

CHAPTER TEN

Detective Inspector Smith's Visit to the Crematorium

The Purpose of the Visit

- 10.1 On his return from Selbourne House on 1st April 1998, Detective Inspector Smith telephoned Dukinfield crematorium and arranged to visit, probably that afternoon. He told the Inquiry that his purpose in so doing was to find out whether the proportion of cremations to burials among Shipman's patients was normal. He also wished to identify the female undertaker of whom Dr Reynolds had spoken.
- 10.2 DI Smith's interest in the proportion of cremations to burials was based on a misunderstanding of Dr Reynolds' concerns. He had somehow gained the impression that it was a cause of concern that a greater proportion of Shipman's patients was being cremated than was normal and that Shipman might, in some way, be influencing the choice of the method of disposal of the bodies of his victims in order to destroy evidence of wrongdoing. He said that he was puzzled by this supposed concern, as he could not understand how a doctor would be able to influence the relatives in favour of cremation rather than burial. He accepted that Dr Reynolds could not have told him of concerns about an abnormal proportion of cremations, as she would not have known how many of Shipman's patients had been buried; she only knew that there were a lot of cremations. It is theoretically possible that Dr Reynolds told DI Smith that Mrs Bambroffe was concerned about the proportion of cremations among Shipman's patients. However, there is no evidence that she did and no evidence that this had ever been one of Mrs Bambroffe's concerns. Although he was puzzled by the nature of this supposed concern, DI Smith did not speak to anyone in an attempt to clarify his confusion. It seems likely that Dr Reynolds told him she was concerned about the number of cremations and DI Smith assumed that she meant cremations, as opposed to burials, not appreciating that the Brooke Practice doctors were only involved in the cremations and not the burials.

The Visit

- 10.3 On his arrival at the crematorium, DI Smith met the Senior Registrar, Mr Michael Gurney. Mr Gurney said that DI Smith was accompanied by another police officer. DI Smith said he was alone. I am unable to say who is right.
- 10.4 DI Smith said that he did not tell Mr Gurney the precise nature of his enquiries; he did not mention that they were connected with Shipman, although he made it clear that he was engaged in a confidential investigation. He believed that he might have told Mr Gurney that the Coroner was involved. He had with him his bundle of copy death certificates from the register office. He did not take his spreadsheet with him. He wanted to find out which of the deceased of whom he knew appeared in the cremation register. Those who did not appear must have been buried. Mr Gurney told him that, in general, about 70% of deaths were followed by cremation. DI Smith also wanted to find out the name of the funeral director in each case.
- 10.5 DI Smith did not ask Mr Gurney to explain what records he held or what information they contained. Had he done so, he would have learned that, apart from the cremation register,

the crematorium retained the bundle of certificates relating to each individual cremation. These contained useful information about the circumstances of the death. Nor did DI Smith ask whether there were any limitations on what he would be allowed to see. Had he done so, he would have been told that, as a senior police officer, he would be given access to the register and the individual bundles.

- 10.6 Details of all cremations are recorded in the register, which is a very large book in which the columns of information are spread across double pages. On the left, the register records a cremation number, the date of cremation, the name, residence and occupation of the deceased, the age and sex and marital status of the deceased and the date of death. On the right, the columns provide for the name and address of the person who applied for the cremation, the names and addresses of the doctors who signed Forms B and C (or the identity of the coroner who permitted disposal of the body), the district where the death was registered, the signature of the minister who officiated at the service and the method of disposal of the ashes. The register does not (or did not in 1998) include the name of the funeral director.
- 10.7 In evidence, DI Smith and Mr Gurney disagreed as to how information was extracted from the register for DI Smith. Mr Gurney said that he gave the register to DI Smith and his colleague and left them to take such information as they wanted. DI Smith said that he did not look at the register, but sat opposite Mr Gurney, who had the register before him. He called out the names from his bundle of copy death certificates and Mr Gurney looked in the register and gave him the information. DI Smith entered the information in his daybook. The list of names can be seen at Appendix A. The list comprises 20 names and includes that of Miss Ada Warburton. Seventeen of the 20 deaths were followed by cremation. It is clear that Mr Gurney found and provided information about the three deaths on the list where the bodies were buried. Mr Gurney was also the Senior Registrar in charge of the eight cemeteries in the area and the interment forms were kept at the Dukinfield crematorium.
- 10.8 The names of the funeral directors who dealt with the 20 deaths are also included on DI Smith's list. These could not have been found in the register. To find them, someone must have recovered the relevant bundles of cremation certificates, filed in another part of the building. Neither man could recall how or by whom this was done. However, this operation must have taken an appreciable length of time.

A Lost Opportunity

- 10.9 On examining the cremation register, it became clear that, if DI Smith had looked at the register himself, he should have noticed that there were more deaths among Shipman's patients than he had been made aware of. That was because some of the entries relating to the deceased about whom DI Smith knew were adjacent to other entries which also contained Shipman's name as the Form B doctor. If DI Smith had noticed these other entries, he might then have realised that the information he had been given by the register office was incomplete. On the other hand, if Mr Gurney were looking at the register, he would not be looking out for other Shipman deaths, as he did not know that the enquiries related to the deaths of Shipman's patients. If it were the case that DI Smith was

accompanied by a junior officer, as recalled by Mr Gurney, it is possible that that officer looked at the register and either did not realise that he should look for other entries relating to Shipman or did realise that but failed to see any.

- 10.10 I am not sure who examined the register but I think that DI Smith's recollection is more likely to be accurate. Mr Gurney is plainly a completely honest witness. However, he was present on other occasions later in the year when the police examined the cremation registers. There is a real possibility that he has confused the occasions. DI Smith, on the other hand, only went to the crematorium once. I accept therefore that DI Smith probably did not look at the register himself, although I think he should have done. I think it likely that he told Mr Gurney the names of the deceased and Mr Gurney provided the limited information requested. Mr Gurney never realised that DI Smith was interested in all deaths of Shipman's patients where Shipman was the certifying (Form B) doctor. That is not a criticism. Mr Gurney was complying with a specific request for information and it was not for him to think about what other information he might be able to supply, unless requested to do so.
- 10.11 Unfortunately, DI Smith was thinking only about obtaining the limited information he had set out to find. He believed that his bundle of copy death certificates was complete even though, if it were, it would follow that Dr Reynolds' figures were almost certainly wrong. Had his mind been open to the possibility that he might learn more about the deaths of Shipman's patients than whether they were buried or cremated, he could have compiled a list of all the cremations within a six-month period for which Shipman had completed Form B. Had he done that (with or without Mr Gurney's help), he would have found details of all the deaths previously missed at the register office since, as it happened, every one of the patients of whose deaths he was unaware had been cremated. In the event, because DI Smith did not ask for a general trawl of the register for deaths in which Shipman had signed Form B (or examine the register himself), another opportunity to discover the error made by the register office was lost.
- 10.12 If DI Smith had asked, he would have been shown the bundle of certificates for each cremation. These would have included the Forms B, completed by Shipman, which contained a great deal of information about the deaths. Examination of the cremation forms relating to the deaths of which DI Smith was by this time aware would have revealed that Shipman had, on his own account, been present at one death and had visited seven of the patients within a period of four hours or less before the death occurred. DI Smith would have seen that seven of the patients were said to have died alone. This information would have provided some evidence of an unusual pattern among the deaths. Because DI Smith never found out how the cremation certification system worked (by asking Dr Reynolds or Mr Gurney or both), he did not realise what he was missing. The crematorium was a valuable source of information about the individual deaths under investigation. The opportunity to tap that source was missed.
- 10.13 Another consequence of DI Smith's failure to ask about the system of cremation certification was that he failed to discover the existence of the medical referee. Had he been asked how the system worked, Mr Gurney would have explained that, before a cremation is authorised, the forms supporting the application for cremation must be

examined by the medical referee, a doctor employed at the crematorium. The law requires that the medical referee should consider whether the fact and cause of death have been definitely ascertained and whether the death might be due to a non-natural cause, such as violence. A medical referee has power to require an autopsy, to decline to allow a cremation without an inquest and even to decline to allow a cremation without stating any reasons. By failing to ask about the system, DI Smith lost the opportunity to interview the Medical Referee at the Dukinfield crematorium, Dr Betty Hinchliffe, or her deputy. An interview with Dr Hinchliffe would not have breached the requirement of confidentiality. As it happens, had DI Smith spoken to Dr Hinchliffe, he would have received an assurance that Shipman always completed his Forms B satisfactorily and that his deaths gave rise to no ground for suspicion. Only if the records held by the crematorium had been analysed would it have been found that, for several years, Shipman had consistently completed more Forms B than any other general practitioner in the area. The unusual features of many of the deaths would also have been noticed; for example, that Shipman was often present when the death occurred or had been present very shortly before it was discovered.

The Results of the Visit

- 10.14 It will be seen from the list in DI Smith's daybook that the firm of Masseys had arranged the funerals for no fewer than nine of the 20 deceased persons on the list. Below the list, DI Smith has written the name '**Debbie Massey**'. At this time, although Mrs Bambroffe was married, many people still called her by her maiden name. DI Smith said that, having noticed how frequently the name 'Masseys' recurred in the list which he had compiled, he concluded that Mrs Bambroffe must be the female undertaker who had expressed concern about the deaths of Shipman's patients. In that he was right. However, he made no attempt to contact Mrs Bambroffe until two weeks later, on 15th April.
- 10.15 In Chapter Three, I drew attention to the list of four funeral directors and their telephone numbers which DI Smith had, at some stage, written on the left-hand page of his daybook, opposite the information recorded during his meeting with the Coroner. It is not absolutely clear when that information was recorded, although, as I observed in Chapter Three, the circumstances suggest that DI Smith obtained it before his visit to the crematorium. Bearing in mind the mistake in the name of Robinson and Jordan, which appears to have originated from the Brooke Practice record, it seems to me that it is more likely that DI Smith obtained this information at or shortly after leaving the Brooke Practice Surgery than from the crematorium. It seems likely that DI Smith took down the names of four funeral directors while speaking to Dr Reynolds and, at some time later, copied the four names onto the opposite page and added the telephone numbers. Whenever he obtained them, it appears that the only one he used was that of Masseys.
- 10.16 DI Smith had found that the deaths of 85% of Shipman's patients had been followed by cremation and only 15% by burial. This was higher than the 70% average suggested by Mr Gurney. However, he did not regard that as a suspicious factor and no one has suggested that it was. It may be that the fact that not every one of Shipman's patients had been cremated added to DI Smith's feeling that there was nothing amiss. The fact is that the exercise was misconceived, as the proportion of cremations had never been a cause for concern.

10.17 As I have said, this visit was a missed opportunity to find out a great deal of information about the deaths of Shipman's patients.

Postscript

10.18 After his visit to the crematorium, DI Smith entered the information he had acquired there on his computer spreadsheet: see Appendix B. The spreadsheet records 19 deaths, the last of which is that of Mrs Lily Higgins. The name, address, cause of death, age, dates of birth and death and gender of the deceased noted on the spreadsheet would all have been ascertainable from the copy death certificates; the information about funeral directors and whether the deceased was buried or cremated came from the crematorium. The column headed '**Found By**' has not been completed. As I have noted, the spreadsheet does not include any information about Miss Ada Warburton, although her name does appear on the list compiled by DI Smith at the crematorium. It appears to me that DI Smith began work on the spreadsheet before his visit to the crematorium and that the information about the funeral directors and the method of disposal was added afterwards. As I have already observed, it does not appear that DI Smith added any information obtained from Dr Banks. All the other versions of the spreadsheet contain columns and information added during the second police investigation which began in July 1998.

