a nervous breakdown?"

The doctor replied, "These recent circumstances would have had a pretty strong effect. In addition, he had been clay-pigeon shooting on the fatal day. Something of that sort might have influenced or suggested something to his mind."

"The power of suggestion over an overwrought mind is a very forceful thing indeed?" Walsh asked.

"It is," the doctor agreed.

Though young Wilfred Gibbs could only be defended posthumously, Walsh was doing a good job of it, as the doctor went on to testify that no one, not even the dead man's father, would have noticed anything wrong with him.

"It is the sort of brainstorm

It seemed that peoples' malicious talk in the town had produced some terrible circumstances

that would take him suddenly," Dr. Alexander explained. "The impulse to do something to his wife could have happened quite suddenly."

The tragic implications of this evidence appeared all the more poignant when the questioning turned to Hilda's drinking habits and the rumours about her neglect of her baby.

Ernest Kempsom, a bus conductor, testified that she was a regular passenger on the route between Shutford and Banbury, and that she usually travelled without her husband. The coroner then asked him if she regularly came home on the late bus with her baby.

"Never the last bus with the baby, sir. The latest Mrs. Gibbs ever travelled with the child, was the 7.45 p.m. from Banbury."

It seemed that those who had criticised Hilda Gibbs had been mistaken and that their malicious talk had produced some terrible consequences. In due course, as expected, the jury found that Wilfred Gibbs had committed suicide after murdering his wife, his sister-in-law and Joseph Messenger. But perhaps some of the gossip-mongers in Shutford felt that they too shared a measure of the guilt.

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