

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...

THE RIOT OF 1919

It is half-past eight in the morning of Thursday 15th May, 1919. Inside the Flowerpot public house sits Amos Catchpole. Amos served his country in the Great War and when he returned to Brandon, following the Armistice six months ago, he was promised a “land fit for heroes”. Truth is, it has not work out that way. Already a middle-aged man when he went to war, his age may be a factor in his struggle to get a job, although he currently works at Brandon railway station for pennies. In his eyes, he sees privileged people, who sacrificed nothing for the war, getting wealthier as he struggles. Amos doesn’t know it yet, but he will ignite a riot in Brandon tonight.

The pub door flings open, grabbing Amos’ attention, and a man, obviously in distress, limps through. The man is Henry Liddiard, an outsider who came to town toward the end of the war to set up a dairy. Liddiard walks with a prosthetic leg and has lost the use of one arm, the result of being severely wounded in the war. Despite his obvious disability, he is usually up early every morning delivering milk from his cart. Amos walks over to Liddiard and asks what has happened. Liddiard tells him that he has just been assaulted by Frederick Gentle, a local butcher and councillor. Amos enquires why, to which Liddiard elaborates. Liddiard is supplied milk from the butcher and believes it to be diluted. Liddiard is not happy at being taken to court for this and believes Gentle should have taken the blame, but Gentle has since refused to talk to Liddiard about this. When Liddiard confronted Gentle this morning, the butcher became aggressive and shoved him over, causing the war veteran to land on his withered arm. It is obvious to Amos that Liddiard is in immense pain and very upset. Amos, no doubt fuelled by alcohol at this early hour, is beside himself that a fellow war veteran has been treated this way and promises to “*set about*” Gentle.

While Liddiard heads off to report the incident to the police, Amos goes about rousing the support of local people, telling them there will be a meeting this afternoon. Then, at four o’clock, he appears on Market Hill ringing a bell, summoning all to attend. He has been busy and five hundred people attend, about one-fifth of the town’s population, thus showing many Brandon people share Amos’ disgust. Speaker after speaker stands to condemn Gentle’s actions and offer support to Liddiard. The crowd then march down High Street and assemble outside Gentle’s butcher shop to hurl abuse. Two men, Cyril Oxford, a soldier dressed in army uniform who is billeted at Thetford, and Fred Adams, another Brandon war veteran, rush into the shop to confront a butcher, but are quickly manhandled out by the local police inspector, Frederick Mobbs. The soldier squares up to Mobbs and screams that he is going to kill Gentle. Mobbs does not let him pass and addresses the rest of the crowd, who are largely observers, demanding they disperse or face a court summons. Fearing for their livelihoods, they do as he tells them, but they do not go far, many choose to proceed down to a fair on a meadow at the back of the Ram Inn.

If the crowd thought the fair would be a distraction, then they were sorely misled. Among the swing boats and rides is a huge tent housing a boxing ring, a clown steps into the ring between bouts to offer a bit of banter with the crowd. During one such

intermission he compares the punches of the boxers to that of Fred Gentle, "*Mr Gentle must learn to be more gentle*", he proclaims, which provokes loud jeers from the angry crowd. Even when the fair winds down for the night, the angry crowd still want retribution, so they march back up High Street for a second go. By now their number has swelled to over a thousand, including dozens of serving soldiers, and at the front is Cyril Oxford, shouting to his comrades, "*C'mon lads. We'll have him tonight!*"

The police presence outside the butcher shop is minimal, no reinforcements, just Inspector Mobbs and Constable Burgess. Again, Mobbs orders the crowd to disperse. Amos Catchpole, who has been spoiling for a fight all day, is the first to rush toward the shop. Mobbs grabs him, stopping him in his tracks. The crowd surges forward and manhandle Mobbs, managing to retrieve Catchpole, who again rushes at the shop, this time throwing a stone through a window. The crowd cheer, which seems to signal more stones going airborne, shattering more glass that lands around the policemen. Mobbs dodges the occasional stone, not knowing if they are aimed at him or badly thrown, while continuing to appeal to the crowd to disperse. Fred Adams tells him it will not be possible to lock all the crowd up tonight and they are intent on burning Gentle out, although he uses more 'colourful' language. The policemen have positioned themselves in the doorway of the shop, so anyone getting in will have to physically remove them first. Oxford and his comrades repeatedly make attempts at this but do not succeed. It does appear the resolve of some of the crowd is waning, perhaps the casual observers are not wanting to be associated with the violence, with some of them leaving the scene.

In the first minutes of Friday morning, an hour since the crowd arrived, word spreads that Gentle is not even in the building, having fled earlier. What was once a sizeable crowd now dwindles down to the hard core few, indicating the worst of the riot has passed. For the two policemen there is some relief, but they remain steadfast with their demands for people to go home. By 02.30am, the last remnants of the crowd do as they are told. However, there is someone still inside the shop, a butcher, named Herbert Raven. He has stayed behind to defend the premises, although what steps he would have taken are unsure, with the shop stocking a huge arsenal of knives and cleavers, if he were to consider violence.

Daylight reveals the aftermath of the violence. Workmen arrive to board up all the windows, none contain any glass, and eighty-nine pockmarks in the brickwork display impacts from stones. Elsewhere in town Inspector Mobbs hand delivers court summons to the ring leaders of the riot. Amos Catchpole apologises when he receives his, suggesting his behaviour was swayed by alcohol, but Mobbs informs him he will have to answer his case in the police court on London Road. At the Police Court, Gentle is found guilty of assault and fined £2, whereas the ringleaders of the riot, Catchpole, Adams and Oxford are released on bail pending an appearance at a higher court – the Quarter Sessions at Bury St. Edmunds, which is booked for Tuesday, 8th July. At that court, solicitors liken the actions of the men to those of the Russian Revolution two years earlier, so there are threats of jail, but the men are lucky. Britain is about to celebrate the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which will put an end to the Great War of 1914-18, consequently the nation is looking forward to a time of reconciliation and rebuilding. The men are bound over to keep the peace, meaning Amos must do his utmost best to not get in trouble again