



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## An ambush near Moate: October 1920



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During the first seven months of 1920, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) became increasingly active across the country.

In Westmeath, for example, local IRA units participated in operations such as destroying abandoned Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) barracks. In response to this growing threat, the RIC evacuated many barracks, withdrawing to more easily fortified locations.

On 9 August 1920, the British government, in an effort to reassert its control of Ireland, introduced the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act (ROIA) which gave Dublin Castle and the Crown forces the right to court martial and intern civilians.

The ROIA led to the arrest of many IRA volunteers and forced others to go 'on the run'. Those volunteers banded together and formed the first flying columns, becoming elite units within the IRA. Some of the flying columns were very effective in their use of guerrilla warfare against the Crown forces, becoming famous during and after the War of Independence.

### The Athlone Brigade

During the conflict, IRA General Headquarters (GHQ) had little direct control over brigades in the countryside although it quickly grasped the possibilities that flying columns offered for hit-and-run warfare. During the summer of 1920, it encouraged brigades, including those in Westmeath, to form such units. By then, the IRA in Westmeath contained two brigades, one centred around Athlone, the other around Mullingar. The Athlone Brigade's flying column numbered about fifteen men, mostly officers who were on the run. It was led by James Tormey, a 21-year-old veteran of the British army, one of at least five such veterans in the column.

The column's first engagement with the Crown forces would take place on 22 October at Parkwood on the road between Moate and Kilbeggan. On the day of the Parkwood ambush, Tormey was accompanied by: Seamus O'Meara, Thomas Costello, Brian Mulvihill, Henry O'Brien, George Manning, Richard Bertles, William Casey, George Adamson, Patrick Macken, Thomas Claffey, Patrick Claffey, Francis (Thomas in some accounts) Egan, Joe Chambers and Ned Johnson.

Apart from the above people, others may have been part of the ambush party. In 1974, the historian Liam Cox interviewed two members



British army vehicles in Athlone. During the War of Independence, the Crown forces regularly transported soldiers, police and material through Athlone and Moate

of the Athlone-based flying column, who provided him with the names of the column's volunteers, as they remembered them. They told Cox that Joe Kennedy and Mick Nestor were also members of the column and that it was usually accompanied by 'two or three unarmed scouts of whom John Hogan of Moate was one.'

### Fire and counterfire

According to Seamus O'Meara, the flying column was 'billeted in a shed, the property of Father McGee [John Magee, local parish priest] at Tober' while making preparations to attack the Crown forces. Eventually, Tormey chose to carry out the ambush at Parkwood because the road was regularly traversed by the police in either a single lorry or a bicycle-patrol. There was little cover other than a small wooded area through which the road briefly ran.

It was among these trees that most of the volunteers were hidden on the morning of 22 October, with two located on the other side of the road. Between them, Henry O'Brien recalled, they had only ten service rifles with about twenty rounds each. All of the volunteers was positioned very close to the road since, according to Seamus O'Meara, some of them had 'no experience of using

their rifles' and needed to be placed within 'practically point blank range'. Two scouts, at least one of whom had a whistle, were placed about 300 metres further down the road in the direction of Horseleap.

Around 1pm, the ambushers were startled to see a police lorry pass their position and continue on towards Moate. Henry O'Brien stated that his group was about to leave the trees in an attempt to ascertain why no signal had been sounded when they heard a sharp whistle. Seconds later, another lorry came into view. O'Brien and his comrades opened fire and this vehicle swerved off the road, coming to a halt on the grass verge.

One of the police later reported that he heard a whistle followed by 'heavy firing'. It was in this volley that the driver of the lorry, a constable from London named Harry Biggs (Henry or Harry Briggs in some accounts), was hit. Biggs, who was in his early to mid-twenties, was gravely wounded and bled to death in the lorry as the fighting continued around him. The passengers of this vehicle were in a perilous situation but they were saved by the arrival of another police lorry. What the IRA had encountered was not the regular patrol but a convoy of Black and Tans and Auxiliaries who were

being transferred from the main police depot in Gormanstown, County Meath, to Galway.

### Outnumbered

Each lorry, according to the subsequent inquest, contained 'about nineteen auxiliaries and the drivers', although it is not clear how many lorries were at the scene. Accounts from members of the flying column speak of several lorries with Thomas Costello stating that six vehicles stopped at the ambush site, although the subsequent inquest into the death of Biggs suggests that the occupants of only two vehicles returned fire on the ambushers.

Some lorries avoided the fighting. The first lorry, the vehicle which had surprised the column, continued all the way to Athlone, its occupants apparently unaware of the ambush. Also, at least one lorry arrived at the ambush spot but immediately turned around and headed back towards Kilbeggan, its occupants leaving their besieged comrades behind. During the inquest, a constable claimed that this lorry left the scene in order 'to procure military reinforcements' in Kilbeggan.

Whatever the actual number of lorries, the flying column was outgunned. A police constable named

William Troy, whose lorry arrived after Biggs had been shot, later reported that he could see a small group of armed men on the left hand side of the road in a cove of trees behind a hedge. One of these men was Henry O'Brien, who described the situation as the police returned fire: 'We realised quickly that we had hit up against something which we had not bargained for and that we were very much outnumbered, so we pulled out and retreated...'

The statements of those involved in the ambush attribute the escape of the column to the fact that some of the police panicked. While a section of the police laid down a heavy fire on their opponents, others ran into adjacent fields, away from the fighting. This afforded an opportunity for the flying column to withdraw and Tormey ordered his men to retreat, thereby ending a gunfight that had lasted around twenty minutes. The flying column had survived its first engagement, while inflicting casualties on the Crown forces. That, however, was not the end of the day's violence. As we have seen in a previous article, the locality would soon suffer a spate of reprisals by the Crown forces, one of which would lead to the fatal shooting of a civilian named Michael Burke.