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Witness who saw fatal attack told police it looked like a free-for-all

By Lesley-Anne Henry
Wednesday, 18 February 2009

There was a "free for all" in Portadown on the night Robert Hamill was attacked, an inquiry into his death heard yesterday.

Mark Black, a civilian witness who had been walking through Portadown town centre around the time Robert Hamill was beaten by a loyalist mob, said he had "seen a crowd gathering".

Mr Black, who was 27 at the time and had been making his way home from a night out, said he was concerned for his younger brother and had wanted to get home as quickly as possible.

Yesterday's sitting at Belfast Interpoint Centre was told how Mr Black had noticed a commotion when he paused for five minutes to finish a bottle of beer outside St Mark's Church in the town centre.

"At that time I seen a crowd. It was nothing to do with me. I just wanted to go home," he said.

Mr Black had guessed there were about 20 people among the initial crowd but that more "people were stopping on their way past".

A police record, shown to the inquiry yesterday, noted that Mr Black had told officers in the weeks after the attack: "It looked like a free-for-all."

Twenty-five-year-old Catholic father Robert Hamill died days after being assaulted in Portadown on April 27, 1997. An inquiry has been set up to find out if the RUC officers facilitated his death or interfered with the investigation of it.

Mr Black, who declined to give a statement to investigating officers, told the inquiry he did not see any police presence.

"I never seen any police about the town. I wasn't looking to them to start off with," he said.

Meanwhile another witness Shelley Liggett fought back tears as she recalled hearing a "commotion" but had "just wanted to get away from it all".

She said: "By the time I got up to West Street there was a commotion going on but I didn't go down the street to see what it was."

Miss Liggett, who was 18 at the time of the assault on Mr Hamill, also denied trying to distance herself from the events of that night in a statement she gave to police.

"I wasn't withholding anything. I was just saying what I remembered," she said.

Six men were charged over the murder of Robert Hamill, however charges against five were dropped. One man was sentenced for affray.

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