



IBRG

LAMBETH

IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

THE GUILDFORD & WOOLWICH
PUBLIC HOUSE BOMBINGS

FACT SHEET 5.

In the last quarter of 1974 and up to December 1975 a series of bomb attacks occurred mainly in the South East of England. These operations, carried out by an IRA active service unit (ASU) were a concerted series of bombings and shootings intended to hit military targets, high class hotels, clubs and restaurants. On December 12th 1975 the ASU responsible was finally trapped in a siege and captured and became known as the 'Balcombe Street Four'. During this period of bombings etc the British public were filled with a sense of outrage, horror and revenge which was fanned by an outburst of hate and misrepresentation against the Irish people by the national press and media.

Two of these 'series bombings' occurred at Guildford, Surrey, and at Woolwich SE18 in three public houses frequented by army personnel. On Saturday October 5th 1974 single time bombs exploded in both the 'Horse and Groom' and 'Seven Stars' public houses in Guildford killing five people and injuring another sixty five. On November 7th a bomb was thrown into the 'King's Arms' public house killing one soldier and injuring many others.

The police had little evidence to go on and proceeded to identify every person who was in the Guildford pubs that night except for three men and two girls. It was after they had probed the intelligence network in the six counties that they, in a very dubious way, came up with the name of Patrick Hill. The Surrey police began a search for this man but eventually transferred their attentions to his brother, Paul Michael Hill (21). Paul Hill was eventually arrested in Southampton on December 1st 1974, only hours after the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974) was passed by the British Parliament.

Paul Hill was held and interrogated under this Act. He had a criminal record in Belfast and there is some suspicion that he was known to the Republican movement as a possible informer. During this time he was returned to Belfast and to the RUC (he was later charged with the murder of a British ex-soldier). After prolonged, violent and sophisticated interrogation he began to talk wildly. He was later to claim that the police had threatened the security of his mother and his girlfriend. Most of his earlier interrogations had shown the police that his statements were uncorroborated and were at times sheer fantasy and they were later to admit that no notes were taken before he actually agreed to make a statement (which finally took three hours to dictate). Many of the details Hill claimed had been 'put to him' by detectives and his final document was fraught with suspicion.

Following Hill's interrogation a further eighteen people were arrested and eight of them were charged with murder for the 'Horse and Groom' bombing. A further five people were charged with possession of explosives and conspiracy to cause explosions. One of those arrested for murder was Mrs Rita Anne Maguire and, although this charge was not sustained, she was later charged with handling explosives along with three members of her family (her brother and two friends). The British Press, before their trial, gave full vent to lurid stories of 'Aunt Annie's Bomb Lessons'.

Eventually four people, Paul Michael Hill (21), Patrick Armstrong (24), Gerard Conlan (20) all from working class areas of Belfast and Carole Richardson (17), an English girl, were charged with murder. The police had dropped charges against those who had made no statements of admission. The very vulnerable remaining four were brought to trial at the Old Bailey on September 16th 1975.

The Crown claimed that the defendants were part of two bombing teams which went to Guildford on Saturday 5th October. The Police were always adamant that two cars had been used (presumably to hold all of their original suspects) but there was only very dubious evidence to support this claim. No witnesses took the stand to identify the accused and the prosecution had really only the uncorroborated and conflicting testimony of the accused themselves. But in the atmosphere of an outraged public, inflamed even more by the press and the media, the Crown was able to bring in a guilty verdict on all the accused. Even the embarrassing details of Carole Richardson's alibi (she had attended a disco dance at the South London Polytechnic on the evening of the Guildford bombings) could not influence the trial.

The accused received some of the longest sentences passed in an English court. Hill was sentenced to life (minimum 35 years), Conlan to life (minimum 30 years), Armstrong to life (minimum 35 years) and Richardson to life (minimum 20 years).

On December 12th 1975 when the Balcombe Street Four were arrested after a siege the police were disturbed to find that three of the prisoners accepted responsibility for the Guildford and Woolwich bombings which were part of their 'series bombing' campaign. When this was revealed solicitors for the 'Guildford Four' began Appeal proceedings which were heard in October 1977. Inconceivably the appeal was lost. Carole Richardson was seen to slump visibly in the dock when the verdict was announced.

In a case where the evidence against the accused was so suspect and uncorroborated, it was only their own dubious statements made in conditions of extreme duress, that finally put them in the dock. The police and Home Office were desperate to satisfy an outraged public opinion which was horrified at these bombings in the very heart of south-east England.

This is yet another disturbing case for the Irish community in Britain, with its apparent political implications, linked with the Prevention of Terrorism Act, of dubious confessions, suspect procedures of the police and Department of Public Prosecutor and the hysteria and misrepresentation of the British press and broadcasting media.