

James Leslie Starkey
Archaeologist
PART 4 (i)(b)

Tragedy in Palestine
10th January 1938

By Wendy Slaninka (Granddaughter of James & Marjorie Starkey by their daughter Mary)

This is my twelfth article for Filming Antiquity and carries on directly from my article Part 4 (i)(a) 'Tragedy in Palestine, 10th January 1938'. It also links in with earlier articles Part 3, 'Bethlehem Geology Project', Part 2, 'Lachish (i)-(v)', Part 1, 'Background and Early Career', 'Living at Lachish – Life in Camp', 'First Lady of Lachish – Marjorie Starkey and her family' and 'Olive Starkey – Lady of Lachish' (Leslie's sister), where there is other information and photos of Leslie and Lachish.

His breadth of outlook, his sound judgement, and his ability to see all sides of a question would have made him a leader in whatever walk of life he chose. The study of archaeology is much richer for his choice and suffers greatly by his untimely end.

Olga Tufnell (obituary)

The news of Starkey's death was announced on Palestine Radio that evening and published the next day in many daily papers across the world with a plethora of headlines, They used typical wording of the times to describe the killing such as wicked, dastardly, cowardly, outrageous, heinous, foully slain etc. Many accounts were vastly exaggerated and varied in content. Even the driver changed his story! They reported that he had been the only archaeologist who had continued his excavations despite the terrorism in Palestine and was the first British civilian to be killed in the disturbances. Pere Vincent wrote a very impassioned obituary and said of the killing '*none was more without cause or provocation or more revolting than this cold-blooded assault on this great English Archaeologist – a man whose whole sympathy went out to the natives of Palestine ...the Archaeological world in Palestine is in mourning*'. Dr. S. Yeivin also published in the Davar '*we shall add thy name to the long list of martyrs who have shed their innocent blood on this sacred soil*'. He also sent a personal letter to Madge from himself, his wife and both his parents and mentioned how they had heard the news on the radio and just couldn't believe it.

The original British Mandate Police Files of the time have been destroyed and only partial records, which had been microfiched, remain in Jerusalem so there is not much to be gleaned from these either, although I have been able to see a few pages. The reports do mention that poor Starkey's head had been 'bashed' in and this is what Holbrook Bonney¹ also reported to Sir Charles in his letter of 24th January. The official death certificate makes no mention of this, (nor how many shots he had received), but this only means hopefully that it happened after death which is what the Police report suggests although it also says he was shot at point blank range. Charles Inge later reports that the bullet wounds were not at point blank range but from a distance of about 50 yards which seems to corroborate the Driver's tale. No post mortem was held as far as I am aware – though apparently the Red Cross took a photo of his body?. I wonder now why the funeral was so rushed? Surely as a victim of murder vital evidence might still be needed?. Maybe in those days funerals were held instantaneously. Veronica Seton Williams (the camp photographer that year) refers to the murder in her chapter on Lachish in "The Road to el-Aguzein' p.74, but there are many factual inaccuracies and she even refers to him being hacked to death with an axe!. In trying to track down the original Mandate Police files I found out that they were all microfiched in 1948 when the British pulled out of Palestine.

¹ Holbrook Bonney was Sir Charles Marston's stepson by his third marriage to Mary Battey Bonney

These records were stowed on board a ship ready to come back to Britain but they were stolen off the ship by the Haganah and stored at Mossad for over 40 years!

The driver's descriptions to the authorities later led to the arrest and imprisonment of several men, two of whom were executed. Apparently these men had been out shooting on the Hebron Road previously and a month before in an area known as Solomon's Pools - see map in Part 3(i)(a) - the Lachish car containing Pummel and Miss Cumming had come across a makeshift roadblock, a telegraph pole stretched over the road, but had been able to drive over it and escape to a hail of bullets. Starkey had not been in the car on that occasion but didn't want Madge to know about it as he knew she would worry. The incident was immediately reported to the Police in Hebron but they did nothing about it. It has been reported also that men were still out shooting on that road after Starkey's death - even as the police were searching for them.

Harding who had only just arrived in Jerusalem (also for the Opening Ceremony of the Museum) reported that only vague rumours had been circulating in Lachish about the incident and he broke the sad news to them at 8.30 am on the morning on 11th January.

The reaction of the native population to this crime was so strong that some Hebronites, voluntarily gave information to the police which led to the arrest of two members of the gang and the shooting of others in an attempt to capture them - such an action was almost unprecedented. An impressive search had been instigated on immediate news of his death by the Police, the Black Watch and the RAF. Dogs had followed trails leading more than 12 miles, both north and south of the scene of the murder, to the hideouts of the bandits and one constable was shot in the leg in the ensuing fighting and gunfire. An escaping bandit was even strafed with machine-gun fire from the RAF plane which was circling above.



RAF plane - Signals, Police and troops on the Bethlehem=Hebron Road

Photo used in many Newspaper reports, home and overseas,
such as News and Chronicle, and Daily Telegraph. 19th Jan 1938

The Arab newspaper El Jamia El Islamiya expressed profound regret at the murder of a distinguished scientist known for his friendly attitude to the locals. It maintained that the murderers must have been ignorant of his identity, which is what the family believed also. However after working that area for the past 6 years how could they not know who he was? More recently Professor Josef Garfinkel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (the current excavator of Lachish) has written a paper outlining his argument that actually it was a planned

murder by the owners of Lachish hilltop wanting revenge for the expropriation of the site (see References). Although at first dismissing this theory I now wonder if he is right. The possibility had been muted before and Olga herself said in an interview in 1983 for the Hampstead and Highgate Express that this may have been the cause after her recent trip to Palestine for the Tel Aviv University commemorations of Lachish. If so, I also wonder if the right men were punished?



Black Watch Officers and Police and Bloodhound
photo appeared in many Newspaper reports
such as News and Chronicle / Daily Telegraph. 19th Jan 1938
Photo courtesy of Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

On 12th January the news was published that the killers had been apprehended with the use of tracker dogs and a reward of £200 was put out on the head of the remaining bandit Issa Battat, the believed ringleader who had got away. It was initially thought that he had been killed by the Arabs themselves, but the police shot him in a gunfire exchange on 7th May, quite some time later. He was a known criminal and before that season begun had raided a village police station, stealing their rifles as well as being behind many of the recent troubles and shootings. Another involved in the murder – Abdel Kader Taha, arrested on 13th January in the village of Sair, near Hebron, was sentenced to death by the Jerusalem Military Court and this was the second death sentence for the murder. The District Commissioner Keith Roach also warned the local headmen that unless the murderers surrendered, heavy penalties may be imposed on the district. He reported that a substantial sum of money was donated by them to assist in apprehending the gunmen and in a letter to Madge that they *'all expressed their sorrow at this dastardly act and to assure you that I and the police are doing our utmost to trace the murderers'*.

In the days and weeks following many, many articles appeared on Starkey in the national papers and other bulletins and newsletters, both at home and overseas – reporting on his death and the ensuing hunt for the killers. In fact Madge managed to collect together over 100 different newspaper report cuttings. A shocked and horrified Harold Falconer of Oxford - wrote a letter to The Times expressing his outrage! – he also wrote a condolence letter to Madge.

Starkey's death was also reported in HM Government in UK, Annual Report to the Council of the League of Nations on the administration of Palestine and Trans-Jordan for the year 1938. The Illustrated London News where Starkey annually published his findings also announced his death, as did the Royal Anthropological Society. The President of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir Henry Balfour, said at the AGM in June *'the murder of James Leslie Starkey is still fresh in our minds – by this wanton act the life of a distinguished archaeologist was very prematurely cut short'*.

Many previous members of the Team got in touch with Madge to express their grief and horror as the shocking news filtered through to wherever they were including Ralph Richmond Brown who wrote from Jordan *'shocked and horrified, could not believe it – it seemed impossible that anything like this should have happened to Starks who was always so very much alive. He was always wonderful to me and it hurts terribly'*. Teresa Colt wrote from France *'poor old Starks died in harness like a soldier'* and her husband Harris Colt also wrote from Italy. Lewis Upton Way wrote to her from Luxor *"shocked beyond words - I am so horror stricken I hardly know what I am writing – I was to have joined your dear husband at Tell Duweir at the end of this month"*. Richard St. Barbe Baker who had worked with Starkey in Palestine could hardly be restrained from rushing out to Lachish to lend a hand and Alkin Lewis actually visited Starkey's widow from London on the evening of 11th January after hearing the news. Dr. Kirkman wrote *'I had the privilege of his friendship for only a short time but I shall never forget his many kindnesses to me and the great pleasure I had in his company. I have lost a very dear friend as well as a great and lovable personality'*. Bill Shaw said *'how much archaeology has lost, far more distinguished people than I, have already told us'*.

Sir Charles Marston said in several newspapers *"This terrible tragedy has robbed Britain of its most able excavator of recent years. Mr. Starkey is the best excavator I have ever known ... Starkey's death was the worst thing of all – he was heart and soul with the Arabs – it was just violence, sheer senseless violence"*.

CONTINUED in

Part 4 (ii) Funeral and Burial, Mount Zion, Jerusalem, 11th January 1938 Part 4 (iii) Memorial Service Westminster, 18th January 1938, and aftermath

Sources/Further Reading/Research: will be given at the end of each Part and will be relevant to all three Parts 4 (i)(a), (i)(b), (ii) and (iii)

Sir Henry Balfour, Royal Geographical Society, Journal Vol.XC11, no.2, August 1938
'A Golden Return to Palestine', Hampstead and Highgate Express, July 1983
Prof. Josef Garfinkel, (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), The murder of James Leslie Starkey near Lachish, PEQ April 2016, pp 84-109
Dr. Nelson Glueck, obituary, Palestine Review, Vol.II, No. 39, p.656, 14th January 1938
Eldad Haroui (Tel Aviv University) 'Palestine Investigated'
Sir Charles Marston, Daily Express 11th January, 'Arabs kills British Scientist – robbed and shot in back'
Sir Charles Marston, The Daily Sketch, 11th January 1938, 'Famous Briton killed in arab ambush – shot in the back by masked desperado'
Sir Charles Marston, Daily Mail 11th January, 'Scientist shot in the back by arabs'
Sir Charles Marston, Daily Express, 'Bible Search is cursed says Scientist', 9th May 1939
Police Files – Israeli Police Museum, Jerusalem – Contact Supt Chetrit Shlomi (who did his Phd on Starkey's murder) and Tel Aviv University, police files open to historical research
Sir Charles Close, President, Palestine Exploration Fund, Opening paragraph, News and Notes, April 1938
Pere L.H. Vincent, French Archaeological School, published obituary (in French), Palestine Oriental Society, 'To the memory of J.L. Starkey', 12th January 1938

Dr. S. Yeivin, obituary Davar, 'The Murder of James Leslie Starkey' 11th January 1938

Dr. S. Yeivin, The Palestine Post 'Scientist and Organiser – Biographical sketch of the late J.L. Starkey', 12th January 1938

Dr. S. Yeivin, 'A. Yellin / J.L. Starkey, In Memoriam, Innocent Victims', Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society, pp 106-108, published by the Israel Exploration Society, 10th February 1938

Olga Tufnell, PEQ, April 1938, obituary 'An Appreciation'

Letters written to Madge by Olga (family archive)

Extracts from some of the hundreds of condolence letters in the family archive

Plus numerous newspaper articles of the day (mostly from originals in family archive)

Permission has been obtained from the various journals, newspapers and publishers where relevant – many of the original publications of the above are also in the family archive..