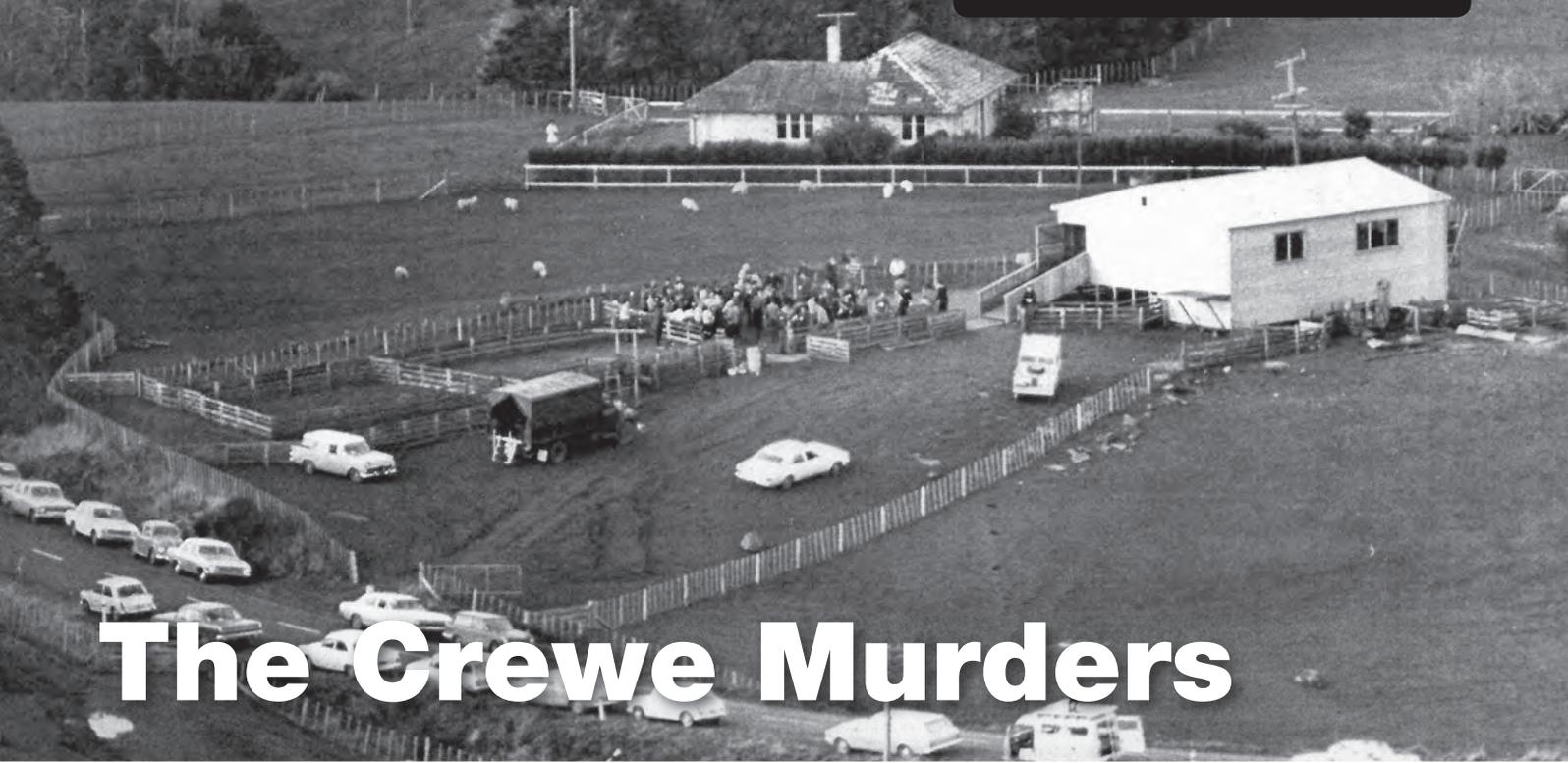


With the farmhouse murder scene in the background, police use the woolshed as their search base. Photo courtesy of Stan Keith.



# The Crewe Murders

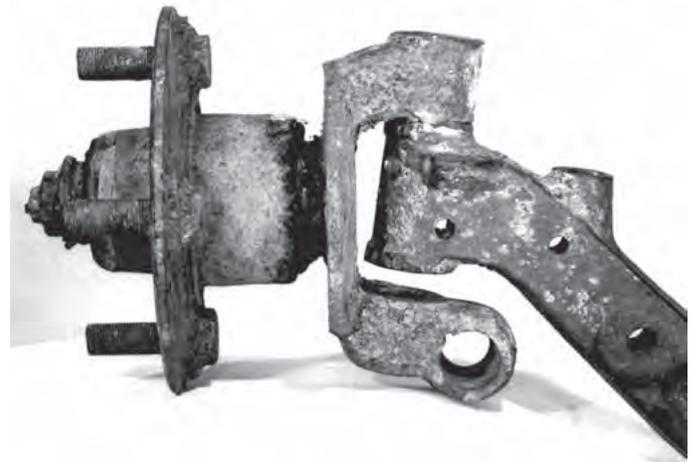
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2010 marks the 40th anniversary of the winter's night when Harvey and Jeanette Crewe, a young farming couple, were slaughtered in their farmhouse at Pukekawa near Tuakau.

The Crewe's were shot dead on or about June 17, 1970. Bloodstains on the walls and carpet pointed to their violent deaths and removal, but there was no trace of them. Their killer spared the life of the couple's only child, 18-month-old Rochelle. Her grandfather Len Demler (died in 1992), who lived on a neighbouring farm, discovered her five days later, trapped, distressed and dehydrated in her cot. Teams of detectives and uniformed police officers converged on the farm looking for clues as to the Crewes whereabouts and who might have murdered them. Their sinister and mysterious disappearance was to become one of New Zealand's most publicised crimes.

The police investigation, their arrest of local farmer Arthur Allan Thomas, his conviction, appeals, subsequent pardon and compensation award sparked a raft of books, films, documentaries and media articles. If the person or people who shot the Crewes hoped evidence of their calculating and cruel crime would remain submerged in the murky waters of the Waikato River forever, they were wrong. The bodies of first Harvey and then Jeanette were recovered from the river in the months following their disappearance. Detectives found proof that both victims' bodies had been weighted down by an axle in what investigators contend was a deliberate attempt by the killer or killers to keep the crime hidden.

Mr. Thomas was charged with their murders and at two subsequent trials, he was found guilty. Two appeals upheld the juries' decisions as did a Privy Council ruling. Thomas had served 10 years of a life sentence in prison when, following sustained pressure, lobbying by supporters, and a controversial book by author David Yallop



**ABOVE:** The axle beam used to weigh down Harvey Crewe's body in the Waikato River is mated here to a stub axle found at the Thomas farm dump. The broken weld at the top of the beam matches the stub perfectly. Photograph courtesy of Stan Keith.

proclaiming Mr. Thomas' innocence, the National Government of Robert Muldoon granted him a pardon.

As a way of backing up the pardon, the Muldoon Government appointed a Royal Commission of Inquiry to inquire into the circumstances of Mr. Thomas's convictions. Chaired by an Australian, the late Judge Robert Taylor, the commission sat in Auckland for 64 days in 1980. Some sessions, particularly those featuring the likes of Bruce Hutton, the former detective inspector who led the police investigation, were stormy at times. The commission's findings included harsh criticism of some police officers for the way they handled the case.

The commission's assertion that police planted crucial shell case evidence in order to convict Mr. Thomas --- a claim vehemently highlighted by his supporters --- still rankles 30 years on with those officers directly involved. At the request of the then Commissioner



Asked how he felt in the wake of the trials, appeals, the ultimate pardon of Mr. Thomas and the Royal Commission's report, Mr. Hutton said: "I just feel the way it was handled was very unfair to the Crown, the police and me and to [the late detective] Len Johnston in particular. [The Royal Commission was critical of Mr. Johnston's role in the recovery of two stub axles said to be evidence in the case.] "As far as I am concerned, the police and me, those involved, did their job and took the case to two trials on the evidence that had been discovered."

Of Mr. Johnston, who died before the Royal Commission sat, Mr. Hutton said: "I was rather surprised the commission criticised him without making any inquiries into the detective's previous service or background, that he was a very honest, straight forward detective."

Does Mr. Hutton have any regrets about the case? "Regrets as far as what the commission did, yes. Apart from that, no." Mr. Hutton regards the killings at Pukekawa, a small farming settlement near Tuakau, as one of the most callous he ever had to investigate. In his view, Harvey and Jeanette Crewe did not deserve to die the way they did. Their deaths were made more heartless by the way their toddler, Rochelle, was left abandoned in cot for five days until maternal grandfather Len Demler discovered her five days later on June 22, 1970. Rochelle's eyes were sunken. "She'd been chewing on wet nappies for sustenance," he said. "To me, that's showing desperation by the child to survive? and biting all the varnish off the top of its cot trying to get nourishment."



**ABOVE:** Detective Inspector Bruce Hutton sits in the armchair in which Harvey Crewe was shot to help recreate his theory of how the shooting occurred. Photograph courtesy of Alan Arnold.

Her physical state was a puzzle. Medical experts gave conflicting views about whether or not she'd been fed. "In my opinion, from what I saw, no way was that child fed. No way." Mr. Hutton said. "Why did it suck its wet nappy until it got sores in its mouth and that? I don't think that child was ever fed. The child was weak. Surely if you are going to feed a child you are going to give it sufficient nourishment to keep it alright?"

Initially, Mr. Hutton thought police were faced with solving a murder suicide case and that somebody had buried the bodies, hence a massive search of the Crewe and Demler properties. Mr. Demler, who died in 1992, was initially one of those on a list of suspects for the murders but was cleared from police suspicion after the Crewe bodies recovered from the Waikato River showed they had been shot with a gun Mr. Demler did not possess.

Of criticism over the years of his decision to dump Crewe murder exhibits, such as a vital shell case, in the Whitford tip, Mr. Hutton said: "As far as I am concerned, I did what I normally would do. That [destruction of exhibits] was our procedure and I was constantly being pressured by Detective Superintendent [Mal] Ross on his monthly inspections to dispose of exhibits in view of no further pending action ever to be taken in the Crewe case. We had a garage downstairs, a single garage [at Otahuhu police station] and stuff was jammed in there. There was no room for it. After that final appeal [involving Arthur Allan Thomas], he [Ross] said "That's it."



**ABOVE:** Crown Solicitor David Morris QC stands outside the Crewe house in the position from which the fatal shot was believed to have been fired through the open louvre windows.



**ABOVE:** The legal team. Back Row: Alan Arnold, Graham 'Bud' Abbott, Mike Charles and Stan Keith. Front Row: Len Johnson, David Morris QC, Bruce Hutton and David Baragwanath.

Mr. Hutton retired from the police in 1976. He's adamant his decision to leave was not influenced by the Crewe murder case. "I always said I wasn't there for the long haul, that I wanted to go back farming and have a go at breeding horses," he said. "I'd previously been farming right from my childhood days."

For former detective Stan Keith, involvement in the Crewe murder case and its ramifications, legal and otherwise, still continues. Since Mr. Hutton's retirement from the police, Mr. Keith has been designated as the "minder" of the 29 boxes of Crewe murder files held in Police National Headquarters archives.

When a politician, author, journalist or member of the public seeks information on the case, Mr. Keith has been the one assigned to seek answers. Their questions have resulted in him having to make countless trips to Wellington to sift through the myriad of information.

"It has been my life," said 69-year-old Mr. Keith who retired from the police with the rank of detective inspector in 1995. "If it hadn't been for this inquiry, I would have chased promotion within the police. You get politicians, you get ghouls, you get journalists who want to write books and you get those who want to do films. You get heaps and heaps of correspondence that comes through from headquarters. I've had enough of it and I've told them so."

Mr. Keith was assigned to the Crewe murder investigation within hours of the discovery of the blood-spattered farm house. He remembers Mr. Walton visiting the Pukekawa crime scene and telling him: "Son, you only get one of these inquiries in your lifetime."

Asked if he thought Rochelle Crewe had been fed, cleaned or both before her grandfather found her in her cot, Mr. Keith said: "The question I have asked is 'How long would a baby survive in a cot on its own in winter?' Then you have a sighting of a woman outside the little gate at the house during the day. The Crewe's had a green coloured car. When the sighting of the car was made on Saturday [June 19, 1970], the witness assumed it was the Crewe car. But it [the Crewe car] was parked in the garage out of sight, so it was someone else's. When an examination of the house was done, there were two saucepans in the kitchen. One of them had Harvey's diluted blood in the saucepan and the second one had Jeanette's blood group. If one person went back, you would grab a saucepan and clean up the blood. It gives an indication of two people [being present]."

Mr. Keith was assigned to attend the 1980 Royal Commission hearings and provide Judge Taylor and his fellow commissioners with any police material they wanted. He told the Herald: "Police had concerns during the hearings that their discussions about the case might be monitored. They were worried their conversations would have been used by the commission. The Security Intelligence Service used to arrange for the police room where the Crown solicitors worked to be debugged every morning. It was to protect us and our conversations. They used to bring in equipment and do their checks. They never found anything. Brian Wilkinson [the late former Detective Superintendent] arranged it."

Did Mr. Keith have sympathy for former colleague Mr. Hutton? "I felt sorry for him, the flak he took from the retrial committee in the early years and later on, as you know, he shut up," said Mr. Keith. "I think he was a great loss to the department."

Mike Charles, who is semi-retired and living Palmerston North, was a detective sergeant in Auckland when directed to join the Pukekawa team. One of his first duties was to take baby Rochelle to visit two Auckland medical specialists for them to establish if she'd been fed in the previous five days. Mr. Charles recalled how Rochelle clung "like a monkey" to the neck and waist of a woman family friend acting as her foster mother. While the two doctors could not agree she had been fed, Mr. Charles believes Rochelle looked well nourished. "She was obviously a well cared for baby," he said. "The thing I feel disappointed about was that in the early days we concentrated on the father as the suspect and we got tunnel vision. We did not have the bodies then. Len Demler became very focused as the suspect when, in hindsight, we were wrong. They [the Crewes] had been killed with a .22 calibre rifle to which Len did not have access."

It was Mr. Charles and his colleague Detective Sergeant Bruce Parkes who found a shell cartridge case in a renewed, more detailed search of a flower bed near the Crewe homestead four months after the murders. He totally refutes a repeated claim over the years that

the shell case had been planted by police. The condition of the shell case and the fact that he was one of two people sent to find it convinced him he had found genuine evidence. "I have never lost any sleep that it was a genuine find. I believe it was a shell case dropped by the killer," he said.

Mr. Charles regards the Crewe murders as a callous and calculated act because of the way the two bodies were disposed of in an obvious bid to conceal how they were killed. And he believes three separate incidents on the Crewe farm in the months leading up to the June murders could well be connected to the killings --- a fire in a hay barn and two burglaries at their home. One aspect of the Pukekawa saga disappointed Mr. Charles. He was denied his request to keep the shell case he found as a souvenir. He believes dumping the shell case was the wrong thing to do because its destruction meant it was no longer available for expert examination.



**ABOVE:** Detective Inspector Bruce Hutton at his desk with his Certificate of Appreciation received for his work on the Crewe murder enquiry. Photo courtesy of Stan Keith.

Rochelle moved to the United States to live with her mother's sister, Heather, in the wake of the murders. Police investigators heard occasional progress reports of Rochelle as she grew up. In recent years, they learned Rochelle had returned to New Zealand to live. Mr. Charles said he'd been told Rochelle now had two children of her own, lived in the South Island and wanted nothing to do with what happened to her parents so tragically 40 years ago.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This was one of three significant and groundbreaking murder investigations to occur in this area of South Auckland. In 1920 Sydney Seymour Eyre was murdered at Pukekawa and this was the first time a police car is recorded to have transported investigating police to a crime scene. In October 1933 Christobel and Samuel Lakey were murdered at Ruawaro. That investigation utilised aerial search and aerial photography for the first time. The Crewe murders of 1970 saw the first use of police divers in an investigation and the largest ground and water search experienced up to that time.*