

## LOOKING BACK THE BRAYBROOK STREET MURDERS

# Story of a day that shocked the nation

► With the notorious Harry Roberts making his bid for parole after 42 years in jail, **Rob Mansfield** looks back at the horrific day in Shepherds Bush when three policeman were killed

**T**HE summer of 1966 is best remembered for an event in west London that England football fans still cling to 43 years on.

However, less than a fortnight after Bobby Moore's England heroes won the World Cup at Wembley, another event down the road rocked the nation.

It was a sunny Friday afternoon and three crooks had decided to give up their hunt for a car to steal as part of a planned robbery. After driving around in search of a suitable vehicle, they headed for Wormwood Scrubs Common, to sit in the afternoon sun with the imposing Wormwood Scrubs Prison overlooking the parkland.

At the same time another car containing three men was travelling through Shepherds Bush. Police patrol car Foxtrot Eleven containing Det Sgt Christopher Head, PC Geoffrey Fox and Det Con David Wombwell spotted an old, battered, blue Vauxhall estate and possibly recognised one, or all, of John Witney, Scot Duddy and Harry Roberts, the three criminals. All were known to the police.

Whatever the reason for pulling the car over, it was not long before DS Head and DC Wombwell discovered that the car was untaxed and the insurance had run out just three hours earlier.

However, these offences were the least of the criminals' worries.

On the back seat were a set of false number plates, ready to use in their planned robbery of a local rent collector – and three guns.

Witney, Duddy and Roberts knew that if they were caught with the weapons they would each be facing prison sentences as long as 15 years. Roberts in particular had a lengthy criminal record, including convictions for theft, robbery with violence. It was this impending doom that sparked Roberts to make the first move,



suddenly shooting DC Wombwell in the left eye as he put his head in through the driver's window.

Seeing his colleague fall to the ground DS Head ran back to the police car that PC Fox had remained in. Roberts and Duddy leapt out of the Vauxhall and Roberts fired off another shot at the fleeing DS Head. He missed and the policeman got behind the Triumph 2000 patrol car, but was then shot in the back by Duddy.

Duddy fired at PC Fox twice from close range through the nearside passenger window but missed. However, a third shot hit PC Fox in the left temple, causing the policeman's foot to push down on the accelerator

and the car to jump forward over the live body of DS Head.

It was with some surprise that Bryan Deacon and his wife, Patricia, saw the criminals in the Vauxhall reversing towards them at speed along



**VICTIMS:** Murdered policemen (from top) Det Con David Wombwell, Det Sgt Christopher Head and PC Geoffrey Fox. Left: H&F Cllr Greg Smith and Insp Tysoe in the Braybrook Room at Hammersmith police station, set up as a memorial. Below left: Harry Roberts and, below right, a tribute at the murders in Braybrook Street

PICTURE LEFT BY DAVID TETT, BELOW RIGHT BY AYESHA ASKIN

charge Witney with the murder of the three police officers.

Before long, Witney folded, implicating Roberts and Duddy in a statement and taking police officers to show them where they both lived. However, by then Roberts and Duddy were on the run. After burying the guns on Hampstead Heath they decided to travel to Scotland, Roberts with his common-law wife, Lilian Perry. But at the last minute, in Euston station, Roberts tore up his ticket and Duddy caught the train without him.

Roberts bought camping equipment and food and, with Perry, caught a bus to Epping where he said goodbye to her. Perry returned to her flat and was immediately picked up by police and soon told them all she knew. The following morning Duddy was picked up by police in Glasgow. Officers also began a search of the 6,000 acres of Epping Forest they suspected Roberts to be camping in. Despite using 500 police officers, tracker dogs and a helicopter there was no sign of him.

### ROBERTS DISCOVERED

BY THE time the trial of Duddy and Witney opened at the Old Bailey on November 14 there had been more than 6,000 'sightings' of Roberts, none of which led to his arrest. However, just days into the trial he was finally discovered hiding out in the woods, and a new trial date of December 6 was set.

Roberts pleaded guilty to all the charges except the killing of DC Fox, while Duddy and Witney denied all charges and accused Roberts of terrorising them. All three were found guilty of murder and of possessing firearms, four months to the day after the crimes were committed. Each was sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation that they serve a minimum of 30 years.

Duddy died in the hospital at Parkhurst Prison in February 1981, Witney was released in 1991 and Roberts is, currently, still in custody.

Braybrook Street. Given that they were in the shadow of Wormwood Scrubs, the couple thought the occupants of the car were probably escaped prisoners and took down the vehicle registration and phoned the police.

### KILLED AT THE SCENE

ALL three policemen were killed at the scene, the first time that three officers had been murdered in one incident since 1911. Such a large loss of police life would not occur again until the 1983 IRA bombing of Harrods.

Witney opted to play it cool, returning home and being picked up at 9pm after the Vauxhall was traced to him as the owner. He maintained that he sold the car earlier that day to a stranger for £15, but by the following evening police had found the Vauxhall in a lock-up garage rented by Witney and inside the car were three .38 cartridges from Duddy's Colt. It was enough to



**The families of the murdered police will never get their loved ones back, so Roberts should never get his freedom back**  
**H&F Cllr Greg Smith**

