

Part 2

Theories About the Murder of Betty Shanks

A Summary of Earlier Theories

Ken Blanch had put forward the first theory about the murder of Betty Shanks in his 2006 book, "Who Killed Betty Shanks?" He argued that the attack on Betty Shanks was an opportunistic attack by an off-duty soldier, because he reasoned that the patterned mark on Betty's forehead likely resulted from a kick by a soldier wearing a canvas gaiter. But Blanch wasn't able to name a soldier, and no soldier was seen around the Grange tram terminus on the Friday night that Betty Shanks was killed. Besides, there were better explanations for the matrix of round dots of haemorrhage on Betty's forehead, and the 'soldier-did-it-theory' was later dismissed. Blanch also contributed a second possible theory that the murderer's intended target might have been Ena Hamilton, Dr Knott's receptionist, a Betty Shanks "look-a-like". Ena lived on the corner of Thomas and Daisy Streets and she walked the same path down Thomas Street a few minutes before Betty on that fateful night. But there was no real evidence to support such a theory and it was also dismissed by the police.

There was another theory, also mentioned by Ken Blanch, that the murderer might have walked to Ashgrove Avenue and got into a taxi driven by Murray Templeton. Templeton gave evidence at the inquest that he picked up a man at 10.40 pm that night, and described his passenger as having blood on his clothes and face. The man was wearing a grey suit, or grey trousers and sports coat. Templeton took him to the Red Hill post office. A passer-by saw him leave the taxi and described him as about twenty years old, of medium height and build and dressed in light coloured clothes. Whoever he was, he was never identified, despite newspapers calling for him to come forward. The man told Templeton that he had been involved in a fight at cards, and there was never any evidence that linked him to the murder.

Jack Sim, at one stage, thought Jim Coats might have been the perpetrator. Jim Coats lived in Thomas Street, two doors up from the crime scene. Coats had given evidence at the inquest that he had heard a loud moan followed by the sound of a motor-bike heading up past his residence in Thomas Street at 10.30 pm that night. The police believed that Coats was mistaken as to the time. The police believed that Coats might have heard the moan and the motor-bike about an hour earlier. Coats knew Betty Shanks by sight but he was not known to be associated with her, and it is hard to imagine he would have had any motive to kill her. The theory that Coats did it failed to gain traction.

Ipswich historian, Lyle Reed, believed that Betty was not murdered at all, but was accidentally struck by a motor-cycle as she crossed the Thomas and Carberry Street intersection on her walk home. However, a collision thirty yards away in Carberry Street would not have caused the blood spatter on the asphalt footpath under the third bauhinia tree. The police were certain that this blood spatter on the footpath indicated that Betty's murder took place in the Hill's backyard. Only kicks to the head from that location were capable of propelling those blood spots onto the footpath. This meant that Betty could not have been killed crossing Carberry Street. Lyle Reed's theory was also quickly dismissed.

Detective Sergeant Ted Chandler, the first detective to arrive at the crime scene at about 6.30 am on the Saturday morning, believed that the likely murderer was the man-in-the-brown-suit seen waiting at the Grange tram terminus by four witnesses. Mrs. Ansell, Clarence Hovelroud, and George Balias, all saw this man at the terminus, while Marie Patton saw him near the crime scene minutes before Betty was attacked. Chandler thought that this man could have been Dr Donald Ashley Billing Carter, the Ipswich doctor who committed suicide two days after Betty was killed. Chandler speculated that

Dr Carter might have killed Betty Shanks and then suffered such remorse that he took his own life. But Chandler was unable to establish a link between Betty and Dr Carter, and police confirmed that Dr Carter had been in Ipswich when Betty was killed twenty miles away in Brisbane.

It was later thought that the man-in-the-brown-suit could have been Leonard Petrie Jackson, the insurance assessor friend of Dr Carter. But Jackson did not fit the detailed descriptions given by the eye witnesses who saw the man-in-the-brown-suit that night, and police accepted Jackson's alibi that he was also in Ipswich when Betty was killed.

Desche Birtles' Theory

Desche Birtles belief that her father, Eric Sterry, killed Betty Shanks, gained prominence after it was published on the front page of *The Courier Mail* on 1st April 1999. In that article, Desche had said that on the night Betty was killed, her father, who was wearing his brown suit, had driven to the Grange and parked next to Wilston State School, in Inglis Street. Desche said that she and her younger brother Darryl were in the back seat of the car. Their father was minding them because their mother, Bernadette, was at a party somewhere. Desche's theory that her father was the murderer was supported by other evidence, as well as by medical evidence. Eric had been diagnosed as a potential psychotic in the war years, and that medical report had noted that "Eric becomes violent at home and is afraid he might injure someone". Desche said that Eric suffered delusions, and one delusion was his belief that Betty would eventually become his life-partner. Desche believes that Betty that night shattered that delusion and that caused Eric to lose control and he killed her. Further, Eric Sterry *did* fit the descriptions given by the eye witnesses, and favoured exactly the type of dress they described. Moreover, Desche remembered the occasion some three months previously when Eric had met Betty at the Grange tram terminus, and after meeting her, had taken her back to his car. This is covered in detail in the three editions of Ted Duhs' book, "I Know Who Killed Betty Shanks." Desche Birtles' theory is the only theory to have withstood serious investigation, and Ted Duhs shares Desche's belief that it tells the true story of Betty's death.

The Esri Podcast *Murdering Betty*

A new theory was revealed in 2022 on the 70th anniversary of Betty's death. It appeared in a podcast called *Murdering Betty*, which was produced by the Australian branch of the international company *Environmental Systems Research Institute* (ESRI). It purported to tell the story of the murder, although at that time, the identity of the alleged perpetrator was kept hidden. Six months elapsed before details emerged.

These details emerged at a Symposium on the Betty Shanks murder on the 12th March 2023 at the Brisbane Square library, where about 100 people attended a two-hour session to listen to Jack Sim, Ted Duhs and Robert Constantine discuss theories about the crime. The discussion proceeded normally, but in question time the unexpected happened. One person in the audience, who identified himself as Ken Bartlett, loudly proclaimed that the theories presented by the speakers were false, and only he knew the truth. He said he had given his information to *Esri Australia*, and he was the 'Ken' in their podcast. He said that his father, Clarence George Reuben Bartlett who had lived at 14 Somme Street, Ashgrove, was 'Joe'. He then displayed a photograph of his mother, Annabel, inviting people to see how closely she resembled Betty Shanks. Ken Bartlett said that 'Joe' had killed Betty Shanks by mistake believing that he had killed his unfaithful wife. This was met with some astonishment and confusion, as people wondered how such a story could be part of the Symposium. And it was at that point, that the Brisbane City Council organizers of the talk, in conjunction with the chairman of the meeting, seemed to relinquish control. Question time was forgotten, people began to talk amongst themselves, and, because time was up, some people started to move towards the exit.

Later, Ken Bartlett, allowed his 31-page handwritten statement to be photocopied. He said that he had first given a copy of his statement to the police in 2010, and again, more recently, to a detective who had visited him at his Gold Coast residence. Ken Bartlett said that a total of three police officers had subsequently told him that they would not investigate his claims, and he was now being pressured to withdraw those claims. But, he said, he would not be intimidated. He considered that it was his task to reveal the truth about what had happened to Betty Shanks and he was determined not to be silenced.

Critics remain unimpressed with Ken's story, and even *Esri* has admitted that there are holes in it. Despite the podcast publicity, it seems unlikely to generate much future support.

Police Involvement and the 65 Year Rule

An advancement of the matter came in a reply to letters Ted Duhs had written earlier in 2023 to the Police Commissioner as well as to the Minister of Police. Duhs had asked if it was true that QPS had appraised and rejected Ken Bartlett's claims that his father had killed Betty Shanks in a case of mistaken identity. The police reply came in July from a Detective Sergeant attached to Homicide. It advised that QPS were unable to release any information on the Betty Shanks investigation as it was an 'open' case.

This was a surprise because police had previously claimed it was an 'active' case. That is how the police had successfully denied Duhs' application to access the Betty Shanks' crime file. The QPS had at that time claimed that any release of information could prejudice an on-going investigation. Duhs' solicitor had pointed out that the letter from the Information Rights officer, Mr. H. Bradshaw, which is quoted on pages 306-9 of the third edition, appears to confirm that there was no 'active' investigation of the Betty Shanks case occurring as of that date, 2019. And if there was no 'active' investigation, there was no investigation which could be prejudiced. In which case, the reason given to deny access to the crime file appears to fall away.

With this new (July 2023) information that the Betty Shanks case was an 'open' investigation, and not an 'active' one, attention is now focussed on the 65-year-rule. The QPS has always insisted that when new reports are added to any on-going cold case the restricted access period of 65 years will recommence from the date this new investigation is completed. In the Betty Shanks case, the Carter brothers had reported that their DNA was tested against DNA the police claimed to have from the clothing Betty Shanks wore the night she was murdered. That test was carried out in 2005 and the subsequent report was, apparently, added to the file. This means that the restricted access period of the Betty Shanks file will now extend to 2070. And if any future reports are added, the restricted access period could potentially extend to perpetuity.

It is implausible that Parliament intended such an interpretation when it legislated the RTI Act. Openness, not secrecy, was Parliament's intention. In fact, justice would seem more likely to be done if minimum restrictions were placed on crime files held by the police. In the Betty Shanks case, it is argued that the coroner should now be allowed to re-open the inquest so that a line can be drawn under the investigation. This should be done while witnesses such as Desche Birtles and Marie

Patton are still alive. Enough certainty now seems to exist in the matter for the inquest to be re-opened. That, at least, is the argument presented here.