

## Chapter 8 Burglary

On the 24th September 1997 Margaret and I went to the John Lewis Store at High Wycombe to buy birthday presents for my grandchildren Curtis and Bianca. Our intention was to then go to the adjoining cinema: however this proved not possible since all seats for the performance we wanted were sold.

On leaving the motorway temporary traffic lights changed to red and a queue of cars formed behind us: we arrived home at 7-30pm as it was growing dark. We had been using the old BMW 750, which I kept in the garage at the bottom of the drive, so I drove up to the front door, Margaret unlocked the house and we unloaded the presents. I then drove down to the garage and put the car away. On closing the garage door three men ran up to me wearing masks. My initial reaction was that this was the Fowler family, neighbours who are always up to something: not long before there had been a tap at the front door and Bob, Penny, Hal, Penny – Belle and a couple of others trouped in to do a song and dance routine in the kitchen, complete with sticks and tails. When a knife was held to my stomach the penny dropped that this had nothing to do with the Fowlers. They wanted my Rolex and wallet - by all means!

Whilst two marched me up the drive, the third ran up to the open door of the house. Margaret had just switched off the burglar alarm and turned on the oven when the thug arrived: she presumed he had been in the house all the time and thought I would soon rescue her. As I was marched in she was fighting him and the one not holding a knife to me attacked her too. They snatched off her earrings and rings despite her valiant fight. I was screaming at her not to resist but she ignored my pleas. Margaret was very badly bruised and her jaw all but dislocated. (subsequently she looked as if she had just done a round with Mohamed Ali). Eventually

we were required to sit on the floor and were guarded by a thug of West Indian appearance. The other two, most likely from North Africa, then roamed the house. Their eyes said they were high on drugs. Of course they required the safe to be opened and I was quick to oblige, thankful that it was operated by a key (just think of the consequences if it was an electronic safe that decided to freeze!!). I tried to make conversation with the West Indian asking why he had targetted us and at one stage his mask fell down so that we had a clear look at him. The date was just after the anniversary of the death of Margaret's son, Patrick, and she made sure he knew this. She told him that he had stolen the bracelet that was purchased in his memory with the small funds in the account in his name. This touched a nerve and he threw the bracelet back to her. He also told the others of this: in Patrick's room they had un-plugged his Hi-Fi, but they never took it.

After twenty-five minutes we were tied up with our own curtain bindings and they made to leave, I thought, taking two 8" carving knives from the block in the kitchen. After a couple of minutes I cautiously looked in the hall but they had not yet gone: it was several minutes later before we had the nerve to venture out. We ran down to our dear neighbours Basil and Connie Ramsden and phoned the police immediately since all our telephone lines had been cut. It took the police thirty minutes to arrive: they were busy.

We never saw the driver of the car but subsequently learned that a very smart Mercedes was parked in the agricultural driveway parallel with the bottom of our garden. Two young lads staying at the adjoining house had seen the car and remarked to one another about it being "swish". Unfortunately they did not think any more of it. At this time I had just acquired a nearly new BMW840 complete with "tracker" unit. This was in the garage

attached to the house and I was scratching my brain to think how I could get this knowledge to them so that they might take it. I could hardly say, “here are the keys to a new BMW”. Unfortunately they never saw the keys in the bedroom neither did they enter the garage.

Our frustration at the late response by the police was tempered by the manner and kindness of those who came to investigate the event. Their view was that this was the same gang that had robbed other shoppers at John Lewis after following them from the store. One assault had resulted in the death of the subject. These were individuals who had started off as windscreen washers at traffic lights and had developed their foul art. The police thought these individuals were part of a gang of around fifteen, some of whom had been prosecuted but none found guilty. Each time they were charged they refused to say anything and the Judge advised the jury that, because of this, it would be unsound to find them guilty! Subsequently I made pleas to change this state of the law and had meetings with the Assistant Police Commissioner and the Member of Parliament. (The MP, John Bercow was very helpful and has gone on to be Speaker of the House of Commons – he was less helpful at a Conservative fund raising auction which I ran. The average age of those attending must have been on the wrong side of sixty and one of the lots was a night’s babysitting. John had just had his first child and was clearly the only likely person to have use for this lot. Inviting him to bid a tenner he declined saying that his mother-in-law performed this function!) I also had correspondence with the Home Office – all to no avail. The gang that robbed us went on to Harrow that same evening and assaulted another couple.

The police did take serious steps in an endeavour to catch the gang. They raided a jewellery shop in Hatton Garden but found nothing of significance: we went to Hatton Garden to

look and a cursory glance was all that was required to see which shop it was. We marched past several times to get a glimpse of the traders but did not see a face we recognised. The police also tagged the vehicle of a suspect. This was reported to have gone to Manchester; that information provided a little relief since our concern was that they would return.

Of course we gave all possible assistance to the Police and agreed to attend an identity parade at Kilburn of all godforsaken places. The persons on parade were all seated and there was thick one-way glass between us and them. It follows that you could not judge a man's stature; neither could you look him in the eye or hear his voice. The proceedings were recorded and I intimated that Margaret had a far better memory than me and would be more likely to make an accurate assessment. I was first to walk the line and concluded that I could not identify anyone as one of those who assailed us. Margaret did identify one person but I disagreed with her selection. It was subsequently established that the suspect individual was not the one Margaret picked out. We both agreed that, having discarded Margaret's choice, none of the remainder was responsible.

I converted the house into Fort Knox and we now have an ear blasting sounder that tells of the approach of any person, bird, deer, cat or whatever.

Dealing with the insurance underwriter was interesting. So used to dealing with bogus claims he immediately saw that our claim was well founded. As always happens in these matters there were some "cloudy" areas. One was that in the safe were some Kruger Rands. Currency was insured but bullion was not; he took the currency view. I think in all there were four such areas of which he conceded three.

I applied to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board concerning the harm to Margaret. This was assessed at “zero”.

The moral of all this is to be extra careful when returning home. If you have any idea that you are being followed be sure to drive round the block and see if the tail continues. When shopping at John Lewis now I look to see who is sitting in parked cars.

**Ramsden Burglary** One of Basil’s business interests was a Cash and Carry venture at Stocklake, Aylesbury and this was the subject of a most audacious robbery. It would seem there may have been some internal connivance since the burglar alarm was de-activated. With pallets, the felons constructed a bridge over the adjacent canal and forced their entry. Their main target was the tobacco cage which they successfully breached. They then showed total arrogance by frying stakes from the freezer on the premises! This effrontery led me to conclude that they were quite likely armed. They were never caught.