

THE SIDNEY STREET SEIGE & LOCAL HISTORY

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Most 'local history', as you will expect, is quite parochial, but sometimes local events have a national (or even international) significance, and occasionally national stories having an unexpected local twist. The Sidney Street Siege of 1911 was one such event.



Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, controversially co-ordinated the troops and police during the siege.

The story really begins in December 1910 when a gang of thieves attempted to break into a jewellers shop in Houndsditch in the City of London. Their noise was heard by a neighbour who informed the police. They responded by sending three sergeants and six constables.

Two of the sergeants knocked at the door of the building that backed onto the jewellers shop, not realising perhaps that that was the property from where the burglars were preparing the heist. One of the gang opened the door, but when he did not answer the policemen's questions they assumed he didn't understand English and asked him to fetch someone who did. The gang-member went inside, followed by the officers, who were then shot at by several members of the gang. Sergeant Tucker died at the scene and Sergeant Bentley later died of his wounds in hospital.

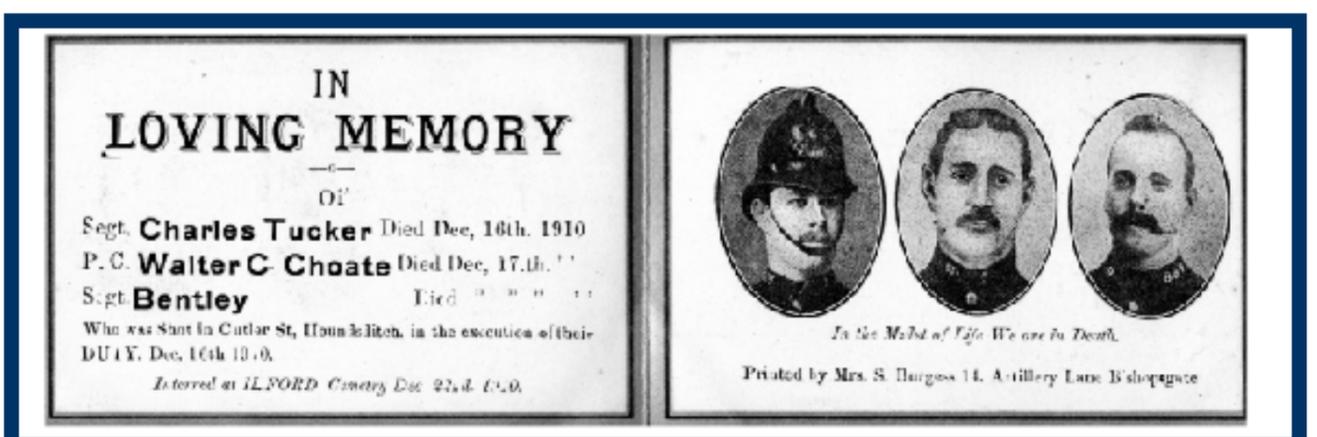
Alerted by the gun-fire the other policemen rushed to the scene with one, Constable Choate, managing to grab the gang's leader, George Gardstein. In the struggle both Gardstein and Choate received gun-shot wounds, before Choate was shot by other members of the gang who then managed to escape dragging their mortally wounded associate with them.

Not surprisingly there was a huge search for the gang which culminated in the siege at 100 Sidney Street on the 3rd January 1911. By now the gang, under the influence of an anarchist known by the name of 'Peter the Painter', were heavily armed, and in response the Metropolitan Police (under whose jurisdiction the Sidney Street property lay), called for assistance from the military, with a detachment of Scots Guards being sent from the Tower of London. The Home Secretary, a young gentleman by the name of Winston Churchill, arrived to observe the battle that was taking place. Six hours into the siege, when a fire broke out in the building, it is claimed that Churchill refused to allow the fire brigade to attend the building, hoping no doubt to 'smoke them out' (although one fireman was tragically

killed by falling debris whilst later putting out the flames).

The famous photograph shows the top-hatted Churchill on the front line (with a photographer perched on the roof above), a position that former Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, thought highly irresponsible. "He and a photographer were both risking valuable lives. I understand what the photographer was doing, but what was the Right Honourable gentleman doing?" he questioned.

Getting great publicity was probably the real answer. The newsreels at the time had captured much of the siege including, it is alleged, the moment a bullet supposedly passed through Churchill's hat!





Funeral of P.C. Choate
at Byfleet Dec 23. 1910

But what of the local connection?

Sadly PC Walter Choate, who was brutally murdered in the Houndsditch Robbery, lived in Byfleet with his family. It was here just a couple of days before Christmas 1910 that the funeral took place (before the final siege up in London). Hundreds lined the streets of the village as the procession made its way to St Mary's

churchyard where the funeral of the brave thirty-six year old took place. A local end to an event that had national (and potentially international) implications!

The final photograph shows not the City of London Fire Brigade that put out the fire in Sidney Street, but the Byfleet Brigade of 1910

The funeral of Walter Choate saw hundreds of people line the streets of Byfleet on the 23rd December 1910.

proudly displaying their new steam-powered fire engine - complete with wicket basket to catch any fish (or other debris) whilst the brigade pumped water from local ponds and stream to put out any flames.

Byfleet Fire Brigade with Captain Vivian Howell of Chertsey Road, Byfleet, standing in front of their new steam-powered engine in 1910.



1910 - THE BIRTH OF SCOUTING IN THE WOKING AREA

In 1907 Lord Baden Powell founded the Boy Scouts, with the Girl Guides movement being created just three years later. In this area a number of local people obviously thought the idea a good one with Scout troops being founded in Old Woking, Horsell and Byfleet & Pyrford by 1910.

Mr Vivian Howell (known apparently as 'Spotty' by the lads – although never to his face) was the Scout Leader at Byfleet (as well as Captain of the local fire brigade).

The picture here shows the handcart that was used to transport their gear to the station at West Byfleet where it was apparently dismantled for conveyance by train to their 'camp' at places such as Hayling Island or Pagham. At the other end it would be re-erected and loaded – the record assembly or disassembly time being allegedly four seconds. I wonder whether some of the lads helped in the change wheels in the pits at Brooklands!



1910-11 - PARISH DAY & THE COUNTRY DANCERS OF ST MARY'S SCHOOL



This mysterious photograph of some of the girls of St Mary's School in Byfleet was taken in about 1910, but why they were wearing what appears to be paper hats is unknown. It is assumed that they were practicing for some country dance, possibly for that year's Parish Day Celebrations, that was held that year in a field off Chertsey Road known as 'Bone's Field' – where, for the first time the previous year, a fee of 6d was charged for entry to all except those over sixty and children.

Byfleet Parish Day had started in 1865 as a celebration of the restoration of St Mary's Church, but it quickly transformed into a parish festival with a flower show, sports and dancing being introduced in the 1880's and even a fireworks display in 1890. In 1892 there was a cycle race around the grounds of West Hall, and in 1902 (combined with Coronation Day celebrations) a free tea for over a thousand parishioners.

First Prize for sweet peas in the Byfleet Parish Day of 1911

