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Ex-policeman to have own legal team at Hamill murder inquiry

By David Gordon
Wednesday, 7 January 2009

A former policeman will have his own legal team at the public inquiry into the murder of Portadown Catholic Robert Hamill, which opens next week.

Ex-reserve constable Robert Atkinson had a charge against him of perverting the course of justice dropped in 2004.

Mr Atkinson denied tipping off a suspect in the murder case through a telephone call, and the criminal charge was withdrawn at court.

It has been officially confirmed that he will be one of the legally-represented interested parties at the inquiry, as will the Hamill family and the PSNI.

The interested parties will each be represented a QC and a junior counsel.

Mr Hamill died from injuries sustained in a sectarian attack in Portadown town centre in April 1997.

The inquiry, which opens in Belfast next Tuesday, will examine allegations that the 25-year-old Catholic could have been saved had police intervened at the scene. The police have denied these claims.

Mr Atkinson and three other officers were stationed in a Land Rover in the area at the time.

The public inquiry will also scrutinise a collusion allegation relating to the subsequent murder investigation. This issue was detailed in a 2004 Government-commissioned report by Canadian judge Peter Cory. Judge Cory said it was alleged that a police officer had telephoned a suspect on the morning after the Hamill attack, warning him to destroy clothes he had been wearing.

The policeman was only named as "Reserve Constable B" in the judge's report, but was identified as Robert Atkinson in court proceedings that same year.

He and his wife Eleanor had been accused of attempting to pervert the course of justice. The charges against them were dropped in March 2004, with prosecutors admitting that the credibility of a key witness had been undermined.

The case stemmed from telephone records showing that a call had been made from the couple's home to the suspect's address on the morning after the attack, the judge noted.

They maintained that another couple who had stayed at their house that night had made the call. The other couple backed up this account initially, but later pleaded guilty to the perversion of justice.

Judge Cory's report also stated that the reserve constable and the suspect had known each other through a Tae Kwon Do martial arts club.

He also stated that the allegations against Reserve Constable B were "so serious as to warrant the holding of a public inquiry" by themselves.



Diane Hamill with a picture of her murdered brother Robert Hamill, who was beaten to death in a sectarian attack in Portadown in 1997

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Virtual reconstruction created of murder scene

A virtual reality reconstruction of the scene of the Robert Hamill murder attack has been produced for the public inquiry.

The computer-generated 3D images show the Portadown town centre location in 1997, as well as surrounding streets and the RUC Land Rover where four officers were stationed.

They have been produced through the same IT technology used to provide reconstruction scenes during the Bloody Sunday Tribunal.

Some 160 people are scheduled to testify to the Robert Hamill inquiry over the next six months. A further 40 witness statements are due to be read out during the hearings.

The proceedings are due to be completed by the end of the year, with the aim of a final report being issued in mid-2010.

Its hearings will be held at the Interpoint centre at York Street in Belfast city centre.

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Will the truth ever be told ? What matters is that the Hamill Family get justice for what happened that night and that his mother brothers and sisters will get the support from the community they so richly deserve after years of torment from bigotted and sectarian abuse endured in silence and dignity for both Robert and his dad Dessie.

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