

PETER GRIFFITHS CASE

Date: 1948
Location: Blackburn, England
Significance: For the first time, mass-fingerprinting of the population was employed in order to bring a savage killer to justice.

At 1:20 AM on May 15, 1948, a nurse making rounds of the children's ward of the Queen's Park Hospital, near Blackburn, Lancashire, realized that three-year old June Devaney was missing from her cot. An hour earlier, the toddler had been sleeping peacefully, recovering from pneumonia, and was due to go home later that day. After fruitlessly searching the immediate vicinity, the hospital staff contacted police at 3:17 AM. A constable found June's body lying beside the hospital wall. Her horrific injuries were described by the police surgeon as follows:

There was a multiple of fracture of the skull...Blood was exuding from the nose...there were several puncture wounds on the left foot. They might easily have been caused by fingernails gripping the left ankle...The injuries to the head were consistent with the head having been battered against a wall. It appears to me that the child was held by her feet and the head swung against the wall.

In addition, the child had been raped, and there were teeth marks on her left buttock.

Foot prints on the ward's polished floor intimated that the killer had prowled between the cots in stocking feet. He also appeared to have moved objects around. A bottle of sterile water -- normally kept on a trolley at the end of the ward -- now stood under June's cot. The nurse was adamant that on her earlier round the bottle had been in its rightful place.

For fifteen hours, Detective Inspector Collin Campbell, chief of Lancashire's Fingerprint Bureau, scrutinized the ward. He began with the footprints: ten and a half inches long, almost certainly male, unlikely to have been made by a member of the nursing staff. Next came the misplaced bottle. Judging from the myriad fingerprints, it had been handled by several different people. By that evening, every member of the hospital staff had been fingerprinted for comparison with those on the bottle. All except one set of prints were accounted for; Campbell had little doubt that these belonged to the killer.

When records also failed to make a match with any known criminal, investigators reconciled themselves to the likelihood of a protracted inquiry. They began by compiling a list of all people with general access to the hospital -- 2,017 persons in all, of whom 642 had specific access to the children's ward. All were fingerprinted, yet none matched the mystery prints left on the bottle.

With his options fast diminishing, the commanding officer, Detective Inspector John Capstick, embarked on an unprecedented step. Because the hospital grounds were difficult to negotiate after dark, he believed that the killer was most probably a man with local knowledge. Therefore, he proposed that every male over the age of sixteen in the town of Blackburn be fingerprinted. It was a revolutionary and daunting prospect. The electoral register showed no less than thirty-five thousand houses; all would have to be visited.

HISTORIC SWEEP

The immense operation began on May 23, with officers going from house to house, fingerprinting every male who had been in Blackburn on the night of the murder, recording each set of impressions on a small card. Despite the response -- more than forty thousand males -- by mid-July the investigators were no nearer to identifying the print. With the electoral register exhausted, it was beginning to look as if the killer

had slipped through the net. And then inspiration struck. Because of food shortages since the War, every British adult carried their own rationing book; possibly names might crop up there and nowhere else. Three weeks of cross checking ration book records against the electoral register showed at least two hundred males still unaccounted for.

One of these was Peter Griffiths, a twenty-two-year-old flour mill packer who lived at 31 Birley Street, Blackburn. On August 11, officers called and asked if he could take his fingerprints. Griffiths, whose niece had been in Queens Park Hospital at the same time as June Devaney, agreed. Later that day, his card -- number 46,253 -- was routinely filed with the bureau. The next afternoon, one of the searchers suddenly cried out, "I've got him! It's here!"

A procedure such as this would be impossible in the [United States](#) where Fourth Amendment protections prevent searches without probable cause. But the plan went into effect in Blackburn on May 23, with police assurances that the collected prints would be destroyed afterward. Two months later, the police had collected over 40,000 sets of prints yet still had not turned up a match. Checking against every registry they could find, authorities determined that there were still a few men in town who hadn't provided their prints.

At first Griffiths denied the crime, then he made a confession, saying, "I hope I get what I deserve." On the night in question, having consumed a large amount of alcohol, he had gone to the hospital, a place he knew well from his childhood. Leaving his shoes outside, he crept into the children's ward. He claimed that a child woke up when he stumbled against her cot and that he carried her outside to keep her silent. But when she wouldn't stop crying, "I lost my temper...and you know what happened then." An already strong forensic case against Griffiths was further buttressed by the discovery of fibers from the victim's nightdress on his suit, while his feet fitted exactly those prints found on the hospital floor.

Rejecting a defense plea of diminished responsibility, the jury found Griffiths guilty of murder, and on November 19, 1947 he was executed.

CONCLUSION

Right from the outset, the police moved to allay concerns about privacy by announcing that all prints unconnected with their inquiry would be publicly destroyed. This was a promise kept, as was their assurance that no one would be compelled to have their prints taken. As it turned out, public revulsion at the ghastliness of June Devaney's death ensured that objections to the exercise were few and refusals virtually nil.



ASSIGNMENT:

1st paragraph --- summary of article

2nd paragraph -- knowing the economy of TODAY'S society, do you think this type of mass fingerprinting would still have taken place. Why or why not?