

Timelines

The Bombing Of Oxford Street Bus Station 21st July 1972



Robert Gibson

On Friday 21st July 1972, the Provisional IRA planted and detonated more than twenty bombs around the central area of Belfast and in parts of the north and south of the city. Among the nine fatalities was my dad Jackie Gibson, a bus driver who had just completed his inward journey.

This essay is my attempt to get to as much truth as possible regarding the events leading up to his death.



Mum and Dad c.1970

Cover photograph shows firemen at the rear of the station, the damaged army 'pig' and the remains of the blue Vauxhall Viva owned by Jack Campbell the depot manager. *(Photo courtesy of Associated Press).*

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Timelines: The Bombing of Oxford Street Bus Station, Belfast 21st July 1972

Just before **twenty past two** on the afternoon of **Friday the twenty-first of July 1972**, my Dad, Jackie Gibson, parked his red-and-cream-coloured Renault 4 in the bus station in Ballygowan. Having just passed my driving test the previous January, he'd given me his old grey Renault 8 for me to drive to work at my first job in Belfast city centre and bought this one as a replacement. 'On the buses' was a job he loved, so much so that the day after his eighteenth birthday, he gave up his work in Mackie's Foundry and joined the Ulster Transport Authority as a bus conductor, an employment career followed by many of his local friends. Now in 1972, Driver-Only buses accounted for many of the journeys, and the company had recently changed its name to Ulsterbus. Having swapped his normal shift with another driver to the Friday as he was due to partake in a choir event on the Saturday evening, he drove his bus out of the depot towards Belfast on the **two-twenty** scheduled service towards Oxford Street Bus Station, which was opened by the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Viscount Brookeborough on 15th July 1960.

Five minutes or so later, he picked up passengers at Moneyreagh and a few minutes after that picked up some more at the Roselawn Cemetery bus stop. Between these two stops (**2.26 p.m and 2.31 p.m.**), a warning to the army 39th Brigade in Lisburn came in from the Public Protection Agency about a two hundred pound bomb in Oxford Street Bus Station (but no description of the car), the station to where Dad was headed to complete his run. As far as can be ascertained, no-one outside of the Army, the Provisional IRA and the Public Protection Agency knew anything about the warning at this time. No mention whatsoever was made of this warning by the Historical Enquiries Team in their 2007 review of the investigation of the murders. As an aside, unknown to Dad and unconnected to subsequent events, the electricity sub-station he drove past on the way down the Ballygowan Road had been the subject of a brief gun battle between the UDR and unknown gunmen just after midnight.

The car containing the bomb in Oxford Street Bus Station, one hundred and ten pounds of high explosive (estimated by the army, though stated as two hundred pounds by the IRA) was, according to the statement of the driver who was charged with the murders, picked up by him at **twenty past two** in Stanfield Street, off Cromac Street - just as Dad was starting his journey. In his statement made on 30th September 1977, five years after the bombing, he claimed that two men, unknown to him, told him to pick up a car just around the corner from where he was staying and park the car behind the bus station in Oxford Street. They threatened to shoot him if he refused. The driver, claiming later under questioning that he was thus acting under duress and that it was a 'dummy' run as he had been told by the

men, started out towards the bus station. (Reports of a PIRA meeting earlier in the week spoke of a bomb to be sent into the depot “on wheels”). In a bizarre twist, the bomber stated that after being held up by traffic, a policeman on points duty actually helped him navigate his way into the station. There is no witness statement from this officer nor does Lord Justice MacDermott mention it in his summing up. An opportunity was clearly missed to corroborate the bomber’s time claims. This is important because witnesses record seeing the car already in the rear yard car park at **twenty past two**, with one account putting the vehicle in the station a full hour earlier at **twenty past one**. These witness times were never considered either at the trial of the defendant, who was acquitted as he was found to have been acting under duress, or by the Historical Enquiries Team some thirty five years later, despite having a remit to fully investigate the bombing. I have spoken to the witness in 2023 regarding the earlier time and after more than fifty years, she is certain her **one-twenty** time is correct because she took an earlier lunch to meet her parents in the city centre and came back in order to let her colleagues get their break.

During the afternoon, Royal Corps of Transport driver Stephen Cooper was celebrating his nineteenth birthday in his billet in the Grand Central Hotel in Royal Avenue which stood where Castle Court Shopping Centre stands today. Along with the Welsh Guards he had just moved in to the hotel the day before. The Grand Central had only recently been taken over by the army for accommodation with metal fencing, concrete barriers and barbed wire surrounding the building for protection against car bombs.

“About” **twenty to three**, between ten and fifteen minutes after the warning received by the army, Corporal Peter Bruffell recalls in his evidence statement that he accompanied Sergeant Philip ‘Punchy’ Price along with driver Cooper and a five-man squad of Welsh Guardsmen to a suspected bomb in Oxford Street bus station. Sergeant Price earned his nickname because of his habit of following up an order to a soldier with a friendly, light, motivating punch. In the Brigade log, serial 103, “WG Tasked” does not specify a time that the Welsh Guards were mobilised, only that the warning came from the Public Protection Agency between **2.25** and **2.30**. Bruffell’s evidence shows there was a ten minute or more delay in the squad’s mustering to attend the incident. Richard Powell commanding the Prince of Wales regiment sent the detachment to the bus station to clear the area. Whether this call to the Welsh Guards came from the army or the RUC isn’t clear even though it is documented that 39th Brigade had the warning some fifteen minutes earlier and logic would suggest that they should have passed it on. The Historical Enquiries Team (HET) say it was made to police at **2.42**, traced to a number in the Markets area. It was made by a male caller and relayed to the RUC as a 999 call from Telephone House in May Street, the HQ of British Telecom at that time. (Although irrelevant to this case, the army had an observation post on the roof of Telephone House for many years since the early days of the

conflict here). It was described by the BT operator to the police constable on duty at Belfast Regional Control Centre as having come from a male caller describing a “massive car bomb” in a blue-grey Austin 1100 in the bus station (this is the first time the car is identified). The officer tried for quite a few minutes over the RUC network to get a police patrol to the scene but without success due to the heavy radio traffic and general mayhem, eventually managing to contact the army with details of the warning. Clearly whatever army patrol got this message, it must have been a few minutes after **2.42**. The information regarding the fact that the call came from the Markets area came from the BT operator at **3.35**, about half an hour after the explosion. The HET described this two minute conflict between Bruffell’s recall and the police time as “an anomaly” and left it at that, making no attempt to investigate whether Bruffell and his colleagues had acted on the police call or on a call from 39 Brigade HQ. If it had been the RUC call then as much speed as possible had been taken, at least by the police, in passing on the warning; if it had been the 39 Brigade HQ, then an explanation is required as to the delay since the first alert around **2.25-2.30**. Because the army patrol focussed on the Austin 1100, it suggests they acted on the police alert raising the question as to what was done by the army in relation to the first warning to 39 Brigade. Equally astonishing is the fact that the biggest conflicts of all, the witness’s accounts of seeing the car in the station at the same time the bomber was getting in to the car to drive it to Oxford Street, and the **twenty-past one** sighting were actually ignored by the HET, despite these timings being described in the trial documents. The Welsh Guards logs (serial 29, 21/7/72) note a warning from the RUC at **three o’clock**, (just two minutes before the bomb exploded) further adding to the confusion. The manager stated that the car had only been there for about ten minutes though this is disputed by other witnesses. These contradictions were disregarded by the court also for whatever reason and some may not have been brought to the court’s attention.

According to the driver, McAvoy’s, statement, he was delayed for ten minutes due to traffic gridlock on Oxford Street. These traffic problems were likely caused by the bomb scare at the next junction, Oxford Street and May Street, and the chaos caused by the car under investigation on the Queen Elizabeth Bridge which exploded shortly thereafter at **2.55 p.m.** The station was in fact surrounded by close bomb alerts to its north, south, and east. This delay means he likely parked the car no earlier than **2.35 p.m.** These timings seem to me to have been an unlikely scenario as it exposed the bomber to being caught en route, especially as the original warning was given while he would have been driving the car towards the target. Accidentally entering the station under the eye of an RUC officer on traffic duty near the bus depot was hardly part of the plan I imagine. In his statement to police, he gave only very scant details in relation to parking the car, volunteering only that he drove it to the rear of the depot and parked it there. There was no mention of the scene at the station, whether there were people around or any other information the RUC may

have been interested in. My own feeling is that the car was already in the station sometime before 2.20 p.m. and perhaps well before.

The issue of the warnings and the bomber's own timeline is curious in that it suggests that the warning was phoned in to the Public Protection Agency just before or even just as the car was parked in the station. This is also strange as it left McAvoy open to being interdicted on his way or the possibility of the army and police arriving at the station before him. Whatever the truth about the timing of the warnings, one thing is notably missing from all the logs: no information was provided by PIRA as to the location of the car or the planned time of detonation.

Along with Stephen Cooper, the six Welsh Guardsmen climbed into the only vehicle available, a Humber armoured personnel carrier (APC) or 'pig' as they were more generally known, and set off for the station. However, because of the number of alerts in the city centre it took a "very long time" according to Peter Bruffell to navigate the streets towards the depot. Cooper arrived in Oxford Street from Chichester Street, most likely against the traffic up the lane reserved for emergency vehicles, and after a brief stop in the middle of the street, drove into the rear parking area where the soldiers dismounted at about **five minutes to three** to begin the search for the car.

At around **ten- or five- to three** in the afternoon, the sun was high over the Royal Courts of Justice, casting a short shadow over the rear car park of the station. Dad had just parked his bus at bay twelve where his passengers disembarked. The day was pleasant and warm with no hint of rain and the station was very busy as it was the last day of the 'twelfth' holiday fortnight and the working week. The crowds were also bigger due to the panic induced by the large number of Provisional IRA bomb blasts that were being heard all over Belfast. One hundred yards away at the junction of May Street and Oxford Street, an Army Technical Officer was checking out an explosives find. Traffic was gridlocked throughout the city. On the Albert Bridge, Brian Allaway and his Fire Brigade colleagues were standing by while the army attended to a one hundred and sixty pound bomb fixed to one of the pillars of the bridge. On the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, the police were dealing with an abandoned Ford Cortina with a suspected bomb on board.

In the station, concerned passengers crammed onto buses in an effort to escape the terror, with buses heading towards their routes to Carryduff and Newcastle driving through the Oxford Street exit at the north end of the station as usual, while routes to the east destinations exited onto Laganbank Road. Southbound passengers looking to their left would have seen some vehicles parked in what was the staff car park. They'd have spotted a red Volkswagen Fastback and a blue Peugeot. They'd have seen the manager Jack

Campbell's dark blue Vauxhall Viva sitting behind his office which was adjacent to the cafeteria and waiting room. In addition, parked beside the Peugeot was a blue-grey Austin 1100 with the rear of the car dipping slightly with something heavy in the boot.

Barry Montgomery had just finished taking the cash from one of the bus drivers through the middle hatch of the Pay-In Office when Sergeant Philip Price and Corporal Peter Bruffell, along with fellow Ulsterbus employee Tommy Killops, came into the General Office by way of the Parcels Office. The soldiers had already spoken to Tommy and the two young parcel boys Billy Irvine and Billy Crothers. They were looking for someone to tell them who owned the blue-grey Austin 1100 car parked at the rear of the station directly facing the doors leading in to the Pay-In and Parcels Offices, and trying to track down the manager to seek his assistance.*

Barry was about to follow them out to help when Dad came into the Pay-in Office from his bus route, which was timetabled to have ended a short time before at **thirteen minutes to three**, although it is possible he was delayed by diversions due to the increasing chaos. Both Dad and Jack Campbell were spotted going into the station together by driver Jim Johnston who also saw the car parked at the kerb, facing the stairwell doors. Jack Campbell later testified that he noticed a dark blue Austin 1100 parked beside the Peugeot. Dad was bringing his takings of £13 from his bus-run to deposit with Barry. Still at the middle hatch he remembers Dad being in a hurry, no doubt to get out of the station, away from the growing threats, and to prepare for the **three-fifteen** return service which would have ended at Ballygowan having first gone out to Derryboy, the furthest part of the route. Myself, Hilary, Lynda and Stephen were returning from the annual Boys' Brigade and Girls' Brigade summer camp on the Isle of Man, another reason for him wishing to get home as quickly as possible. We had disembarked about an hour earlier from the Isle of Man ferry at Belfast docks at **2.00 p.m.**

On our journey home we had seen Dad at around **twenty five to three** and he had also seen us, as he drove his bus along the Castlereagh Road en route to Oxford Street. When I saw him, from the rear seat of Frank Dickson's car, he was wearing a pink shirt with the sleeves rolled up and was letting a lady onto the bus at the stop just preceding the turn into Montgomery Road, paying as she entered through the front door. At least he knew we were safely through Belfast while his youngest daughter, six year old Dorothy, was at home with mum. How much he was aware of the developing serious situation in the city is hard to say. It's virtually certain though that he would have heard the distant, visceral thunder of the blasts in Botanic Avenue and Great Victoria Street Station as he came closer to his final destination in Oxford Street. In addition, the sound of emergency vehicles speeding around would no doubt have alerted him to something more than usual occurring in the city. The

bomb on the Albert Bridge necessitating him being diverted would have been no doubt exasperating for him as a driver. As for us, we weren't conscious of any problems on our route towards home as we were well out of Belfast by then.

Any other afternoon it was likely he would have gone for a cup of tea in the upstairs canteen, but this day was not one for hanging around. Just about this time, **five to three**, the bomb in the Cortina had exploded on the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, blowing a hole in the road and shaking the bus station, causing broken windows and a lot of fear. Two minutes later a bomb wrecked the Gas Office in Ormeau Avenue just half a mile across the city. These explosions prompted Dad to tell Barry to "keep clear of glass." By this simple remark, Barry is certain that Dad saved his life that day, something our family are very proud of and glad that Barry was saved though he did receive injuries from flying debris. Billy Irvine was also opening windows to reduce the chance of flying glass in the event of any more blasts, no doubt hearing the rumble of a blast three quarters of a mile away at a premises in Garmoyle Street just before **three o'clock**.

As the soldiers went through the building they were followed by Tommy Killops and the two young parcel boys Billy Irvine and Billy Crothers. Welsh Guardsmen Price and Bruffell went on through the Parcels Office showing obvious concern, and found Jack Campbell on the phone immediately within the General Office. The two soldiers spoke to Jack, then headed towards the suspect car with Killops, Irvine and Crothers in tow. It's likely that Dad, still in the Pay-In Office heard the whine of the APC engine and the guardsmen coming through the offices. Outside, Sergeant Price sent Corporal Bruffell with the rest of the seven-man patrol to expand the search of the car park and ordered one Guardsman to stand at the high wall about thirty yards towards the Queen's Bridge.

The manager Jack Campbell quickly ended his phone call and came out to join Sergeant Price at the car telling the soldiers that the car belonged to someone working for Ulsterbus and they shouldn't be worried, but on approach to the car said it wasn't as he couldn't see a pass in the windscreen. As he looked back on his way towards the street, Peter Bruffell saw Jack Campbell with his elbow on the roof of the car, talking with 'Punchy' Price. In his deposition, Peter remembers that there was no 'telltale' smell of marzipan which was one of the tests for the presence of gelignite or nitrobenzene. Jack then leaned over the bonnet to inspect it more closely for the existence of a pass on the windscreen that would have identified the vehicle as belonging to a member of staff. Philip Price was standing next to the rear offside passenger door. Army driver Stephen Cooper joined Price near the driver's side and Tommy Killops came over beside Jack to help check out the car. Billy Irvine wandered round to the back of the car, between it and the armoured personnel carrier. It is likely that Billy Crothers was very close to the car also.

Barry raised his hand to pull the shutter down, Dad tidied up his belongings and turned to leave, walking no more than two or three steps. Then the bomb, one hundred and ten pounds of ammonium nitrate/fuel-oil high explosive mixture, detonated.

It was **two minutes past three**.*

The blast, at a velocity of over 3000 metres/second, ripped through the building obliterating the Austin 1100 and the Peugeot. The red Volkswagen Fastback was blown towards the north-side railings, still on fire when the first rescuers arrived who were no doubt fearful of another explosion caused by the fuel in the burning car. The Humber 'pig' was moved ten feet by the bomb and was now enveloped in dirty, black smoke with CS gas canisters in the vehicle having been set off creating a stinging, execrable atmosphere in the vicinity. Those beside the car were killed instantly with the exception of Jack Campbell who was critically hurt, sustaining life-changing injuries, having been blasted up into the canopy of the station and pinned down by a steel beam.

Injured and screaming people rushed blindly towards Oxford Street, including office staff who climbed out of the broken windows on the ground floor and ran towards Chichester Street. The station was quickly engulfed in a huge thick acrid cloud of smoke and flames from the fiercely blazing wrecked cafe, waiting room and offices, which ascended in a dense black cloud high above the two storey office block. Some of the injured were treated in Chichester Street Fire Station where all the appliances were out on 'shouts', the space now available being used as a first aid post. Others sought shelter in the Petty Sessions Court adjoining the fire station.

As well as can be ascertained from the sources studied, the bodies were found in areas largely dependent on where they were in the seconds before the detonation:

Dad, the only one of those killed who was inside the station when the bomb exploded, was likely blown against the waist-high metal shelving in the Pay-in office, receiving a fatal gaping wound in his left armpit. The design of the Pay-In Office meant that he was effectively trapped there as the only door was the one through which he had come in, the far wall only having three small hatches through which the drivers paid their cash in to the General Office. If he had had any concerns about the security activity going on, his only way out was in the direction of the bomb. After the bomb exploded he then either staggered (or was carried out a short time later by rescuers) through the Ground Floor double doors at the stairwell, his body lying at the turn of the kerb at the northeast corner

of the two-storey office block and just a few metres to the right of where the bomb car had been parked.

Billy Irvine was found at or just inside the driver's door of the army APC which had been moved about ten feet by the blast having been parked by driver Cooper just behind the car containing the 110 pound (50 kilogram) bomb.

Stephen Cooper was lying arms outstretched and face up, opposite the windows of the storeroom on the north wall of the station.

Philip Price was beside the steel railings which bounded the site on the north side of the building, alongside what used to be an old railway line. He had impacted the railings which bent under the force.

Billy Crothers lay on the pavement on Oxford Street having been blown over the high wall bounding that part of the site and where a Guardsman had been posted some five minutes earlier.

Tommy Killops was blown onto Laganbank Road.

Fatalities by descending order of age:

Jackie Gibson (45)

Tommy Killops (39)

Philip Price (27)

Stephen Cooper (19)

Billy Irvine (18)

Billy Crothers (15)

The Isle of Man ferry docked at **2.00 p.m.** and the cars driven by those church members who had picked us up at the Belfast quayside continued through the summer countryside,

depositing us back home. We emptied our suitcases giving our presents to Mum and setting aside those we'd bought for Dad, awaiting his return from work.

He was scheduled to return to Ballygowan at **twenty-five past four** after having gone out to the end of his outward route, Derryboy, just two miles from home, some twenty minutes before. Expected back home at around **a quarter to five**, there were absolutely no thoughts among our family that anything was wrong and we all assumed he would come through the door at the normal time.

As the evening wore on and Dad didn't arrive home, we were aware of bad news coming out of Belfast. We didn't know the extent of it but due to the absence of Dad, Mum began to get really worried and started to cry around **half past six** as genuine fear and dread began to descend on her as Dad was never late home from his work shift.

This fear that began to grip the family pushed us into action and I drove to the house of an Ulsterbus inspector and his wife answered the door, but when I enquired as to any news of Dad she was unable to help, having heard nothing. By the time I got home, news had filtered back that Dad had been killed by an IRA bomb at the bus station. A swirl of grief, confusion and horror engulfed us all as we tried to come to terms with the news. Along with Uncle Mervyn, one of Dad's brothers who had come to the house, I went to Crossgar to the doctor's surgery to get medication to help Mum get some kind of immediate mild sedation, such was her understandable state of mind. Dad's other brother Uncle Gordon, also an Ulsterbus driver, had arrived as well on hearing the news.

The bodies of those killed in the bombing were removed from the station to the Royal Victoria Hospital and then to the morgue on Laganbank Road for the post mortem examinations to be carried out the next day, Saturday. The morgue was just across the road from the exit from the bus station that Dad would have driven through on his return journey.

Late on the Saturday evening, the summer sun low in the sky, the hearse containing his body reversed up the short fifty-yard laneway that was bound on each side by hawthorn hedges neatly trimmed by him only a couple of weeks beforehand. The sight of this black, sombre car created another wave of emotion and grief in the household. In life, his final journey was ended at Oxford Street, and in death he was now at home.

On the 21st July 1972, some forty-one bombs in total were planted across Northern Ireland, mostly Belfast, Derry and Craigavon; more by far than at any time before or since. Belfast accounted for about half with around twenty one used across the city in a crude encirclement of the central area. Much has been discussed regarding reports of hoax calls which added to the chaos and panic but these seem to have originated in newspapers. The Director Of Operations Brief, the RUC Duty Officers Report and all army logs I have seen show no reference to hoax calls. It is a fact that the unprecedented number of real attacks was more than enough to cause the mayhem that was occurring.

The other bombing that caused fatalities in Belfast was at a row of shops on the Cavehill Road in the north of the city. Here, a Ford Cortina, first described in army HQ logs at **six minutes past two** and passed to 39th Brigade and the RUC Liason Officer one and two minutes later respectively, was also noted by RUC Communications Centre at **twenty-five to three**. A document titled 'RUC Duty Officers Report' states that no warning was given, which was clearly incorrect. Forty Commando operating in the north of the city received news of the car at Cavehill from the police at **2.52 p.m.** and deployed a squad to Cavehill eighteen minutes later at **3.10 p.m.** but were too late.

It exploded at **3.20 p.m.** with a last minute warning by young Stephen Parker confirming that the car contained a bomb. Escaping the detonation was impossible. Margaret O'Hare, Brigid Murray and Stephen Parker died in the blast. The Cavehill bombing was mentioned in the HET report into Dad's murder, where it states that no warning was given, something completely at odds with my own research. As with the Oxford Street bomb, there is nothing in any source I've read that a time of planned detonation was provided by PIRA.

Not far away, a bomb attack on the Limestone Road had severely injured several people. In this incident a warning was received by 40 Commando from the police about a box covered in a cloth, in the back seat of a Morris Oxford car, at **1.45 p.m.** Some fifteen minutes later a note in the army log states that the box measured one foot by one foot by one foot six inches. The note in the log also states that the car was unknown to locals suggesting that the army was in the process of assisting. However the area was not cleared in time for whatever reason and the blast occurred at **2.40 p.m.** An additional warning about the Limestone Road bomb, to 40 Commando from the RUC, accompanied the Cavehill alert at **2.52 p.m.**, too late as it had exploded twelve minutes earlier. Like Oxford Street there is a question over exactly when the cars in these attacks were parked.

The following is a direct quote from the HET report:

“The HET has recovered all available material concerning the bombings on ‘Bloody Friday’”

Clearly it did not.

A total of one hundred and thirty people were injured in the bombings across the city.

Regarding the Oxford Street blast, it was a regular occurrence in the months and years preceding the attack for soldiers and police to frequent the first floor canteen to avail of the good food provided for the staff by Hamilton and Kirk Ltd., the company contracted to run the catering. Whether this had any bearing on the choice of the station for the bombing is unknown though general PIRA attacks on companies supplying army and police wasn't something they carried out until the early 1990's. Oxford Street's proximity to the Markets area, an area from which IRA units often operated, meant that the locale was targeted regularly. A bomb attack on Allam's sales yard had occurred just eleven days earlier on the tenth of July causing extensive damage but no injuries. Barry Montgomery made the very important point that the bomb was planted on the route most buses took to exit the station. Bad as it was, the deaths and injuries could have been much worse. According to the timetable, passenger-filled buses heading to Carryduff/Newcastle direction would have driven past the bomb. He is definite that no warning was received by anyone in the bus station.

In fact the bomber having parked the car then walked the ten minute distance to Mooney's bar in Cromac Street without giving any alert. Was this proof he genuinely thought it was a 'dummy' run? If he parked the car according to his admitted timings, then his walk to the bar would have meant he passed or skirted around soldiers and police attending the bomb scare at the May St/Oxford St junction. Certainly no member of staff knew anything about a bomb threat until the soldiers turned up although Jack Campbell stated at the inquest that he received a warning from head office a minute or so before going with the soldiers to check the car. Barry is 90% certain that the bus station had no direct telephone lines so all calls went first to Great Victoria Street station and then either patched through or messages relayed to Oxford Street so in any event a direct telephone warning to the station was impossible.

The driver of the bomb car, threatened by unknown gunmen to take the stolen car to the station did not have a drivers licence. He worked at sea full time and was only home irregularly so any driving experience would be very limited. A very curious choice for the PIRA to make in taking a large bomb through heavy traffic on a busy Friday. According to A

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R Oppenheimer in his book 'IRA, The Bombs And The Bullets', it was considered dangerous to drive a car bomb to its target with the detonator attached to the bomb, always affixing it on arrival. Again a curious detail in that the driver would not be competent to attach the detonator meaning the bomb was fully armed while en route to the bus station. If these events happened as the bomber described, then it would have been an almost laughable series of events had the operation not had so devastating an outcome. The slightest lurch or stalling of the car could have seen the explosion occurring anywhere on its journey.

At no point was an order given to evacuate the bus station although earlier the Drivers' School at the bottom of the yard had been cleared in response to the bomb scares on Laganbank Road and the Albert Bridge. It's conjecture on my part, but perhaps any evacuation would have been left to the police who may have been expected to arrive soon although it appears the army's orders were to clear the area.

Peter Bruffell's recall, and subsequent witness statement, of seeing Cooper inside the army vehicle is (understandably) mistaken. The terror and shock of the explosion, the smoke and fire and the eye-watering and choking CS gas created a kaleidoscope of horror that would have warped the senses of the most phlegmatic soldier. As stated earlier, I believe this to be the body of Billy Irvine who was in the habit of wearing khaki trousers (he was in the UDA and he may have worn some military-style clothing). In any event this was fashion not that unusual for many young men in those days. This may also have led to the erroneous belief that three soldiers died in the attack as seen in reports from the RVH and army logs. This probably also explains the confusion over the number of soldiers killed, as one army log raised the possibility that there were more than two.

The HET reappraisal mentioned Brian "Squire" Maguire (originally charged in connection with the bombing) stating that he had been sentenced to ten years in prison for explosives offences on Bloody Friday, not connected to Oxford Street, on 14th of December 1978. The HET states they could find no details of his release date. Yet Brian Maguire was found dead, by hanging, in his cell at Castlereagh Police Station on 10th of May, seven months beforehand. This was supposed to be a deep review of the details of Dad's murder yet missing this detail indicated that it may not have been as thorough as it should have been. Even the original investigation, no doubt hampered by the huge workload the police had to deal with because of the blizzard of IRA bombings, fell short in the early stages. Photographs taken by the RUC photographer at 3.00 p.m. on Saturday 22nd July, 24 hours after the bombing, amount to a total of five pictures in a crime scene where six people were murdered: Two general shots of the Oxford Street frontage, one of the damaged army personnel carrier, one of the burnt-out Volkswagen Fastback and one of the damaged

Vauxhall Viva belonging to Jack Campbell. There were no photographs taken of the seat of the explosion or of the remains of the Austin 1100.

On Sunday 9th July, just twelve days before Bloody Friday the GOC Harry Tuzo in a memo to William Whitelaw, NI Secretary of State at the time, predicted a major car bomb offensive as a prelude to the resuming of IRA hostilities after the breakdown of the short-lived ceasefire. He said that Belfast, Londonderry and Mid Ulster would be the likely targets. Whether referring to specific intelligence or as a more general note, in a directive dated 15th of July just six days before the bombings, Major PW Graham ordered all units to concentrate on “countering the IRA planned bombing campaign in the City Centre.” The memo was likely circulated to thirty nine army units including 1Welsh Guards (city centre including Oxford St) and 40 Commando (North Belfast including Cavehill Road).

Clearly the army was concerned about imminent bombing in Belfast. Nevertheless almost one tonne of high explosives was being moved around the city in amounts between fifty and a hundred and fifty pounds in the day or so before the 21st July bombardment while army logs show nothing except normal communications traffic over the same period, only sparking into response as the first bombs began to explode on Friday afternoon. In addition, up to seven hundred pounds in total of explosives was being used in attacks across the rest of the province, mostly in Derry. Subsequent events, ie Operation Motorman, occurred just ten days after Bloody Friday on the 31st July and was a watered down version of a much more radical army plan, Operation Folklore. Folklore originated on 22nd July, the day after the bombings, and remained as a plan into 1973. The very speedy implementation of Motorman might raise the suspicion that the ‘gloves off’ approach by the army was enabled by the atrocities on the 21st. To be blunt, did it suit the Army’s plans to allow the bombings to go ahead, not anticipating the horrendous deaths and injuries, in order to have an excuse to “Respond to all other forms of Provisional IRA activity with vigorous action” (Graham directive)? In a memo to the Secretary of State on 12th July signed by ‘MC’, it was outlined how the army wished to take action against the PIRA in order to reduce Protestant support for the UDA, who were making noises about taking republicans on themselves in response to PIRA violence, potentially opening up a much greater conflagration.

On 30th November 2000, the late Lt Col James Malcolm, commander of 1 Welsh Guards in the city centre writing about his memory of the events, stated that they knew on the Thursday about bombs being planned for the next day in Belfast. He stated also that the army sealed off the city centre and suggests the IRA diverted their explosives to other locations because of this action. There was a plan of the new security actions published on the day of the bombings in the Belfast newspapers inviting business owners to a meeting at **2.30 p.m.** to discuss the arrangements which had been put in place the previous

Wednesday, possibly as a result of the Major Graham directive. The army had a number of standing operating procedures planned for sustained bombing etc by PIRA but as to how far, or even if, they were implemented prior to Bloody Friday is unknown.

Although almost inevitable that the day would be termed 'Bloody Friday' it is interesting that it was described thus in a newspaper report in the Birmingham Post the day after the barrage of bombing, stating that the label was coined by someone from the office of William Whitelaw, the Secretary Of State for Northern Ireland. Was this nomenclature cynically designed by the Northern Ireland Office to somehow dilute the pressure on the army after Bloody Sunday just six months before? Expedient perhaps that a similar description to the events in Derry was being put into the public domain by a government department to describe an IRA atrocity that resulted in nine deaths and one hundred and thirty injured.

As for the Provisional IRA, an ongoing power struggle was occurring at the top of the organisation where Sean MacStíofáin, with a preference for military action, and Seamus Twomey, won out over David O'Connell and Rory O'Brady. In his memoirs, MacStíofáin described the operation on Bloody Friday as "a concerted sabotage offensive" intended to demonstrate the IRA was capable of planting a large number of bombs at once. In her book 'To Take Arms', ex Provisional Maria McGuire alludes to the militancy of the IRA in Belfast which presumably provided fertile ground for MacStíofáin's ambitions to lead the movement in the direction of more bombings and destruction. Overall, sole responsibility for the bombings lay with the PIRA whose commander in Belfast's Lower Falls was Brendan Hughes, a close friend and associate of Brian Maguire discussed earlier. Hughes was apparently horrified as to the results of the blitz, realising on hearing the large number of blasts that they had overstretched the army and police by carrying out too many attacks in such a short time span. Quoting Hughes verbatim from a small section from the Boston Tapes in an interview with Anthony McIntyre:

"I was responsible for a fair deal of the bombs going into the town. It wasn't directly my decision to do this, but I was the person that organised it. [...] It was a **major, major operation** but it was never intended to kill people. I mean, if I could reverse the situation, I would. I have a fair deal of regret about Bloody Friday." (*My bold type*)

Whatever the truth, including Hughes's reprimanding of IRA volunteers who cheered on hearing the cacophony of blasts, the result was families torn apart by death and injury in an unprecedented attack on civilian infrastructure and on his fellow citizens. In 'To Take Arms', McGuire is unequivocal that the Provos' "twenty warnings could never be dealt with." This was underlined in an apology by PIRA to all 'non-combatants' on the thirtieth anniversary

of the bombings in 2002, clearly no apology to the two soldiers killed while going to the aid of civilians and infrastructure under attack.

To add insult to the egregious events of the day, at around **one o'clock a.m on July 22nd** the IRA fired high velocity rounds at RUC officers on duty in the remains of the still smoking bus station. Pinned down at the south entrance to the depot, they were eventually extracted by the army and no one was injured. In the week or so after the bombings on Friday 21st July 1972, among the sad list of murders (whether they were sectarian, of British soldiers or UDR soldiers or the one case of mistaken identity), the brutal deaths of three Catholic men; Frankie Arthurs, Frank Corr and James McGerty stood out, young Arthurs having been brutally killed in the early hours of the 22nd. Rosemary McCartney and Patrick O'Neill may have also been murdered due to the tension over the Friday's events. Loyalist paramilitaries took it on themselves to 'avenge', in their twisted logic, the bombings and these poor people died to satisfy their blood-lust. Horrific, and like all murders, both unjustified and unjustifiable. From this distance, some fifty years after the events of that day, it is difficult to convey the context of the sheer volume of violence. On the Republican side, the focus of my research into the Oxford Street bombing, there were an average of around four explosions every day throughout 1972 so it's easy to see the severe limitations on police success in investigating, and for the judicial system in dealing with, the volume of attacks.

There is more, much more no doubt, buried in British and Irish government records and in the collective memory bank of Provisional IRA members that will never be known. Equally, many people who could have added immeasurably to this narrative are no longer with us. The end result is we are limited in what is known now and what can ever be known about Bloody Friday. History can never be reconstructed, only a version of it can be constructed and this will always be a work in progress. My search to find out as much as possible about the circumstances surrounding the murder of Jackie Gibson continues.

Footnote:

Something I found on the unofficial Army Rumour Service forum is worth adding here. I can't verify the source but I have no reason to disbelieve the contents. Although I haven't found any photos of any other APCs at the station, neither are there pictures of fire appliances or police cars, only ambulances. So absence of evidence definitely isn't evidence of absence:

By 'Knights of Rowallan': Army Rumour Service forum:

"My (late) Step Father was Welsh Guards and latterly a Police Detective. A large gentleman, hard as nails but very well read and could be extremely funny.

He served in Aden, Cyprus (during the invasion) and a few tours of NI. Some excellent tales to tell and was definitely not man to embellish or make things up [sic]. As I got older he also held back less of the grisly realities of war / etc.

The only time I ever saw him get upset was the (only) time he recounted his experience at the Bloody Friday Oxford Street bus station bombing. 21 July 1972.

Essentially, a car (possibly a Cortina iirc) had been parked in the Ulsterbus station. It was suspected of being a VBIED. [Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device].

His call sign (he was patrol 2ic) consisted of 2 Humber pigs. They attended the scene, saw the car and decided to take a close look. As was the SOP [standard operating procedure], his vehicle held back and the other pig was driven closer to the car to have a closer look, the normal drill was that pig would withdraw and if they decided it was a real threat, ATO [army technical operator] would be called, clear, cordon [sic], etc etc.

However for reasons we will never know, he watched in horror as the comd [commander] and dvr [driver] got out and approached the car. As they got close to it, it detonated. They rushed forward. One of the poor souls had been blown through a set of railings, (there is an account by a detective who said he saw a torso blasted onto a wall); all that was left at the site was a pair of legs. There are some other grisly details, but I think we all get the picture.

Sadly 4 civilians were also killed including a teenage boy.

RIP

Sgt Philip Price (27) WG [Welsh Guards]

Dvr Stephen Cooper (19) RCT [Royal Corps of Transport]"

Posted on 12 Sept 2019

My note: Peter Bruffell stated that they didn't smell the tell-tale marzipan odour of explosives so perhaps the patrol saw no threat in the car at that time. However the fact remains they did focus back on the car once they'd gone into the bus station to find the manager, who followed them to the vehicle to try and identify it, without clearing the area first. Peter in a phone call with me in February 2021 almost apologetically said they could have cleared the area but as we know now, they arrived too late.

**Barry thought the explosion occurred at two minutes before three, but it is generally accepted that it was two minutes past the hour.*

Researched and written by Robert Gibson ©

Heartfelt thanks to the following, without whom very little of the essay could have been written. (Additional crucial research and support from victims' charity, **Paper Trail (Legacy Archive Research)** www.papertrail.pro):

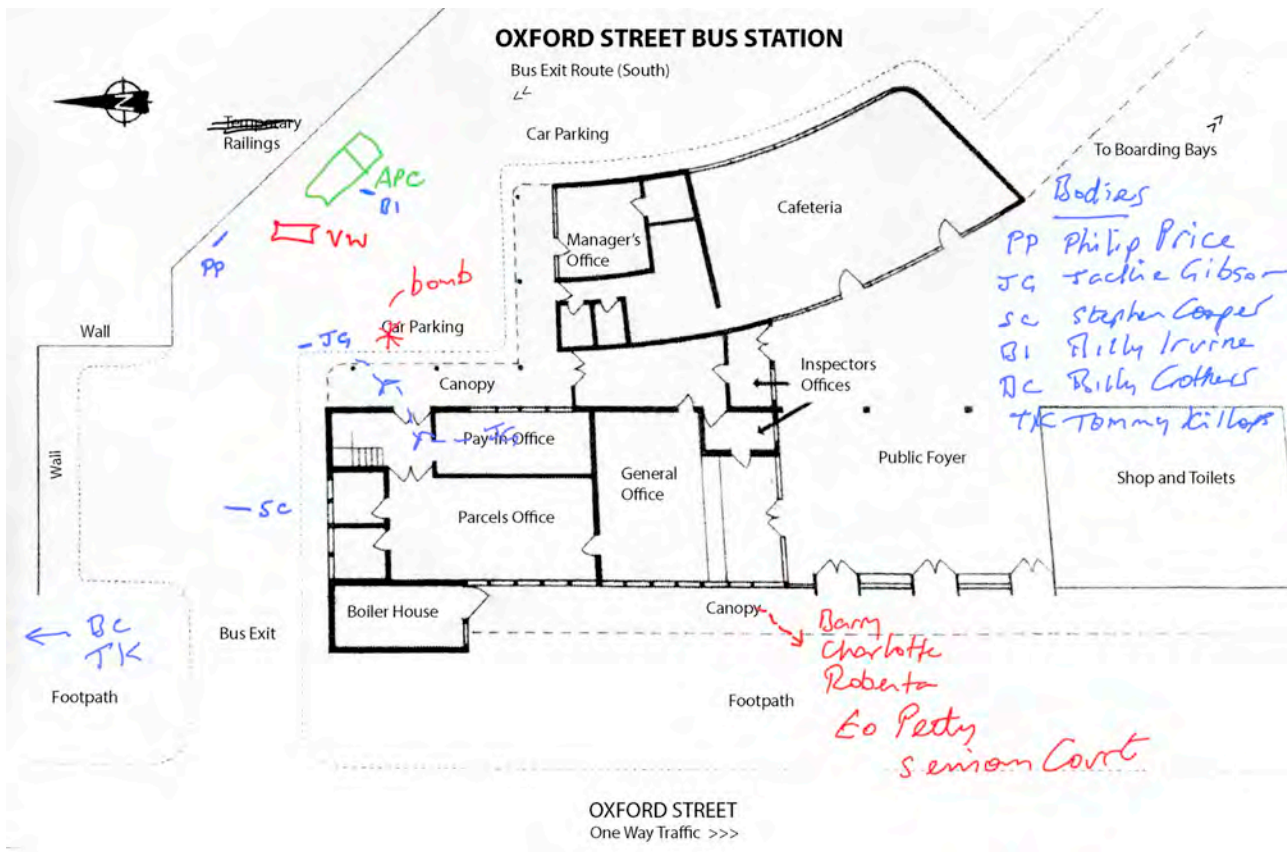
Brian Allaway
Raymond Bell
Peter Bruffell
Frank Clegg
Lena Ferguson
Davy George
Arthur Hamilton
Michael Henderson
Roberta Hulme
Tommy Hynds
James Kinchin-White
Ciarán MacAirt
Charlotte Martin
Jonathan Miller
Ed Moloney
Pat Moss
Barry Montgomery
Dr Gareth Mulvenna
Madeleine Price
Michael Ross
Stanley Spray



This metal plaque, which was inside the passenger lobby over the entrance doors, is all that remains of the bus station which has since been demolished and redeveloped. Thankfully it was rescued and still exists today, affixed to a non-public area of Laganside Bus Centre in Marlborough Street, close to Oxford Street. Damage caused by the bomb is still visible where the top edge is bowed out slightly from the wall though it can't be seen in this picture.



Dad's body about to be lifted on a tarpaulin while a red VW Fastback burns in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. Station Officer Jack Hyland (white helmet) is aided by Davy Page (black helmet with white band). The man in the glasses is a fire brigade mechanic, name unknown.



Above: Plan of the station with positions of the bodies and the bomb car. Shown also are the armoured personnel carrier (APC) and the VW Fastback which is shown still on fire in the previous photograph. The open door of the APC is just visible through the smoke.

LOG SHEET				Date 21 JUL 72	Log Keeper(s) G BRANCH
Time	DTG	To	From	Event	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
	1405			Bomb scare: from Irish Press. Red bag on Rlwy Br, Fin Rd Should crack 1445.	
1405	1405			1. Austin Maxi Sydenham Flyover 2. Light blue Cortina Queens Eliz Br. 3. Cruslin R1 car bomb 9944028, Star Taxi 1/2 hr warning. 4. Old Tram depot Salisbury Ave.	
1405		PRA		Oxford St bus Stn - 200lbs. Appeared centre of city is ringed.	
1405	1430	19 FD		2 gone off, Brooke Vale Hotel/Antrin Rd.	
				Felix Regd. Red lorry Finaghy Rd N railway Bridge wire leading from lorry.	

Previous page bottom: Watch-keeper log of 39 Brigade showing warning about Oxford Street between 2.25 and 2.30 on 21st July 1972 from the Public Protection Agency (PPA). No description of bomb-car given.

Below: Section of statement to police by the bomber interviewed in 1977 in relation to the time the car was collected and driven to the bus station.

█████'s house in █████ for our honeymoon. On Friday 21 July 1972 two men called at █████'s house and asked to speak to me in the parlour at about 2 pm. These two men told me I had to drive a car from Stanfield Street to the Bus Station in Oxford Street. They gave me a bunch of keys and told me the car was parked in a gateway in Stanfield Street. They told me to go right away and park the car behind the Bus Station itself. These two men who I didn't know told me I had to do this or I'd get a bullet in the head. They told me not to worry because it was a dum run. The men left the house and I never saw them again. I went out of the house without saying anything to █████ or █████ and in fact they didn't see anything. I walked round to the gateway in Stanfield Street and got into the only car there. It was about twenty past two at this time and I made my way in the car past the Fire Station in Chichester Street and then got stuck in the traffic in Oxford Street. A Policeman was directing traffic and after about ten minutes he made a way for me to get into the Bus Station. I drove right into the parking spaces behind the station and parked. I got out of the car and walked back and went into Mooney's Bar at the corner of Eliza Street and Cromac Street. There was a

Below: Army HQNI Watch-keeper's log showing Cavehill Road and Limestone Road (mispelt Loanstone) warnings at 2.06 p.m., then passed to 39 Brigade and RUC Liaison Officer one and two minutes later respectively. The fatal Cavehill Road bomb detonated at 3.15 p.m., one hour and nine minutes after the first alert.

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION _____ (REPEAT AT BOTTOM OF PAGE)

LOG SHEET

Formation/Unit HQ NI Date 21 Jul 72 Log Keeper(s) _____ Sheet No. 7

Serial	DTG	To	From	Event	Action
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
<u>47</u>	<u>1406</u>		HQ NI EXCHANGE	Car bombs reported by anon caller: (1) Grey Wolsey [REDACTED], LOANSTONE RD, ANTRIM (2) Silver Grey Cortina, [REDACTED], Shopping Centre, Cavehill Rd BELFAST	1407 39 Bde info <u>1408 RUCLO info</u>

I am a Police Constable attached to Belfast Regional Control, Assistant Chief Constable's Office, Ladas Drive, Belfast. On Friday, 21st July, 1972, I was on duty at that office. At 1442 hours I received a call on the 999 system from the Operator, Telephone House re an anonymous male caller reporting a massive bomb in a grey/blue 1100 car at Oxford Street Bus Station. I immediately put out a call on the radio network for a mobile but did not get a reply. I then made a general call for any vehicle City Centre and was still without success. There had been several explosions in the City and both radio and telephone communications were in constant use. I had to wait for the first available telephone line and tried to contact the Bus Station, the line was engaged. I then tried the Pocketfone network which was also in constant use returned to the main network and made a general call for any vehicle. I was successful in contacting the Army by telephone and requested an Army unit be sent immediately. During this time 999 calls were constant and had to be answered. An explosion was reported at 1502 hours. At 1535 hours the Operator, Telephone House, reported the call traced to Belfast, Telephone Number [REDACTED].

Above: RUC Communications centre and the 2.42 p.m. warning first identifying the bomb-car at Oxford Street.

Statements from two witnesses stating when the bomb car was seen; first statement, at 2.20 p.m. and second statement, at 1.20 p.m.

In July 1972 I was employed as a Clerk by the Ulsterbus, Oxford Street. On 21st July 1972 at about 1.15 pm I left the office to go for lunch. I returned at 2.20 pm and entered the Bus Depot via the entrance nearest the bridge. I walked around the back and entered the office via the parcel office. I was accompanied by [REDACTED]. Before we entered the office I said to [REDACTED] I wonder who owns those cars parked opposite the parcel office. There were three cars parked, a Vauxhall Viva, blue colour, a Red Volkswagon and a blue Austin 1100. We walked on into the office. We were in the office a short time speaking to Mr Campbell, the Manager when an

In July 1972 I was a [REDACTED] employed by Ulsterbus at Oxford Street Bus Depot. On 21 July 1972 at about 12 MD I left the office to go for lunch. I left via the front entrance. I returned via the entrance nearest the bridge and around the back at 1.20 pm. As I passed the parcel office I remember seeing a blue 1100 car sitting nearest the entrance to the parcel office, then a Red Volkswagon and a blue Peugeot. I walked on into the

Justice MacDermott's comment on the bomb-car driver's veracity in telling the full truth of his activities.

car is surprising. At times his evidence was in my judgment evasive and deliberately vague. Additionally his account of his movements on the morning of the 21st July was quite inconsistent with what he had earlier told police and also it is clear



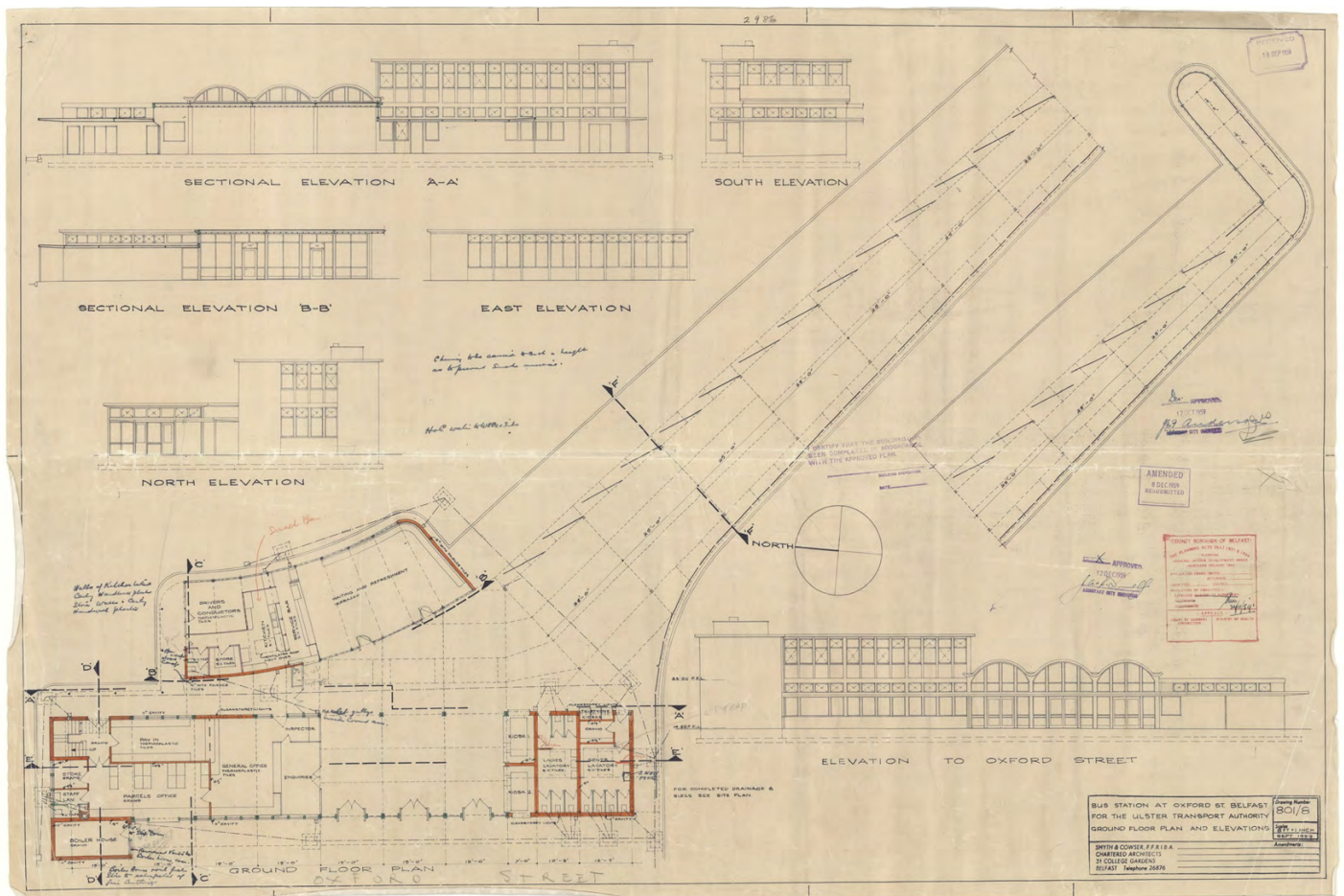
The rear of Oxford Street bus station shortly after opening in 1960, some twelve years before the attack and well before the 'Troubles' began. The bomb car was parked facing the double door entrance visible on the right hand side of the two storey office block. The car was likely driven up from the bottom left direction. *(Photo courtesy of Jonathan Miller)*



Acrid black smoke rises from the bus station as firefighters hoses criss-cross Oxford Street. Two ambulance stretchers can be seen just inside the vehicle exit route. In the near distance an army Saracen is parked as they deal with an explosives find at a separate incident at the junction with May Street.



Previous page bottom: Oxford Street platforms. Dad reversed his bus up to No 12 just over halfway down and likely walked up the concourse towards the office block and the Pay-In Office. (Photo courtesy of Jonathan Miller)



Original plan of the station in 1959 by architects Smyth and Cowser. It was built by Belfast contractor FB McKee Ltd.

Artist Stephen Conlin's impression of the bombed station published in 'Belfast 1000 Years' by Jonathan Bardon (Blackstaff Press 1985)



The Pay-In Office pictured in the early days of the station's operation. Dad had just finished paying his takings to Barry Montgomery through the middle hatch and had turned and walked a few steps to leave when the bomb exploded. The Austin 1100 was parked opposite the exit doors less than fifteen feet from the bottom left hand corner of the picture. *(Photo courtesy of Jonathan Miller)*



In order to give context to the huge number of attacks by both bomb and bullet on Bloody Friday, the following is a list of explosions (which occurred in a period of one hour and twenty minutes in Belfast) collated soon after by the army in a document entitled The Director of Operations Brief. They are set out below as in the list which is not in actual order of occurrence. Some explosions are missing from the list* and excluded are many bombs defused by the army such as those in May Street and on a pillar underneath the Albert Bridge. Bold type signifies fatalities:

Belfast Explosions

Garage, Donegall Street 100 lbs

Bus Station, Oxford Street 100 lbs

Bus Depot, Smithfield 100-150 lbs

Bus Depot, Glengall Street 100-150 lbs

Footbridge, Windsor Park 20 lbs

Shops, Botanic Avenue 50 lbs

Shops, Ormeau Avenue 50 lbs

Bank, Antrim Road 50 lbs

Garage, Crumlin Road 50 lbs

Food Van, Crumlin Road 20-30 lbs

Hotel, Brookvale Avenue 50 lbs

Railway Station, York Road 20-30 lbs

Shops, Cavehill Road 50 lbs

Railway Bridge, Finaghy Road North 50-100 lbs

Garage, Lisburn Road 50 lbs

Electricity Substation, Salisbury Avenue 50 lbs

Bar, Fortwilliam 50 lbs

Food manufacturer, Garmoye Street 20-30 lbs

Bar, Donegall Quay 30-50 lbs

*Queen Elizabeth Bridge; Agnes Street; Bellevue Bridge on M2; Stewartstown Road; Grosvenor Road; Sydenham Road flyover; Great Victoria Street Railway Station.

Rest of Northern Ireland Explosions

Railway Line, Lurgan/Portadown 25-50 lbs

Post Office, Killlen, Castlederg 50-80 lbs

Garage, Tullyhommon, Fermanagh 30-50 lbs

Meal Store, Letter, Fermanagh 5-10 lbs

Service Station, Letter, Fermanagh 20-30 lbs

Electric transformer fence, Portadown 1-2 lbs

Mill, Armagh 3-5 lbs

Sand pit office, Lurgan 10-20 lbs

Railway Station, Lurgan 30-50 lbs

Embassy building, Derry 200-300 lbs

Garage, Derry 10 lbs

Road Hauliers, Derry 100 lbs

Garage, Strabane, 15-20 lbs

Unknown, Nutts Corner 20-30 lbs

In addition between the 20th and 22nd July the report states there were 192 shooting incidents (mainly in Belfast) across Northern Ireland.

“How beautiful upon the mountain are the steps of those who walk in peace.”
– Lyrics from a song by Tom Paxton

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