

Criminal Law News

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Book review by Sally Ramage

Brian J Heard, *Handbook of Firearms and Ballistics*, (John Wiley and Sons Ltd; Oxford 2008).

ISBN 978-0-470-69460-2

John Wiley and Sons has a series of handbooks written by forensic experts. The aim is to explain to the layperson, including judges, solicitors and barristers, scientific expert knowledge. This handbook on firearms and ballistics is welcome. It is a fallacy, however, to think that, in the past, lawyers did not always grasp such expert knowledge. Case-law shows that there have been very eloquent and astute cross-examination in courts where the case was won because of the barrister's good grasp of such knowledge and ably transmitting this to the jury.

In 1878, Charles Peace¹ (featured in Madam Tussauds' waxworks and in a film in 1949 *The Case of Charles Peace*) was charged with shooting a Blackheath police officer with intent to murder. He nearly escaped being charged because John and William Hebron were charged with killing police officer Nicholas Cook on 1st August 1878. The Hebron brothers were the original suspects because they had been heard to make threats to kill the police officer Cook for causing their arrest in an earlier incident. There was a boot mark at the scene of crime and police said that it matched a boot worn by the older Hebron brother. Apart from ballistic expert evidence, this 1878 case must have been the first ever shoeprint case, some 130 years before the established UK police shoeprint database. Evidence was called to prove that William Hebron had tried to buy gun cartridges at a local ironmonger's. Evidence was called of someone who claimed to have seen William Hebron near the crime scene minutes before the police officer's death. However, there was evidence that the two brothers were working at a nursery. Their death sentence was reduced to life after a successful petition by local residents.

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¹ See also David Ward, *King of the Lags: The Story of Charles Peace*, (Elek Books, London 1963).