

MURDER: Confession And Corroboration

Murder is the ultimate crime, and as such attracts the stiffest and indeed at times the ultimate penalty. It is only right therefore that proving murder should require the strongest corroboration. The following two cases illustrate this graphically. Information about the first was gleaned from the documentary *Random Act Of Madness*; and about the second from the documentary *Babes In The Wood*. Additional sources have been utilised for this latter, but because of its notoriety there is no real need to cite them here.

In April 1995, Portland, Maine resident and father of four Billy Greenwood was shot dead for no apparent reason. Greenwood was a man who appears to have made friends and enemies in equal measure, so there was no shortage of suspects. His body was discovered in the open, and because of overnight rain there was no meaningful forensic evidence. Two prime suspects soon emerged, brothers, so-called local tough guys, with whom Greenwood had a history.

They held him responsible for a drug bust many years previously; even though Greenwood himself had served hard time because of it, he was thought to have been a “rat”. Naturally the brothers denied any involvement with the murder; they were subjected to a polygraph each – for what these tests are worth. They also had an alibi, a taxi driver. Back on the street they began to boast about murdering Greenwood, to everyone except the police.

Another lead came from a jailhouse informant who claimed he witnessed one of the brothers murder Greenwood. His account was both graphic and plausible, but it contained one false detail that led to the police dismissing it. Another jailhouse informant was more plausible, but again this account led nowhere.

Then the most extraordinary lead came in from New Orleans, some sixteen hundred miles away. A man had a violent altercation with his live-in girlfriend and told her that he’d do to her what he did to that guy in Portland, Maine. He gave her key details; the girl ran this information through her search engine, and horrified by what she found, called Portland police. It turned out that he had served time with the aforementioned brothers.

Then, more than a decade after this unsolved and perhaps never-to-be-solved crime, the real killer handed himself in. He was from out of town, a man with no connection to the victim; the crime was literally a random act of madness. Steven Cutting led the authorities to where he had dumped the murder weapon, which after all this time immersed in water, could still be positively identified as such. To the disgust of the victim’s family, Cutting pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was given a ten year sentence.

With no proper corroboration, do such boasts as those enumerated above, count? If they had, two men without blood on their hands would almost certainly have been convicted of this crime. Compare this case with the conviction of Michael Stone.

The *Babes In The Wood* case is nowhere near as convoluted, but is interesting nevertheless. In March 1970, 12 year old Susan Blatchford and 11 year old Gary

Hanlon went missing in Epping Forest. They were murdered by predatory paedophile Ronald Jebson, but although he was known to be living not that many miles away, he was only one of a number of possible culprits. In fact, by the time the bodies were found it was not possible – or so it was believed at the time – to determine a cause of death. Jebson was lodging in Hatfield with Robert Papper, an old schoolfriend. Four years later, he would repay Papper's kindness by murdering his eight year old daughter.

More than two decades into his life sentence, Jebson claimed from Wakefield Prison that he had information about the *Babes In The Woods* murders; they were, he said, committed by Papper and his wife. This left the police the odious task while investigating these claims of putting them to Robert Papper. The Pappers were ruled out, which left two possibilities: either Jebson was making everything up, for whatever reason, or he was himself responsible. In due course, he confessed, but what is a confession worth? If your name is Michael Stone and you are alleged to have shouted it through a prison wall to the inmate in the next cell – a man who tries to phone his own dead mother – it counts a lot, but in order to corroborate Jebson's claims, the body of Susan Blatchford was exhumed, Gary Hinton's having been cremated.

The result was that previously overlooked crush injuries were found, and these partly corroborated some of the claims made by Jebson about the murders. In 2000, thirty years on from the *Babes In The Woods* murders, Jebson pleaded guilty, and received another two life sentences.

It might be argued that his conviction was academic; he was already serving one life sentence for the murder of a child, and in view of his track record he was unlikely ever to be released. Justice does not work like that though, at least not in the UK most of the time.

At times, even a guilty plea will not be considered sufficient without corroboration. In December 1979, Bruce George Peter Lee set fire to a house in Selby Street, Hull, an attack that led to the deaths of three young boys. When Lee was brought to trial in January 1981, he pleaded guilty to 26 counts of manslaughter, having confessed to a number of other fires including one in January 1977 which had killed no fewer than 11 elderly men. However, in December 1983, the Court Of Appeal quashed Lee's conviction for the Wensley Lodge fire because of "a lingering doubt" about his responsibility for it.

So where is the corroboration in the case of Michael Stone and the Chillenden Murders? Come to think of it, where is the evidence?

It is true that although in one sense this case is unique, there are other cases, including murders, in which defendants have been convicted on the most tenuous of evidence, check out for example the case of Omar Benguit, who is currently serving a life sentence for a murder that was almost certainly committed by a psychopath named Danilo Restivo. If a murder case that involves a genuine confession requires some corroboration, then one that is based solely on an entirely bogus confession surely requires a great deal more. Tell that to the intellectual prostitutes and outright liars who control our criminal justice system. At the end of the day, these people believe what they want to believe, which is why the best way to get away with murder is to carry a warrant card.