

Memories of a chilling crime that remains a mystery

The murder of the five prostitutes in Ipswich brings to mind a similar serial killing in the early sixties which hit the headlines when I first arrived at the Brentford and Chiswick Times.

The case had many parallels. All the bodies were naked and several were discovered around Dukes Meadows, on the Richmond/Chiswick border. Police inquiries got nowhere.

The stretch of river bank by Chiswick Bridge known as Riverside Drive was notorious at that time and christened Gobbler's Gulch by the local constabulary. Every evening, courting couples were much in evidence there as you could park cars close to the river and there was little chance of being disturbed.

It was perfect venue for the girls to bring their clients from Earls Court, Notting Hill or the West End, where the main red light districts were situated – ironically taking advantage of the dogma where the country met the town.

Widespread publicity was generated by the case – but chiefly in the News of the World and the tabloids. The broadsheets had higher things on their minds in those days.

The murders were spread out over a long period – between 1959 and 1965 – and there were eight victims, their bodies generally finishing up in our circulation area. Press coverage was not so intense as there was not a lot of public sympathy – the prevailing view was that girls who did that sort of thing deserved that sort of end.

The fascination was less compassionate and more prurient. The Brentford and Chiswick Times carried the story extensively and the three London newspapers that existed in those days –



The Malcolm Richards Column

the Star, News and Standard – kept their readers up to date. But overall everything was much more muted.

Puritanism still reined supreme and to have expressed sympathy with women who involved themselves in such disreputable commerce would have been to step outside acceptable contemporary thinking.

There was a huge investigation, but there was not the same kind of national concern and there was no question of reconstructions or of 300 policemen combing the surrounding parkland. No clergymen prayed for their souls or expressed sympathy with their families.

The permissive society was in its infancy although the first signs of the red light district spreading to the suburbs were seen in newsagent windows in Chiswick High Road where ladies of the night advertised their wares on carefully-coded postcards: 'Chest of drawers for sale', 'Brief underwear available', 'Strict disciplinarian offers French lessons'.

Considerable ingenuity was shown in finding words that would not offend the innocent but would attract the right class.

Sometimes police ordered newsagents to remove them and occasionally indignant readers would call and report that they had phoned a number to get some extra curricular foreign language tuition for their offspring only to be offered, 'personal services'. It was no joke in 1962.

The Dukes Meadows murders had all the ingredients to boost newspaper sales. And although the coverage was of a lower key there was plenty of opportunity for lurid detail and speculation and analysis.

In those days local reporters were able to interview the police officers involved personally – unlike today where you only meet the front men, police officers specially trained to deal with the press.

The Chiswick detectives loved to tell lurid tales of their experiences with low life and the criminal underworld and we were regaled with their own pet

theories about who was responsible and how they operated. (A bent copper was one theory in the early stages).

Homosexuality was still illegal and their stories were spiced with descriptions of how they slipped into public lavatories to find an easy prey. Sex crimes were easy meat for officers who needed to prove they were on the ball and soliciting by men and women was easy to prove.

No one was ever charged with the Dukes Meadows murders. Eventually the killings stopped and public interest subsided. Police had their own theories about what had happened and the most prevalent was that a night watchman at a local factory was responsible – and had committed suicide when he suspected the police were on his track.

The last victim had been found with traces of paint on her body that was traced to a factory on an Acton trading estate.

The more enlightened attitude that prevails today has meant that the Ipswich tragedies are being investigated more openly with greater public involvement. With all the new scientific techniques that have since been developed it will be very surprising if the culprit or culprits are not eventually convicted.

And it is good to see that this has generated a new debate about whether laws which ban soliciting, brothels and drug-taking need reviewing so that women desperate for a fix are not forced to risk their lives by taking violent men into sordid toilet backwaters.

If drugs were regularised and brothels were legalised – some good would have emerged from this hideous slaughter.