

A MURDER WAS COMMITTED—BUT WHERE?

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One of Sherlock Holmes's most atmospheric cases is "The Bruce-Partington Plans." Picture the backs of a row of houses next to the railway line. It is a foggy night, and you can see the windows only as lit blurs through the cotton webbed dark. The smell of coal is distinct. Chimney pipes fill the roofs, and the railway steam engines help to fill the air, as do the many factories in that ancient, beloved London. Out of the tunnel comes a train that stops under the buildings. A window is opened, and something is lowered down onto the roof of the waiting train—the dead body of young Cadogan West.

In November 1895 a murder was committed near Gloucester Road Station, and the dead body was disposed of out of the back window of Hugo Oberstein's house and placed on the roof of a railway carriage. An underground train was waiting underneath this window, which it often did, due to the intersection of one of the larger railways. The body was later found near Aldgate Station, where it had fallen from the carriage. It is absolutely essential that Oberstein's house have a back window leading on to an open part of the underground system, where a train is held motionless for some time. According to Watson, Oberstein lived at 13 Caulfield Gardens, London. However, there never was a Caulfield Gardens in London, so let us try to determine Oberstein's true address.

A handful of streets have names similar to Caulfield Gardens. Michael Harrison argues Cornwall Gardens is the true Caulfield Gardens: "Cornwall Gardens overlooked the big cutting bounded by Cromwell Road, Lexham Gardens and Cornwall Gardens; the Metropolitan and the District had a junction in this cutting, and all the time there were halts, to allow north-south, south-north, west-east and east-west trains to let others through."¹

However, it is somewhat bewildering that Cornwall Gardens was only capable of overlooking the mentioned junction from a considerable distance. According to Norman Crump, who investigated these premises in the early 1950s, it would have been quite impossible to dispose of a body from Cromwell Gardens. Crump recollects from his investigation: "At High Street we walked along the track towards the tunnel under Cromwell Gardens (this also sounds like Caulfield Gardens). Here the inner rail is bounded by a vertical retaining wall, but alas! at the top there is a large garden."² It is doubtful that Harrison ever set foot on the premises. Another thing that seems to point against Harrison is the evidence of Bernard H. Davies:

Two mansions did indeed overlook the cutting—across some sixty yards of sloping grass and shrubbery above the tunnel. Unfortunately the rails in question formed the District line from the west terminating at High Street Kensington. So, even if Mr. Harrison had the unfortunate victim shot from a cannon onto a convenient train, chances are he would have been found languishing behind “Harding Brothers” emporium next morning!³

This means that even if the body could have been shot onto the carriage roof from Cornwall Gardens, the train would not have taken the body to Aldgate.

In 1895 Gloucester Road Station was known under the name of Brompton Station. It was renamed Gloucester Road Station in 1907, and “The Bruce-Partington Plans” was published in December 1908.⁴ So it was appropriate to use the current name of the station.

Holmes relates:

I began my operations at Gloucester Road Station, where a very helpful official walked with me along the track, and allowed me to satisfy myself, not only that the back-stair windows of Caulfield Gardens open on the line, but the even more essential fact that, owing to the intersection of one of the larger railways, the Underground trains are frequently held motionless for some minutes at that very spot.

To correspond with this statement, the following by Wayne B. Swift:

The phrase “one of the larger railways” is clearly critical in understanding what is involved here, because Watson tells us that the stoppage of the underground train beneath Oberstein’s window was due to “an intersection with one of the larger railways.” Today to encounter a British Rail train rumbling into a Circle Line station is *at least* as surprising as to encounter either a tram car *or* Mycroft rolling down a country lane. But this was not always so. . . . From the railway maps we can see that the “intersection” which Watson mentions with “one of the larger railways” cannot have been a physical joining or crossing of the underground by tracks owned by the larger line because there are none; instead it *must* have been a situation where service of a larger line using trackage rights over the underground tracks caused a conflict leading to the underground train “regularly being held motionless for several minutes.” Such conflicts were common in the Cromwell Curve area, even without the extra trains provided by the larger lines.⁵

This statement seems very satisfactory, since the tracks between Cromwell Curve and South Kensington were indeed famous for causing delays. The tracks could not handle the heavy traffic. Despite this, the area was not rebuilt until 1956. The fact that there *was* turmoil from too many trains using the Cromwell Curve is a link in a larger pattern. The evidence proves that trains were halted at one particular point of the Cromwell Curve, and that main line traffic in fact followed these tracks. Note in the drawing (opposite) where the point in question is marked with a C. Swift provides the evidence: "Point C is where halts might be caused by Earl's Court-Gloucester Road traffic. The heavy majority of the main line traffic we have found on underground rails follows this route."⁶ Point C backs up to the address of 118 Cromwell Road. Swift writes:

Three conditions must be met by the true location of Oberstein's house: (1) there must be the potential for holding underground trains there, at a point possibly overlooked by houses, because of conflicts with other traffic; (2) the conflict must be capable of being created by "larger line" traffic; and (3) the point of holdup must be just after the held-up train has emerged from a tunnel.⁷

He explains carefully how the track at point C is the only track that meets all these conditions. Among the trains using this track are District trains running east from Gloucester Road Station. The trains will stop under the back windows of 118 Cromwell Road, waiting for trains from Earl's Court destined for Gloucester Road to pass, before they go round the curve and proceed towards High Street Kensington. These trains are thus the only trains to stop under a window while waiting for larger line traffic to pass, which at the same time will reach Aldgate Station in order to drop off a dead body. Furthermore, these trains went clockwise round the circle from Gloucester Road to Aldgate via Paddington and Baker Street, contrary to going anti-clockwise via Victoria. Note this for later, when we shall see where the body was found at Aldgate.

Davies regards the houses on Cromwell Road backing up to the underground railway system as being too far away from the tracks to allow any bodies to be thrown from there and onto the roof of a carriage. Concerning this point Davies states that "the backs of these houses [at Cromwell Road] *were simply not close enough* to the District tracks for a body to be dropped onto a carriage roof. If you travel on the westbound line nearest to the building, you can see that at least four yards of grassy verge separates them from the rail-bed."⁸

In this statement Davies argues that the westbound trains are not close enough, but this is irrelevant, since the trains in question were the outer-rail trains coming from Gloucester Road and headed towards High Street Kensing-

ton. These trains only touched the most eastward blocks on the Cromwell Road coming out of the tunnel from Gloucester Road Station. Note the verge at the mentioned point consists of gravel—not grass.

But Davies unveils a completely unique candidate for the house of Oberstein—28 Hogarth Road. The railway system coming out of the tunnel from Earl’s Court runs immediately behind the houses of Hogarth Road. From here the line goes up to the before-mentioned Cromwell Curve. As to the requirements for the lines, for trains being held motionless for some time, there were signal posts holding back trains until travel through Cromwell Curve was free. Hogarth Road is closer to Earl’s Court than it is to Gloucester Road. Davies provides an explanation for that:

If Hugo Oberstein lived at Earl’s Court, why did Holmes choose to commence his investigation at Gloucester Road? There could be several reasons . . . He may have known some official there personally—possibly the one-time “railway porter in his velveteens” who had visited him in 1881 [A *Study in Scarlet*, Chap. 1]. More importantly, if he wished to observe closely all the signalling arrangements it would be the obvious place to start.⁹

This means that since the Cromwell Curve was closest to Gloucester Road, this would be the station at which to start inspecting signals and train movements.

Davies claims that Holmes went to Gloucester Road in order to inspect signals and train movements. But there is nothing to indicate that these were his wishes. Furthermore, nothing indicates that the official of “The Bruce-Partington Plans” was the same person as the porter of *A Study in Scarlet*.

However, there is one good reason for Davies to pick 28 Hogarth Road. All houses here back on to the railway system, but one house in particular has an extension towards the tracks—No. 28. According to him this house has some of the best access to the railway system that one is likely to find:

I recall, during the 1950s, being in eastbound District trains held motionless at that very same spot after leaving Earl’s Court. Pre-war electric stock still in service had manual sliding doors, with grabhandles, that could be opened at will. I have opened them and looked up to see the rear of 28 Hogarth Road just above me.¹⁰

Concerning the distance to the given buildings near the railway system, as well as the situation of windows in these building, Holmes explained to Watson how he came to think this the scene of the crime:

You are aware that the Underground runs clear of tunnels at some points in the West End. I had a vague memory that as I have traveled by it I have occasionally seen windows just above my head. Now, suppose that a train halted under such a window, would there be any difficulty in laying a body upon the roof?

You may ask yourself why this particular place is essential to our investigation. The reason is that Holmes states a very simple fact, which proves that the murder could not have been committed at 28 Hogarth Road. According to Holmes it was possible to see windows just above as one went by in an underground train. And we have Davies's account that in order to see the back windows of the buildings in Hogarth Road, one had to open the train doors. Naturally, this was not the case at the place Holmes was thinking of, because when Holmes noticed the windows above his head, he would have had no reason to open the doors. This was a mere observation for later reference; he had no reason to look at the houses at that time. The observation took place prior to "The Bruce-Partington Plans."

This statement by Holmes is rather decisive concerning the distance to the building. When it was possible to see the windows just above while sitting in an underground train, there must have been a longer distance between the house and the train than there would be on Hogarth Road. And therefore we are provided with a sign of relief in the text. Watson quotes the murderer as saying that there was less than four feet from the window-ledge to the roof of the carriages. Not even 28 Hogarth Road could support this statement, and at the same time it was too close. In order to achieve the "less than four feet" between window and roof, the window has to be at just the same level as the roof. This would make it possible to lay the body on the carriage roof without throwing it. But still, then, there has to be a little distance from the house to the side of the carriage in order to be able to look up a little from inside the carriage. In sum, we have to dismiss 28 Hogarth Road because of Holmes's statement.

Turning to Aldgate Station, where the body was found, we find information that helps draw a pattern around the site of the murder. Watson read aloud the details of the case from the newspaper: "The body was found at six on the Tuesday morning. It was lying wide of the metals upon the left hand of the track as one goes eastward, at a point close to the station, where the line emerges from the tunnel in which it runs."

Holmes and Watson inspect the place, where the body was found:

An hour later, Holmes, Lestrade and I stood upon the underground railroad at the point where it emerges from the tunnel immediately before

Aldgate Station. A courteous red-faced old gentleman represented the railway company. "This is where the young man's body lay," said he, indicating a spot about three feet from the metals.

There are two possible routes for trains to arrive from the west to Aldgate, (1) from Liverpool Street being the clockwise route round the Circle and (2) from Mark Lane being the anti-clockwise route. When coming from Liverpool Street the train will be on the outer rail of the Circle, and coming from Mark Lane the train will be on the inner rail. If we take a look at the layout of Aldgate Station, we will see that a train coming from Liverpool Street will have an opportunity for disposing of the body, while leaving the tunnel and coming round the curve just outside Aldgate Station. The body, then, would be thrown off to the left of the rails, just as described.

Considering trains approaching Aldgate from Mark Lane, Davies holds the opinion that the train did not enter the station at Aldgate but went round the curve towards Whitechapel. We quote Davies: "The evidence points to the train not having entered Aldgate, but having been switched instead onto the triangle towards Whitechapel."¹¹ But if this were the case, the body would be left in the fork between the railway tracks, which Davies confirms in his study of these points. This spot is marked with the letter X. But this will not do, considering the statements that the body was found "lying wide of the metals to the left of the track . . . about three feet from the metals." If the body had been found in a fork formation, would this perhaps not have been noted? Also consider the distance at which the body was found from the track. As the body was lying three feet from the rails, could it have been described, then, as lying wide of the metals, if it had been in the fork? Lying three feet from one track would undoubtedly place it somewhat closer to the other line of the fork.

Finally, from Swift's evidence, it was not possible for a suitable train to reach Aldgate from the anti-clockwise route via Victoria, since it would not have been led to a stop caused by other traffic at the Cromwell Curve.

The back windows of the houses in Cromwell Road overlook the Cromwell Curve. Going through the Post Office Street Directory, Swift noticed that 118 is omitted. Comparing this knowledge with a map of the houses in question "shows 20 buildings in the row on the north side of Cromwell Road and between Grenville Place and Lexham Gardens. The postal list indicates 19 addresses (counting '120&122' as a single address). Therefore an unoccupied (or perhaps an *unlisted*) 118 is possible."¹² An unlisted residence would be a perfect hideout for a German spy such as Oberstein. 118 deserves further inspection.

Watson recollects as he and Holmes visited Oberstein's house:

Caulfield Gardens was one of those lines of flat-faced, pillared, and porticoed houses which are so prominent a product of the middle Victorian epoch in the West-end of London. . . . The fog still hung about and screened us with its friendly shade. Holmes had lit his lantern and flashed it upon the massive door. "This is a serious proposition," said he. "It is certainly bolted as well as locked. We would do better in the area. There is an excellent archway down yonder in case a too zealous policeman should intrude."

Number 118 is a flat-faced, pillared, and porticoed house in a line of other houses just like it, which was the usual style of the middle Victorian architects in this area. The cast iron rails along the facade and the area with stone steps leading to the basement are still there. The local archives kindly provided a basement drainage plan, which was the closest they could come to a floor plan. This concludes the pattern around the address of Oberstein, and therefore it seems very likely that the murder was committed at 118 Cromwell Road.

NOTES

1. Michael Harrison, *In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes*, London: David & Charles, revised edition 1971, p. 147.
2. Norman Crump, "Inner or Outer Rail?" *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May 1952), p. 20.
3. Bernard Davies, "Ever-Decreasing Circles: A Slight Case of Railway Mania," *Sherlock Holmes Railway Journal*, Vol. 3 (1995), pp. 11-12.
4. Wayne B. Swift, "The Bruce-Partington Railway Geography," *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 52.
5. Swift, p. 52, 55.
6. Swift, pp. 55-56.
7. Swift, p. 55.
8. Davies, p. 13.
9. Davies, p. 16.
10. Davies, pp. 14-15.
11. Davies, p. 21.
12. Swift, p. 56.

SOURCE

- D. Martin Dakin: *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*, London: Davies & Charles, 1972.