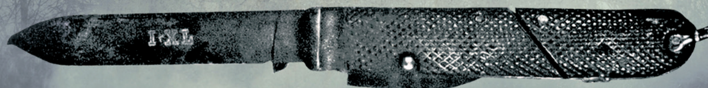
THE WIGWAM MURDER

A FORENSIC INVESTIGATION IN WW2 BRITAIN



M.J. TROW

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Chapter 1

The Girl in the Wood

Hankley Common, now. The Grey Goose Moon. A knife's throw from the busy A31 and the busier A3, where traffic races north-east to bypass the bottleneck that is Guildford and to join the nightmare that is the M25. Large, opulent houses are set back from the road, ringed with neat lawns and rhododendron bushes and studded with burglar alarms; middle-class, Home Counties Britain in the days of recession.

Drive south-west from Milford Crossroads; go back, back in time. Look at the older maps; the older names. Hammer Pond, the Moat, Houndown, Pitlands, the Devil's Jumps. Take the minor roads, twisting through the countryside as they did before the Highway Code. Leave the car under the pines and climb to the heights of Kettlebury Hill. Here it is exposed, lonely. The only sound is the moan of the wind in the wires. On all sides stretch sandy dunes and yellow coarse clumps of grass. The mixed forest of conifers lies, a darker green, among the deciduous birches; the heather, carpets of purple and mauve, makes spring pathways.

The trees have grown up. Seventy years on they clothe the slopes of Houndown Wood. Count the rings of those that have been felled; they would have been saplings then. Duck under the conifers that the hurricane of 1987 brought down across the dell. Here the bracken is thick, the leaves are a brown carpet of decay. Stand still. Listen. It was here. Here the deadly dance began.

She ran this way; forwards, down towards the stream, towards the road. It was not far – 200–300 yards. Here, where the tripwire lay, are her teeth still buried, smashed from her gums. She did not make it, in

the still early morning, as his stronger legs closed the distance between them and the blood filled her eyes and dripped from her ripped arms. The birches still stare down from the hill, silent witnesses.

The chase ended at the stream, at the slit-trench in the mossy hollow where her head was smashed to a pulp, where her skull disintegrated and her breath stopped. He rolled her sideways under the leaves. He saw her face, a mask of blood, her front teeth gone, her right cheek shattered, the dark stain spreading over her thin, green cotton dress. He left her under the blanket. He had to be elsewhere, before they missed him.

On that hilltop, now covered with conifers, he dragged her – what? Two, three days later? – in the darkness of a September night. She was still lying in the leaf mould. The last flies of summer droned upwards at his approach. Did he look at her face under the stars? The red blood turned brown and caked hard? The laughing eyes now cold and dull and still. By the left arm he dragged her, face down now, her bare legs ripped by brambles. Not long before, they had picked those blackberries together and laughed and tickled each other, as lovers will. Children had watched them, curious in the upside-down world they lived in; nosiness that would be honed to a razor in the confines of a court of law. Her shoes fell off as her dead feet bounced on the bracken, 16 yards to the first shoe, 35 to the second. Then up the steep bracken-deep hill to the top, to the high ground, where the tanks trained. To the sky.

The army is still here. Signs read 'Troops training – there may be sudden movements and noises near paths and bridleways.' There are black Nissen huts, khaki vehicles, perimeter fences. After seventy years, the army is still here.

On Hankley Common, then – Wednesday, 7 October 1942 – the Moon the Birds Fly South – among the picturesque moorland of the Surrey-Sussex border 'with its gentle hills topped with bracken and heather, fir trees and silver birch', between Godalming and the Hog's Back, more than 100,000 American and Canadian troops were camped. One woman

who walked here in those days was Molly Lefebure, who remembered the area in *Evidence for the Crown*:

> Hankley Common was a former beauty spot, all heathery slopes, broken with graceful spinneys of birch and oak and surrounded by wide vistas of wooded countryside and windswept sky. The Army, noting its loveliness, had of course taken it over as a battle-training ground. Camps had been built in the neighbouring woods and every day young men were taken out and toughened up amid a welter of anti-tank obstacles, mortar ranges, field telephones and trip-wires.

Chief Inspector Edward Greeno of Scotland Yard knew it too:

> the whole panorama of the plain, pitted with tank traps and pimpled with those man-made mounds.

There was a war on and on that day the Marines were exercising in the sand dunes. POX 100381 William Moore RM was patrolling the area on a routine march. Everywhere the ground was rutted by the iron teeth of tanks, lurching over the heather in search of phoney enemies with blackened faces and leaves wound round their helmets. In one such tank track, at a little before 10.20 Ack Emma, Moore saw what appeared to be a human hand protruding from a mound of earth. He crouched beside it. The thumb and the first two fingers had been gnawed away, as though by rats. There was a foot too, protruding at the other end of what was clearly a human body. Moore did not touch the grisly find, but reported it at once to Sergeant CHX 103272 Jack Withington RM, who, in the tradition of all services, passed the information on up the line, this time to Lieutenant Norman McLeod. The officer joined his men on the hillside and took one look. Then he telephoned the police.

It was Sergeant Benjamin Ballard of the Surrey constabulary stationed at Milford who arrived at the scene, together with Constable

A. W. Bundy from Thursley. In the emergency situation of wartime, police forces throughout the country, especially those on the fringes of London, had to take extraordinary measures to cope with the extraordinary demands made on them. The Surrey force was now a joint one, along with the police of the boroughs of Reigate and Guildford. With hindsight at the trial which followed, Ballard was able to testify that the hand in the mound belonged to a woman, but there was nothing on that Wednesday to verify this. Even the protruding foot at the opposite end of the mound gave little away, except that the body seemed to be lying face down in a shallow and makeshift grave.

By evening, the full panoply of the law was in action and a knot of trilby-hatted, trench-coated policemen stood grim-faced inside a cordon around which uniformed officers patrolled, still in their upright Victorian collars, their gas masks and tin hats in canvas bags at their hips. Superintendent Richard Webb, stationed at Godalming, had been informed at 4 p.m. He ordered the mound to be covered with a mackintosh sheet. He noted that the earth was criss-crossed with the tyre tracks of a military vehicle, probably a half-track, and it was this which had displaced the earth sufficiently to reveal the hand and leg. Strange how incidents like this interfere with cunning. The best laid plans of mice and men …

Twenty-four hours later, Webb was accompanied by Major Nicholson, the chief constable of Surrey, Superintendent Thomas Roberts, head of the Surrey CID, and police photographer Inspector Eric Boshier as they made their way to the murder scene. With them was Dr Eric Gardner, consulting pathologist at Weybridge Hospital, and Dr Keith Simpson, lecturer in forensic medicine at Guy's Hospital. With them too was Molly Lefebure, Simpson's secretary.

> Greetings were exchanged and then off we set to climb a windy ridge which reared itself, rain-swept and dismal, ahead of us. It is odd how it invariably begins to rain when one reaches the scene of a crime …

Miss Lefebure, young, inexperienced, female, remembers shivering in the cold, trying to warm herself by smoking.

> Few young journalists [wrote Simpson years later] can have had the remarkable experience that befell Molly Lefebure on her translation from 'crime and news' reporter on a London newspaper to a job then quite unique – private secretary to a pathologist engaged in scientific crime detection in and around the metropolis of London.

Molly Lefebure had studied journalism at London University and in 1939–40 was working as a reporter on a chain of East London weeklies. She walked, she later wrote, on average 12 miles a day, working from 8.30 in the morning until 10.30 at night, seven days a week. Her take-home pay was £1. She covered everything from Boy Scout meetings to the Blitz. But something within her drew her to the coroner's court and police court like a moth to a flame. It was here that she met Simpson:

> He certainly looked remarkable; there was something of genius about him, a hint of lightning flashes and thunderbolts. I frequently mused upon his unique but intriguing occupation, wondering whether cutting up bodies all day long had any effect upon the cutter-upper …

Cedric Keith Simpson – CKS to colleagues and friends – was 35 at the time. His rise had been meteoric. The son of a doctor from Brighton, he had been educated at Brighton and Hove Grammar School and entered Guy's Hospital Medical School in 1924. Here, he won all the glittering prizes: the Hilton prize for dissection; the Wooldridge prize for physiology; the Beaney prize for pathology; the Golding-Bird gold medal; and a scholarship in bacteriology. After he qualified in 1930, he joined the clinical staff at Guy's and became a lecturer in pathology there in 1932. Five years later, he began to devote himself entirely to

forensic medicine – hence his constant appearance in the courts which Molly Lefebure frequented.

It was the heyday of the forensic scientist. Donald Teare and Francis Camps were his contemporaries and Simpson often crossed swords with them in court. Over them all, however, was the almost legendary figure of the gaunt, hollow-eyed Bernard Spilsbury. 'These were the days,' Simpson wrote with hindsight in 1954, 'when Spilsbury was fading'. The honorary Pathologist to the Home Office killed himself shortly before Christmas 1947.

On that damp Surrey hillside, Simpson, assured, steady, every inch the professional, only remembers taking off his jacket in the heat. 'The stench of putrefaction was strong,' he wrote in *Forty Years of Murder*, 'the air was buzzing with flies and the remains of the body were crawling with maggots.' He estimated that it must have lain exposed to the air for long enough for blowflies to have settled and laid their eggs. There were, he told the police, two or three successive egg-layings. The body would have been partially covered first, perhaps with leaves or a blanket.

Tom Roberts remembered the scene years later in his autobiography, *Friends and Villains*.

> the grave was shallow and the soil light and sandy. Decomposition was well advanced, the skull had collapsed and most of the soft tissue of the head and neck and lower parts of the body had been completely eaten away by maggots.

Together, Simpson and Gardner, who were old friends and had worked on cases as a team before, began to scrape away the earth with shovels. Everyone who could moved out of the wind to escape the stench, but the stoical Miss Lefebure stood by CKS taking from the pathologist specimens of beetles, maggots, earth and heather, carefully labelling them in separate buff envelopes. The police photographer angled his shots and the camera popped and flashed on that rainy hillside.

The body was clearly that of a woman, lying face down in the Surrey soil, the remnants of her clothing clinging to her decomposing form, her legs apart, her left arm stretched forward as though she had been dragged. Her hand and leg were becoming mummified and parts of her had been eaten by rats. The head in particular was on the point of disintegration, a seething mass of maggots. She was wearing a tatty green and white summer frock with a lace collar, fastened around the waist with string. Her underclothing consisted of a slip, vest, brassiere and French knickers, all of it shabby. A headscarf was tied loosely around her neck and she wore short ankle socks but no shoes.

Kneeling by her side, Simpson speculated on the cause of death: 'A heavy blunt instrument, perhaps an iron bar or a wooden pole or stake'. In his mind were wilder speculations which it was not his business to voice: 'A sex assault and strangling? Concealment after a stabbing in London or an abortion death in some nearby city?' And most prophetically (although cheating, I suspect, with hindsight): 'A ritual burial on a hilltop'.

Dr Gardner estimated, from the extent of the flowering heather around the body, that the woman had been buried five or six weeks earlier. Gardner, the local man, knew his heaths. The heather finished flowering about the beginning of September. That took the likely time of the murder to the end of August or early September, the Snow Goose Moon; an important initial 'timing' for the police, but one that was to be proved wrong by between two and three weeks.

It was clearly impossible to learn more from the rotting corpse *in situ* so Gardner and Simpson contacted the coroner, Dr Wills Taylor, who gave permission for it to be taken to Guy's for the week's work in the laboratory that Simpson estimated would be necessary. They wrapped what was left of her in a waterproof sheet.

> Maggots seethed out of the chest and abdominal cavity [Simpson wrote later] and by tea-time thousands more were struggling for life in a carbolic bath in Guy's Hospital Mortuary.

Molly Lefebure was heartily glad that she had not had to travel back to London in the police van with the corpse.

Cases like that of the body on the common formed only part of Keith Simpson's work. As Home Office Pathologist, he has rightly won a place as one of the greatest of forensic scientists, dominating the middle years of the century.

Guy's Hospital, where the body now lay, was founded in 1721 by Thomas Guy, bookseller and printer, who made a fortune in speculation and endowed a number of charitable foundations. The original block, Guy's House, built in 1729, had been badly damaged by bombs in 1941 when Simpson was working there as Assistant Curator in the Gordon Museum. Three months before the body at Hankley Common was found, the great man had led his assistant, S. F. Ireland, and Molly Lefebure into a tiny room off the Department of Clinical Chemistry. 'Miss Lefebure, Ireland,' he announced with a flourish, 'allow me to usher you across the threshold of Guy's Hospital Department of Forensic Medicine.' Ireland was carrying a microscope, Molly Lefebure a typewriter and Simpson the remains of what turned out to be Mrs Dobkin, murdered by her husband Harry in another spectacular case which effectively launched the department. As such, it is worthy of discussion.

There was a war on. And one of the targets of that war, whether wittingly or not, was a Baptist Chapel in the Vauxhall Road, Lambeth. Workmen hacking with pick and shovel to clear the debris found a partially mummified corpse under the shattered flagstones. It was 17 July 1942, a date we shall meet again. The remains were taken to Southwark Mortuary where Simpson went to work. The body was that of a woman (her mummified womb was still in place) and she was not a victim of the bomb blast. In fact, she had been quite carefully buried in slaked lime and its yellow deposits still clung to the corpse.

Simpson reassembled the bones, and the macabre jigsaw, using Pearson's formulae (then the most reliable technique for gauging

height) produced the result that the dead woman was 5 feet ½ inch tall. She was between 40 and 50 and her hair was dark brown, turning grey. Beyond that, all recognizable features had disappeared. A swelling in the uterus and the survival of the teeth in the dead woman's upper jaw proved beyond a shadow of a doubt, however, that she was Rachel Dobkin, aged 47, the estranged wife of the local fire-watcher, who had vanished fifteen months earlier on her way to visit her husband over a matter of arrears of maintenance.

'That's my patient!' [Mrs Dobkin's dentist] burst out excitedly on seeing her skull upturned on Simpson's bench at Guy's. 'That's Mrs Dobkin! Those are my fillings!'

> It was as dramatic a moment as I can remember [Simpson wrote]. Molly Lefebure nearly fell off her lab stool.

At the Old Bailey in November, the jury took twenty minutes to find Harry Dobkin guilty of murdering his wife. He was hanged at Wandsworth Prison, on 27 January 1943.

The 'department' at Guy's measured 10 feet by 5 and when all three of its members were there, accompanied frequently by portions of a corpse, it appeared very small indeed. A bench ran the length of one wall and above it a single window gave a view of a brick wall and the smoky Southwark sky. There were two stools, a number of reference books, a set of weighing scales and a huge blotter. The whole room had been lent to Simpson by Dr Ryffel, Head of Clinical Chemistry. It was his weighing room.

By 1942, the worst of the Blitz was over but London was still a city in turmoil. Everywhere were the craters of incendiary bombs and the shells of buildings. Simpson's work was an endless round of post-mortems, police courts, coroners' courts, magistrates' courts, the Old Bailey. With Molly Lefebure in tow, he visited prisons, hospitals, asylums – 'the alleys and filthy courtyards and tenements of Limehouse, Rotherhithe, Poplar, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green,

Whitechapel, Stratford-by-Bow' – the decayed wreck of the still-Victorian Metropolis. Then there were the 'amazing no-man's-land of the suburbs' and 'the West End … plushy, well-washed, but with its sordid secrets in Chelsea, Westminster, Marylebone.'

It was the day of the spiv and the black marketeer. And a young airman named Gordon Cummins had left a trail of terror in London with four corpses mutilated in the space of five days. With all this going on and the Metropolitan Police stretched to breaking point, Simpson examined the Hankley Common corpse in his tea-breaks, much to Miss Lefebure's disgust, alongside the carbolic tank in which the body floated. They sat with their teacakes and anchovy toast while Simpson worked on the cadaver, occasionally assisted by Gardner, who came up from Surrey for the purpose. By this means, Simpson was able to answer all the questions the police would need to ask in order to ascertain who this woman was and how she had died.

He at first agreed with Gardner that she had died between five and seven weeks before she had been found. He later revised this to a month, based on the extent of adipocere in the breasts and thighs. This is a whitish, fatty substance which occurs in damp conditions. It smells and feels horrible and clings to the bone, retaining the body's usual shape. The process – known as saponification – by which neutral body fats are hydrolysed into a mixture of fatty acids and soap, normally takes five to six weeks to reach the stage it had in this case, but Simpson realized that the huge presence of maggots would have generated heat, accelerating the process considerably. So the woman had probably died in the middle of September.

He then turned his attention to the cause of death. The dead woman's skull had been shattered by a single, very violent blow. The head had all but collapsed and Simpson and Gardner spent three days carefully piecing and wiring together the thirty-eight major pieces of the skull. At the back was a gaping hole, 1¾ inches across, which was the site of the impact. The length of the entire impact area was 5¼ inches. From this at least six fractures radiated outwards, three, which Simpson was

to number 4, 5 and 6, to the base of the skull, and three (1, 2 and 3) across the top, number 2 following a suture line. The pieces of bone left in a pile on Simpson's bench belonged to the gaping hole, but there were lots of them, each one too small to reconstruct. A second area of the same width and contiguous with the hole indicated that a heavy blunt instrument with a diameter of 1¾ inches and of indeterminate length had been brought down diagonally across the back of the head. It followed then that her killer had struck from behind. The blow would have caused loss of consciousness immediately and death within a few minutes, from shock and brain damage.

It was not as simple as that, however. There was a series of stab wounds at the front of the skull and on top, but without any skin or flesh remaining, Simpson was unable to tell whether these had been delivered before or after death. There were three holes, grouped close together on the top left of the head, indicating that whoever made them had attacked with his right hand while facing his victim. Simpson checked the right arm, the one that would naturally be raised to ward off such an attack. Although Simpson maintains this in *Forty Years of Murder* and was to offer it in hypothesis at the trial, the notion seems flawed. It is the *left* arm of the victim which is nearer to a right-handed attacker striking from the front. A right-handed person would probably raise both arms in defence. Similar stab wounds peppered this arm and microscopic evidence proved that these where inflicted while the victim was still very much alive, fighting in fact for her life.

In *Murder What Dunnit*, J. H. H. Gauté and Robin Odell say that the knife 'superseded the axe and the bludgeon, lending subtlety and concealment to the act of killing'. This was clearly not so here, as both blade and bludgeon were used – and subtlety is hardly the word for the fatal blow in this case.

Knife attacks constitute two types – the cut, incision or slash as exemplified in the Ripper murders of 1888 and the stab, as here. The latter produces small slits at the point of entry which often cause relatively little bleeding. As these wounds were to the head, however,

Simpson assumed that bleeding was profuse. A single-edged weapon would leave a 'tear-drop' shape, as opposed to the shallow ellipse of a double-edged knife. In this case, however, there was no flesh left on the head and the wounds on the skull were virtually circular, looking for all the world like counter-sunk screw holes. Chief Inspector Greeno likened them to the work of a brace and bit.

From this, Simpson was able to establish the likely course of events. Two of the three holes in the front of the head were shallow cuts. They were probably delivered first, would have caused great pain, dizziness and possibly later collapse, but the woman would still have been able to run away. The front teeth were missing from the upper jaw and this could have been caused by a fall or by a fist to the mouth. The fracture to the victim's right cheek, however, cleared this dilemma up. It was a crush fracture which had separated the cheekbone and was commensurate with the fatal blow to the back of the skull having been struck while she lay face down on the ground. One of the radiating cracks in the skull had virtually reached this bone below the right eye socket.

The murder weapon, Simpson had already decided, was likely to be a pole or bough – and in Houndown Wood, a mixture of coniferous and deciduous woodland, such things were hardly in short supply. The knife that caused the stab wounds, however, was highly distinctive and it led with deadly accuracy to the man apparently guilty of murder. The wound in the right forearm and another on the palm of the right hand had the curious feature of tissue and tendons pulled out of the slit, as though by a sharp hook. The wounds to the front of the skull had bevelled edges, as though the point of the weapon had been twisted before withdrawal. Why should the murderer have done that? To inflict greater pain? Or because a peculiarity in the knife gave him no choice if he was to retrieve it to strike again? Simpson was therefore able to tell the police that they were looking for a knife with a blade like a parrot's beak.

The victim's brain had gone. Her face had gone. But she told an eloquent story still.

On two points she remained silent. Dr Eric Gardner at the trial which followed was asked whether he and Simpson had examined the woman to see if she had been pregnant. His reply was that it always occurred to pathologists to do this in the case of young female corpses, but that not enough of the uterus remained to be positive on this point. Something of the shame of an unwanted pregnancy still lingered in Britain in 1942, for all there was a war on. There were scores of women living in wretched conditions in mental hospitals and asylums because they had 'fallen' (note the vituperative word) pregnant in their teens. It was still a motive for murder. Simpson agreed that the generation of gases after death might well have dissolved the foetus anyway. The other imponderable – and one that had to be cleared up quickly for any headway to be made at all – was: who was the dead girl?

Simpson was able to provide a working description of the girl, although her face was beyond recognition. The X-rays of her bones and the state of her teeth indicated that she was between 19 and 20. She was 5 feet 4 inches tall with a small frame. Her hair was fine, a mousy-brown colour, probably worn in the then fashionable bobbed style, and had been bleached some weeks earlier. The most distinctive feature about her, oddly enough, could be gauged by the angle of her missing front teeth – they had protruded significantly.

The clothing was unhelpful, but the fact that she was wearing brassiere, slip and knickers indicated that sexual assault was not involved. It was the green and white summer frock, however, that rang bells with Superintendent Webb of the Surrey force who visited Guy's on the day that Simpson removed the clothing. He had seen that frock briefly in his own office on 23 July and again in August for rather longer. At her own instigation, the girl wearing it had gone to a local hospital. Her name was Joan Pearl Wolfe. She was 19 and had had protruding teeth. There was no need for the elaborate reconstruction of the dead girl's face which Professor Brash had created in the Ruxton case some years earlier.

At the end of September 1935, a woman crossing Gardenholme Linn, a tributary of the River Annan, on the road between Carlisle and Edinburgh, saw a human arm lying in the mud below her. Subsequent police investigation revealed the dismembered remains of two female bodies, wrapped, like old chips, in the *Sunday Graphic* for 15 September. This particular edition was sold only in the Morecambe and Lancaster areas and eventually the two women were traced to Bukhtyar Ratanji Hakim, a Parsee doctor living in Lancaster and practising under the mercifully simpler Anglicized name of Buck Ruxton. His common-law wife, Isabella Van Ess, had left him, he said, for another man. And her maid, Mary Rogerson, had taken the opportunity to leave too.

Forensically, the two corpses in the river mud matched in general terms, but the specifics were less neat. Mary Rogerson had an obvious squint, but the eyes had been removed. Isabella 'Ruxton', like Joan Wolfe, had prominent front teeth. These, too, had gone. She also had a deformed left foot and this was mutilated.

Professors Glaister and Brash, working out of Edinburgh University, pieced together the seventy pieces which the two women had been extended to. Brash's superimposed photograph of Isabella 'Ruxton' over the skull of one body has become legendary and features in most modern forensic books.

Ruxton, who admitted screaming rows with his wife, had tried to hawk a woman's bloodstained suit recently and carpets at his home were found to be bloodstained too. He was an arrogant, unpleasant individual with whom the jury at his subsequent trial had no empathy. He was hanged at Strangeways Prison, Manchester on 12 May 1936.

Neither, in the case of Joan Wolfe, was there a need for a house-to-house search in which hundreds of coppers would ask 'Have you seen this woman?', wearing down shoe leather and tempers in equal quantities. They knew who she was. All they had to know now was the answer to one question – how did she come to die in Houndown Wood, her head smashed to a pulp?