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'Death threats led to cancellation of Hamill murder inquest'

By Victoria O'Hara Thursday, 29 January 2009

Northern Ireland's senior coroner John Leckey last night said evidence from a key witness to Robert Hamill's murder was "compelling", but cancelled the inquest nine years ago because of threats to the witness's life.

Speaking at the inquiry into the 25-year-old's murder, Mr Leckey said he had spoken to two key witnesses, Tracey Clarke and Timothy Jameson, before his decision in June 2000.

Mr Hamill, a Catholic, died after he was kicked to death by a loyalist mob in Portadown in 1997. Both Ms Clarke and Mr Jameson had made statements to the police about the events surrounding Mr Hamill's killing.

Ms Clarke had originally claimed she saw men jumping on Mr Hamill's head and kicking him. She also named people she saw involved.

The inquiry heard that one of the men she named was Allister Hanvey, who was her boyfriend — but according to documents read out by leading counsel Ashley Underwood, they were, at the time, "on one day, off the next". Part of Ms Clarke's original statement to the RUC was shown to the panel.

She said she had spoken to Mr Hanvey after Mr Hamill had died and claimed he told her he had jumped on his head and kicked his head.

However, both witnesses refused to go to court, leading to the prosecution of a number of men collapsing. The two witnesses did not want their names or statements read out during an inquest into Mr Hamill's murder.

Mr Leckey, who was coroner for the Greater Belfast area at the time, said he had to consider whether to hold the inquest in a "simplified" form and conceal the evidence of Tracey Clarke and Timothy Jameson, or to inform the Hamill family solicitor of the gist of their evidence, knowing that both witnesses feared for their personal safety.

Mr Leckey said he took legal advice and was told to "satisfy himself" in his decision and not to rely on police. The inquiry heard that in November 1999, Mr Leckey spoke to Ms Clarke on the telephone.

Mr Leckey described her as being frightened for her personal safety and "very tearful and genuine". She told him she had been threatened by loyalists and had to leave Portadown. Mr Leckey said that she feared that "even reading out her statement or being referred to by a code would identify her".

She told him if that happened she would have to leave her present address and possibly her present employment. Ms Clarke was described as being relieved when told she would not be named or have her statement read at the inquest.

However, Mr Leckey said when he spoke to Timothy Jameson on the phone he found him "unco-operative and morose". "He repeated that he didn't want to be involved and didn't want anything to do with the incident," he said.

Mr Leckey said he felt the information given by Ms Clarke was "compelling evidence" of what had happened. He added that he had no indication that words had been put into her mouth. And he was "convinced it was truthful".

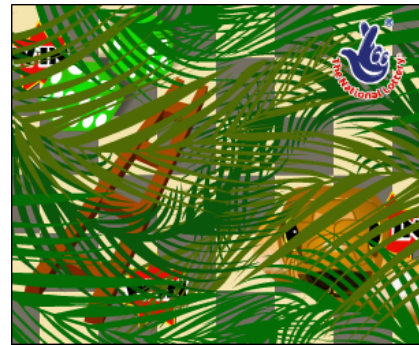
However, Ms Clarke, who was due to appear at the inquiry yesterday, failed to attend. At hearing.

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