

Looking back



On the 30th anniversary of the Hungerford massacre, Tony Moore reminds us of how Constable Roger Bereton of the Thames Valley Police Force [pictured on front cover], was tragically killed

The crashed cars

On the morning of 19 August 1987, Police Constable Roger Bereton said good-bye to his wife, Elizabeth, at their home in Almond Avenue, Newbury, not knowing this was the last time he would see her, and travelled the short distance to the Southern Traffic Area base of the Thames Valley Police on the outskirts of Newbury where he worked. Booking out a Vauxhall Senator police car, he commenced his patrol

At around 12.45pm, Roger Bereton, together with another traffic officer, Police Constable Jeremy Woods, driving a similar car, were directed to the A4 road to keep observation for a silver Vauxhall Astra motor car, the driver of which had been involved in a shooting incident at the Golden Arrow Service Station at Froxfield, which was in the adjacent county force area, Wiltshire. The two officers were unaware that the driver of the Vauxhall Astra, 27-year-old Michael Ryan, who lived in Hungerford, had already shot dead a woman, picnicking with her two young children, in Savernake Forest, seven miles to the west of Hungerford, and he was armed with a Chinese 'Type 56' copy of a Kalashnikov AK-47 semi-automatic rifle, an M1 Carbine semi-automatic rifle and a Beretta 92 semi-automatic pistol

Shortly afterwards, there were reports of shootings in the Southview area of Hungerford. Ryan had apparently returned to

his home in Southview, shot the family dog and set fire to the house, before shooting dead two of his neighbours, a husband and wife, who were in their garden. Southview was a short distance from the main A338 road which runs north to south through the centre of Hungerford. For traffic, it was a cul-de-sac running from west to east off Fairview Road but at the eastern end was a pedestrian path which led to a large common. Being the first police units to arrive, and with the intention of confining the gunman to the area he had last been seen, using the police radio network, the two officers agreed between themselves that Woods would take the longer route, driving across the common to seal the footpath whilst Bereton would enter from Fairview Road. A third vehicle, containing two officers, was also on its way to the common from Hungerford Police Station

Meanwhile, unknown to the two officers, Ryan had walked towards the path leading to the common, shooting and injuring two women before going down the path itself and shooting dead a man who was walking with his son before doubling back to Southview. As Roger Bereton drove his Vauxhall Senator police car into the western end of Southview, Ryan, dressed in what looked like military fatigues, suddenly appeared from the direction of the footpath and fired a number of shots at the police car. Bereton was hit but managed to send a message, *ten-nine, ten-nine, I've been shot*, on his radio, which meant he required immediate assistance, but died soon afterwards, still clutching the radio phone from which he had sent that last message. Ryan then walked round the police car systematically shooting until the magazines of the Beretta and the Kalashnikov were empty. Subsequently, it was found that the police vehicle had been struck by 24 bullets. Roger Bereton had been shot five times, including fatally in the neck, mainly with bullets from the Kalashnikov. Ryan continued his killing spree. This included shooting at another car, containing two men, that entered Southview. The driver was killed and his car collided with the police car

Ryan had shot a total of 31 people, killing 16 of them, including his mother, before breaking into the John O'Gaunt Community Technical College. Closed and empty at the time because of the summer holidays, Ryan barricaded himself into a classroom as armed police officers surrounded the building. Attempts to negotiate a peaceful conclusion failed and at 6.52pm Ryan shot himself

Roger left behind his wife, Elizabeth, whom he had married in Newbury in 1968, and two sons, Sean, aged 18 years, and Paul, aged 16 years. He was posthumously awarded the Queen's Commendation for Brave Conduct

I acknowledge the help given to me by Roger Young, a former member of the Thames Valley Police Force and a member of the Police History Society, who provided additional information about this incident and the photographs