

New evidence emerges in 100-year-old footballer murder

The only witness to the crime was not telling the truth about what she saw, according to an analysis of testimony and on the ground research.

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EINPresswire.com/ -- New evidence has emerged that undermines the key testimony that convicted a former soldier of murdering an Aston Villa footballer on Armistice Day in 1923.



Tommy Ball and George Stagg

Wounded World War I veteran George Stagg was sentenced to death over the killing of his neighbour, aspiring international full back Tommy Ball. The punishment was subsequently commuted but the case remains the only official murder of a top flight footballer in English history.

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Colin Brown

However, new evidence uncovered by author Colin Brown suggests that Ball's widow Beatrice, the only witness to the killing to give evidence in the trial, was not telling the truth.

By identifying the exact location of the shooting, at a long-since demolished house in the Perry Barr area of Birmingham, Brown was able to establish that the sworn timeline presented by Mrs Ball of the night of the killing was all but impossible. Furthermore, he highlighted major

doubts over the claim that Stagg shot at Mrs Ball after the killing of her husband.

Brown, whose father was the last living person to have seen Ball play, revealed the discovery in an interview for podcast The Murder that Changed English Football, available now on [Spotify](#), [YouTube](#) and [Apple Podcasts](#).

"Having reviewed the original, previously-neglected court documents and maps from the time, Mrs Ball's claims allow unfeasibly short timescales between the shooting and the arrival of the police," Brown said. "Furthermore, her claims to have been shot at just don't stand up - it's hard to imagine a trained marksman with a shotgun less than 10 metres away would have failed to even touch his target. And obviously the police gave no credence to the allegations as there was no attempted murder charge."



The murder marked the end of Aston Villa's golden era

Stagg always denied the murder, claiming that his gun had gone off by accident during a late-night tussle in the garden the pair shared.

And Brown's revelations cast serious doubt over Stagg's conviction. He also uncovered details of how the trial judge, Sir Arthur Rowlatt, attempted unsuccessfully to undermine the defence's case that the shotgun was triggered by striking a fence post

The murder has long formed part of Aston Villa folklore, coming at the end of a golden period in which the club dominated English football. Rumours suggested sexual or financial jealousy or even mental illness might have led Stagg to kill his neighbour and tenant. But Brown could not find any evidence of a motive which could have led Stagg to murder. And he clearly sets out how the deadly confrontation between the two men came about by sheer chance after Ball went looking for his dog late at night after a night at the pub.

The facts

Tommy Ball was a former miner from the north-east of England who had been scouted by Aston Villa in 1919. After a couple of seasons in the reserve team, he broke into the most successful English club and became a popular regular in the defence.

However, his career was brought to a tragic end when he returned from a night at the Church Tavern with his wife Beatrice to find his dog had run off. Ball went off to find the pet and during his search roused the guard-dog of his neighbour.

George Stagg was a British army veteran who had fought under General Kitchener in Sudan and been seriously injured in the trenches of France. Struggling to work, he had managed to scrape together enough money to buy a pair of semi-detached houses on the rural edge of Birmingham. One of these he rented to the footballer Tommy Ball, living with his family in the

other.

When his dog started barking, Stagg was roused from a snooze and headed outside with his shotgun. Fittingly for the era of *Peaky Blinders*, it was probably a former German military rifle. That was when a row broke out across the garden fence that ended with the deadly shooting. Stagg immediately went to find help, returning with a doctor and a policeman but Ball was lifeless, shot through the heart at close range.

Stagg was immediately arrested and hurried through the court system towards a final trial in which he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in a single day, despite suggestions of reservations from the jury. He only escaped the noose thanks to the intervention of the first Labour Home Secretary, serving a life sentence instead.

Colin Brown is the author of *The Armistice Day Killing: the death of Tommy Ball and the life of the man who shot him*. His family have been watching Aston Villa for four generations back to the 1880s.

The Murder that Changed English Football is presented by Duncan Hooper and produced by Istorias Media. It is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube

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