

## Sheila Bowler *'Murder in Toytown'*

The case of Sheila Bowler took us straight into Murder-at-the-Vicarage territory. Nothing could have been in greater contrast to the seediness of, for example, the case of Mills and Poole than the lace-curtains, tea-shops, cobblestones and gossip of Winchelsea and Rye in East Sussex; a murder in toytown.

Except I'm not sure it was a murder. In fact, it is one of the strangest aspects of one of the most bizarre cases we have ever investigated that a woman was convicted of murder on no evidence whatsoever.

The mystery began on a fine summer's evening in 1992. Mrs Bowler, a formidable, somewhat forbidding, and recently-widowed woman of sixty-two, had just finished teaching at Battle Abbey School. She was a freelance piano-teacher, and the school was one of those where she taught. Pausing only to telephone her son Simon, she set off for the Greyfriars Residential Home in the coastal village of Winchelsea. The town, perched on a mound from which the sea has long retreated, is proud of its historic status as one of the Cinque Ports; and local wisdom, with all the unhesitating arrogance of proud parochialism, has - it that its street layout parallel roads intersected at right-angles - provided the inspiration for the urban planner of New York. Winchelsea's mellow brick and white-timbered cottages make it picture-postcard pretty. A Neighbourhood Watch sticker peeps from every window, and one suspects that any felon apprehended in possession of his burglarizing tools would face a summary gibbeting outside the town gate. It seems, however, a depressingly lifeless community; doubtless it has its own busy economy of committee meetings and village-green vendettas, but, to the visitor at least, the place looks suspiciously like a commuter community; a neighbourhood degraded into a dormitory, in contrast to the bohemian vivacity of Rye, just two miles down the road.

Greyfriars was a noble pile on the edge of town. Sheila Bowler's aunt, Florence Jackson, had been resident at Greyfriars only a matter

of months, judged incapable, at eighty-nine, of looking after herself. For years, she and her sister Lil had coped on their own in a small flat in Rye, and were known as local characters, trotting up the cobbles to Simon the Pieman's coffee shop for breakfast every morning. But Aunt Lil had died a few months earlier, and Mrs Bowler, on one of her regular visits to her aunt, had found Flo one day lying in a pool of vomited blood, the result of an undiagnosed intestinal illness; it was clear that Aunt Flo could no longer look after herself and, under some protest and after receiving assurances that this needn't necessarily be a permanent arrangement, she had allowed herself to be taken into care at the home.

Mrs Jackson was in fact the aunt of Mrs Bowler's late husband, but she was known to all the family as Aunt Flo, and, to avoid cumbersome reference to aunts-in-law and nieces-in-law we'll leave them as aunt and niece. Just after eight one evening, Mrs Bowler tucked Aunt Flo into the front passenger seat of her ageing, but well-tended green metallic Audi, to take her home for two days. The plan, according to Sheila Bowler, was to assess whether or not she could be looked after at Fairmeadow, the Bowler family's pleasant, modern detached house on the outskirts of Rye. Mr Bowler, in one of a series of family tragedies which included Aunt Lil's death and Aunt Flo's illness, had died earlier that year, after unexpected complications following routine surgery. Sheila Bowler's children, Simon and Jane, had left home - he to work as a civil servant, she to pursue a promising career in music. Fairmeadow was too large for just one person; and there would be the advantage that if Aunt Flo could be cared for at home, she would avoid the weekly £250 haemorrhage of nursing-home fees.

Thirteen hours after waving goodbye to the staff at Greyfriars, Aunt Flo was found dead in the River Brede, where it runs through the marsh pastureland at the bottom of Winchelsea Hill. She had been reported

missing at midnight. At one in the morning a police helicopter had been scrambled. In spite of having only a limited area to search, it drew a blank. The eye-in-the-sky, we were later told, had a sophisticated thermal-imaging system to detect the body-heat of anything below. We were also told that the helicopter used not a sophisticated satellite system but the *AA Road Atlas* to navigate by. Next morning, though, the crew had better fortune. Just six hundred yards away from where Mrs Bowler had abandoned her car they found the body of Aunt Flo.

Much of what happened during those thirteen hours is not in dispute; but the motives of each and every action are fatally ambiguous. For a start, Mrs Bowler did not drive her aunt straight home to her pleasant detached house on the outskirts of nearby Rye. She set off in the opposite direction towards the seaside town of Bexhill, saying she wanted to pick up a protein supplement from a supplier and family friend. It was, we later discovered, an errand on behalf of another elderly lady whom Mrs Bowler had taken under her wing. When she called at the house in Bexhill, however, leaving her aunt in the car with the radio to keep her company, she was told that the supply had not arrived. 'Never mind,' she said. 'I'll be passing this way tomorrow.'

There are two explanations for the detour. The first is that Sheila Bowler, a woman forever dashing around who made her plans on the spur of the moment - even Aunt Flo's outing was arranged at the last moment - thought it worth combining an errand with a pleasant summer's evening ride. Aunt Flo had been cloistered in Greyfriars, and she would appreciate the liberation of a trip in the familiar and friendly car.

The other, and less charitable, explanation is that Sheila Bowler wanted to use up the hours of daylight and dusk, so that she could tip her aunt into the river under cover of darkness.

There are also two explanations about what happened next. On the way back from Bexhill, as the Audi was sweeping along the straight road bisecting the plump orchards and sheep-dotted pastures of this idyllic corner of East Sussex, Mrs Bowler was aware that the car was handling badly. She noticed it as she drove along Icklesham straight, but kept on for another couple of miles, until she got to Winchelsea. At Winchelsea, the A259 skirts the town, and then plunges steeply down to the bottom of the inland cliff on which it stands, resolving itself in a sharp hairpin bend. The gradient and the abrupt change of direction put an intolerable strain on the wheel and, some sixty yards beyond the

bend, Mrs Bowler parked her car on the kerbside. Finding that the front nearside tyre was badly deflated, she made her aunt comfortable in the passenger seat, tried, unsuccessfully, to find some music on the car radio, and set off, at a brisk pace, in search of help from a row of roadside cottages a quarter of a mile or so distant. Ringing the doorbell of Number 4, she discovered that she vaguely knew one of the residents of Tanyard Cottages, a local barber, Mr Soan. Explaining her predicament, she used Mr Soan's telephone to call the Britannia Recovery Service, to which she subscribed. She was connected at 10.21 p.m. After gratefully accepting a glass of orange squash, Mrs Bowler, accompanied by Mr and Mrs Soan, then walked back to the car. It was Mrs Bowler who was the first to realize that her aunt was missing.

That's Mrs Bowler's story. It is everyone's nightmare; most of us have, against our judgement, but due to circumstances beyond our control, left our children or those dependent on us for 'just a few minutes'. Every minute seems an hour, as we fret at our separation; the relief when, on our return, the house has not burnt down, and the children have not electrocuted themselves, is palpable, and we vow never to take such a risk again. But there was no relief for Sheila Bowler. A ragged search party set out - soon to be joined by the police and the man sent by Britannia Recovery. But Mrs Bowler told them not to range too far - her aunt could hardly move without her zimmer frame; and the zimmer was back at the nursing home.

There could be, again, a more sinister explanation; as it became conveniently dark, Mrs Bowler drove her aunt down to the bottom of Winchelsea Hill, and instead of following the hairpin bend round to Rye, she turned left at the smaller road at the apex of the bend. The road, called Station Road because it eventually leads to the picturesque Railway Children station just outside Winchelsea, is a well-used local short cut to Udimore and, eventually, the main London road. Station Road passes a caravan site on the right, a couple of houses a little further up on the left, crosses the River Brede, and then winds in a big curve to the left. Shortly before another kink to the right, there is a small, squat brick building. It houses an enormous Archimedes screw, and at unpredictable times of the day and night the screw revolves, pulling water up from one of the drainage ditches and into the River Brede.

The pumping station has an area of concrete hard-standing, and it is

easy to drive in, off Station Road, and park a car behind it. Local romantics know it well as a discreet and convenient venue. But Sheila Bowler - according to the version of that night's events which ultimately convicted her - wanted to exploit the convenience and discretion of the place for a darker reason. She parked the car, escorted her confused old aunt to the bank of the River Brede, and pushed her over the edge. She would have been able to see the lights of Winchelsea twinkling on the hill dead ahead of her, some four hundred yards across the fields, and the headlights of cars sweeping down the hill. But, so long as no one came down Station Road, she would be safe under cover of darkness.

Then she drove back up Station Road. Reaching the hairpin of the A259, she turned left, towards Rye, but then - and this, of course, is still the murderous explanation of the night's events - she pulled into the kerb after ten to fifteen yards or so. She got out of the car and, checking to see that no one was passing, crouched by the front nearside tyre, and let it down. Then she set off, ostensibly to seek help, but in fact to recruit the unwitting and innocent Mr and Mrs Soan into a calculated charade. The whole night's events had been coldly planned; Mrs Bowler had not even prepared a bed, or laid in food, for her guest back at Fairmeadow. What would be the point in making a meal, or taking sheets out of the airing cupboard, for someone who - you knew - would not be coming home?

Two versions, then, of the night's events. Everyone in the area subscribes vehemently to one version or the other. Each person we met was convinced either that Mrs Bowler was a wicked murderess, or a woman with a heart of gold who had become the victim of a tragic misfortune. Each conviction is held passionately, angrily.

It doesn't seem to matter that there is literally no evidence either way. There is nothing upon which to base a passionate conviction of Sheila Bowler's innocence. Nor of her guilt. But that doesn't seem to stop people clinging, furiously, to their views. Toytown always was a place for passionate prejudice.

It was this that made it such a frustrating case. We need a degree of evidence, because we then have something to investigate. But with the Bowler case, there was nothing; what evidence there was, as we shall see, was totally discredited in court. We needed to find a new dimension to the case.

In fact, our preliminary investigation almost immediately revealed

matters which the court, and the gossips, were unaware of. Sue Walker, the researcher who originally went to Sussex, met a redoubtable octogenarian who volunteered interesting information on the state of the tyre. A few weeks earlier Sheila Bowler had driven her - in what she described as a typical act of charitable friendship - to Hastings. She remembers the day well, because she had to buy a hat for a wedding. On the way back, the old lady said how much she missed the sea views she used to enjoy when she lived on the coast. Mrs Bowler immediately swung the car off the main road, and down the narrow lanes to the local lighthouse, where they stopped to enjoy the view. As they left, however, Mrs Bowler complained about the way the car was handling. 'It absolutely sticks in my mind,' the old lady told us, 'because I had this naughty thought; oh dear, if we crash, I won't be able to wear my lovely new hat.'

But even that cuts both ways; it could suggest that Mrs Bowler was studiously laying the groundwork for her cunning plan, relying on the old lady to come forward with her corroboration. Indeed, practically every aspect of the Bowler case is capable of two interpretations. Take that somewhat heartless injunction not to bother looking too far for the missing eighty-nine-year-old. Well, Mrs Bowler was a bit like that; a heart of gold, everyone would say, but one of that brittle breed of uniquely English, no-nonsense, unsentimental matrons who are the bossy backbone of every village committee. Mrs Bowler is the kind of mother who might say of her son's broken collar bone that it would jolly well teach him to keep his feet in the stirrups; the kind of woman who tells you that she doesn't suffer fools gladly - leaving you with the firm impression that when it comes to fools, she regards you as a prime specimen of the species. Such women provoke simultaneously contrary reactions; and, as even her friends told us, Mrs Bowler was a wonderful woman, but your heart tended to sink as you saw her looming towards you in the High Street at Rye.

Other features of the case are sinister or redeeming, according to prejudice. Mrs Bowler was said to have told Greyfriars staff that her aunt wouldn't need a zimmer frame. Well, of course she wouldn't if Mrs Bowler planned to murder her; but, on the other hand, Aunt Flo had recently fractured her wrist, and was wearing a cast, so she couldn't have used a zimmer even if she had wanted to. Again, the point about her not having a bed ready upstairs - was that because she knew Aunt Flo would not be coming home that night? If so, for a calculating killer it

seems somewhat remiss to leave such a blatant statement of intent. A more prosaic reason - and the one that Mrs Bowler impatiently gave me in a 'what-sort-of-idiot-are-you' tone of voice - is that she did not know whether or not Aunt Flo could manage the stairs at Fairmeadow. If she could, she'd make a bed up upstairs, and if not, she would have made up a couple of beds on the ground floor, to be close to the old lady.

In the absence of evidence, and with the circumstantial detail open to such widely varying interpretation, everything depended on the attitude of those investigating the affair. Detective Sergeant Linda Booth was with Mrs Bowler on the next day, Thursday, when the news was broken. 'She seemed really quite jovial, full of the joys of spring,' DS Booth reported to the incident room. Particularly suspicious was the fact that Bowler, instead of collapsing in the requisite flood of tears, had begun capably to bake a batch of biscuits. 'But Sheila's not like that!' one of her friends exclaimed. 'She'd never cry in front of strangers - particularly not the *police*.'

The Bowler case was unique in our experience, in that it was the first time that we had access to the police side of the story. Since the major miscarriage-of-justice scandals of the eighties, the Crown has been compelled to take more seriously its duty to disclose any relevant information to the defence. Among this stack of paperwork, in the Bowler case, were the duty logs of the Sussex Police, and their internal briefings on the progress of the case. It has long been our belief that most miscarriages of justice arise not from malice but from the onset of a fatal preconception, which accentuates any information tending to support it, while blinkering officers from anything that tends to challenge it. With the police logs we could see how the prejudice set in from the very first hours.

At five past two in the morning, for example, the sergeant at the operations room spoke to a senior figure at the Greyfriars home. The log reports: 'She expressed great concern about the circumstances of the disappearance, and was scathing of Mrs Bowler. Although she didn't openly accuse Mrs Bowler of doing harm to her Auntie, she left me in no doubt that she thought it a distinct possibility.' It seems inconceivable that such an observation would not have been passed on to the woman detective sergeant who went to see Mrs Bowler next day, and it must have coloured her perception of the person already emerging as prime suspect. Indeed, DS Booth reports to the incident room with a breathlessness that disregards the usual canons of syntax:

'Mrs Bowler appeared very sprightly and jovial having just learnt that she had been informed of the death of Mrs Florence Jackson, however, she showed no signs of distress.' During the course of the (uncautioned) conversation, 'She kept jumping up to tend to the workmen and various other excuses and albeit answered my questions appeared reluctant to do so ... she expressed that she was extremely tired and felt that she'd really been inconvenienced enough by the police over the matter.' WDS Booth's suspicions are further aroused when it appears that Mrs Bowler has not got much in the way of food ready for her Aunt's visit and 'she also remarked that she was finding it extremely difficult making ends meet on a widow's pension ...' The conversation ends when 'she virtually ushered myself and some fello [sic] officers who were taking a statement from her son out of the house, saying that she needed to go and get a meal and could assist us no further that evening ... *'She was evasive, and had a number of phone conversations with her daughter' who 'was surprised at her mother's resilience; at which point Mrs Bowler explained that life must go on.'*

It's easy to picture the taut relationship that developed, almost from the outset, between these two obviously tough-minded women, the policewoman and the haughty suspect. One suspects that Mrs Bowler is the sort of person who would have preferred the police to use the tradesmen's entrance. When Mrs Bowler produced the boots she was wearing the night before, and said she had 'rubbed them up', suspicions deepened further still. Later, Mrs Bowler would produce a second pair of shoes - these, too, 'rubbed up' - saying she'd been mistaken about the first pair she produced; she also said, according to WDS Booth, that this was the first time the car had misbehaved (again, she was later to modify her story). When, a few days later, she said she had been down Station Road on the very day that Aunt Flo disappeared, the police interpreted this as Mrs Bowler desperately covering herself against the possibility that incriminating tyre tracks had been found. (None were.)

Back at the incident room, meanwhile, the case was taking shape. A slipper had been found near a pumping station on the River Brede, apparently pinpointing the murder site (the case had very rapidly been categorized as a murder). Bruising had been noticed, in the form of 'grip marks', round Aunt Flo's upper arm. A pathologist would later testify that abrasions on Aunt Flo's head were 'encouragement blows'. Authority had been gained to examine the bank account statements

both of Mrs Bowler and her aunt. It was established that Greyfriars was owed £3,589 in overdue payments for Aunt Flo's care. Aunt Flo's will would shortly be examined.

A week later came a significant, and damning statement from a woman who had passed the parked Audi that night. Judith Pearson said she was driving round the hairpin bend at 9.40 p.m., and saw a woman walking away from the car towards the cottages; this must have been Mrs Bowler. But the important thing was that Mrs Pearson did not see anyone in the car. If she was right, this would be proof of Sheila Bowler's cynical pretence of seeking help for a car she had herself disabled, having earlier disposed of its passenger.

A briefing from Detective Superintendent Foster reviews the situation a fortnight after the death of Aunt Flo. A critical experiment had been carried out to see if it was possible for Aunt Flo to shuffle the distance from the breakdown scene to the pumping station. A woman of similar weight was charged with walking the distance wearing new slippers, and the soles of those slippers were compared with the sole of the slipper recovered from the bank shortly after Aunt Flo's body was found. 'A recap of the available evidence was carried out and we still do not have evidence to suggest that Mrs Jackson was in Mrs Bowler's car after the alleged puncture ... In fact we have statements which lead us to believe she was not in the car. In view of the implausible [sic] accounts given by Mrs Butler [sic] together with these statements which tend to conflict with her account and her changing of the original stories to DS Booth, we must suspect Mrs Bowler of involvement in Mrs Jackson's death. As such, Mrs Bowler will be arrested on suspicion of murder today and interviewed.'

We've read our fair share of police interviews; Mrs Bowler's are, in their way, the strangest. Her solicitor, Russell Parkes, had advised his client to say nothing. This was eminently reasonable, given that Parkes had actually overheard a knot of policemen discussing Aunt Flo's fate a few days after the fatal night and saying that 'they had a body' for the murder, that it was now just a matter of getting the proof. Mrs Bowler's garrulous nature - she struck us, from what we knew, as a very much blurt-now, think-later type - made it even more sensible to recommend his client to say nothing. It was particularly apt given the extraordinary devices resorted to by the interviewing officers. Every technique in the interrogator's arsenal was brought to bear.

Andrew Sanders, at Oxford University's Department of Criminology,

has identified a number of inquisitional tricks of the trade. The Bowler interviews illustrate them all. There's the Battering Ram approach: 'You're not defending yourself, you're not maintaining your innocence,' says DS Booth at the outset; she then accuses Mrs Bowler of being 'a liar - there's no other nicer word that I can use.' Then there's the A Thousand Scientists Can't be Wrong approach. Mrs Bowler is confronted with the evidence of the scientist who has examined that tyre: 'Mrs Bowler, this man is an expert in this field; he's a forensic scientist ... there's nothing wrong with that tyre; you let that tyre down.' Then there's the Sympathetic Psychology approach: 'Was Aunt Flo that much a source of irritation to you? Did you feel bitter that she was still alive and in reasonable good health ... Your husband had recently died. Did you feel some bitterness towards her?' Next comes the Normalization Tactic - the suggestion that murder is a quite understandable temptation: 'After all, she was ninety wasn't she - she'd had a good life. So did it really matter if she died? Perhaps it didn't. Perhaps we shouldn't be caring anyway ... perhaps you didn't mean it to happen?' There's the Soft-Hard approach: 'You're an intelligent woman, Mrs Bowler' wheedles DS Booth, confronting the suspect with the logic of the case against her; and then her colleague DS Renno chips in brutally a few seconds later: 'You knew [your aunt] was face down in the drink, didn't you?' Heavy Irony makes an appearance: 'Lo and behold, yes, when you get back to the car she's not there, but then of course you would have been aware of that because she wasn't in the car when you left it, was she?' There's the Overwhelming Evidence argument: 'Are all these people telling us the truth, or are you the only one that's told us the truth and everybody else is telling lies?' The police even - presumably as a shock tactic - show her photographs taken of her aunt's body.

To all of this, Sheila Bowler resolutely responds: 'No comment.' 'So you're making no comment because you're guilty of this offence?' suggests DS Booth. 'Are you finding it difficult to face up to reality ... is it something you feel embarrassed about ... do you find the fact that we are sitting here accusing you of murder an uncomfortable situation?' And, later: 'Are you really this cold, callous woman that we're hearing from people?' There are four of these interviews, together totalling two hours and eight minutes. Given that Mrs Bowler only says 'no comment', there must be the best part of two hours of this barrage.

This interview, clumsy, hectoring, insidious, and apparently

dedicated to proving an assumption rather than entertaining the possibility of innocence, was tape-recorded, in the full knowledge that it could be heard in court. One shudders to think of how interviews were conducted before taping was introduced. Had Mrs Bowler confessed, and had she been convicted on the basis of that confession, I am sure that the Court of Appeal would have quashed the conviction because of the not-so-subtly oppressive way in which it was conducted. Sanders himself, whom we commissioned to cast a dispassionate academic eye over the interviews, reports: 'The interviews reveal a remarkable single-mindedness - the police are not really after the facts, not really after the truth, what they're after is a confession ... what they're trying to do here is to take a short cut and get the evidence through interrogating her.'

But Mrs Bowler did not confess. Why then was she convicted? The defence were confident, throughout, that the case would fall.

The trial took place at Hove Crown Court. Halfway through, after the Crown had put the evidence against her, the defence stood up and asked the judge to stop the trial and let Sheila Bowler go. The defence's 'respectful submission' was entered at the conclusion of the Crown case. With deft and drastic forensic surgery, Nicholas Purnell QC sliced away the evidence such as it was; Purnell preferred to call it 'a theory which effectively is wrapped in a straitjacket upon the minds of those investigating the case and a blinker upon those who present the case'. The prosecution had rested on three pillars, he said. (Read these speeches often enough, and you soon find that the world of advocacy divides between those for whom cases either rest on 'pillars' or 'planks'; some barristers are planksmen - Purnell is for pillars.)

First, there was the question of the sighting of an empty car, with Bowler striding away from it. Judith Pearson had said that she 'couldn't be sure' whether she would have seen a passenger in the car. There was a second witness, a Mr Beckett, but he, too, admitted that he 'was not sure' - so that evidence collapsed. We were later to confirm the frailty of this evidence. We parked the same Audi on the bend exactly two years later, and, travelling past in another car at precisely the same time, videoed what would have been apparent. We hired an actress of exactly the same age and build as Aunt Flo and put her in the passenger seat. We discovered that the head restraints of the Audi would have made it impossible for anyone to tell whether or not anyone was in the passenger seat. We also noticed, with some amusement, that a police television programme called *Crime Monthly* had also

reconstructed the experiment. Quite inexplicably, whereas we had used the very motor car involved in the night's events, with permission of the Bowler family, the model of Audi that *Crime Monthly* used did not have solid headrests, but merely a moulded frame. One would really have hoped that a programme being made with the cooperation of the Sussex Police would have paid more attention to such an important detail. But one is often disappointed. Besides, common sense suggests that you would recognize a car as being 'empty' with reference to the driver's seat, not the passenger's. All things considered, pillar one lay in pretty spectacular ruins.

Pillar two supported the theory of how Mrs Bowler had perpetrated the murder. The pathologist, Michael Heath, had first maintained that Aunt Flo had been pushed from the top of the bank. It was only when he was invited to go down to the River Brede that he realised that the theory could not be sustained. The banking is incredibly steep - I myself, though even my best friends would not see me as a metaphorical gazelle, found it hard to maintain a footing on the slope. More importantly, though, there is a ledge made out of stones, bound together in blocks by stiff wire netting - a construction known as 'gabions'. If Mrs Bowler had pushed Aunt Flo from the top of the bank, Aunt Flo would have crashed against the hard ledge - and there were no such injuries. The jury actually went to the site of the supposed murder - a rare, imaginative and often crucial move in a murder trial.

It was obviously a salutary experience for Dr Heath, who had to revise his original theory. The pathologist had to improvise a new scenario; this time Bowler had to lead Aunt Flo down the precipitous slope, along the top of the ledge, down two more feet of steep slope to water level, before tipping her in. The jury had to work hard to contain their laughter at what was a self-evidently absurd scenario. No one could have coaxed a frail woman - who, after all, as everyone agreed, was virtually immobile - down a slope which would have challenged an athletic teenager. Heath tried to recover his position in the witness box, saying that his mother of eighty could have bounded up the slope in a couple of steps. Purnell asked him, witheringly, if he was trying to be funny. The judge, evidently sceptical himself, asked Heath if his theory was predicated on Aunt Flo going voluntarily to her death, and described the scenario as outlined by the hapless pathologist as 'rather improbable'.

We were, it has to be said, astonished by the state of the

pathological evidence; vast and vague theories were being elaborated on the basis of little more than speculation, while crucial matters like the condition of the body, its height and weight, its temperature on recovery, and the temperature of the river water had simply not been taken. In that regard, the conduct of the investigation was eighth-rate. And this was an investigation into the gravest crime in the criminal calendar.

If that sounds as if we're being a little hard on the police, let me offer in return a fairly disastrous cock-up that we brought upon ourselves. When we came to reconstruct the prosecution's theory, on the last day of filming, we trooped down to the river bank. It was a misty and overcast morning, after a night of thunderstorms. I was going to declaim to camera the prosecution's account, retracing the absurdly unbelievable steps of Aunt Flo's supposed last walk. What we hadn't realized was the effect those thunderstorms would have - they had raised the level of the River Brede by a good two feet. So my reconstruction was going to be problematical - much of it was under water. It being the last day, we were well and truly stymied - bringing the crew down for an extra day at some future time would wreck the schedule and cause grievous budgetary harm.

It's at times like this that producers have to think fast. 'Waders', said Steve Phelps; and, under protest, I squeezed myself into form-hugging rubber, and completed my piece-to-camera by jumping, up to waist height, into the brown waters of the Brede.

The pathological evidence, then, looked fairly shaky. We went to see the doctor who examined Aunt Flo's body for the defence. Dr Vesna Djurovic told us that there was absolutely nothing on the body to suggest forceful treatment. The 'grip marks' on the arm could perfectly well be the result of helping a frail old lady out of bed - old people bruise very readily. As for the 'encouragement blows', Dr Djurovic said that the term had no validity; no scientist could apply a motive to a wound. Everything was consistent with an accidental fall. We conducted the interview in the mortuary of Guy's Hospital, a room of slabs, sluices, hosepipes and sinister-looking buckets. In the course of it, one of the friendly mortuary staff popped his head round the door and asked us if we could be as quick as possible: 'I've got a young doctor here wants to come in and fiddle around with a leg.' Of course the pathology didn't

prove Mrs Bowler innocent; nothing ever did, and nothing ever will, just as there is nothing to prove her guilty.

With the sightings and the pathology destroyed, the Crown's third pillar was the business about the tyres - the attempt to prove that Mrs Bowler had cunningly let the tyre down to provide herself with a cover for the whole murderous exercise. For this theory to hold water, they had to show that the tyre had not been driven on while it was deflated; in other words, that the tyre had been fine until Mrs Bowler had driven Aunt Flo down Station Road, killed her, returned to the main road, and let the air out of it.

Once again, the Crown's expert witness came to grief. The Crown contended that the tyre could only have been driven, while deflated, for at most a couple of revolutions, so that Mrs Bowler's story of a developing deflation, and presumably driving the tyre when it was flat, must be untrue. But when the expert witness was called, it emerged that he had been wrongly briefed; his report referred to the effect of sustained driving on a totally deflated tyre. Then the driver of the recovery vehicle was called, and showed that the tyre had revolved a considerable number of times as the car was manoeuvred on and off the breakdown truck. The whole evidence about the tyre was further tainted by clumsiness on the part of the constabulary. A policeman had called to collect Mrs Bowler's car on the morning after Aunt Flo's disappearance. He had found her trying to pump up the tyre - she intended driving it down to the garage where Lofty, the mechanic at Rye Harbour, would check it over. The policeman, however, inflated the tyre himself, and drove it away for tests. Any innocent evidence of debris, like a piece of grit in the valve, would have been destroyed. Interestingly, the tyre - supposedly intact until the wicked Bowler tampered with it - deflated significantly of its own accord during that very journey with a policeman at the wheel, at least according to the evidence of those policemen who checked the pressure before and after the journey. Yet, by now, the police blinkers were so firmly on that they failed to take account of the evidence of their own eyes. The judge was clearly exasperated by the state of the tyre evidence. 'The tyre tells us nothing', he said; the evidence 'adds nothing to the sum of human knowledge.' Once again, basic evidential rules had been overlooked by the East Sussex Police; no one noted or photographed the state of the car at the Bowler house on the morning after Aunt Flo's disappearance, and no record was taken of whether or not the wheel had a dust-cap on

it.

'There is no single element in each of these three pillars of evidence about which the prosecution can legitimately address the jury and say "there is evidence about which you can be sure," ' the defence submitted. 'My learned friend has set out a theory, and the evidence to prove that theory has been lacking. ... My Lord, the evidence has fallen away, and what we are left with is a collection of witnesses who have been called in pursuit of a theory, the theory which is shown to be faulty, and cannot be supported by the witnesses and the facts.'

Collapse of case? Well, if it had been a third-rate burglary in Catford the case against the accused would almost certainly have been abandoned. Mr Justice Garland agreed that 'the evidence actually given did not support all of the assertions' made in the Crown's opening statement. The tyre tests, for instance were 'all based on wholly false premises.' The pathological evidence was flawed, and, far from Mrs Bowler being a callous and uncaring woman, there was ample evidence of her concern and care for her late husband's aunt. And yet he concluded that 'there are issues to be left to the jury.' And, principal among these issues, was the question: 'If not the defendant, then who?'

All this argument took place with the jury dismissed. The professionals were agreeing that the evidence was in tatters - but this information was not for the jury's ears. Having lost the battle of the submission of 'no case to answer', the war was lost. It is very hard to prove someone innocent, to prove the negative proposition that someone did not commit a crime. Yet, that - a classic reversal of the burden of proof - is what led to the conviction of Sheila Bowler. It was Friday afternoon, and the jury were finding it hard to reach a unanimous, or even a majority, verdict. The judge knew that if their deliberations were to continue, it would involve the court sitting over the weekend. A hotel would have to be booked, and the hotel's deadline for reservations was looming. The judge explained the situation to the jury. Minutes later, the jury filed back in to pronounce their verdict of guilty.

'A typical Sussex jury,' a lawyer at the heart of the administration of criminal justice told me. 'Ever since' ... and he went on to quote an infamous case in which a local jury had acquitted a man of murder, who then went on to commit an attempted murder - 'you can usually rely on a Sussex jury to convict.' These local traits are an open secret among lawyers. Liverpool juries, for instance, are notorious for taking their time over reaching a decision, if it means a night in a hotel, while

southerners don't take so kindly to the idea of being away from their beds.

Logically, however, it is hard to see how the jury could have come to any other conclusion, given the judge's decision and the police's lack of independent investigation. By leaving the jury with the question of who else could have led the immobile old lady to her death, he had left them with an unanswerable riddle. A Libyan assassin? An alien invader? There was no evidence of anyone else's involvement - but how could there be, if the police had never looked for evidence of such an eventuality? The Bowler conviction is a salutary experience for those who believe that an accused can only be found guilty beyond reasonable doubt and on the basis of the evidence set before it in court.

The branchline from Ashford, with its rattletrap two-coach trains - pensioned off, one suspects, because they were too old even for the London commuter lines - adds to the Agatha Christie feel of the case. You almost expect sepia photographs of Worthing on the compartment walls, or the train windows to be operating on the old strap-and-buckle principle. Sue Walker had been on the case for some days, and Stephen Phelps had immersed himself deeply into the paperwork, before I made my first visit to Rye and checked in at the Mermaid Hotel.

As journalists, we spend a lot of time in hotels. We can predict the pictures on the walls of our room in every Forte Crest; we could take 'Complimentary Bathroom Accessories' as a specialist subject on Mastermind. We have all stayed, some time or another, at the nightmare hotel with the yellow nylon sheet through which you can see the floral print of the mattress. The plywood veneer of the bedside surround is scarred with cigarette burns. A built-in radio has five buttons, only one of which works - and it cannot receive Radio Four; When you run the bath a torrent from the shower hits you on the back of the head, because the chamber-maid has used it to rinse out the bath and has not bothered to flick the switch back to bath mode. A more than usually boisterous social evening organized by the junior chamber of commerce is taking place in the room immediately below, and it sets the wire coathangers in the wardrobe jangling. Next door a couple are involved in a lengthy argument in which, tantalizingly, you cannot quite make out the words, but which later climaxes in a rumbustious, rhythmical reconciliation. There is a worrying scrubbed patch on the carpet near the head of the bed. The alarm call does not come through.

All we really ask for is somewhere warm, quiet, with access to a

telephone; the restaurant doesn't matter - we are hardly ever back before last orders, because the evening is the best time to catch people at home. The Forte Crest at Gloucester, unpromisingly sited in the middle of a business park and next to an out-of-town Sainsbury's, was ideal. But the Mermaid at Rye - 'Rebuilt in 1420' as the sign on the wall declares - was a delight; genuine creaky timbers, every piece of furniture an oaken antique and joy of joys - no kettle for home-brewed tea, but a real, old-fashioned, room-delivery, early-morning-tea service. The telephone worked. A log fire the size of a small ballroom blazed at one end of the bar. Breakfasts were a riot of cholesterol, with the life-prolonging option of haddock as well as kippers. One woke to the sound of birds rummaging under the eaves; or they might have been rats. It didn't matter. It was an unexpected and blessed haven - in a town, as we were to find, bitterly divided by the case.

It made the contrast with Sheila Bowler's accommodation all the more poignant. You get to Bulwood Hall Prison down an unobtrusive lane in suburban Essex. Within yards, it seems, you are in the depths of the countryside. When we went the countryside was positively bulging with springtime: buds were fit to burst, daffodils pumping through like roman candles. The prison comes as a shock, as you round the corner from this bucolic idyll. Twenty-foot high, vomit-coloured mesh surrounds the squat, damp brick buildings. The very climate seems to drop by five degrees. The prison officers are friendly enough as the visitors are processed, but there's a nervous, edgy atmosphere in the little gathering of boyfriends, parents, and bewildered toddlers who have made the journey to Bulwood Hall. Suddenly, we felt very lucky to be there by choice.

As the fourth door was unlocked I caught my first sight of Sheila Bowler. A commanding figure, she was fussily arranging the chairs in the visitors' room, for all the world as if she was setting up the seating for the AGM of the village-hall committee. We bought her tea from the WRVS counter - one cup only per inmate per visit, warns the notice, for some pettifogging reason. At neighbouring tables couples spent their pent-up passion in a manner acceptable to the burly, bald prison officer on the raised dais who supervised the visits; fevered fondling, voracious kissing. Matter-of-factly, Sheila Bowler answered the fifty-six questions we had prepared for her.

Why, having collected Aunt Flo at eight, had she driven all the way to Bexhill and back, breaking down at 9.45 p.m., instead of taking the old

lady straight back home? After all, her aunt's bedtime was eight o'clock. Nonsense, she prickled, that's what staff at the residential home may have said, but in fact Aunt much preferred to stay up late. As for the food, Aunt Flo had already been fed at the home. 'They feed them early, don't they?' I said. 'I suppose it's for the convenience of the staff.' 'We get supper at five o'clock here,' she shot back. 'Still, it's better than Holloway - last meal at a quarter past three!' Prison had already begun to leave its stain on this game, starched matron, inklings of the worldly-wisdom of the old lag. 'Not much going on between the ears of that prison officer,' she remarked conspiratorially. 'The only qualification she has is knowing how to lock doors.' Then back to business: 'I can see how it looks bad that I didn't have any food in the house; but then, if I had been planning to kill her, I'd hardly have made my intentions so clear!'

The same, of course, was true of Mrs Bowler's attitude to the zimmer frame, which Greyfriars had suggested she should take for Aunt Flo's convenience. Her refusal to take it was interpreted as evidence of murderous intent - after all, Aunt Flo wouldn't need a zimmer frame for much longer. Studying the paperwork later, we found that one of the care assistants who saw Aunt Flo off that night heartily agreed that taking the frame would be a waste of time. In fact, Mrs Bowler reckoned that the last thing she wanted was her aunt tottering round the house with the frame; she would be easier to deal with if she stayed put. 'She was a bit of a wanderer, you know.'

That took us a bit by surprise. The entire case had been founded on the fact that Aunt Flo could not have left the car unaided, while Mrs Bowler went off to get help. When Mrs Bowler returned to the car, she had specifically told the search party not to range too far because of her aunt's relative immobility. Now, apparently, Aunt Flo had a history of independent locomotion. 'A few months before she went into Greyfriars, when she was living at home, I suddenly saw her on Rye Station; she'd taken herself off for the day to Hastings, for a look round the shops.'

So had Aunt Flo deteriorated so fast in the six months or so since this little escapade that she was virtually incapable of movement on the fatal night? The question intrigued us. Certainly we would have to take a closer look at Aunt Flo's medical records. A chat with the local GP might pay dividends. Yet even her niece assumed that she was virtually chairbound; but could that attitude have more to do with the way all of us regard old people? Of course no one had seen Aunt Flo walking by

herself - because by definition you go to the assistance of an old lady. We want to think the old are dependent upon us, and the old, in turn, do nothing to disabuse us of this.

There was another intriguing aspect to Aunt Flo's health. During the drive to Bexhill, Mrs Bowler said that Aunt Flo had been in pain from her stomach. 'I assumed it was a symptom of her stomach cancer,' she said. We probed further. 'Yes,' she said, 'she'd been in to hospital several times for tests. I was shown the X-rays by a doctor - can't remember his name - but he said "It won't be long now." He said it right in front of Aunt Flo - I remember thinking at the time how tactless it was.'

Why murder a woman who is going to die anyway? We edged the conversation, as discreetly as we could, round to the subject of euthanasia. 'I disapprove of it intensely,' said Mrs Bowler. With that out of the way, we looked further into the matter of motive. It would be financially advantageous, the police had argued, for Aunt Flo to die before her Greyfriars bills had eaten up all her capital, which was in the form of the small flat she owned and which Mrs Bowler stood to inherit. 'But we were making plans for that,' said Mrs Bowler (shortly after I had struck a blow against the system and bought her a second cup of tea). 'We were going to let her flat, and, with her pension, that would have gone a long way to meeting the bills for the time that was left to her.'

Why present the police with the wrong shoes, first time round? 'I made a mistake,' she shrugged. 'Anyway, if I was guilty, why would I have corrected my mistake and shown them the right ones later?'

As we left, we saw her once again tidying up the interview room, marshalling the chairs and rounding up the errant teacups. We drove back to London. Had we just spent two hours in the company of a murderess of infinite, double-bluffing cunning? With a woman who simply could not come to terms with the enormity of her crime? Or an innocent woman trapped by suspicion and circumstance?

We had no very clear answer to that question. But we had looked her full in her clear grey eyes and Stephen Phelps had asked her bluntly: 'Did you do it?' 'No, Mr Phelps,' she said. I am no psychologist, and my instinct is as flawed as anyone's; but I had spent most of the time watching her, watching the way she took her foot out of her shoe to scratch her calf, watching the impatience in her face as we asked questions 'to which you already know the answers.' How she must have annoyed the police, as she bristled at their impertinent, importunate

questioning.

But whatever we may have thought of Mrs Bowler was not going to alter matters - the case was already bedevilled enough with subjective judgements. There were no other witnesses to what went on that night; the owner of the caravan park had seen a car at the pumping station, but not at the relevant time, and it was almost certainly one of Rye's romantic young couples. The answer had to lie in the six-hundred-odd yards that separate the pumping station from where the car was parked.

We began by deciding we had to know all there was to know about the behaviour of the River Brede. Aunt Flo had been found only a hundred yards or so downstream from the pumping station. If she had walked just half the distance, she would have come to a bridge across the Brede. The railings along the side end abruptly; anyone feeling their way along them in the dark would then have plunged down the forty-five degree bank to the river below. This scenario would mean that Aunt Flo would only have to walk a more manageable three hundred yards.

It also meant that she would have had to float *upstream* to the position where she was found.

A few days later saw the Bowler team - Stephen Phelps, Sue Walker and myself - heading west along the M40 to the Hydrology Research headquarters at Wallingford. We had spoken to local experts at the National Rivers Authority; we had even dredged the expertise of the Inland Drainage Board, and everything had pointed us towards the experts at Wallingford. Rivers do strange things - but do they ever flow uphill?

The Brede very nearly does. In fact, we had a heady moment when we analysed the twenty-four-hour charts logging the water levels at various points along the river. They revealed that the level of the River Brede where it entered the sea at Rye sluice was a good metre higher than the point, several miles upstream, where we were hypothesizing that Aunt Flo might have fallen in, after a comparatively short walk. Could this be true? Sadly, it could not. There was, the expert told us, almost certainly a calibration error in the recording equipment. But the river's proximity to the sea, as it meanders through the Romney Marsh, does make it behave differently from waterways further inland, because of the action of the tides. Twice a day, at high tide, the sea wants to come charging up the River Brede. Lockgates at Rye sluice are closed to prevent the inward flow. In effect, then, the water moving down the

river backs up from the sluiceways. 'It virtually ceases to be a river, and becomes a pond,' explained our expert. 'There might even be, for a time, the very slightest upstream flow, but it would be negligible.' As we pored over the Ordnance Survey maps, we noticed that a canal fed into the Brede; if that water was flowing strongly it could add to the upstream current. We would need accurate measurements of the Brede flow from the nearby gauging station. Sadly, however, a few more minutes' research revealed that the station had been closed a couple of years earlier - part of the economies of our national infrastructure.

We left Wallingford with our heads buzzing with statistics and jargon: the ordnance datum (a vertical Greenwich meridian taken from a point in Newlyn Harbour) of the riverbed, the offset factor for tides calculated from Dover for Rye; we also wondered how carefully the police had analysed the workings of the River Brede. We got the answer from a police statement, which I reproduce for its innocent simplicity. 'At 3 p.m. I went to the scene on the River Brede and conducted an experiment with one of the walking sticks I had obtained from the Greyfriars Home. For a period of six minutes I placed the stick into the water. The stick floated. However it travelled a distance of about five metres before becoming lodged in the river bank.' No tidal analysis for this honest East Sussex copper, no calibration of the mean flow rate for comparison with that relevant to the night in question. I suspect, however, that, in the end, his game of forensic pooh-sticks may have been just as valuable as our hi-tech, top-level research.

That experiment had helped buttress the police against Mrs Bowler. She had told the police that there was a walking stick in the car when she left it, but no trace of the stick could be found. It wasn't to be found in the river. If the police could prove that the stick should still be in the river, and would not have floated away downstream, this would suggest that Mrs Bowler was lying about the existence of the stick. The experiment satisfied the policeman conducting it that any walking stick would have stayed put. Now, thanks to Wallingford's experts, we can inform the Sussex Police that their experiment was desperately flawed; their walking sticks couldn't have floated away, because at exactly the time that they threw them in the water, the tidal conditions downstream were causing maximum stagnation. I repeated the experiment, in similar tidal conditions, and actually got the sticks to voyage upstream at a fair rate of knots, under the influence of a brisk easterly wind.

Forensic Access, the Newbury-based team of independent forensic

experts, were surprised at the bias and amateurism they detected in the do-it-yourself detection of the police. The walking stick experiment wasn't the only example; when the police had restaged a walk in slippers, to assess the effect a six-hundred-yard walk would have had on the scuffing of the soles, no assessment was made of how scuffed Aunt Flo's slippers already were. The problem, we discovered, lies in Home Office economies. Police forces, instead of being able to call on the central resources of police laboratories, now have to bear the actual cost of forensic experiments themselves. The internal market, it seems, has spread from the Health Service to the police, with equally problematical results.

Our own amateur efforts, I have to admit, would, in turn, have amused the police. We wanted to see what would have happened to the second slipper - the first had been found on the bank close to where Aunt Flo's body was found. Steve Phelps set off into Rye to buy a pair of slippers. The quest was to prove problematical in more ways than one. First of all, there were not many shops open. When, eventually, Steve found a shoe shop, he found himself suddenly at a loss for words when asked what style and size of slipper he was looking for. The answer 'it doesn't really matter, because I'm going to throw them into the River Brede as soon as I've bought them' would clearly be confusing. Ever conscious of budgetary constraints, Steve asked for a small pair. He had the misfortune to stumble upon the most assiduous, attentive and patient shop assistant in East Sussex - just when he was in a hurry and could not, frankly, care less about the quality of the merchandise he was buying. He was subjected to a gentle lecture on the importance of getting the size of footwear exactly right, especially, as was clearly the case, if he was buying for a child. He picked out a pair of pink fluffy slippers. 'Wouldn't you like to see some of the other styles?' asked the concerned assistant, as aware as Steve himself of the hideous quality of the slippers. Steve assured her that these were indeed the very pair he wanted most in the world, and asked how much they were.

Seven pounds fifty is not a great deal of money for a pair of children's slippers, but it is a lot of money for a pair of slippers you are intending to throw away in a few minutes. 'Seven pounds fifty!' Steve couldn't help exploding. 'Well, you did say they were just the ones you were looking for,' said the assistant, 'and I have to say that it's a very reasonable price.' As this abyss of mutual misapprehension grew wider,

a flustered Phelps proffered the cash. But the shop assistant, ever solicitous, said that she would make a special exception, and take only five pounds. This made Steve feel even worse, of course; especially as he left with the kindly assistant's words ringing in his ears, 'do feel free to bring them back if they don't suit.'

It was with quite a sense of relief that Steve threw a slipper into the Brede, to observe the effects of the current. But as it drifted ever further downstream, Sue Walker, the principal researcher on the case, became agitated. 'Aren't you going to fish it out?' She asked. It then dawned on Steve that the discovery of a child's slipper down by the sluice at Rye Harbour could trigger a major emergency inquiry. At worst, the team could be prosecuted for wasting police time - Steve had made such a fuss that the shop assistant would certainly be able to identify him to the police. So the next half-hour was spent in a frantic chase downstream, Phelps dangling precariously from the bankside undergrowth to intercept the serenely fluffy slipper as it floated by, maddeningly, out of reach. Eventually, his linen suit more than fashionably crumpled, he managed to retrieve the thing.

We had learnt a lot about rivers, and we thought we knew all there was to know about the River Brede - until a local man assured us that things actually did float upstream: 'Happens all the time with dead sheep'. But in the end we had to acknowledge that Aunt Flo probably fell into the river near the pumping station, where one of her slippers was found. Study of the police scene-of-crime photographs, and comparison with the record of when they were taken, convinced us that the slipper could not have been 'planted', nor accidentally placed there by police activity.

On another front, however, our researches were making better progress. We went to Aunt Flo's flat, to see what sort of a motive for murder it represented. It is a sad little place, left very much as it was when Aunt Flo went to Greyfriars. It can't be sold until the lawyers work out who it belongs to, because, although Sheila Bowler is named in the will, no one may benefit from committing a crime. While we were there, we were struck by the layout of the place; it's a series of rooms, all leading off one long corridor. Quite clearly, Aunt Flo would have had to be fairly mobile before she went into Greyfriars.

Neighbours confirmed this. 'I'm not saying she could do the Highland fling,' said one, 'but she was well able to get around, albeit in a limited sort of way.' We went back to Aunt Flo's GP, Dr Jeelani, who told us

that in his view, as her GP, she was reasonably mobile - indeed later nursing notes describe her as 'mobilizing well'. 'From what I knew of her, I can well imagine her getting out of the car and walking ... but no one ever asked me.' We amassed a great deal of evidence about Aunt Flo's ability to walk, but all of it referred to the time before she went to Greyfriars, five months before her death, and the staff at Greyfriars - who, to a woman, refused to talk to us - were adamant that she could not walk unaided in the time that they knew her.

But would they actually know? It sounds a preposterous question - of course those intimately involved with a patient's welfare would know the limits of her mobility. In fact, the reverse is true. When an elderly person is taken into care, we learnt from experts in geriatric medicine and from leading physiotherapists, it often happens that they lose their independence, their motivation for mobility. The atmosphere of care conspires to keep them immobile. Meals are brought to them, they are escorted to the lavatory, they are carried out of bed - in part because no one wants to tax their energies, but also because it is, frankly, handier for the staff. The staff, indeed, had said that they took Aunt Flo to bed in a wheelchair. 'Well, of course they did!' one professor of geriatric medicine chuckled. 'Last thing in the evening, when you are going off shift, and there are only four of you and a lot of them, you want to get the old dears into bed as quick as you can, and if that means using a wheelchair, that's what you'll use.' A local physiotherapist allowed us to film her unit at the Conquest Hospital in Hastings, and told us how her patients, given encouragement and confidence, are capable of far more than even the nursing staff or doctors assume.

Further checks with the pathologist confirmed that there was nothing structurally wrong with Aunt Flo which would have inhibited mobility. There was no particular muscle degeneration, or skeletal infirmity. Indeed, we discovered that whatever had been causing her intestinal bleeding, including the vomiting of blood which precipitated her move to Greyfriars, seemed to have gone away. Examination had revealed no trace of cancer, and, if she had been suffering from a stomach ulcer, a recent course of pills seemed to have cleared it up. Aunt Flo had also, after years of looking after herself in a fairly random manner, been enjoying regular meals and bedtimes at Greyfriars for the past five months; in other words, she was probably in better condition on the day she died than she had been for years.

But if she could have walked - would she? Why leave the safety of a

car, on a busy road, late at night, when you've been told by your niece that she won't be long? It's one of the luxuries we enjoy that we know where the top experts are to be found, and have the resources to borrow their expertise. Another thing we enjoy is their confidence that we are serious about our work. Professor Brice Pitt is Professor of Psychiatry for the Elderly, and from a study of Aunt Flo's medical notes he was able to make a diagnosis of mild to moderate dementia. So how would she have reacted to her situation, that dark midsummer night?

'I think she might well have reacted catastrophically,' said the Professor. 'We know that she was afraid of the dark, we know that she was afraid of being alone, she wouldn't have known if it was five minutes or five hours, and I think she would have found her isolation there quite terrifying. There would be a sense of terror, of awful loneliness, a sense of total bewilderment - she would be strongly motivated to get out of the situation if she possibly could and try to find help.'

The jury had to choose between two unsatisfactory alternatives; either Sheila Bowler took her aunt to her death - and there was no evidence for that - or it was some other, unnamed, mystery killer. The court was never given a third possibility - that Aunt Flo could have gone out into the night by herself. Everyone assumed that she could not have walked - even Sheila Bowler herself. If the jury had known that old people in homes are more capable of movement than their carers can know; that Aunt Flo was a relatively sprightly soul before she went into Greyfriars; that there was nothing physically to inhibit her mobility, and that she was healthier than she had been for some time; and that, given her mental condition she would have done almost anything to get out of the situation she was in - would they have found Sheila Bowler guilty beyond all reasonable doubt?

I don't think we'll ever know what happened on the banks of the River Brede that night, but I know that there's nothing to prove Sheila Bowler guilty - nothing, actually, even to suggest that she is. The strangest things ring true, things which I would not expect any court in the land to take seriously, nor an investigating detective sergeant to appreciate. Jane Bowler, Sheila's daughter, said that her mother would never have done such a thing - 'and certainly not during my exams, when she knew how much I'd be upset by Aunt Flo dying.' Another friend said: 'Even if I could imagine Sheila doing it, she'd blurt it out the next day - she couldn't keep anything to herself.' Another friend, the

former vicar of Rye who knew her churchwarden husband as well as Sheila Bowler, refuses to believe her capable of the crime; she was too saintly and - with a twinkle - 'she's simply too intelligent to do something so obvious.'

Filming at the scene of the crime had its problems; it's not the easiest thing to film on a busy main road in the middle of the night. In one particularly busy reconstruction - with actors playing the parts of emergency-breakdown-vehicle drivers, policemen, dog-handlers, and search-teams - a man in a policeman's helmet asked me what it was all about. I explained the background to the case, how police suspicions had fixed upon Mrs Bowler, and the general shortcomings of the enquiry. 'But shouldn't you be being filmed?' I ended by asking him. 'More than my job's worth, sir,' he replied - I had been talking to a genuine member of the Sussex Constabulary. I remember that night well; my night-time pieces-to-camera, to be filmed with dramatic midnight lighting, slipped further down the schedule. We only just managed to get them in before dawn broke - if you listen closely you can hear a morning cuckoo. The night also took its toll on Laura, who had left the office to run itself to come up and lend a hand. In one particular scene, we had to coordinate five cars driving round the hairpin bend. Laura, however, did not respond to the walkie-talkie order 'Action'. Her car remained immobile. Laura, bless her, was asleep. It was, after all, three o'clock.

If you want to kill an eighty-nine-year-old woman, there are easier ways to do it; damp sheets and an open window on a chilly night would probably do the trick. Of course it's less exciting a prospect than taking an old lady down a precipitous path on a dark night, hurling her to a watery death, and then arranging an elaborate plan involving artfully deflated tyres. It's no comfort to the wagging tongues of Winchelsea - who at one time organized an *ad hoc* vigilante squad to spy and report back on our activities - but truth is usually a little bit drabber than fiction. In real life, widowed piano teachers do not plan the murders of elderly aunts for the sake of inheriting small and dingy flats. In real life, there is disappointingly little dirty work at the crossroads, still less at the hairpin bend. There is not much murder at the vicarage these days, and, dull as it may be, the Cinque Ports Murder Mystery was in all probability no more nor less than a sorry little accident.