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## Witness knew Catholics just 'by looking at them'

By Bimpe Fatogun

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A man who was charged with the murder of Robert Hamill has told the public inquiry into his death that he could tell a Catholic "by looking at them".

Stacey Bridgett was one of five men who had murder charges against them dropped after two key witnesses withdrew evidence.

He was aged 19 at the time of the attack on Mr Hamill (25) in Portadown.

The Catholic father-of-three died in hospital of brain damage 12 days after being kicked unconscious by a loyalist mob in April 1997.

Witnesses claimed police sitting in a nearby Land Rover failed to intervene.

Mr Bridgett denied involvement at the inquiry yesterday.

He said he had been exchanging banter with a policewoman in a Land Rover about his "Ralph Lauren shirt and Replay jeans" when the fracas began.

"She was talking about me being stylish," he said.

Mr Bridgett said the Land Rover had obscured his view of trouble at the junction of Market Street and Thomas Street – a known sectarian flashpoint.

"I didn't hear it and the police didn't hear it," he said.

"We were having an amicable conversation."

He claimed to have "pretended to be a Catholic" when a man approached him because he feared being assaulted if identified as a Protestant.

When pressed on how he knew the man's religious denomination, the witness replied: "Sometimes you can sort of tell one by looking at them. I can sort of tell what they look like."

Barra McGrory QC, appearing for the Hamill family, put it to Mr Bridgett he was "a sectarian bigot... motivated by sheer hatred of Catholics when you attacked Robert Hamill... and jumped on his head".

Mr Bridgett denied this, insisting he had been struck on the nose in an unprovoked attack near the Land Rover and then retreated to "allow my nose to bleed".

He said he never saw anyone on the ground being kicked during what he described as a "killing match" involving between 20 and 30 people.

Mr Bridgett said he had no explanation for a drop of his blood found on Mr Hamill's trousers, said to be consistent with blood falling on the murdered man from above as he lay on the ground.

He said a sore foot he was suffering from after the murder was from a worked-related injury.

Police statements were read placing Mr Bridgett at the front of an angry mob trying to break through their lines to continue attacking Mr Hamill and his cousin, who was also unconscious.

Mr McGrory said the witness had been "crazed with drink that night", with one officer recalling: "His eyes... I've never seen such a look of excitement on his face".

However, Mr Bridgett said the same officer had wrongly described him as wearing a charcoal shirt that night.

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