

GUILDFORD PUB BOMBINGS

A closed book

THE inquest into the Guildford pub bombings which decided last month that the five victims were “unlawfully killed” was a waste of time and money, having revealed nothing the bereaved and the injured survivors didn’t already know. It scuppered the last real opportunity to lift the veil of secrecy over events surrounding the 1974 IRA atrocity, which also injured 65 people.

The inquest also ignored two recently unearthed documents that raise serious questions about whether the bombings could have been prevented. One revealed that fingerprint evidence gathered at the time proved that members of the same IRA unit had carried out similar attacks throughout 1974 – both before and after Guildford.

Further, four months before the November bombings, Hampshire CID and Special Branch had alerted the military to evidence suggesting the terrorists responsible for the March 1974 Ripon army barracks bombing might be planning an assault on a barracks at Aldershot – close to Guildford. Yet nothing was done to raise the alert level, and it appears no action was taken. In the event, terrorists targeted the two pubs, the Horse and Groom and Seven Stars, known to be frequented by service personnel.

The bombings also led to one of the country’s most notorious miscarriages of justice, with 11 people wrongly jailed for more than 15 years. Surrey Police had fabricated evidence, forced confessions, and destroyed alibi evidence against the young people who became “the Guildford Four”. Anne Maguire and six members of her family, including her youngest son who was only 13, were convicted as “bombmakers”, courtesy of dishonest and flawed scientific evidence.

The justice system maintained their guilt, long after the notorious Balcombe Street gang, who had waged a long and bloody campaign, had not

only admitted responsibility but had even given details only the real bombers could have known.

More than 700 “confidential files” on the IRA’s English campaign, due for release in 2020 (ahead of the inquest), were reclassified for another 75 years – an action supported by Surrey Police. Little wonder concerns of cover-up persist. Surrey coroner Richard Travers did nothing to ease those concerns. Given access to those files, he handed them to, er, Surrey Police to decide which were relevant! It identified just two.

Unlike every other coroner presiding over legacy inquests (including the Birmingham bombings) in recent years, Travers also decided it was not in the public interest to hold an Article 2 inquest under human rights legislation. That would have allowed him to explore the wider aspects of the case, including events leading up to the attacks and any intelligence which would have helped him decide whether they could have been prevented. Instead, he restricted himself to answering when, where and how the five victims died, saying he was prepared to consider whether their deaths were immediate and to look at the response of the emergency services. But as to who the bombers were and how they were able to plot, prepare and cause such carnage, he wasn’t interested.

With an Article 2 inquest comes a stronger case for legal aid for the families and a jury. However, the taxpayer-funded ranks of QCs, their juniors and solicitors at the inquest were there to represent the Surrey Police, the Ministry of Defence and the Metropolitan Police, all considered to be “interested parties”. Other than Oliver Sanders, QC for the uncurious coroner, there was no one to ask the wider questions. The families of soldiers Ann Hamilton, Caroline Slater, William Forsyth and John Hunter and plasterer Paul Craig were refused legal aid and had no independent voice to probe and question. Unable to afford transport from the North and accommodation, they could not even attend.

Thus a seriously misleading myth – started by Sir John May when he led the inquiry (half of which was held behind closed doors) into the miscarriages of justice – went unchallenged at the inquest. The claim that the Guildford bombings were the first in a new wave of Provisional IRA attacks in England, which ended with the 1975 Balcombe Street siege, when the perpetrators were arrested, remained

a central tenet of the inquest – despite the documents suggesting otherwise.

Travers did call forensic evidence about the composition of the Guildford bombs. But Lorna Hills, principal case officer for the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, was not asked by counsel to the inquest about forensic links between the Guildford bombs and subsequent explosive devices found after the Guildford Four and the Maguires were in custody. In fact, within weeks of Guildford, the Met Police bomb squad had matched fingerprints to the earlier bombing of the Ripon barracks, to those found inside the watch-dial of a time-bomb defused at Aldershot railway station in December 1974 and another in Warminster the following day. Two members of the Balcombe Street gang, Brendan Dowd and Joe O’Connell, were later to give detailed admissions that they had bombed Guildford. Yet they were never charged with that offence.

At their trial in 1977 for the other bombings, it emerged that Guildford had been removed from the list of forensically linked incidents involving members of the IRA unit, on the orders of the head of the Bomb Squad and the director of public prosecutions. In other words, the Crown did not want to give any hint of the possibility that the wrong people had been convicted.

The families of the dead and the injured survivors were misled from the start, denied the right to participate in the inquest, and continue to be kept in the dark. Travers said in his conclusions: “I find that there was nothing specific about the date of the attack or the choice of the pubs which could have made the bombings reasonably foreseeable or preventable.” That is because he did not look.

Christopher Stanley of KRW Law, which has in the past acted pro bono for the family of Ann Hamilton and would have attended the inquest had legal aid been available, has asked Surrey Police to reinvestigate. Given the force’s track record, he’s not holding his breath.

In any event, if the government gets its way its controversial legacy and reconciliation legislation – opposed by all sides in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and human rights groups – will bring to a halt virtually all ongoing Troubles-related inquiries, including civil claims, judge-ordered inquests and police investigations.

● Our report in the last *Eye* included a photograph of one of the bombed pubs, incorrectly captioned as the “Coach and Horses”. It was the Horse and Groom. Apologies for the error.



Left to right: Caroline Slater, Ann Hamilton, William Forsyth, John Hunter and Paul Craig