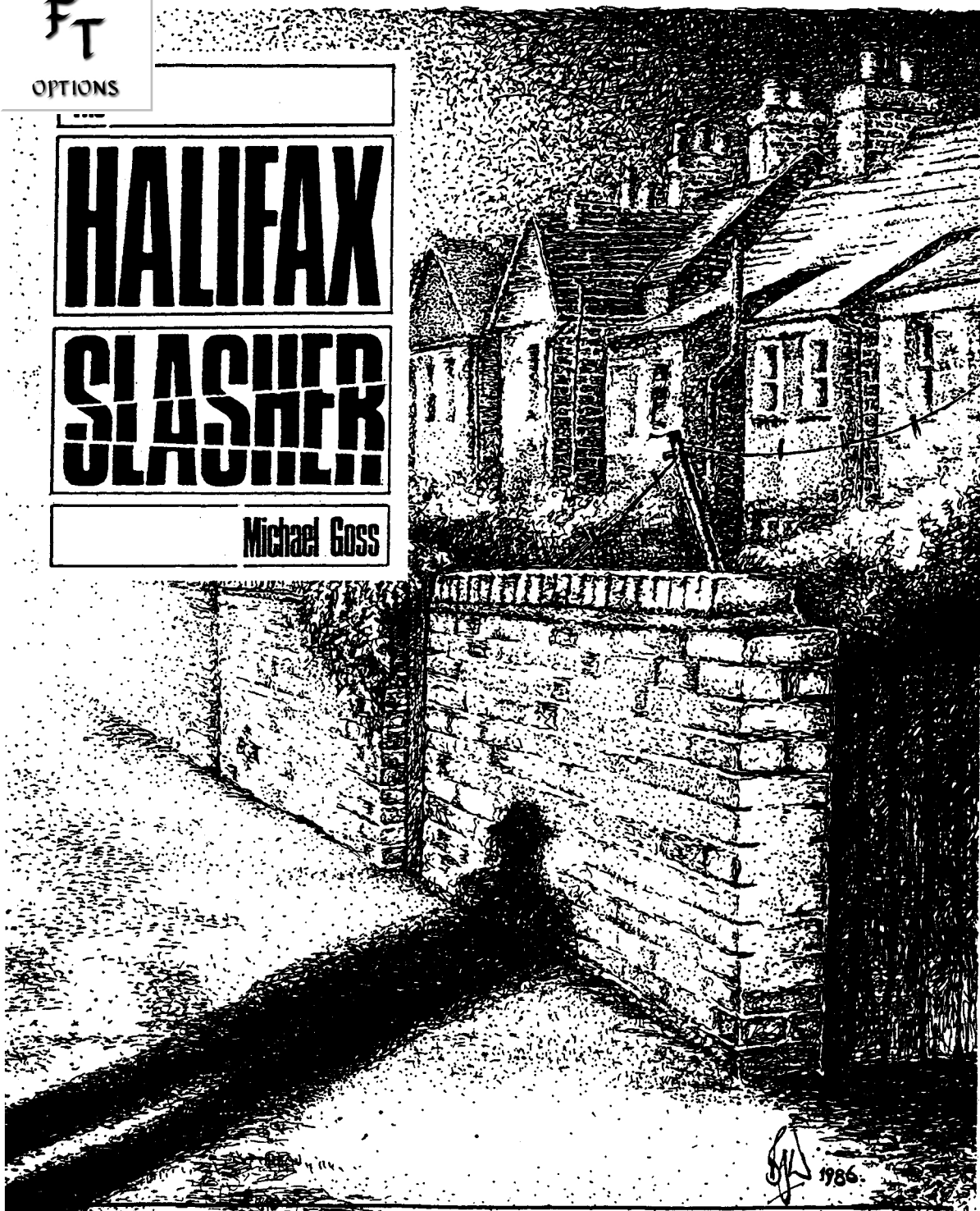
FT
OPTIONS

HALIFAX SLASHER

Michael Goss



1986

An urban terror in the north of England

'ALIFAX SLASHER: An urban terror in the north of Engiana by Michael Goss

[*Fortean Times* Occasional paper no.3]

ISSN 0260–5856

Published by *Fortean Times*, 96 Mansfield Road, London NW3 2HX

Cover illustration by Brian Watson
Maps drawn by Richard Furlong
General editor/designer: Mike Dash

1: Scene-setting

Peter William Sutcliffe paid Halifax at least two significant visits. On the night of 15 August 1975 he overtook a 46 year-old office cleaner named Olive Smelt and with the pleasant remark, "Weather's letting us down, isn't it?", fetched her a smashing blow that left her skull shattered like the proverbial eggshell. Miraculously, Mrs Smelt survived the encounter, but only just. A little under four years later - close to midnight of 4/5 April 1979 - Sutcliffe was back in Halifax. This time he patrolled the Bell Hall residential district to the west of the town centre until in Savile Park he met, murdered and mutilated Josephine Whitaker, aged 19.

In this way, through these crimes, Halifax became part of what Sutcliffe himself once styled 'Yorkshire Ripper country': a broad motorway-tied zone straddling the Pennines from Manchester to Bradford and Leeds and reaching as far south as Sheffield where, on 2 January 1981, this same Peter Sutcliffe (who proved to be none other than the Yorkshire Ripper, of course) was finally arrested. Most of the Ripper's biographers consequently found themselves attempting pen-portraits of a place which to many outside the county is distinguished only by the reputation of its building society (one of whose employees, incidentally, was Josephine Whitaker). To Roger Cross ('The Yorkshire Ripper', Granada 1981) it is "a place of even darker Satanic mills than Keighley, clinging grimly to a cleft in the foothills of the Pennines", while Peter Kinsley and Frank Smyth ('I'm Jack', Pan 1980) note that it has "some of the steepest hills in Yorkshire", but no definable red-light or prostitute areas as can be found in Huddersfield and Bradford. "Not that the town had been unused to bloodshed in its distant past," continue these authors, ingeniously digging out the etymological nugget that the very name (from the Old English 'Halig Fax' = 'Holy Hair') commemorates a sanguinary tradition of a virgin's decapitated but uncorrupted head. And like John Beattie ('The Yorkshire Ripper Story', Quartet/Daily Star 1981), who works in references to "From Hull and Halifax and Hell, Oh Lord deliver me" and the prototype guillotine erected in the 16th century, they record the detail that Savile Park is named after the family who commanded the opposed Royalist and Parliamentary forces at the battle of Halifax Bank in 1642. The inference here is that the original local name for the battleground received new and tragic topicality thanks to Sutcliffe's visit in April 1979; it had formerly been known, they say, as the "Bloody Field".

These assertions notwithstanding, the Ripperologists found nothing to endow Halifax with a unique history of violence against the person and still less to suggest any parallel with the psychopathic personality of Sutcliffe: a personality impelled by inner motives to attack and mutilate women, a concept so alien to average people as to appear totally without motive. But in fact his were not the first cases of reasonless, manic-seeming attacks that Halifax - nor, indeed, the north of England - had experienced. Over a period of about nine days in 1938 the town underwent a reign of terror no degree less harrowing than that imposed by the Ripper, even allowing the proviso that it stopped short of actual murder. The assailant, "this terrorist with a razor blade", as the 'News of the World' dubbed him on 27 November 1938, had a strictly localised identity but soon introduced panic across a wider sweep of country than even the too-mobile, too-unpredictable Sutcliffe was able to command. He was known as the Halifax Slasher.

Some idea of what the Slasher meant to the people of Halifax is conjured forth by the retrospective words of W.N. Curtis, assistant solicitor of the town's corporation. Mr Curtis was acting on behalf of the Director of Public Prosecutions - the precise circumstances behind this will be explained later - and it was not in his interest to underplay the seriousness or magnitude of the situation. He spoke of "the intense state of public feeling in this town during the time when it was thought that some person was lurking in dark streets and passages, viciously slashing at persons, mainly women,

e sharp instrument, inflicting deep
n some cases, then disappearing without leaving a trace of his footsteps." If it does nothing else, this study should demonstrate that his scene-setting speech was not tinted for effect.

"It is no exaggeration to say that the whole town was in an uproar," Curtis opened. "Thousands of persons were terrified to go out unaccompanied or open their doors after dark. The town was almost deserted of normal pedestrians and there is good reason to believe that places of entertainment and tradesmen suffered heavy loss as a result. Members of many well-known organisations in the town and hundreds of civilians placed their services and cars at the disposal of the police. Hundreds of persons banded themselves together armed with sticks and other weapons to deal with the supposed mysterious assailant should he come their way..."

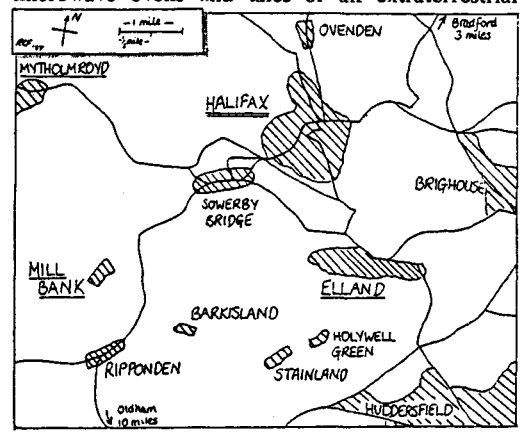
The speech, extensively reported in the 'Halifax Daily Courier & Guardian' as well as in other Yorkshire papers of 14 December 1938, continued methodically and inexorably to reconstruct the successive phases of the panic - the thousands of police hours spent investigating victims' complaints which disrupted the constabulary's normal operations, the drafting in of help from Bradford, West Riding and Huddersfield forces, the offer of a reward for information leading to the arrest of the Slasher. And then, as the epidemic spread and reproduced itself in similar attack-reports "over different parts of the country" from Glasgow to Brentford, the mass excitement and vigilante spirit seized on any hint to pick a candidate - anybody - on which to work out its passions: "it only needed some person to say, 'There he is' for an innocent person to be instantly surrounded and violently assaulted before he could make any explanation."

So into the terminal stages. "Reports of alleged attacks continued to pour into Police Headquarters. Inevitably, many proved to be false rumours started by persons unknown. Each report had to be carefully investigated. The thing grew like a snowball and had every appearance of growing bigger. Faster than one report could be thoroughly investigated, another came in. It was eventually decided to seek the assistance of Scotland Yard...Chief Inspector Salisbury and Sergeant Studdard arrived on Thursday, November 29, after which the town gradually reverted to normal."

Yes! Magically and absolutely the Halifax Slasher - the elusive, razor-bearing criminal maniac who placed an entire town under nocturnal curfew - had gone. And now it not only appeared that there was no Slasher; it was authoritatively stated that that there never had been a Slasher, at least not in the way that people were led to suppose. Suddenly the scare seemed positively silly. The sense of fear and vulnerability gave way to a scarcely-admitted embarrassment and this bred something like a desire for revenge that could only be directed at certain individuals who had made the threat seem as palpable as a razor wielded in a dark corner.

The Halifax Slasher is a curiously little-known example of the 'mystery assailant' syndrome. From time to time it becomes horribly apparent that an unknown person is perpetrating a series of assaults on folk in a manner which suggests he is working to a pattern, but for reasons which to us seem utterly obscure, if not illogical; and eventually the fear, outrage and panic which these inspire may grow drastic enough to be equally free from strict logic. In its turn, the process can be seen as a variety of 'flap': an exaggerated, perhaps hysterical, public reaction to a number of unusual and often alarming reports.

The focus of a flap can be something which partakes of the supernatural (a ghost scare, a UFO wave) but may as easily derive from more mundane sources such as accounts of an escaped and presumed-dangerous wild animal or health hazards from defective microwave ovens. The common denominator is usually some implied threat with the flap's coherence and credibility relying upon the way that individual incidents are collated by media or rumour after a fashion which "proves" they are intrinsically related rather than accidentally or generally similar. Obviously, there is a credibility difference between, say, a panic over microwave ovens and tales of an extraterrestrial



The Halifax area, 1938

; we know that microwave ovens exist (and occasionally go wrong) but we are not unanimously agreed that earth is being visited by ufonauts. Yet the difference is only one of degree. The essence of a flap is that the menace, regardless of what form it takes, is reported as solid fact and corroborated by a collation of accounts on the same theme. Taking the ovens and UFOs as the top and bottom of the hypothetical credibility-scale for flaps, we might place the Mystery Assailant somewhere around the centre of the marker – more credible than UFOs, that is, but less so than the radiation-spewing ovens. He is believable in that we are aware our society is plagued by maliciously violent criminals, yet his habit of vanishing wraith-like when the pursuit is hottest – and his paralogical motivation, maybe – casts over him a sort of uncanny mantle. He appears less substantial than a real street-criminal and almost like a phantom or demon.

One other chief characteristic of a flap is that it will greatly modify the behaviour, beliefs and perceptions of those exposed to it. Inasmuch as they seem to threaten our physical well-being, mystery assailants like the Halifax Slasher, the 'Mad Gasser of Botetourt' and the more famous 'Spring-heeled Jack' may appear to jeopardise the very basics of our existence. And yet the physical danger is a great deal less important than the fear that goes along with it; it is the terror surrounding these unknown characters which does the real damage. The essential anonymity of the assailant, his ostensibly-random choice of prey and imperviousness to control or restraint – let alone capture – means that we are all standing with our backs to the wall. This panic-response is all the more interesting when hindsight reveals that the mystery assailant never actually existed, since the inference is that the flap centred upon this imaginary danger may have been a symptom of unrest, protest or local tension of which the assailant was an ambiguous symbol. The trick is to define the tensions which made this possible.

In a Mystery Assailant cycle a number of separate attacks are built into a disorderly series. Once this is achieved, the Assailant will assume a local identity despite any contradictions arising from various eyewitness descriptions of him. More reports come in, a kind of siege mentality develops and may spill over into the likeness of mob law, this conceivably being visited upon anyone who conforms with what the defenders of communal safety want the culprit to resemble. And there will probably be further escalation. "The matter originated in Halifax," declared Mr Curtis, "but was by no means confined to Halifax and seemed to be spreading over different parts of the country." This is a very typical feature of flaps, be they centred upon witchcraft accusations, UFOs or mystery attackers, and it reminds us that we are not dealing with an isolated phenomenon nor yet with a response unique to a particular geographical unit.

Eventually the snowball stops rolling...and melts. The scare is officially, decisively repudiated; the collapse of the panic and return to normality come with spectacular swiftness which may strike observers outside the enchanted zone as being almost beyond belief. The tension which gave rise to it is dissipated through a burst of well-orchestrated reassurances and perhaps formal reprisals against individuals who made the panic seem all too reasonable.

Unless we believe that 'hysteria' is its own explanation for the elaborate panic-mechanism through which local tensions were released and expressed, we need to define what those tensions which made the process possible were. Why Halifax, for example? Going by estimated figures for the preceding year, it had in 1938 a population of close on 98,000, a respectably wide range of civic amenities, and entertainments which included a professional football team floating just below midway in the Third Division North. Its levels of unemployment would not have been appreciably worse than those of neighbouring large towns and the suspicion that war was approaching (as evidenced by sundry references in the local press) was no greater source of disquiet here than anywhere else. There is no concrete factor to suggest that Halifax was peculiarly prone to any type of stress, disadvantage or source of hysteria, much less of a variety which equipped it to function as an epicentre for a panic that bubbled erratically across other parts of Britain.

So, if the Halifax Slasher was a product of localised hysteria, what values – what meanings and senses of protest – did he express? This monograph cannot claim to say. It will only undertake to chronicle the brief career of a fantastic nocturnal bogey-man whose debt to real life may now never be established. Yet in doing so it might arouse the suspicion that 'mystery assailants' are not accidental creations and that perhaps they are no less formidable in their own way than indubitably-real menaces like Peter William Sutcliffe.

COURIER AND GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER

2: Onset

Wednesday 16th November 1938
Friday 25th November 1938

Ripperologists and connoisseurs of coincidence may derive interest from the fact that the first victim attributed to the Halifax Slasher was a 21-year-old named Mary Sutcliffe. Walking home from the late shift at Mackintosh's toffee factory around 10.10pm on Monday 21 November through a well-lit, populous part of the town, she was about to cross Lister Lane when a man she had never seen before stepped from under a street lamp just two yards away, arm raised as if to deliver a blow. Miss Sutcliffe instinctively threw up a hand to ward it off and felt an unusual though not very painful sensation in her wrist. She ran home and only on getting there did she notice that the wrist was bleeding profusely.

The wordless interlude had lasted only two or three seconds, yet long enough for the girl to sustain a deep, clean cut that needed the insertion of four stitches at the infirmary. This and the relative absence of pain suggested that a razor or something similar had been used; it was shock rather than physical damage that kept Miss Sutcliffe off work next day.

The prospects for apprehending the assailant may have seemed fair at the very least, because the girl was able to give a good general description of him: age 25-35, clean-shaven, height 5ft.10, wearing a double-breasted military overcoat (buttoned, but evidently not enough to prevent the witness from seeing he also had on a dark grey suit) and topped by a soft trilby. The only real distinguishing feature was that his eyes seemed somewhat more prominent than usual. One subsequent report stated that the victim believed she may have seen the man before after all. Previously the same day (1.45pm) in Apple Street, quite close to her home, she had accidentally dropped her work-cap; a man who'd been about to pass picked it up and handed it back with the casual inquiry as to whether she was going to work. Logically enough, Halifax CID were anxious to interview this passing stranger.

It would not have been remarkable if reports on the Sutcliffe episode caused some Halifax residents to cast their memories back a dozen years or so to an affair which their 'Daily Courier' had headlined "Slashing girls' clothing in Halifax". This related how on Wednesday, 16 February 1927, labourer James Francis Leonard, "a smart-looking young fellow" of 26 (albeit of no fixed address) had been sentenced to six months' imprisonment for damage, injury and spoil to the garments of six different "working girls" and to the tune of £30 13s. in total.

Leonard, as proceedings against him showed, had a regular system as well as an obsession. He would haunt places of entertainment – preferably crowded ones where girls might find themselves unable to get a seat and settle for standing at the barrier, theoretically oblivious to a man behind them or to the occasional tug at the bottom of their coats. But on 31 July 1926 – the first time the police had reason to take cognisance of Leonard – no less than four young ladies became all too aware of a rearward male presence and of pulling at their attire which they could not help but associate with the belated discovery that something and someone had inflicted a gash of up to six or seven inches, penetrating two or three layers and perhaps the skin beneath.

Up until February of the following year Leonard had suffered no worse reprisals against his attacks than a stray kick from Annie Fleming and a surge of adrenalin after Annie Inman, whose coat and frock he had damaged in an Alexandra Street queue on 22 January, located him the following night and complained to the nearest policeman – who was, however, unable to prevent the slasher from making a rapid exit. His misfortune or error was to thrust his attentions on an even more persistent pair six days afterwards. Mary Whelan and Louie Hartley were confident they could recognise the man who had pushed his face between them in the theatre (with the usual fabric-ripping aftermath) and indeed on 12

the determined girls went out into [illegible]cial Street and led the police straight to him. Leonard's was a face not easily forgotten, it seems; four separate witnesses had already remarked on his "rather peculiar-shaped nose", which tended to work against any plea based on mistaken identity. The fact that when arrested he made an attempt to dispose of something that tinkled as it hit the road – the fact that this item proved to be a safety razor blade, presumably mate to two others found in his pocket with a razor top – and the fact that the razor top had no handle and was therefore scarcely suitable for shaving, while the blades had evidently been unused for that purpose for a long time – did little to support Leonard's professions of ignorance and innocence.

In court Leonard staged a somewhat haphazard defence. The razor set happened to be in his pocket because he was "travelling to a new address", and "it is quite a simple thing for a blade to get lost in your overcoat pocket"; he'd made his original statement (containing a suspicious denial of having been in the theatre, which he now contradicted) when he was drunk and he didn't feel it was right for a man to be charged when he was intoxicated. Beyond that he could only deny the allegations and, unsurprisingly, he was not believed. The Chairman of the Bench gave him the benefit of his opinion – "mean, dastardly and cowardly" were a few of the epithets he bestowed on the convicted man – and two months for each of the three cases found against him.

It did not require a Sherlock Holmesian mind to make the connection between one Halifax Slasher caught and convicted and another who wasn't. No doubt at the height of the 1938 scare a few people privately took pleasure in the belief that they at least knew the unidentifiable phantom of the night to be none other than the mean, dastardly and cowardly young man sent down for razor-attacks on women that relatively short time ago. The only problem is that there exists no positive evidence and still less likelihood that the unvoiced (?) accusation was justified.

For one thing, Leonard's operational technique was markedly different. As just outlined, he was primarily a lurker in crowded public places and the damage he inflicted was consequently aimed at the lower rear portion of victims' coats. To square with details of the 1938 Slasher assaults, the amateur detective would have to postulate a complete change in mood and approach, so that the culprit – possessed, let's say, by a terrible desire for vengeance on girls of the class who had put him in prison – now waited in darkened streets and aimed his blade not from the back downwards but from the front and towards the face. And it is highly improbable that James Leonard was the 1938 Slasher for other reasons. As we heard, his very prominent nose made his too recognisable for his own good; it was one of the chief causes of his being apprehended. In other words, it wasn't a detail to escape the 1938 victims' attention, yet none of their numerous descriptions made a play of it. More cogently, local recall of his trial, police records, or both would have fingered him as an automatic suspect. But Leonard was not arrested nor, as far as I have been able to discover, questioned.

The most that can be urged is that the Leonard case had a lingering effect. Maybe the image of this "Slasher" drifted vaguely in the public consciousness of Winter 1938, lending credibility to fresh reports of another nocturnal prowler with a penchant for razor blades. More certainly, at this time several newspaper-reported events conspired to bring into that consciousness a slow-dawning sense of relationship between nocturnal mystery assailants, young female victims...and razors.

Perhaps the case of William Mason, who slashed shorthand typist Catherine Hay's cheek during the Two Minutes' Silence in Manchester, proves little besides the disposition of certain men to carry razor blades about their person and an equally odd willingness to use them for other than their legitimate end. The 43-year-old ex-con could furnish no motive for his unprovoked attack on the woman, only suggesting that at the time his mind must have been lost in a reverie of his war years in France. If he hoped his veteran status might sway Mr Justice Croom-Johnson on the bench, he was sadly mistaken. Mason owned a less-than-meritorious record; he had spent only 12 months of the October 1927 – December 1937 period out of prison and had been, said the 'Sheffield Star' for 18 November, "one of the most prominent ring-leaders" of the Dartmoor mutiny. The judge felt little remorse in directing him back gaolwards for another six years.

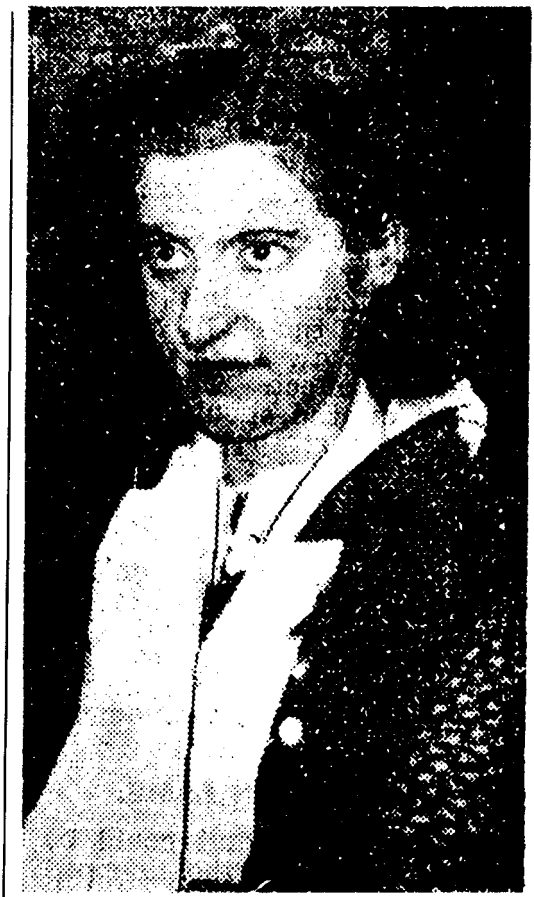
This case of gratuitous violence and random use of a razor probably had an impact on the collective imagination and nervous system of newspaper readers on both sides of the Pennines. However, it is far more certain that the attack on two 21-year-old Barkisland mill-girls just outside Halifax – and merely

ys before the Sutcliffe incident – exactly that kind of stimulus.

Shortly before 6.45pm on the dismal, foggy Wednesday evening of 16 November, Gertie Watts and Mary Gledhill were on their way to an evening class at Ripponden Institute of Technology – walking, as usual, for no locals had to date worried about using the dark paths around the town even when they were as muddy underfoot as on this particular night. Taking a short-cut in Old Bank Lane some 50 yards from the main road, one or both heard a slight noise behind them and immediately afterwards they received a stunning blow apiece. Despite this, they managed to turn and fight back against their unknown assailant, nearly managing to wrestle him down before he broke free and ran off into the murk. (In fact, Miss Watts claimed that she'd not only floored him, but gave him a pummelling as well.)

Blood streaming from severe wounds to the face and back of head, the girls fled up the steep country lane as far as the cottage of Mr and Mrs Helliwell where they lapsed into shock. Mr Harold Helliwell made an effort to search for the attacker, but – excusably, given the dark and drizzle – failed to locate him. Just as excusably, the victims could offer no description of their assailant, but gradually hindsight fixed on a man they'd seen on leaving Barkisland – a man of 30-40 who wore a gaberdine overcoat (or dirty mackintosh), a white muffler, lightweight shoes and a cap pulled down over his forehead. Besides observing that he "appeared to be acting in an unusual manner", the girls especially marked that he owned a "big mouth". They had noticed him for a second time at the Fleece Inn shortly before the attack. More incriminating still, the 'Yorkshire Observer' alleged that Miss Watts had seen the man behind them as they were halfway down Old Bank; she was in the act of saying, "Look, that man again" when he struck her companion. The inference was that he had followed the girls from Barkisland to the point where an opportunity arose to attack them with something like a mallet or hatchet.

At this juncture the West Riding would seemingly have had as much cause to fear a Bludgeoner as a Slasher. Not long since at Elland, some eight miles away, Joan Wilkinson of Thornton's Mill had been "hit on the head with some heavy instrument" by persons unknown – male persons and, she thought, two of them. Putting this case alongside the Ripponden affair, it would have been



Mary Sutcliffe, 21, of Allerton-street – the Slasher's first victim. As she walked home from the Mackintosh toffee factory a man stepped from under a street lamp and slashed at her wrist with a razor. [See map on p.48]

understandable if panic focussed on a mysterious concusser rather than a razor-bearer. But attempting to connect a number of generally-similar cases in a given area can be highly misleading. Arguing solely from the sheer quantity of mutilation-murders in the Whitechapel area between 1888 and 1891, for example, it would be possible to suppose that Jack the Ripper accounted for 13 victims, if not more; conservative studies agree, however, that he was responsible for only five. It may be futile to blame the wounds left on the Ripponden girls – Watts needed eight stitches, Gledhill three – or the attack on Joan Wilkinson upon the same man or men,

more futile to suggest that he was coidentical with the character who soon became known as the Halifax Slasher. What matters most is that the public response to the Barkisland episode and to the equally anonymous attack on Mary Sutcliffe five days later was to assume that the same man had been responsible for both – a theory upon which the police were understandably reluctant to comment.

Local reaction to the Ripponden assault was marked and immediate. "The news of the attack...quickly spread through the district," affirmed the 'Halifax Daily Courier' of 17 November, "and everybody seemed to be discussing the matter." A 'Yorkshire Observer' journalist found "the bleak, hill-top village of Barkisland" engulfed by nocturnal terror; no-one could be seen on the streets after dark and dress-making classes at Ripponden Night School experienced a fall in attendances. Like the allocation of all available police and 'specials' to the investigation, this sudden excitement appears highly significant. As if from nowhere there had arisen a fear of an amoral, unpredictable and possibly homicidal personality who preyed upon young women – the kind of criminal who is as difficult to ignore as he is to defend against. Society and normality had come under siege. Conditions at Barkisland resembled a rehearsal for what was to take place at Halifax over the next fortnight.

No single point of origin, no solitary assault, can be blamed for the birth of the Halifax Slasher myth. Instead he evolved out of a string of disparate attacks with a number of common features (night-time ambiance, victims female, no apparent motive, assailant vanishes without trace) which could easily seem connected in what the 'Yorkshire Observer' styled "the West Riding terror epidemic". Yet if one case could be blamed for detonating the process, it may have been the discovery of eight-year-old Phyllis Hirst's outraged body in a carriageway at Horton Green, Bradford, on 28 October: a repugnant crime that sent shock-waves across a wide area.

It may be that there was a pre-existent unconscious sense of disquiet about the rise in urban violence and that this child-murder seemed to epitomise the worst fears of those alert to the trend (real or perceived). If so, hereafter the expression of that alarm was to focus upon one symbolic figure – the Slasher – who conceivably summed up all the public fears of violently-anonymous, incomprehensible denizens of the urban darkness. Curiously, he was to make his home in Halifax. Until the Watts/Gledhill and Sutcliffe attacks, it would have been safer to predict that if any town produced such a mystery assailant – cum – bogeyman, it would have been the one where the horror of the Hirst killing was felt most strongly. Had things followed that pattern, we would have been talking about the Bradford Slasher. Just how close Bradford came to that state of affairs can be deduced from the fact that on 23 November – a little under 48 hours after the attack on Mary Sutcliffe in Halifax – the city was thrown into panic by news of an identical-sounding assault upon Mrs Ann Josephine Stebbings that occured less than a mile away from where Phyllis Hirst's body had been found the previous month.

The 19 year-old Mrs Stebbings (engagingly referred to by the 'Yorkshire Observer' as a "girl-wife") had been making her way down Thursby Street at 7.20pm, basket and carrier filled with potatoes, eggs, and bottles of milk, when a man crossed the road and slashed her. The cut passed through her coat, frock and cardigan to leave a nine-and-a-quarter inch gash on her arm. The search for the Slasher – 30-38 years old, height 5'10", pale, clean-shaven face, and wearing a dirty raincoat, dark grey trousers, and grey trilby – began at once. Despite reports that a man of this description had been seen lurking in the vicinity up to an hour before the attack, the assailant was not found. Yet inquiries revealed an unsuspected climate of local fear. The person who slashed Mrs Stebbings was only one of many masculine terrors haunting this part of Bradford.

Annie Croft, the 15-year-old neighbour of Mrs Stebbings, claimed that a man had stopped her that morning on her way to work; she had reported as much to her employer, but couldn't say what the interloper had looked like. Within the past fortnight, two women in Maperton Road (half a mile distant) had been scared by mysterious males, and a reporter heard "tales of strange men and alarming experiences" from the Leeds Road area. Women had also been accosted in Planetrees Road "and everywhere in the district one hears of unknown men lurking in passages and wandering through backyards in the dead of night." One woman answered the journalist's knock on the door with a carving-knife in her hand: "You've got to be careful these days," she apologised.

All this – the rumours, the sense of being under attack, the alarming prevalence of unknown and suspicious characters – was an embryo of what was to happen in Halifax on a

r scale. Thus, even if actually unrelated to events at Barkisland and Bradford, the Sutcliffe case inevitably reinforced a rapidly-emerging consciousness of a mystery assailant who infested the dark hours, materialising without warning; moreover, situated as it was in a busy, well-lit area, it intimated that he had forsaken lonely country lanes and was now treading boldly down the pavements of town. As yet, he lacked a true identity, one which subsumed all that he stood for. After the night of Thursday 24 November 1938, though, that would change.

It was the attack on Mr Clayton Aspinall, only 300 yards from the scene of the Sutcliffe incident, that transformed the mystery assailant from something between rumour and neurosis into a definite, almost tangible threat. Reportage of this latest act of incomprehensible violence not only conveyed the message that his existence was so far beyond doubt that it could be calculated in financial terms, but invested him with a localised name-tag and identity. The 'Courier' s 25 November banner headline read simply: "£10 Police Reward for Arrest of Halifax 'Slasher'".

On the evening in question, Mr Aspinall was standing at the side door of St Andrew's Methodist Sunday School, of which he was caretaker, in Queen's Road facing out onto Jasper Street. The thoroughfare was more or less in darkness save for the light from the windows of Kitchen & Wade's works a few yards off and from the School of Art to the rear. Having attended to the boiler fire, Mr Aspinall was casually glancing around for latecomers to one or other of the meetings scheduled at the school when a youngish man raced through the narrow way out of Arundel Street. As the caretaker stepped back to let him pass the unknown shot a sudden blow at his head. Once again this caused the victim to throw up an arm; again there was a sharp sensation, caused by shallow but painful cuts to the side of his head and two fingers of the protecting right hand. The attacker made off through the gateway to the Art School, disappearing into the dusk at the rear of the building before Aspinall and a colleague had time to do more than start on his track.

Perhaps it is too much to suggest that Halifax had half-consciously been waiting for something like this, yet the swiftness of reaction to the incident - the converging of police on the crime-spot, the public announcements and security arrangements - might imply that the reappearance of the Slasher was not a complete surprise. In the aftermath of the Aspinall attack the immediate concern was for the Art School students - most of them young and female - who were about to arrive for their classes. That night studies were undertaken behind locked doors and at closing time the police presence was obvious, while the students went home in parties and/or under escort. Two girls who seemed to have anticipated that the school would attract the Slasher were said to have come forearmed with a police whistle and a pepper-pot.

The main import of the Aspinall slashing was that it left neither police nor public in doubt that the culprit must be the same person who had attacked Mary Sutcliffe three nights previously. He now had a local label - the 'Halifax Slasher' - and, thanks to a description provided by the latest victim, his physical image was growing clearer: a 30-year-old male of about 5'9" in a fawn overcoat, clean shaven with "well-brushed hair inclined to ginger" and "a slight stoop". More invidiously, he possessed local knowledge ("no stranger could thread his way in semi-darkness around the rear of the School of Art or the maze of semi-private streets all round", warned the 'Courier') which in turn suggested that he must be a local man. This kind of criminal is far more disturbing to a community than a rank outsider or stranger. He knows the lie of the land, blends into it, cannot be isolated from it. He could be standing next to you in the chip shop, might work next to you... live next to you.

Along with this proto-panic came the awareness that the mystery assailant would surely strike again, escalating the number of bloodied hands and faces as well as neurotic uncertainties about who he might be and the overall sense of terror. Readers were still digesting the details of the Aspinall attack related by their copies of Friday's 'Courier' when newsmen from that paper were hastening to cover no less than four fresh and separate slashings which had occurred that night.

During the week Mrs Annie Cannon, 39, who worked alongside a relative of the unfortunate Mary Sutcliffe, had been heard to voice the hope that the Slasher "doesn't get me". Her words may have tempted Providence. At around 6.20pm she stepped out of the lavatory and prepared for the long walk down the passage leading from it to her Highroad Well home - an ill-lit alley-way with many shadowy places where a would-be assailant might conceal himself. As indeed one appeared to Mrs Cannon to have done, since a man

Mr Clayton Aspinall, a Sunday School caretaker, stands at the door where he was attacked on November 24. It was this incident which transformed the mystery–assailant from something between rumour and neurosis into a definite, almost tangible threat.

emerged as if from hiding behind the midden door to lay a transient but destructive blow across her left shoulder. "I was really startled," Mrs Cannon would relate afterwards, "...I was then pushed on the back of my neck and I fell, my head hitting the causeway. I heard the rustle as of a raincoat or parcel as the man ran away." Most likely it was her screaming that made him do so; the same alarm brought out the neighbours and Mrs Elizabeth Adamson at least was prepared to testify on oath that she spotted a figure flashing into the distance. Mrs Cannon herself hadn't seen anything – the blow to her neck had dislodged her spectacles.

The damage to the victim was relatively trivial – the left sleeve of her cardigan bore a jagged three–and–a–half inch hole, with the blouse sleeve beneath showing another, cleaner gash. Mrs Cannon had the impression that the instrument which caused these injuries had stuck momentarily and had been tugged free. The arm, observed Inspector Griffiths, had no sign of bruises, though Dr Tidd found small ones on her head consistent with her story of having fallen against the wall. In the light of what transpired several weeks later it is worth noticing that all who saw Mrs Cannon were agreed on one thing: her fright and distress were convincingly unfeigned.

A pedestrian could have covered the distance between Highroad Well and Ovenden quite comfortably in 30 minutes, which was when Alice McDonald, walking along a narrow cinder track from Rugby Terrace towards Grove Park, saw a man who seemed to be waving a white handkerchief. Like Mr Aspinall before her, she stepped aside to let the person pass – only to have him seize her left arm and slash at her throat. The fact that she had been

with collar turned up against the cold ...ved her; she didn't notice it had been cut until later, being too occupied at the time in trying to scratch the marauder's face with or without the help of her hat-pin (in which she was sure she had succeeded). At last her coat tore and Mrs McDonald fell to the ground shouting. The last thing she registered between the man fleeing and help arriving was that the mysterious attacker wore shoes with bright buckles.

Not long after this, but eight miles away in Elland, 38-year-old Percy Waddington was thinking of closing the Halifax Co-operative Industrial Society grocery store which he managed and going for a drink. Retracing his steps at 9.55pm along Elland Lane carrying fish and chips, he was attacked at the entrance of a passage leading to the rear of an adjacent row of houses: virtually outside his own shop. Mr Waddington emphasised to reporters that he had heard no warning footsteps: "I don't really know a great deal about it. I never heard a thing. I felt a cut across my hand, and, turning round, grabbed. I didn't know I had anything in my hand until I went to the house of some friends nearby." Mr Waddington was wearing his arm in a sling when he spoke to the press next day; a three-inch cut had severed an artery in his left hand. But at this price he'd secured two useful clues for the police. Responding quickly to the alarm, they had visited the scene of the attack to discover a pool of blood, and, close by it in a gutter, a Corrux razor blade. Then there was the 'thing' which Mr Waddington found in his hand when he reached the friend's house; his prompt action seemed to have led him to tear off a tab from the assailant's mackintosh. It was an encouraging start to an investigation which would tie up 112 officers for 2,069 hours at a cost of £180.7.6d to public funds.

To get from Elland to Halifax and a fourth victim in only fifteen minutes required a most mobile as well as dedicated atacker. Like the Elland store manager, Mr Lodge of Green Lane had opted to crown a visit to a pub by bringing home a fish supper for himself and his 35-year-old wife Hilda, who had been in poor health lately with 'nerves' and depression. Shortly before 10.00pm Lodge realised there was no vinegar in the house - anathema to fish and chips, of course - so she set out to buy a pennyworth from a nearby shop. Clutching a decanter, she took a route down a poorly-lit path. "I'm not too keen about going up there," she confessed later, "and I was singing to reassure myself... Just as I got to the corner an arm came round the wall-side and aimed a blow at me..."

Without waiting to see what was on the end of that arm (encased, she thought, in a grey sleeve) Mrs Lodge dropped the decanter and ran for the nearest house - that of her next-door neighbour Mr Whitaker, who found her crouched on the doorstep. Although she remained moaning and apparently semi-conscious for some time, washing revealed that the bloody cut on the side of her face and scratched forearm were less serious than they appeared at first. More potentially serious was the damage being done out on the street...

Sergeant Bland was one of three officers who paid Mrs Lodge a prompt visit, noting as he went into the Green Lane house a crowd of perhaps up to a hundred milling around. A sudden cry of, "They've got him" caused the police to hurry out again, just in time to save a certain Clifford George Edwards from a worse manhandling than he had already received from a hostile mob. When the officers managed to extricate him - an operation neither instant nor easy - Edwards explained that on hearing the hue and cry for the Slasher he'd left his wife in Pellon Lane to join in. At some point he found himself in advance of, or otherwise separated from, the main body of searchers and was investigating an outhouse when someone cried, "Here he is!" and pounced on him. Next moment Edwards was pinned in the centre of a huge crowd which blatantly didn't care for his protests that they had made a mistake. Police parried a rain of blows to effect the rescue; cries of, "Kill the b-----!" and "Break his b----- neck!" punctuated the melee. There is small doubt that in the absence of the police Mr Edwards would have suffered much worse. Even after Inspector Griffiths had told the mob that they had just missed murdering the wrong man, it was deemed advisable to give Edwards an escort out of the immediate vicinity.

"When will the mysterious assailant strike next?" demanded the 'Courier'. "That is the anxious question Halifax people are asking themselves." There was no disputing that he would - must - strike again. In a few short days the Slasher had established himself as an entity as solid as St John's Parish Church or the Town Hall. There were signs that the social life after dark was slowly being strangled: children were kept off the streets, solo walkers were uncommon, and fried fish shop proprietors saw more male customers than usual

women were said to be too scared to get the suppers in. At Elland the laundry roundsman had to identify himself before housewives would unlock the door to him.

The police were reassuring the nervous public that they had made unspecified (but sufficient) arrangements "to meet the situation and cope with the emergency." Some may have found the very admission of an emergency state the opposite of reassuring, but in any case the Yorkshire papers carried hints that for many folk the measures weren't enough. A sort of vigilante spirit was now growing. Its positive aspects included schemes to utilise the energies of "thousands...of willing amateur detectives"; Scouts and Rovers who wanted to help were invited to a meeting under District Commissioner Alderman P.N. Whitley, JP, on Sunday to discuss anti-Slasher measures. Meanwhile women were to be chaperoned to work and worship, while the Art School students were given some handy tips on self-defence. But there was a wilder, vengeful and unreasoning aspect of the civilian hunt for the Slasher. Clifford Edwards had learned all about it, and others were to do so as well.

Against this threat there was little of a more practical nature to be done. The Elland incident had provided police with two clues – a razor blade of the kind you could buy from any corner shop for a penny and a tab from a raincoat. Worse again: that particular attack, occurring as it had a considerable distance from the fourth in terms of geography, but only fifteen minutes in terms of time, implied that there must be at least two Slashers – "unless, of course, a car was used" – enabling the same man to hit Percy Waddington in Elland and then cover the ground between him and Hilda Lodge in Green Lane, Halifax. Musing on this last hypothesis, the 'Courier' of 26 November toyed with another: "It may...be proved that this wave of insidious attacks, reported also in Bradford and elsewhere, is imitative action."

Yet people seemed in no mood to believe in "imitative action". They wanted one concrete, comprehensible enemy. Pooling all the attack reports (including those of Watts and Geldhill at Ripponden Bank on 16 November, though omitting a few perhaps contradictory details) the 'Courier' now produced a word-portrait of that enemy, the man they chose to call "the Silent Slasher": 5'9", slight stoop; fawn raincoat, minus a tab on one sleeve; bare-headed, hair inclined to ginger, and wearing shoes with bright buckles.

■ The illustration shows crowds outside Halifax police station on the evening of 29 November 1938.

...DAILY COURIER AND GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER ... 1938.

3: Escalation

Saturday 26th November 1938
Tuesday 29th November 1938

Four attacks on the same night pushed the Halifax Slasher scare into a new and violent phase. This was to feature a mishmash of fresh reports from locations both familiar and alien to the scenario so far, rumours and false alarms blended with fact, constructive demonstrations of practicality at a time of trial and sheer outbursts of frenzy. These developments constitute a typical example of a process common to all flaps: the escalation characteristic.

A flap stems from a seminal eyewitness report of some anomalous event which is sufficiently striking or alarming to foster other reports of the same kind. The escalation of accounts fixes the outlines of the reported phenomenon in the audience's consciousness, generating an excitement-cum-hysteria which challenges the authorities' powers to restrain it; there is a sense that the community is becoming increasingly irrational. But the escalation may not be confined to only one community. Reports of similar-sounding events can appear from points near to or far away from the original area, inviting speculation as to whether whatever lies behind them has shifted camp, or whether they must be the work of more than one agent. In the long run, the geographical spread of reports works not in favour of the phenomenon's credibility, but against it; here, as we shall see, there were eventually too many reports from too many places for observers to believe in the existence of merely one Slasher or even a whole team of them. So, just when the phantasmal menace seems to be about to take society down into its yawning maw, it collapses into incredibility and is gone.

As just mentioned, the 'Courier' for 26 November remarked on "imitative action", taking as indicators reports of slashings outside of Halifax itself - "from Bradford and elsewhere". It was a logistical impossiblity to blame them all on a solitary Slasher. They could be the work of a small plague of razor-happy males acting in imitation of the Halifax demon and paying a kind of perverted homage to him. Alternatively, the reports were groundless rumours based solely on widespread awareness of the published Slasher reports - homage of a different but still perverted sort - as was demonstrated by a scare at Sowerby Bridge on the night of the Cannon/ McDonald/ Waddington/ Lodge attacks. The unlikely tale that a woman had seen a male figure creeping along the roof of the Lock Mill cotton-spinning factory near the centre of town had spread like wildfire, resulting in a traffic jam that blocked the main street; police investigated, found nothing, and dismissed the incident. Quite obviously, the spread of Slasher mania implied that mistaken reports and rumours were going to play an important role in the story, but for the moment no-one fully appreciated what that might mean.

With the Slasher cycle moving into its next stage,this geographical diversity and the doubts it created grew more marked. Confusing, episodic and disjointed as the narrative will become, it is a true reflection of the prevailing state of affairs as the Slasher's image reached beyond the boundaries of Halifax.

Let's concede again that patterns of evidence may be a conceit of the researcher; that grouping together a collection of generally-similar incidents across a certain area might prove delusively coherent rather than historically valid. Perhaps like the Huddersfield police at the time we should refuse to tie in with the Halifax Slasher the man who jumped upon Jack Townend of Royal's Head Farm, Longwood, at 6.15am on Saturday 28 November from a seven-foot wall, brandishing "a knife similar to the knives cobblers use." If he desired to emulate the Halifax Slasher, though, he was signally unsuccessful, landing only one blow that penetrated the target's coat and getting several in return before he "ran away like a boxer in perfect training." Aged about 33, a stiffly-built 5'8 - 5'9" with high cheekbones and two or three days' growth of beard, this man in a raincoat and dirty tweed

runs right out of the Slasher story – but not without warning readers that events will soon be taking them on an extensive cross-country ramble .

Back in Halifax that same Saturday, there was more than enough to occupy the attention. At 3.00pm a 15-year-old boy showed police a raincoat he'd found at Old Earth Rugby Union Football Club's ground at Elland, less than 50 feet from where Percy Waddington had been attacked. The left cuff tab was missing – proof enough that it had been worn by the man with whom the store manager had briefly tussled the preceding evening. Cheap and badly-worn it may have been, but the coat teemed with useful clues quite apart from its torn-off tab. It had been repaired with Dunlop tyre patches inside one pocket and on the inner lining near the back of the second button from the bottom; a number, T34/874, with the figure 3 beneath it and (possibly) scrawled initials, was also visible. Surely someone studying the 'Courier' s description and the accompanying photo – salesman? drycleaner? pawnbroker? – would be able to point the police towards the overcoat's owner.

At 7.30pm, while the area around the Old Earth RU club was still being probed for more clues, the Slasher himself took the form of a 30-year-old 5'7" male in dark cap and dark muffler to visit Aspinall Street in Halifax, where he cut the apron of baker and confectioner Leslie Nicholl. Mr Nicholl, 20, sustained no worse injuries and, he told the police, chased the man through a dark passage into Vickerman Street where the assailant jumped into a small, old-fashioned car with no rear light – perhaps an Austin Seven – and drove off up Hopwood Lane.

Some form of motor transport ostensibly clarified how the Slasher could get from the scene of one outrage to another so promptly but he scarcely needed to hurry in order to carry out his next job at Caddy Field, a little after 11.30pm. Mrs Margaret Reynolds had left home to look for her husband (who, ironically enough, was providing an escort for their near neighbour Mrs Stenson, who'd just called on them) when below Caddy Field Methodist Chapel at the junction of Trooper Lane and Swan Bank a man grabbed her upper arms near the shoulders. He seemed to be about to kiss her, but instead his hands brushed downward and Mrs Reynolds felt a sharp pain from a two-and-a-half inch wound that required three stitches. Her screams brought neighbours (and Mr Reynolds) to the spot immediately, but as usual police and volunteers found nothing and no-one. The victim affirmed that she would recognise the man again anywhere – not surprising, since he was superbly hideous with "a flat nose like a boxer and rotten teeth – almost black". Never had the Slasher appeared in such unappetising guise before.

So to Sunday when, far from respecting the sanctity of the Sabbath, the Slasher introduced himself to cork warehouse hand Beatrice Sorrell. Having parted close on 7.00pm from her much older sweetheart Michael Alphonsius Higgins – he was 46 to her 19 – she walked down Bedford Street North and was passing a dark yard when "I suddenly saw an arm come out...mackintoshed, and the hand seemed to be covered with a white handkerchief. I felt a sharp dig, and I said, "Oh, oh," – I was too terrified to scream properly." Miss Sorrell paused under a street lamp long enough to see that her arm was bleeding and then ran to the Fire Station for help. "Look what someone has done," she told Deputy Chief Officer Joseph Smith, displaying a cut in the left arm of her coat a little below the shoulder. The wounds were superficial – one cut and a scratch – and Smith noticed that the girl wasn't especially perturbed, distressed or out of breath. Much more agitated were the hundreds of people who materialised on the scene, some to help the police in a typically-futile sweep of the area. Miss Sorrell could offer no description to guide the hunters; she professed to have seen no more of her attacker than that arm and "very broad hand". But Mr Gallacher, caretaker of the Catholic Boys' Club on Bedford Street North, had been at the top of the steps about the time of the assault and said that a bare-headed man of c.5'10" had run past. The man had appeared to be wearing a mackintosh....

A few hours later, another lovers' farewell was being taken in Twine Lane on the Brearley-Mytholmroyd turnpike. Lily Woodhead, a Dodsworth (Barnsley) girl in domestic service with a Halifax family, had just kept one of her regular tri-weekly trysts with her fiancé, Frank Coupland, who doubled as a council carter and a labourer at William Lucas' Lower Ewood Farm, Mytholmroyd. At 10.10pm the girl was walking alone up the steep lane towards the bright sodium-electric lights on the main road where her bus would halt. About 20 yards from the end a hatless, raincoated man of 24 to 25 and 5' 7-8" sprang over the left side-wall, inflicted a stinging blow that knocked Miss Woodhead down, and disappeared into the darkness.

upset and screaming, she struggled to her feet and hurried in the direction of the Lucas Farm, into which she was conducted by the owner's son.

There are discrepancies in the reports of how bad Miss Woodhead's wounds were; some suggest that the four cuts on the right side of her neck and the seven or eight which she caught on the back of her right hand while trying to ward off the assault were better classed as scratches. But there was no disputing the seriousness of the police response. Having kept the farm's inhabitants up till 2.00am with their questions, they resumed the hunt at dawn and were said to be particularly interested in a mysterious car seen on the main road just before the attack which held perhaps three men and had an 'L' on the back. Again, the idea that the Slasher was a motorist had certain attractions, if only because it reconciled how one man could cover so much ground with so little time between strikes. Yet despite its having taken place only five miles from Halifax proper, the police were apparently inclined to divorce this latest incident from the others. Despite resembling them on the surface, it "presents some peculiar features," explained the 'Courier' for 28 November, "and police have expressed the opinion that it is unconnected with the other slashing cases."

Elsewhere outside the centre of Halifax that Sunday evening, 15-year-old Fred Baldwin had an adventure of a different but no less violent kind. As he pushed his bike down the hill to his home village of Copley, five or six men detached themselves from the Standard of Freedom Inn and demanded to know why he wasn't riding it. (Answer: the light wasn't working.) The group drew a few yards off, and one was heard to say, "See if you know him, Bill."

Bill – William Spencer, aged 25 – ought to have known the lad, since he lived just three blocks away from him. What happened next is probably understandable from the fact that the men had been drinking, but could also be taken in context of a subsequently-denied remark from Spencer that he'd welcome the £10 Slasher reward as a useful Christmas box. Seizing Fred by the back of the neck, he announced: "Yes, it's him," and began to punch the boy's face – whereupon the others joined in.

Several people came out of their houses armed with pokers. By the time there were 50 or so the squirmish had become general and Fred Baldwin – the least likely person in Halifax to be mistaken for the Slasher, one might feel – owed his rescue to the arrival of a woman who recognised him. With four or five police cars also arriving, Fred retrieved his cycle from the gutter and crept painfully home nursing a swollen eye plus other well-distributed bruises. Neither he nor Spencer had heard the last of the matter.

On Monday 28 November Halifax was still trying to take in the weekend's slash-action when news came that at 6.45am that very morning a woman had been attacked a mere five yards outside her front gate. Mrs Constance Wood had just left for her work as a weaver at Walsh & McCrae's mill when a bare-headed man in a raincoat dashed across the road – "Why the hurrying?" she was thinking to herself – and knocked her down. Like several others, Mrs Wood experienced a sharp pain in her left arm and (also like them) drew her husband and many neighbours with her shouts for help. Indoors, her cardigan and dress beneath were seen to have a slit of several inches, and there were two shallow cuts on her upper arm; "the shock of the attack", reported the 'Courier', "was worse than the actual injury." Outside several people were giving chase to one or more possible candidates for the crime; a few pursued a tall man in a grey pullover while young Mr Dennis from several doors away went after someone in

Mrs Constance Wood of Long Lover-lane was attacked early on the morning of 28 November as she left home for work. Locals pursued a tall man in a grey pullover.

Almost inevitably, the runner vanished.

"It is inconceivable that a man can live and sleep in a well-governed town like Halifax and no-one have any knowledge of him," declared a statement from the police headquarters that day. With the attack on Constance Wood bringing the total of Slasher victims to 11 – the press ignored police advice that the Mytholmroyd incident should be kept separate – it was no longer feasible to treat the mystery assailant as a vague, semi-supernatural being in the shape of "a bare-headed man wearing a raincoat, who conceals himself in the shadowed part of a street, makes a slashing attack, usually to the left side of victims – and disappears before the person has time to recover presence of mind." For the first time newspapers began to reflect an incredulous interest in the Slasher as a human being. "Who is Shielding the Terror Man?" asked the 'Courier', echoing police thinking. "It is considered that as the assailant must have a home or lodgings, his goings and comings must be known; some suspicious aspect must be impressed upon some householder, who is failing in a public duty by witholding help that would be valuable." Yet this only added to the fear; the Slasher was not merely among the people of Halifax, but had to be one of them.

The police couldn't fail to appreciate that they were not only up against a physical, elusive criminal who was "playing 'tip-cat' with a razor", but a shadow-monster created from people's neuroses concerning the Slasher. Pulled in different directions by the sheer number of individual incidents which had to be investigated, they seemed only fractionally closer to the quicksilver razor-man, if at all. They had the old Elland mackintosh and a small collection of discarded blades; a handful of suspects had been detained, questioned... but always released. West Riding officers were faring little better with the assault of the two Barkisland girls on the 16th. The discovery of a dirty raincoat in a little-used Ripponden hen-cote which initially seemed significant proved to be another dead end and on Saturday the police had drained a millpond in an unrewarded effort to locate the "hatchet" they believed had been used on Misses Watts and Gledhill. And all the time the public's fancied impressions of the Slasher were threatening to come between the investigators and the hard facts of the situation.

The official communiqué from Headquarters contained a rare attempt to convey how detectives regarded the Slasher's motivations. Reassured an anonymous spokesman: "The victims are not badly hurt. There is no doubt that the person or persons concerned are getting tremendous satisfaction from the publicity...It is not thought that this is a mental case. It is sheer devilment." And then, contrary to the dominant image of the Slasher, contrary even to the fact that from today an increased reward of £25 was claimable for information leading to the arrest of the assailant, this release concluded: "There is probably more than one person concerned – probably about three."

A trio of Halifax Slashers? Looking at the eleven incidents as they stood, it seemed a reasonable premise. The MO used in the attacks fell into three distinct types with the assailant delivering a frontal attack in passing (after some kind of a run-up approach) in seven cases, from the rear in two others or from hiding – the "arm around the wall" technique – in the last pairing. Some variations – the way the Slasher grappled with Mrs Reynolds, for instance, but knocked down Mrs Cannon – could have been due to circumstance, yet when considered against the geographical spread of the attacks and fluctuating descriptions (it is impossible to reconcile Mrs Reynold's man with a boxer's nose and bad teeth with any of the other depredators, to take an obvious point) the multiple-assailant theory looked quite indisputable. However, the current of public belief had fixed on one Slasher. Somehow it was easier – more tolerable – to picture a single monster than several.

That Sunday about 150 Scouts accepted Alderman Whitley's invitation to meet at the Heath Grammar School Troop's hut for discussion of how they might keep the streets safe from the Slasher. "The attacker, whoever he is," promised the Alderman, "will get a good towelling from any of our lads if they catch him." Towellings aside, the police were now welcoming civilian action so long as it stuck strictly to defensive patrols and didn't take on the roles of judge and executioner if the chance arose. But the social and economic life of Halifax was being constricted. Three cinemas specially opened that Sunday night in aid of the Save the Children Fund couldn't blame disappointing attendances entirely on bad weather; churches noticed a drop in congregations, especially the female parts, and shopkeepers said that the evening trade was down. Personal freedom suffered as folk heeded police warnings not to go out alone, to keep clear of dark streets and to be especially

at corners and junctions. Some even took to walking in the road instead of on the pavement.

In fact it was inadvisable to walk alone for a quite different reason: you might not meet the Slasher, but there was a fair chance you might be mistaken for him. Public reaction was threatening to get out of control. There were perilous rumours, wild stories which could inflame the passion for reprisals on the slightest excuse. A 'Yorkshire Evening Post' journalist heard how somebody who happened to be in the neighbourhood of Miss Sorrell's home just after her attack narrowly missed being mistaken for the Slasher under police escort simply because he happened to arrive by taxi – which, in the heightened perceptions of the bystanders, looked like a police car. Having negotiated that problem, he made his way up an alley to locate the Sorrell home, only to run into worse danger: "a never-to-be-forgotten sight. Men with torches were falling over each other in their anxiety to be the first to lay hands on the Slasher". When the investigator tried to ask out the address at corner-house, its female occupant brandished a knife with a foot-long blade until the startled man finally managed to disabuse her of the idea that he was the mysterious terror of the night.

The Copley affair of young Fred Baldwin and Bill Spencer indicated that a person need not be remotely close to the published descriptions of the Slasher to be in trouble. Besides creating a climate in which any local spleen, unrest or malice could be vented freely, overreaction to the danger showed that people had become aware of their vulnerability. The 'Yorkshire Evening Post' for 28 November went in search of the latest victim, Mrs Wood, and in doing so captured the strange atmosphere of terror that hovered around Long Lover Lane, Pellon, where she lived. It was a long, broad and not too well illuminated street with new Corporation houses set back on one side and a mill, side-streets, passages and alley-ways on the other. Residents claimed that they had been expecting a Slasher attack here for several days before it happened, partly because the terrain was (said one) "such an ideal ground for the man's purpose", but moreover due to odd sightings of peeping toms and figures loitering in the dark.

Plainly, householders on Long Lover Lane were looking at the part of Halifax they called home in a new, disturbed way whereby the casual behaviour of possibly-innocent strangers took on menacing significance. Yet if the rumours gleaned by the 'Post' had any foundation, people may have had reason to worry. Some spoke of a tall young man in the now-obligatory pale raincoat who had been seen over the past few nights lurking in the shadow of the mill and alley mouths or peeping into lighted windows and – more relevant still – standing opposite Mrs Wood's house. Once at around 11pm when her husband was out Mrs Brooks from two or three doors down saw the man (not in a raincoat this time) "standing for no apparent reason" in her gateway; she ran up to the children's bedroom and as she crept downstairs a little later she heard the door being tried.

The reporter suggested that the mystery-figure might be a policeman carrying out security checks, but this did not satisfy Mr James Dennis, the Woods' neighbour whom we last heard of chasing a character in pumps. The police (evidently anticipating an attack too?) had been here by the dozen the night before the Wood assault, affirmed Mr Dennis, and they were seen to move the man along – which seems rather unsuspicious of them in the fraught circumstances unless they had reason to know that he was not a suspect. "I believe the man knows the district well," continued Mr Dennis of the Slasher, "and that is why he vanishes with such promptitude among the alleys and side streets." Then, contradicting the tacit belief that the culprit would assuredly bear physical indications of depravity such as a werewolvish countenance and manically-glittering eyes: "I believe, too, he will be found to be a man, who, apart from this abnormality, is apparently normal – at least to all appearances. I think this because it seems to me that the attacks are carefully premeditated and planned, with a view to carrying them out quickly and taking advantage of every opportunity for a quick getaway."

The catalogue of suspicions and conjectures continued. Mrs Wood recalled how, shortly after coming home at 5.20pm on Wednesday, she had answered the door to a man who asked if she had any old garments; she was frightened and banged it shut in his face. Nothing odd about that, except that she had seen no barrow or any of the traditional hawkers' gear with him and he didn't seem to have called at any of the other houses. When 13 year-old Donald Gibb from next door – he had gone out on his paper round minutes after the attack and must have walked within yards of where Mrs Wood lay in the dark – mentioned having spied a man in a light tan raincoat walking and smoking by Thrum Hall

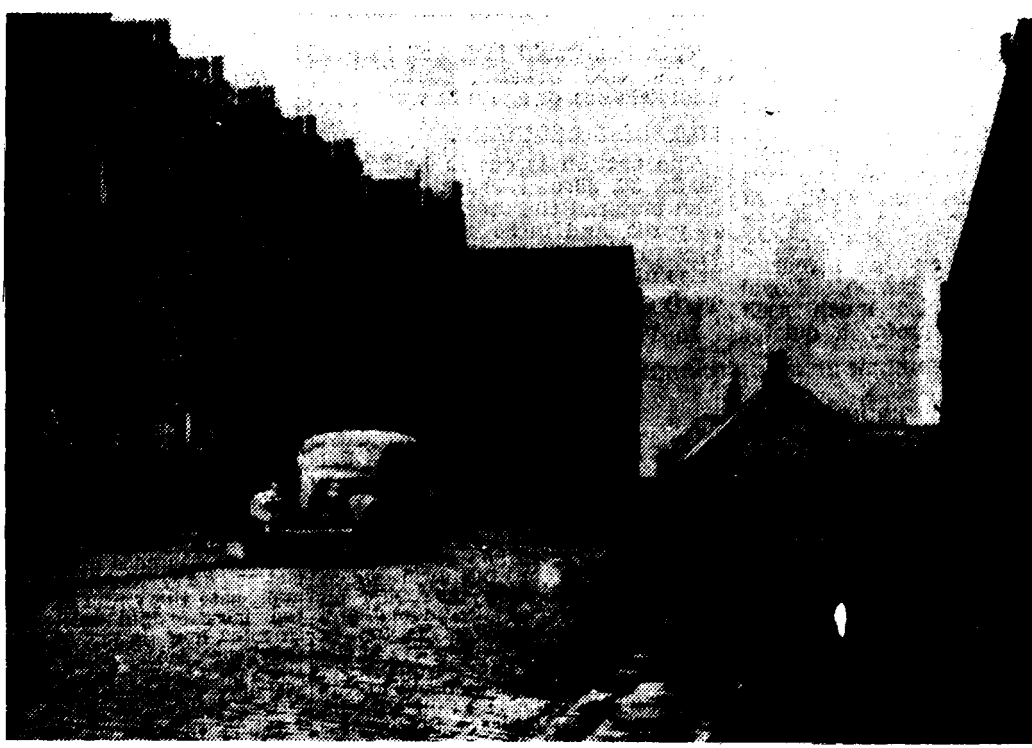
ground, the victim felt sure he had seen her assailant.

The Slasher had polarised all the night—fears that could haunt a place like Pellon. He was seemingly more malevolent with each passing day — no longer a random kind of personality, but a calculating spirit of the darkness, bold enough and confident enough to risk what would happen if he fell into the hands of the police... or of the locals. He had intimate topographical knowledge as well as split—second timing. Was he a man with a plan?

Next day — Tuesday 29 November — it seemed horribly likely. Another tantalizing quality of the Slasher was that you had hardly finished reading of his most recent exploits in the evening edition of the paper when he was out and about adding to them. Within a period of less than 36 hours following the Wood attack, the Slasher had logged two or three more victims. The quibble over the number arises from the fine distinction as to whether the first of the trio can be counted because she was not a fresh victim: Mary Sutcliffe, with whom he had opened his terror—campaign in Halifax, had been slashed a second time.

Shock as much as her still—unhealed wrist had kept Miss Sutcliffe off work ever since the razor assault on her eight days ago. At 4.55pm that Monday afternoon she was literally on the doorstep of her Allerton Lane home when the assailant struck again, presumably from a dark pocket created by the fact that the next house was unlit; her mother had just seen her as far as the door and had barely turned away when she heard a thud and a scream. Mary was lying in the yard, her chest slightly lacerated from a clean cut that penetrated her clothing. Several people further along on the opposite side heard her cry and some reported that a light—coloured motor—van had driven the full length of the street moments afterwards — either coincidence or more proof that the Slasher had transport.

Police were on the scene in five minutes and were able to add to their growing store of discarded razor blades. (The Slasher didn't stick



Mary Sutcliffe's Allerton—street home the morning after she was slashed for a second time.

According to her father, "there is no question that these attacks have been carried out as the result of a grudge or private grievance."

ourite brand, evidently: he had dropped blades at Elland and in Twine Lane, Mytholmroyd, but deposited a rusty-on-one-side 'Mick Lee' after the Sorrell encounter.) With this latest outrage against a woman who had already suffered, public resentment reached new heights. Hitherto the Slasher had seemed an opportunist who preyed on any likely target. Now he appeared to have some kind of fiendish scheme directed against certain carefully-selected victims. "This time there is every evidence that Miss Sutcliffe was singled out," said the 'Courier', "and that the attack was carefully planned." Albert Sutcliffe, her father, was inclined to agree. In a much-later interview with the 'Yorkshire Observer' (6 December) he said there was "no question in our minds that these attacks have been carried out as the result of a grudge or private grievance," - though what that might entail he couldn't say for certain. Perhaps, he added, the second slashing was because the man believed that Mary could identify him; a theory which several papers were to repeat at various times. Without necessarily arguing with that idea, the 'Sheffield Star' caught the rumourised hint that the Slasher, armed with a rota of victims' names and addresses, planned to hit each of them twice and that police were allegedly guarding their houses at night.

The next attack came at 7.20pm. Mrs Margaret Kenny was positive of the time because, having just descended the steep flight of steps in Crib Lane and glanced at the clock in the window of the Dean Clough Mill, she was only half a dozen paces into the return trip when a man grabbed her from behind with a crushing grasp on her left arm. The 40 year-old at once felt a sharp pain in her opposite arm as he inflicted several cuts a little below the elbow and she turned to grapple with the assailant. Mrs Kenny described herself as "a fairly strong woman - I have heavy work to do", and she clung on determinedly, not daring to scream lest she scare him off. She possessed confidence enough to believe she could hold the attacker until someone came along. Unluckily, no-one did.

It was too dark for Mrs Kenny to get a clear idea of the Slasher. All she gathered was that he seemed a well-built man with a broad face and wearing "very lightweight shoes"; his coat felt to the touch like a mackintosh and "a rather dirty one as well". After what seemed to her like two or three minutes Mrs Kenny gave up hope of assistance and screamed; the man released her immediately and ran off towards the centre of town. One of the first

Mrs Margaret Kenny, 40, of Back Crib-lane. She described herself as "a fairly strong woman - I have heavy work to do," and attempted to grapple with the Slasher.

on the scene was Mr Martin Egan. The Slasher - soft-footed as always - had apparently left his pumps at home, since Mr Egan had the impression that the man he saw running away was either wearing socks over his shoes or no shoes at all. This did not impede his flight, however, and he was said to have left several pursuers behind - even some amateur footballers who joined the chase could get nowhere near him.

On Tuesday 29 November at 6.45pm the police received a visit from Winifred McCall, a

-old spinner who claimed she had been slashed near Union Square Church as she left work. Miss McCall was expecting to meet her stepfather who'd taken to escorting her home during the Slasher scare when from out of the darkness came a hand in a brown glove and something sharp raked her forehead, leaving a few parallel scratches from one temple to another. The damage was minimal; the girl merely registered it with an expression of, "Oh!" and walked on. As she did so, a man in raincoat and brown leather gloves came out of a gateway and wished her goodnight, speaking with a notable Yorkshire accent. Predictably, he was gone when Miss McCall and her stepfather returned shortly afterwards to look for him.

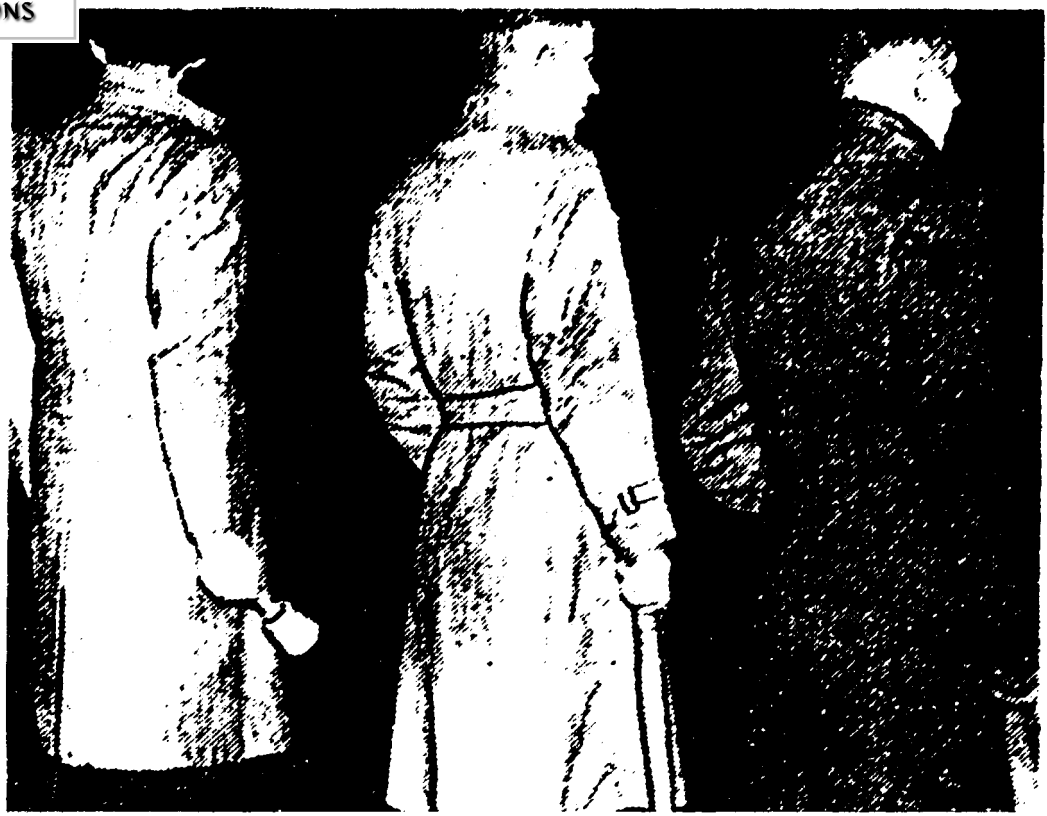
"Halifax has certainly never had such a man hunt in its history," wrote the 'Courier' that day with no fear of contradiction, "and the hunt generally is probably unparalleled since the days of the Jack the Ripper scare in London..." Comparison with that gorily-celebrated mystery assailant set the Slasher at the height of his fame: he was about to become folklore. The concise pen-pictures created of him by previous descriptions wavered before an impulse to regard him as a protean monster, an evil genius, a fiend in human form that kept shifting. The police's latest description was a desperate attempt to incorporate as many features from eye-witness accounts as possible. The man was now supposed to be 25-30, of medium build, 5'10-11" in height, clean-shaven with a broad face and rather prominent eyes and he wore a military raincoat (possibly dirty) with the collar up, a dark soft hat, dark grey suit and perhaps dark rubber shoes. Zigzagging from one report to another, omitting some details which didn't really accommodate themselves - for example, what became of the stress on his "inclined to gingerish" hair or the shiny buckles on his shoes? - the result was the opposite of what was intended. Far from refining the image of the Slasher, the new composite description tended to distort it.

The psychological profiling was even more confused and confusing. One paper conceived the Slasher as "a 'gone mad' film fan of low mentality," a "dual personality" and someone "who may be well connected" or "a twisted mind personality out to revenge himself on society for some 'bee in the bonnet' reason." Such quasi-theories were advanced with a tentativeness which spilled over into choice of phraseology, as if the writer wasn't entirely sure of what he or she was writing about. And perhaps he or she knew that readers would in any case find the psychology of the Slasher too weird to make any sense in practical terms; it was simpler to regard him as a criminal lunatic and therefore beyond the need for understanding.

Given the quality of explanation trotted out by experts unleashed in some national papers - it was essential that readers be allowed the benefit of pundits' wisdom, of course - the ambiguity wasn't too surprising. 'A Psychologist' informed patrons of the 'News Chronicle' for 1 December that the key to the epidemic-spread of these crimes lay in imitation. Though the results of imitation of a leader-figure could be positive (Christ) or negative (Fascist) it was an infantile trait, as indeed was the desire to slash. Once a person found he wasn't alone in that forbidden whim, he would feel it to be sanctioned by the fact that others experienced and acted upon it. He also gloried in publicity. Crime-waves like face-slashing or vitriol-throwing "are as 'unreasonable' as the popularity of crinolines or pyjamas - and are as dependent on the force of example." But since the force of public opinion was against these perverted acts (the Psychologist presumably meant slashing rather than wearing pyjamas) only the "seriously ill" will react to publicity, "like a disease germ to a chronically susceptible invalid".

Whether you understood all this or not, it was common knowledge that people did the strangest things. For instance, "the police have in mind the possibility of neurotic or hysterical women wounding themselves in order to attract attention," mused the 'Yorkshire Evening Post'. "It is not considered, however, that this has happened in any case so far reported."

As the 'Post' appreciated, the Slasher had acquired the status of a bogeyman. The latest folk-belief endowed him with exceptional power and vigour which, the writer conceded, was partly borne out by the fact that the bruises he caused on Margaret Kenny's left arm were more serious than the actual cuts he inflicted on her right. The problem facing anyone who wanted to dispel this neo-supernatural image and focus on the man behind it was, as always, that the Slasher operated under conditions which favoured preservation of his anonymity. Quite simply, it was all too easy for him to escape. "The old buildings of the long-established industrial town are riddled with ginnels and by-ways through which he can appear and disappear," wrote a 'Yorkshire Evening Post' reporter. "The cover



Vigilantes armed with home-made weapons on patrol, 29 November. "Halifax has certainly never seen such a man-hunt in its history," wrote the 'Daily Courier' that day with no fear of contradiction.

and opportunities at his disposal seem almost inexhaustible. 'I will guarantee,' said a man who had lived all his life in Halifax, 'that I could go down into the Crib Lane district, where one woman was attacked, and break a window and vanish without a soul seeing me come or go. I could bury myself in a moment.'" Conditions and observations of this kind were an overt criticism of the borough council, of course; super-criminals like the ultra-elusive Slasher are frequently seen as a bad reflection on those whose neglect of duty appears to make their success possible. In the same way Jack the Ripper was hailed by certain radicals of his day as a condemnation of the state into which Whitechapel had been allowed to fall and a fine publicity-agent who, in George Bernard Shaw's words, "has been so successful in calling attention to the social question."

The Slasher's influence was still more obvious from the behaviour of the people. "Halifax is a town of nerves," continued the 'Post', drawing a scene of streets deserted at night and women thrown into near-panic by the cries of a dog that had been run over. Evenings round the wireless had never been more popular. Two Rover Scouts patrolling the Upper Calder Valley in the proximity of the Mytholmroyd attack reported going a full mile without seeing a soul; the first persons they met were two other patrolling Rover Scouts. One 1,500 seater cinema was said to be getting only 200 for each performance and naturally the Slasher was blamed for the fall-off in female attendance at evening classes and for cancelled hairdressers' appointments. Once-popular fried fish shops were feeling the pinch, if the reduced orders experienced by Hull merchants were to be believed. "You would be surprised if you knew the difference this scare at Halifax is making to the fish-buyers," confided one Hull wholesaler, "...the takings of one fish fryer have dropped

r night."

When folk ventured forth, they often went armed. Girls carried pokers wrapped in newspapers or short wooden staves that boded ill for liberty-takers, while ready-to-hand martial objects like truncheons, Indian clubs, hammers, hosepipes filled with lead shot and the like were also on open display; even workmen were carrying lengths of piping. (Also dating from this time is a 'Courier' photo of a female member of the Holmfield Musical Society - then engaged in a production of 'Puss in Boots' - showing off a weight on a length of cord "which she carried in case of attack on her way home." The picture is captioned "She went prepared".) Practically the only bright spot on retailers' horizons was the sudden demand for whistles and walking-sticks; knuckle-dusters and 'coshers' (heavy wooden clubs weighted with lead) had sold out completely.

The Slasher had never yet struck a child, but the schools fell in with the pattern of escorting pupils home in batches and once again fear was blamed when only 100 recipients - half the eligible number - attended to collect their certificates at the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music prize-giving in Marlborough Hall. Chaperoning of women had become a standard feature of Halifax night-life; organisers of a dance at King Cross necessarily stressed that a special bus and private cars had been requisitioned to ferry the girls home afterwards. (West Riding police at Mytholmroyd were less fortunate. Their annual whist drive and dance had to be postponed due to public unease after the Woodhead attack.) There was concern and an appeal for extra security over the protection of voters at the Thursday by-elections in Pellon, East and Kingston wards where it seemed likely that the polls would be affected and a freak result returned. One political agent said that door-to-door canvassing had ground to a halt. People were either too scared to answer when the canvassers knocked or flew into a temper when they found out what the callers had roused them for; "we are finding it more dangerous to our interests to canvass than not to canvass," he admitted. A poor turn-out seemed inevitable, especially as at one Monday night election meeting those present were confined to the guest speakers, the candidate and his agent.

The 'Sheffield Star' flourished the incredible statistic that all of 20,000 men - more than a fifth of Halifax's total population if true - had enrolled in vigilance societies. The rush of volunteers enabled police to organize patrols "in likely areas all over town"; car owners placed vehicles at their disposal and the British Legion was now mobilised - all very necessary, since "the difficulties of watching the thousand and one streets will be apprehended". It wasn't correct, however, that soldiers from the Duke of Wellington's Regiment depoted in Halifax were officially involved, for - as their acting OC Major Kington pointed out - the Slasher would surely avoid tackling men in uniform. On the other hand a few had been escorting women on the long road past the barracks and the Major confessed to having indulged in a spot of Slasher-hunting himself, using his wife as a decoy. (In fairness, she was armed with a golf club just the same as her husband.) Perhaps mercifully for one or both, they met nothing unusual.

This was the extraordinary pass that Halifax had been brought to in under a fortnight - and by a single man or maybe (as police thought) three men. And the panic was still spreading outwards.

At this time Wigan police were investigating the complaint of 18 year-old Winifred Walsh, "a pretty brunette" who had been attacked in her own Platt Bridge backyard and received a 9-inch cut on her left arm. "I was walking down the backyard in the thick darkness," she recalled for a reporter, "when I was grabbed by a man. I struggled and screamed. He flung me to the ground and thumped me in the back. I heard the man say, "If I do not finish you now I will finish you some other time." I was terrified and kept on screaming. Then I felt a sharp pain in my left arm. My father and brother came rushing out of the house but the man got away. I fainted."

Apart from the geographical problem in attributing this attack to the Halifax Slasher, Miss Walsh intimated that her assailant was no random caller. For the past six months she'd been pestered by an unknown man and anonymous letters; she had also been under police protection. Nonetheless, the way in which the Platt Bridge case was reported in tandem with recent Halifax developments suggested that the Slasher's baleful influence was escalating - as did the 'Sheffield Star's 29 November mention of a similar report from Stavely and two others from Doncaster (despite the fact that only the day before the paper had explained that these were instances of molestation rather than slashing.)

More substantial in its insubstantiality was the wave of terror that engulfed Wincobank, Sheffield, where a "parrot-nosed man" was said

e attacked several women and nearly one of them. Mrs Wright of Hyacinth Close answered the door to see an unsavory 5'4" man with an unusual hooked nose and little pride in his appearance – he wore an old trilby, a mud-splattered raincoat, grey trousers and either a beard or several days' growth – who mumbled something about tea. Mrs Wright turned from this apparition to the stove and next instant felt something hit her in the eye, from which eight pieces of grit had to be removed long after her screams drove the man off. A local butcher alleged that certain other girls had been attacked by this hardly inconspicuous assailant, including Lillian Crapper who believed he was the person who ran out of the shadows and hit her. The Wincobank scare sounds very reminiscent of the one reported from Bradford in the early days of the Slasher panic. Arguably things had not completely calmed down in that area, for on the 29th an unsuspecting Bradford resident opened his door to have a 15 year-old boy rush in, coat sleeve torn and left temple bleeding. He blurted out a story about having been slashed – he'd dropped the parcel he was carrying, said the brave youngster, and hit the man with a brick.

Newspaper readers across Britain must have felt they were under siege from a multitude of lunatics whose scrambled minds, satisfied by acts of stray violence, hadn't even the intelligible motives of rape or robbery to excuse them. Latest reports said that two 14 year-old girls had joined the list of non-Halifaxian Slasher victims. Marjorie Murphy had been scored in a street near her home in City Road, Old Trafford, Manchester by a well-built, 5'6" man in a dirty overcoat; she was on her way to the laundry when he pounced, twisting her arm behind her back and scratching a cross-like formation on it. Ivy Smithson of Brentford received 12 long cuts to her arm "similar", in the opinion of the 'News Chronicle' reporter, "to those that might have been made by a horse comb." A 25-30 year-old male in raincoat and dark cap had pushed into her at the corner of the alley behind Mercury Road. "I said, 'Sorry', and then felt a cut at my coat and felt a sharp pain. I screamed and the man placed his hand over my mouth. After that I did not have time to scream again because he was gone. I staggered to the corner..."

Curiously, I have been able to trace only one other published record to suggest that the Slasher's itinerary took in London and it isn't an especially solid-sounding case. On 1 December a 74 year-old woman rushed into a chemist's on Uxbridge Road, Shepherd's Bush, saying that a passing man had scratched her hand; she was taken home for treatment and no more is heard from her. Banal as this account may sound, it is fine evidence of how widely distributed the Slasher image was and how it conditioned people's behaviour. More drastic by far was the report which followed hard on the heels of the Manchester and Brentford incidents. At midnight on the 29th Hilda Sharrock (18) was found bound and gagged on the doorstep of her Rufford, Ormskirk, home. Badly bruised about the face, she was last reported spending a delirious night in hospital. What was wrong with the world?

The Slasher – the Slashers? – had grown daring to the point of defiance. He/they now took victims on their very doorsteps or in their back yards, only feet away from avenging males and yet with utter impunity. Some cases – the second Sutcliffe attack, the Wigan slashing – implied that the criminal had a personal interest in chosen targets. Nor were they necessarily silent slashers now. Miss Walsh's attacker had delivered a Hollywood-style promise to finish her off later and Mary Sutcliffe's second-time-around assailant had spoken a few words, too, though she couldn't recall what they were. And there was absolutely no sign that the Slasher would let up or be caught. Few people at this juncture would have believed that the terror was almost at an end.

The two most important developments of the day occurred in the heart of the Slasher's kingdom. That afternoon at the request of Chief Constable A.H. Richardson, who already had men from Bradford, Huddersfield and the West Riding forces helping his beleaguered and sleep-deprived men, two Scotland Yard detectives arrived in Halifax. And at 9.15pm a young man named Oliver identified the raincoat found at Elland in connection with the Waddington incident. Oliver was a former errand-boy at the Co-operative stores managed by Waddington and recalled how a year before leaving that job he'd been asked to put two Dunlop patches in a coat. Naturally, he also recalled to whom the coat belonged.

At 11.55pm Elland officers paid a call on the man who had provided the crucial clue of the cuff-tab torn from the Slasher's raincoat. Shortly afterwards and with little prompting Percy Waddington confessed that despite the severed artery and three-stitch wound on his hand, the report he had made about having been slashed was false.

...MAIL COURIER AND GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER ... 1938.

4: Cool-down

Wednesday 30th November 1938
Thursday 1st December 1938

Purely as a public relations tactic and besides any operational value, the enlistment of Scotland Yard's help was of immense psychological advantage. 'The Yard' had a talismanic ring about it and a reputation as a centre for superior detectional experience which infallibly got results – a reputation, incidentally, which was still credited as late as the 1970s when certain sections of the press asked why the Yard had not been invited to take control of the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper. (Senior Yorkshire police officers are said to have challenged the logic of that idea by pointing out that the Londoners still hadn't caught their own Ripper – Jack of Whitechapel fame – yet.)

The very presence of Detective Chief Inspector William Salisbury and Sergeant Harry Studdard implied that the Slasher was about to meet his match.It was doubly reassuring to find the Yard sending a 'high flier' like Salisbury. His practical credentials could hardly have been better: he was the 'Terror of the North London toughs', said the 'Yorkshire Observer', and the man who had smashed the London razor gangs. At the age of 43 and (according to the 'Courier') "famed for his extensive acquaintance with the peculiar methods employed by certain types of criminals", his rise had been comparatively rapid. Only five weeks before he had been promoted to Chief Inspector, thus capping an 18 1/2-year career which had included duty as Divisional D.I. at City Road, Islington and with the Flying Squad. The 'Yorkshire Evening Post' interpreted Salisbury's visit to the North as "a drive against hooligans and violent criminals of all types", of whom the Halifax Slasher was emblematic – and, of course, the most topically problematical.

Shortly after their arrival the Yard men settled down to scrutinise some 400 Slasher reports (later amended or reduced to half that number). They examined victims' clothing, the incident scenes and some of the victims themselves. On Tuesday night they re-interviewed Mary Sutcliffe. The 'Courier' explained that the second attack on her had been "provoked by a fear that she, more than the other victims, had furnished facts helpful towards identification", but unfortunately didn't support that statement with details about what those vital facts might be. There was an air of progress; it was as if nothing had been done up to now, an impression that was wholly false. But few realised for how little time the two Yard men would be detained by the Halifax Slasher.

On the face of things, Slashermania was as rampant as ever. From Villiers Street, some 300 yards from where Mary Sutcliffe lived and was attacked that second time, came a report that Nellie Widdop had been assaulted "by a dark figure" at 6.20pm as she went along the backyard to empty a pail. Mrs Widdop spoke of feeling a sharp pain in her left arm and of an impression concerning "something black" that reached down from the lavatory roof, seizing her wrist and cutting it, but apart from the allegation that she had fallen down the steps to the grate and had arm abrasions – the 'Yorkshire Observer' said her bandages showed bloodstains – events were unclear. The Yard men joined local officers at the scene and later dissociated the incident from the Slasher investigation with a briskness that was rather significant.

The town was still saturated with patrols. One journalist said there were more patrols afoot than normal pedestrians while each phone kiosk had its overseer, a parked car nearby to rush him to the spot should the alarm be raised. About 30 Auxiliary Fire Brigade volunteers had been sworn in as special constables, taking the total to 80 overall – they were cautioned "to be sure that a man had really done something before they tackled him" – and 150 King Cross British Legionaires had been allocated a patrol area for Wednesday night. Meanwhile 'Courier' readers were forwarding their own suggestions, ranging from the proposal that for the duration of the scare, street lights should stay lit from evening to early morn, to recommendations that women

Detective Chief Inspector William Salisbury of Scotland Yard (centre), 'The Terror of the North London Toughs', arrives in Halifax to confront the press.

carried bottles of red ink or thinned-down white paint to throw over the Slasher.

Hundreds besieged the police station – some in the hope of a new announcement, others merely to swap Slasher gossip or to watch the comings and goings of the police, most curiosity being lavished on the exotic visitors from Scotland Yard. Developments seemed imminent, even when Salisbury scotched the story that a married woman had supplied information likely to lead to an arrest. The word as relayed by the 'Yorkshire Evening Post' was that the police expected their man to strike again soon, perhaps in the residential beshrubbed cover of the Skircoats district. "The police reason for believing that the slasher has not finished his work is based on a psychological view of the case," the writer expounded. '"This man is not out to maim or kill," said a police official, "but to terrorise, and he extracts a vicious pleasure from doing so. It is very much on the cards that this impulse will lead him to strike again. Another motive which may govern him is vanity. His success so far may delude him into the belief that he cannot be caught and he may be unable to resist indulging once again his vicious impulse. It may be that the vanity which helps to actuate him will prove his downfall."'

The disturbing logic of such speculations fired more alarms and diversions as the vigilantes set about chasing shadows or each other. There was a report of two women attacked at Shelf – a case of mischievous entry of an empty house, replied West Riding police – and of a man chased in the Boulevards before being eliminated as a Slasher. The public was urged to use discretion, but 'lurking men' stories like one from Long Lover Lane (scene of the Wood attack) proliferated and tied up the police further; in each case the witness swore that the suspect fitted the Slasher's description in that he wore a mack with collar turned up and "probably... rubber pumps". The most alarming reports dissolved into "sheer gossip and imaginary adventures", as in the episode of a 16 year-old Hebden Bridge youth who was transfixed at the sight of a man stepping unexpectedly from a side street. The lurker was equally transfixed at the sight of the lad: "I'll kill thee if tha comes near me!" he threatened. When police descended on the area, the 'culprit' (who presumably believed he was the one being menaced by the Slasher) turned out to be an old and respected resident of Hebden Bridge "whose fighting and running days had passed their prime more than half a century ago".

The next night – a night of atrocious weather when people unthinkingly mimicked the descriptions of the Slasher by going about in

oshes with collars up – brought repeat performances. On reaching work at Waterside that 9pm a man discovered two slight cuts in his raincoat; he couldn't remember having been approached nor attacked, but thought he'd better notify the police anyhow. Half an hour later a volunteer watcher ("who said that, as husband and father, he was going to do all he could") chased a suspicious character over a wall and into Stead Street without catching him; 30 minutes or so onwards after a nervous boy claimed that he'd been clutched on the shoulder, a Hume Street patrol similarly failed to make anything of "a man up to no good... lurking in the shadows." The West End and Spring Hall Lane districts furnished tales even less well-founded. The most stirring encounter, though, took place in the Gibbet Street area in the heart of 'Slasherland' where a 36 year-old cripple named Jimmy Fawcett averred that around 10pm he'd been menaced by a man in a dark coat and trilby who came at him "grimacing and grinning". Mr Fawcett screamed and helpers materialised – only for one to be mistaken for the Slasher and pursued by a patrol that happened along moments afterwards.

Next day Sheffield, which for some reason appears to have been oddly susceptible to the panic, was the location for perhaps the most distasteful incident in the whole Slasher scare. Boys in a primary school playground took to playing at being slashers and inflicted some minor cuts on the girls before order was restored. The headmistress confiscated no less than 20 blades; the 'game' had patently been planned long in advance and was inspired by the inescapable Slasher talk on all sides. Although the Chief Education Officer, Mr Newton, would later protest that the press had magnified the incident – only one boy had taken the blades to school – the fact that he apparently found five-to-eight year-old chums to distribute them amongst was serious in itself. No further comment on the pernicious influence of the Halifax mystery-figure seems necessary.

And still from near and far off came the reports. On the 30th November Constance Lamb, 22, claimed to have fallen victim at Four Lane Ends, Giggleswick. Returning from delivering milk at about 4.30pm, she saw a dark saloon halted on a lonely part of the road. The driver, a middle-aged man in light-coloured clothes, was sitting with one nonchalant foot on the running board and beckoned her over as if he were lost. Mrs Lamb dismounted from her cycle and went across all unsuspectingly. At once an arm shot out and struck her three or four times, piercing the right sleeves of the two coats she was wearing and she fell on top of her machine to the accompanying sound of breaking milk bottles. The car drove away towards Settle and beyond saying that it was in good condition with its back plates obscured by mud Mrs Lamb could provide no information about it.

The day before at Boulder's Bridge, Carlton near Barnsley, a 15 year-old labourer who'd been boasting what he would do if he met a Slasher was allegedly left with a gash that went through the left arms of his raincoat, jacket and shirt to graze the skin. In a back-court of Glasgow's Shettleston district a man bumped into Mrs Mary Murphy, stooped and cut her leg; the sleeve of "tall, good-looking" Muriel MacLellan (19) was left in ribbons after someone inflicted four cross-like cuts on her outside her aunt's home at Lion's Fold, Sale, in Cheshire. One of the last publicised incidents featured 19 year-old Monica Abbott, an unemployed Blackburn weaver. Her grandfather heard her go into the yard and scream; next thing she was indoors showing an arm bloodied by a man who'd been waiting there to attack her, uttering a promise that "I will get you again." Maybe the Slasher wasn't intimidated by the London detectives after all.

Yet despite everything, at the centre of the panic a marked cooling-down process was evident – so much so that the 'Courier' for 30 November commented upon "the curious fact that since the decision was taken to call in Scotland Yard, the slasher has shown no sign of activity... Has the 'slasher' taken alarm?" Voting had taken place (under guard) and even if the poll was lower than usual – Kingston down 11% to 54% of the electorate, Pellon down only 3% to 55% – at least there had been some turn-out. There was even a move to challenge the popular assumption that the Slasher had brought the town to an economic standstill; in contrast to the grocer who told the 'Post' that the scare had left him £50 out of pocket, one centrally-situated trader said he had noticed no appreciable difference. The 'Courier's 1 December headline said it all: "No slashing attacks in Halifax and district yesterday."

The changing mood was orchestrated by a fresh police initiative. Chief Constable Richardson reassured the public by simultaneously reproving the rumour-habit, emphasizing that not all the reported incidents were related to the Slasher (he wouldn't stipulate how many may have been genuine)

they could help further "by keeping [illegible] realising that all they had learned about the slasher's activities was not necessarily accurate." (In Manchester the Old Trafford police had gone in harder, stating that false reports were indictable offences.) In fact the Slasher scare was deflating like a bladder with a slow puncture. It was unable to sustain the pressure caused by the excitement it had generated and, as the senior police officers were well aware, the cases that went to comprise it were collapsing one by one. The deflation began on the 29th when Inspector Marshall told Percy Waddington he felt that he hadn't heard the full story from him. After a moment's token resistance Mr Waddington faltered: "Can I tell you about it now? I've been wanting to tell someone ever since I did it."

Walking back from the chip shop that night, he had been overcome by an unfathomable impulse to cut his own hand. "I *don't know whatever came over me, but I took* out a safety razor blade from my pocket and cut my left hand across the back. I was frightened and went to a house near by and kicked at the door." Mr Waddington freely conceded that the idea must have been on his mind for some time – he had not only provided himself with one of the Corrux blades he sold in his store for the razoring, but "I remember getting an old mackintosh out of the shop, pulling a tab off one of the sleeves and later throwing the mackintosh into the Old Earth football field... as near as I can remember, on Friday afternoon." Hardly a spontaneous act, then, but we look in vain for any thorough piece of self-analysis which might explain why the poor man went to all the physical and mental discomfort of posing as a Slasher victim. Mr Waddington spoke vaguely of not having been well for the past three years, adding: "I get very excited and sometimes don't know what I am doing. It had been on my mind about these other attacks in the district. I am not responsible for those slashing attacks." The police agreed – no-one had ever seriously suggested that he was. Charged on 1 December, Mr Waddington simply asked them to do what they could for him.

Throughout the disclosures to come, only one person tried to furnish a logical explanation for having faked a Slasher attack and that explanation was perhaps too ingenious to be convincing. Baker and confectioner Leslie Nicholl's story of how his apron came to be cut hadn't impressed D.I. Griffiths from the

Miss Beatrice Sorrell, 19, was slashed in Bedford Street North on the evening of 27 November.

moment on the 26th when it was written down; he saw that the hole was suspiciously like the damage which could have been done with the man's own pocket knife and on the way to the crime-scene he warned Mr Nicholl of the seriousness of making a false report. But the baker stood by his story and the investigation proceeded until the 30th when Salisbury expressed his belief that the cut had been self-inflicted. Would Mr Nicholl still insist upon his version? "No," came the reply. "I would like to get it off my mind. Can I tell you how it happened?"

The new story was nothing if not intriguingly divergent in its thinking. Mr Nicholl claimed to have slashed his apron and filed a false report in order to trap the real Slasher! "...I came to the conclusion that if I reported to the police that I had been attacked, my name and address would get into the papers," he said, "and the man would get to know who I was... would follow me and attack me, and as I would be prepared for him I would catch him. I had heard that there was a reward for information leading to the apprehension of this man." Mr Nicholl would have done well to

nfided this plan to somebody who might have been able to corroborate what he said; as it was, he was in an unenviable position.

The problems of Lily Woodhead, the Mytholmroyd victim, had begun when she quarrelled with her boyfriend on the night of 27 November. He refused to walk her down the lane to her bus as usual: "He told me not to come again. He told me that I should not be surprised if there was a slasher in the road tonight." There was indeed. On the 30th, Superintendent Gee informed her that he was "very dissatisfied" with her story. Miss Woodhead began to contradict herself – despite having given a description of her attacker previously, she now said she'd seen no–one in the lane – and at last confessed to fabricating the attempt. "I don't know what made me do it. I must have been feeling a bit low at the time... I was very distressed and had been reading about the slasher scare." So much so, one reasons, that she had taken to carrying a razor blade around with her – when the emotional crisis arrived she obviously had one ready to hand.

Beatrice Sorrell had also suffered from boyfriend problems that Sunday night. Alphonsius Higgins had refused to take her for a walk because of the rain and as he headed for the door of the Prince of Wales pub his inamorata demanded the money for her bus–fare home. She promptly went inside an off–licence and spent half the tuppence he'd given her on a Mick Lee razor blade. What the shop–owner thought a 19 year–old girl wanted with a razor blade isn't recorded, but finding herself in Bedford Street alone and unwatched Miss Sorrell unwrapped her new purchase.

"I held hold of the blade in my right hand and slashed down my left arm, making a long cut in my mackintosh coat and cardigan. I then put the blade back into the cut, and scratched down my arm twice... I put my fingers through the cut in the cloth and saw that they were covered in blood. I then threw the razor blade away and ran to the Fire Station."

It hadn't occurred to Miss Sorrell that a real Slasher would have to be a magician to produce two distinct cuts down her arm but only one on the outer surface of the mack which enclosed it. This, less than surprisingly, occurred to Detective Chief Superintendent Salisbury who expressed grave doubts when he interviewed her on 1 December. Then the facts emerged: she'd been reading newspaper reports of girls being slashed, she'd argued with her boy and she was in a temper...

The sorriest confession–narrative belonged to Hilda Lodge, whose tale of being attacked from behind a wall when going for a penn'orth of vinegar on 25 November had nearly caused Clifford Edwards to be dismembered by a frenzied mob. Salisbury saw her on 1 December, too, and used the same tack he had adopted with Miss Sorrell, expressing disbelief in her original statement and pointing out that the damage to her clothes wasn't consistent with an assault by a second party. Mrs Lodge began to weep: "I don't know what made me do it. Will it get into the papers if I tell you what happened?"

Salisbury assured her she had no need to tell the press that she'd spoken with him. "All right. I will tell the truth. It has made my nerves worse since I done it... I have always suffered with my nerves and last week I read a lot in the papers about people being slashed with razors. This seemed to get on top of me and I thought I would cut myself..." So Mrs Lodge had broken the vinegar decanter against the wall, scratched her face and arms and thrown the pieces away to where a grandson of her neighbours the Whitakers, 8 year–old Herbert Dyer, found them next morning. Like the others, she was sorry for all the trouble she had caused, "but it is all through my nerves."

Until the case of Rex v. Manley in 1932, defence lawyers had occasionally and often successfully argued that no existing law allowed for the punishment of false statements made to the police. But in that instance a Court of Criminal Appeal ruled that where a false charge led to a waste of police time it could be classed as a public mischief, a civil demeanour which carried a possible prison sentence. Police time had undoubtably been wasted on these Slasher reports – and a good deal of it at that. Already at Oldham 39 year–old May McNeeney had been committed to the next Quarter Sessions after her claim that a man had struck her several times with a big knife was exposed as fraudulent; she eventually confessed to having gone into her yard to use an old table knife on herself. Mrs McNeeney's inability to comprehend what had made her do this, her reference to having newspaper reports with their pictures of bandaged women "on the brain", her contrition and distress in the dock (she fainted during the hearing) were to become very familiar to all who wanted to keep pace with the Slasher – especially those from Halifax.

And now the Halifax Slasher scare was into its penultimate phase.

COURIER AND GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER

5: Recriminations

Friday 2nd December 1938
Monday 27th March 1939

"Carry on Halifax! – The slashing scare is over", triumphed the 'Courier' of 2 December 1938. "The theory that a half–crazed, wild–eyed man has been wandering around, attacking helpless women in dark streets, is exploded... there never was, nor is there likely to be in this connection, any real danger to the general public. There is no doubt that following certain happenings public feeling has grown, and that many small incidents have been magnified in the public mind until a real state of alarm was caused. This assurance that there is no real cause for alarm, in short, no properly authenticated wholesale attacks by such a person as the bogy man known as the 'Slasher', should allay the public fear."

It went completely against every belief, against every iota of evidence up until that time, but – those fears were allayed. Magically the police, spearheaded by the no–nonsense men of Scotland Yard, had exorcised a demon of the collective imagination. It was safe to go back to reality. This wasn't to say that all had been revealed, however – not quite. During a terse question–and–answer session that Friday – the last official communiqué on the Slasher – police were not prepared to say that inquiries were at an end, nor whether one man, three men or four had been involved in any attack; "at present the position is vague on this point," they fenced. Likewise the number of reported attacks regarded as genuine; how or why the 'Yorkshire Evening Post' knew that the Yard had concluded that only one woman – Mary Sutcliffe – could be classed as a legitimate victim of the mackintoshed nightmare is mysterious, since when the Halifax Slasher received the ultimate accolade of being the theme of a House of Commons question the following week, even the Under Secretary of State for the Home Office could not guess how many of the reports were regarded by detectives as genuine. At any rate, Salisbury and Stuttard were staying on because, as one officer observed darkly, "they still have a job of work to do."

It must have seemed like an ill–timed joke when Bournemouth suddenly, belatedly, spawned a Slasher story. Muriel Lillington, a 28 year–old laundry packer, was walking along Victoria Park Road, Winton, to her fiance's house when a middle–aged man in a fawn mack and cap bumped into her; a few minutes later as she turned into the gateway he or perhaps someone else came up from behind and slashed her coat above the elbow, leaving a 4 and–a–half inch flesh wound. But elsewhere all over the country the facts were working against the fabric of belief in these reports.

Manchester had suffered badly from Slasher–mania. On 3 December it was announced that 46 year–old Michael McKeiven had committed suicide by swallowing 20 aspirin because he thought that his workmates believed he was the Slasher – a totally unfounded fear, as it happened. Mr McKeiven was clearly unstable; he bore on his neck the scars from a previous suicide attempt. But Manchester police were taking no chances. A recantation of an alleged attack at Cadishead on the 30th was the third confession of self–injury they had heard in two days. 14 year–old Marjorie Murphy of Old Trafford decided she'd had enough and confessed that the 'injuries' she had received on the way to the laundry had been purely accidental; in Huddersfield there came the same confession from a boy of the same age, thus disposing of the town's only slashing report, and at Woodlands, Doncaster a 15 year–old almost immediately retracted her statement about having been waylaid and assaulted – a tale she had based on what she'd read of the Slasher.

In Glasgow two persons were remanded on similar false accusation charges: Alexander McFarlane and the aforementioned Mrs Mary Murphy (now "an anxious and worried woman") of the cut leg. The claims of Blackburn's Monica Abbott lasted only as long as it took Inspector Stones to say, "I do not believe you have been attacked by a man. These cuts appear consistent with you having done them yourself" – that is, less than 24

Miss Abbott agreed at once – she had used a broken bottle on herself.) On 10 December she was bound over for six months, while the Cudworth boy who had 'imagined' he had been attacked – and wasted 100 hours of police time – received double that plus a warning that anything like it in future would be "serious for him". The Bradford boy (also 14) allegedly slashed on 29 November was sent home with a caution – "I had dreamed I was attacked and I dropped my parcel and hit him with a brick and it got on my nerves," he confessed with ungrammatical candour – after the Juvenile Court dismissed his case under the Probation of Offenders act only seven days later. Finally, at Preston Quarter Sessions on 10 January 1939 Hilda Sharrock, the bound-and-gagged domestic servant of Rufford, admitted she had improvised after reading those unavoidable Slasher stories in the papers. Despite having started a first-class scare in the neighbourhood which led to 30 people being pulled in for questioning, she escaped quite lightly.

Had she not lived in Halifax where recriminations were always likely to be stronger, the red-haired Winnie McCall might have done so as well. Hers was the most feeble Slasher story, notwithstanding the original touch of having the assailant wish her goodnight afterwards (and in a Yorkshire accent) but when inspecting her wounds under a magnifying glass when she came in to tell it Salisbury at once suspected they had been made with something like a stiff wire brush. In fact, as he learned when he confronted her on 4 December, she had used a comb. Miss McCall said she "read so much about it that I got excited," and elected to turn herself into a victim on her way home from work. Presently it didn't seem like such a good idea: "Ever since I told the police I had been attacked I have been worried because I thought they would find out I had told them a lot of lies." Now that they had, Miss McCall would be joining the four others in court.

Then there was the not-so-negligible matter of the assault on young Fred Baldwin of Copley. At Halifax Borough Court William Spencer, alleged ringleader of the attack on a boy who could never remotely pass for the Slasher, pleaded Not Guilty to a summons brought by Fred's father. Someone else had raised the Slasher cry, he said; more than that, he'd even got the lad out of the ruck and walked him most of the way home (which wasn't how Fred remembered it). Then, worried by a visit from the police, he'd gone to see the victim – only to have Mr Baldwin answer the door. The next thing he knew was when he woke up in the infirmary with stitches in his head; he'd lost two days off work because of that but hadn't considered taking out an assault summons himself because "I have not a penny. I have enough to do to fill the cake pot."

Besides a conflict of evidence, the court took into consideration the temper of the times and also the fact that alcohol had been consumed by the Spencer faction. As Mr Ludlam urged on behalf of the complainant, it seemed probable that the men hadn't really acted out of an interest in the Slasher case at all. Bench chairman Clifford Ramsden decided that enough was enough: "Even though there was exceptional excitement in the town at that period," he ruled, "people ought to know that they have no right to take the law into their own hands, particularly where so many are against one." Yet, thanks to Mr Baldwin's having done much the same thing (under provocation, though that was insufficient excuse) Spencer had already been punished. He was allowed to walk out of court on the end of a 10/- fine.

The Halifax Slasher was now reduced to a single, short column in the 'Courier's 5 December issue: ousted from the banner headlines by personal violence of a different kind, namely the discovery of a small boy's body at Cricklewood. Henceforth, in the paper's opinion, "it will be remembered as a nine days' wonder – though how expensive we may never know." Halifax's notoriety had attached itself to their football team. During the previous Saturday's away fixture against Hartlepool United the crowd frequently broke into cries of, "Come on, Slashers!" and when Town's diminutive right winger Foulkes was locked in a series of shoulder charges with the home side's full back Wilson a loud-voiced terrace wit won a roar of laughter with, "Search him for razor blades."

Halifax had returned to normal – the Slasher was gone and the patrols with him. But now the cost was being counted: not so much in crude financial terms, since the Chief Constable was insisting against all expectation that the hunt had not involved any abnormal expenditure, but in other ways. Suspicion had fallen on innocent people; there had been a vast neurotic uncertainty which curtailed such taken-for-granted liberties as walking along a street at night. Women had been herded under escort. Folk had been chased, beaten up and – worst of all – everybody had been duped,

d into believing in a bogey-man straignt out of the Brothers Grimm. Someone ought to pay for that shame: the people who had made the bogey-man so irresistibly believable.

Earlier the police had appeared to have ruled out the possibility that the Halifax scare was the product of attention-seeking and hysteria (particularly the feminine variety; now the whole business seemed to resolve into that explanation. Then as today, 'hysteria' to the layperson meant not a psychological illness but a character-flaw, a weakness which might need to be punished as well as corrected. The two men and four women held responsible for creating the scare, the self-mutilators and false witnesses, were in many respects as much victims of the flap as anyone else - victims in a more valid sense than the one they had posed for - but if anybody was to be blamed for making it possible, it would have to be them.

The charge against them read: "That the accused did by means of a certain false statement that a person had attacked him (or her), cutting clothing and causing injury, cause officials of the Halifax Borough Police, maintained at the public expense, to devote their time and service to the investigation of false allegations, thereby temporarily depriving the public of such public officers and rendering liege subjects of the King open to suspicion and arrest, and in so doing unlawfully effect a public mischief." But legal reprisals were only a ritualised way of expressing local anger. More direct, more dangerous were the manifestations of that disapproval faced by any purported Slasher victim in the course of daily life - the jeers, the mutterings of neighbours, the averted looks.

We may guess at, but never really know, the extent of these pressures on people known to have been integral to the Slasher scare; it wasn't the sort of thing to get into print. But some taste of it comes over in the interview which Albert Sutcliffe gave to the 'Yorkshire Observer' of 6 December when he appealed to "a certain section of the public of Halifax to stop uttering the malicious and slanderous lies which are going about concerning the members of our family, all of whom are above suspicion of doing anything approaching wrong." One of these rumours suggested that Mary had actually been slashed by her own brother since the attacks coincided with his half-day off; another drew a horrible significance from the quite-untrue tale that Mary had been at a dance in Bradford on the night little Phyllis

Waiting for the news - Halifax Daily Courier & Guardian photograph.
'Womenfolk, anxious for the capture of the Slasher, outside Halifax police station last night'

was murdered. The family had been [illegible] behind locked doors since the second attack, though whether through fear of another visit from the Slasher or of local vengefulness isn't entirely certain. Mary herself was midway between invalid and prisoner. She had not been to work since the first assault and the 'Observer' reporter remarked on her painful nervousness; she started from the sofa when someone opened a door suddenly. The police had not been in touch with the family for five days and Mr Sutcliffe reacted strongly to the idea that they now regarded the Slasher as no more than a myth. People do not cut their hands and then pose in bandages for photographs unless they truly have been attacked, he protested. Unfortunately mounting evidence indicated the opposite.

On 3 December Percy Waddington had been committed to Leeds Quarter Sessions. The public was there in force to watch; he was allowed to sit throughout the hearing, his solicitor S.W. Garsed pleading that he was in "a very nervous condition". The crowds were back eleven days later to see Beatrice Sorrell, Winnie McCall and Leslie Nicholl answer public mischief charges and be sent for trial with £10 bail and £10 surety apiece – if "answer" be the right word, since they hardly managed a dozen words between them. Miss Sorrell was notably distressed; she held her head down for most of the proceedings and afterwards was helped in tears from the box by her mother. (In addition to her other problems she was said to have discovered she was pregnant.) Next day Hilda Lodge and Annie Cannon received the same verdict, the latter most reluctantly. While Mrs Lodge repeated her plea that "I have suffered with my nerves a long time and have been depressed," the other woman remained defiant – the only one of the six Halifax/Elland people to continue to insist she had been a genuine victim of a genuine attack. It tells a lot about the mood in certain quarters that some unknown persons had expressed disbelief or spite by breaking a window of Mrs Cannon's house and there was an unaccepted Defence plea that her case be put before a Leeds jury rather than a local (and possibly prejudiced) one. Chairman Hilbert felt that a Halifax venue was preferable, but made a point of reminding folk that at this stage all the defendants had yet to be proven other than innocent and that "strong police measures" would descend on those who felt like prejudging the issue.

According to Mrs Cannon's solicitor, W.R. Hargrave, there was no case for her to answer; "in every material paticular" hers was a different situation from those of the others brought before the court on this charge. The crux of the argument was that Mrs Cannon claimed she had not given a statement confessing that she'd damaged her own clothing. Salisbury had interviewed her on the 1st – a good day for obtaining confessions, as far as he was concerned – and alleged that she duly made a confession of that kind, but its nature was oddly dubious. The mere mention of this statement at the commital proceedings had Mrs Cannon on her feet in the defendent's box shouting, "It's a lie!" Her Quarter Sessions trial promised to prove interesting.

That same day (15 December) there was a sensation at Todmorden Petty Sessions court where Lily Woodhead was due to attend her public mischief hearing. The sensation was that she didn't attend; she had absconded. "I do not think she will appear today," said Mr G. Billington, prosecuting on behalf of Wakefield County Hall. "She was not at her home last night, and she was not there this morning. Also missing is her young man. He is a witness for the prosecution in this case."

Lily had phoned her parents asking them to come to the hearing, but now they had no idea of her whereabouts; "she just went out in the ordinary way last evening. We expected her back, but we have not seen her since," her mother told the press. Fiancé Frank Coupland had done much the same vanishing trick; he had been to work as usual the day before, changed out of his work clothes after tea, left the house... and had not come back. On their return home from court the Woodheads found a pencilled note from their daughter waiting for them; post-marked Halifax that day, it told them little more than that all was well and that they were not to worry. Another from Manchester on the 20th was in Coupland's hand, assuring the parents that the couple would return soon "to explain our present position. I would like to make it clear that we in no way have anything to hide." That was a very debatable point. Miss Woodhead's false allegation had employed 104 police for 1,027 hours at a cost of £106.7.6d and caused two men to fall under heavy suspicion; her abscondence on its own hardly spoke in her favour. She was eventually arrested in Sheffield on the (to her) unlucky date of Friday 13 January 1939 and appeared in court three days afterwards. The hearing, which had to be adjourned for five minutes when she collapsed, ended with Miss Woodhead committed for trial

uarter Sessions on £10 bail. When she appeared there on 27 March she had become Mrs Frank Coupland and had swapped a career in domestic service for a job at the mill. She pleaded guilty and was bound over for £5 on two years' probation.

The trials of Sorrell, McCall, Lodge and Nicholl on Monday 23 January were muted affairs, the accused meekly accepting their fate with little comment and every sign of remorse – especially Winnifred McCall, who despite having produced a doctor's certificate to vouch for her poor state of health was told by the judge that she must be made an example to others. She was carried from the box in a faint. Each defendant received a sentence of four weeks in the second division plus, for Leslie Nicholl only, a fine of £10. The Annie Cannon trial, which preceded the other four lest jurors be unduly influenced by the verdicts in those cases, was a very different proposition. Hers was the single plea of Not Guilty and the single case where there was doubt as to whether she had actually confessed to having made a false report.

The evidence implied that Mrs Cannon had been the victim of some kind of attack, or at least honestly believed that she had been. John Riley of Thackeray Street testified that he'd heard her scream and that on going to investigate found her lying in a passage. He saw no–one else there, but another neighbour, Mrs Elizabeth Adamson, told the court she had seen Mrs Cannon in the act of falling and was positive that "Just like a flash I thought I saw somebody running around into Dickens Street," though she couldn't describe him. Imagination, expectancy? However we account for what Mrs Adamson said she saw, she stuck to it under cross–examination. More certain it is that everyone who saw Annie Cannon immediately after the attack (including Dr James Tidd) was struck by her authentic–seeming terror – a fright ostensibly beyond simulation and which was still noticeable three days later.

Against all this was the opinion of William Lithiland Stuart, lecturer on textiles at Halifax Technical College, that the damage to the victim's blouse could not have been caused by the 'snare and drag' method she described. The hole could only have been made by several cuts from a sharp instrument like a knife or lancet – or a pair of scissors – while the garment was held against a firm surface. The lack of blood on the fabric proved it wasn't being worn at the time it was damaged; it would have been impossible to slice the blouse from someone's arms without breaking the skin beneath, unless of course the victim co–operatively stood there and let the Slasher perform the deed with due delicacy and caution.

The main item against the accused, needless to say, was her supposed confession. On the 1st she had allegedly told Salisbury: "I don't know what to say. My nerves have been so bad lately," and when asked by him whether she was sure she had been attacked she replied, "No. I done it myself." Mrs Cannon then said she wanted to tell the truth and began talking about a family quarrel centred upon her brother–in–law's washing machine and a solicitor's letter.

"This letter preyed on my mind. I had also been reading in the newspapers of the man who had been attacking women in the town, and my nerves became all on edge. While I was in the kitchen I picked up the scissors and gave my cardigan and blouse several cuts on the left sleeve. I went out to the lavatory... and leaving it I thought I had been pushed from the back and I fell down, catching my head on the wall as I fell."

This was the self–condemnatory statement that Mrs Cannon now denied having made. Whether she had done so or not, it soon became clear that in legal terms her mouth had never been open. Chief Inspector Salisbury had gone against the established rules of procedure by taking a statement without administering a proper and formal caution – which would have included the important clause that Mrs Cannon was not obliged to make a statement at all.

Salisbury defended his neglect of Judges' Rules by saying that "as there was no charge being preferred at the time," he had merely given a general sort of caution – the kind he always administered when called upon to take a statement. This was enough for Hylton–Foster for the defence to raise certain awkward queries about the whole conduct of that interview. Salisbury denied having prefaced it with the words, "Well, Annie, we have had your jumper to Sir Bernard Spilsbury and it hasn't been cut, it has been torn. Now then, we want to get this cleared up and get away from Halifax. Why did you cut your jumper?" Much less had he or Sgt. Studdard pretended to phone Sir Bernard before the very eyes of the accused – who, like 98 per cent of the British population, would have known about the great forensic expert and criminologist from enthusiastic newspaper reports of his 'case cracking'. And he certainly hadn't paced up and down the room, occasionally veering over

Mrs Margaret Reynolds of Swan Bank–terrace.

to Mrs Cannon and saying: "You did it, didn't you? Look me in the face and tell me the truth." The detective agreed that any evidential statement gleaned from such a melodramatic and "grossly improper" charade would have been "rubbish". For his part, Sgt. Studdard refuted the idea that it took them two hours to get Mrs Cannon's statement or that they'd told her she could not go home until she had signed it.

However, the Recorder decided that the statement as it existed – taken without administration of a strict caution after the approved Judges' Rules formula – was, if not exactly rubbish, then "impeachable". If it went before a jury, he had a duty to warn them it was unreliable and a Court of Criminal Appeal would take 'first view of the evidence'. On his direction a Not Guilty verdict was returned and Annie Cannon was discharged.

That decision did nothing to resolve the uncertainties about what (if anything) had happened to Annie Cannon. Doubtless there were those uncharitable enough to feel she had been allowed to escape her just desserts on a purely legal technicality and that she was as culpable as those pseudo–victims who were punished. But maybe some had more tolerant views. Looking at the 'impeachable' statement and the Adamson evidence in tandem, there is a remote possibility that she was the victim of an attack and also of an unlikely coincidence. A spate of emotional pressures may have led her to decide that she would pose as a Slasher victim; she may have gone as far as cutting her jumper to support that fabricated tale. It would be a bizarre twist of Fate if, on the way back from the lavatory and before she had had time to put her scheme into operation, she had been floored by a genuine mystery assailant. However, there is her revealing comment that at the critical instant "I thought I had been pushed." Postulating that Mrs Adamson only imagined the glimpse of a running figure at the end of Dickens Street – and given the neurotic tenor of the times, she had perhaps a fair excuse for imagining something like that – there is the strong alternative that Mrs Cannon's was a case of self–delusion. She had mentally prepared herself to appear as a Slasher victim, even to the point of cutting her own clothes; but before she could announce her martyrdom to the world an accidental slip convinced her that she really had been attacked. And subconsciously convinced this had happened, her reaction was enough to convince others as well... Salisbury and Studdard excepted.

Then again, some folk may have wondered what had become of all the others who had stood up to be counted as Slasher victims. What of Mary Sutcliffe, Mrs Kenny, Mr Aspinall, Mrs Wood, Mrs Reynolds? They were not being charged, it seemed. Had the authorities failed to prise useful confessions from them or did the police perhaps feel that they could have been subject to authentic slash–attacks? If so, was the Slasher more than just a bogey–man from the collective imagination of Halifax?

The most striking thing is that he had been so horribly credible: he had not only caused people to flinch at shadows, but had inspired a minority who were curiously susceptible to his charismatic spell to draw razor blades over their own flesh. "For some unexplained reason, which makes us all wonder about your mentality, you deliberately slashed your own hand and caused a great deal of public money to be spent on investigations," summarised Judge Stewart, addressing a man of previously irreproachable character who had held the same job for 24 years and was married with a child. The object of his remarks was none other than grocery store manager Percy Waddington; the scene the West Riding Quarter Sessions in Leeds on 9 January 1939. A plea for leniency was accepted and the accused was bound over in the sum of £10 to be of good behaviour for three years, which in view of the sentences meted out at Halifax was perhaps better than he could have expected. But the incomprehensibility of it remained. Why had Waddington – why had so many others – wanted to pose as victims of the Slasher? And why had so many people come to believe in the Slasher?

...Y COURIER AND GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER ... 1980.

6: Echoes

"A single man of excellent previous character... responsible and active in the community in quite a respectable way" – and a schools careers officer as well. This was how a defending solicitor described 'Jack the Snipper', the so–called 'Phantom Skirt–Slasher of Piccadilly' who for six months prowled the escalators of London underground stations surrepticiously exposing women's backsides until the Transport Police put an end to his fun in June 1977. As the court accepted when placing him on two years' probation with the condition he sought psychiatric help and paid £268 towards the 17 skirts he was known to have dissected, 'Jack' was neither monster nor maniac. No more was Stanley Scaife of Sheffield who fastened copper wires with acid–soaked cotton swabs to girls' dresses in 1932, or Sidney Eastbury, sentenced three years afterwards for culminating slash–attacks on females by hurling on his handiwork a concotion of oil and chocolate which added messy insult to sartorial injury. With a bit of editing, though, these men could have been made to seem monsters and maniacs.

Slashers, snippers, pokers and jabbers are real persons. We learn of them through stray court appearances when they stand revealed as curious, often pathetic but essentially ordinary people who are wholly unable to articulate what made them slash, snip, poke or jab at random strangers nor define the satisfaction they derived from it – thereby leaving us free to play the amateur psychologist. But we are told that the Halifax Slasher was not a real person at all. It follows that any amateur psychology here should be directed at the people who believed he was real, the inventors of this shadow. It becomes the psychology of crowds and committees.

The material just adduced shows that at least 13 Halifax people believed in the Slasher – or rather, they filed official reports testifying to his reality. Six of them were subsequently prosecuted on public mischief charges arising from the contrary–belief that each report (and hence the Slasher) was a fabrication. But what of the remaining seven? Why no prosecutions for them?

It has been put to me that the police decided to proceed with only the 'worst cases' – ones upon which most time and effort had been wasted – and that 'psychological considerations' may have led them to overlook certain false complainants. If so, their choice of cases seems odd. Why, for example, pick on Mrs Lodge, whose long–standing nervous trouble as much as her genuine contrition made her seem a deserving case for leniency? Why pick on Winnie McCall, whose transparent story detained the investigators only a matter of days, when Mary Sutcliffe (who not only set the Slasher inquiry in motion but went on to report a second attack requiring attention on her case to be doubled) was not chased up? Why penalize a 20 year–old baker for cutting his own apron when on printed evidence the testimony of caretaker Aspinall appears not only as suspect but far more influential in publicising and encouraging the panic during its early and formative stages?

It cannot be that the police concentrated on cases for which they had managed to secure uncontested confessions – that the unimpeached seven simply defied attempts to get them to confess by sticking to their original stories. Annie Cannon stuck to her story, yet the police prosecuted (and failed to make their case). Nor is it credible that the police privately believed all of these seven reports to be authentic. A reply by C.I. Salisbury to a direct query raised during the trials of Nicholl, Sorrell, Lodge, McCall and Cannon on 23 January reveals quite unambiguously that they did not subscribe to anything of the kind. Salisbury was asked whether he regarded the Slasher as a myth. "Definitely the Slasher was a mythical person," he answered, "I had doubt in one case only... If there was an assault it was committed by someone known to the assaulted person." Thus six more reports had to be instances of false allegation. It is virtually certain that the one possible exception mentioned by Salisbury was the case of Mary Sutcliffe – and that the police no longer thought it was a matter of random, casual

a total stranger.

Conspiracy theories and hints of official cover ups always make good reading. It would be fun to insist that something of the sort had transpired here – to insinuate that the police, embarrassed by their failure to solve the attacks and by the discredit this cast on their competence as guardians of society, reacted by pretending there had been no attacks to be solved at all. The reconstruction might go on to suggest that the trick worked by distracting the public through a series of accusations against certain 'scapegoats', thence portraying the Slasher as a product of those culpable folk's neurotic fantasies and by extension of all the witnesses' neurotic fantasies. Suffice to say that there is no evidence that anything like this took place. The confessions, given under no appreciable form of duress or intimidation, suggest that the Slasher was indeed a figment of the shared imagination.

If we can't accept the consensus view that there was no Halifax Slasher but only Halifax hysteria, we are left with a number of open-ended (and unconfirmable) possibilities. Perhaps some of the attacks were genuine – not necessarily the work of one man but (as mooted in police circles at the time) of several who modelled their activities on what they had read of the phantom assailant in the papers and so helped to reinforce his spurious existence in the public mind before going to ground for ever. Given that there is some evidence of a trend towards apparently motiveless urban violence of this type (and directed especially at women) the possibility seems valid, although it must be said that this trend was a great deal less pronounced in 1938 than it is today. Again, the publicity given to the Slasher may well have caused some victims of these violent attacks to mistake the nature of the assaults or even to glamourise them by self-inflicted 'Slasher' injuries. But this, too, is conjectural.

Yet it is reasonably certain that the Halifax Slasher did not exist as the Compleat Bogey-Man paraded in the popular conception. How did he become so believable?

The Halifax scare appears to have been one of those times when society goes briefly, chaotically insane. Analogies between this panic and other historical outbreaks of irrationality were clear to authorities hunted out when national newspapers went in search of eminent quotables to put the thing into perspective; Professor Flugel of London University compared it with the mediaeval witchcraft epidemic and Dr Stekel, "the internationally famous psychoanalyst" was reminded of a Swiss lycanthropy mania. It was, of course, taken as beyond dispute that the Halifax mechanism was not only the province of the alienist, but particularly those specializing in the study of individual or mass hysteria. In an interview published by both the 'Evening News' (26 November 1938), and 'Reynolds' News' (4 December 1938), Dr Edward Glover from the Institute of Psycho-Analysis explained that the "fantastic imitation" of hysteria could be seen in cases of "unmarried women who invent tales of having been attacked by men, or... actually slash themselves to bear this out. This type of fantastic imitation is commonly observed in children, who gratify unconscious wishes and inflate their self-importance with tales of attacking or being attacked by animals, strange men etc." The psychoanalyst would have welcomed a session with the Cudworth boy, no doubt: a nervous youth who went to bed at nine every evening, seldom played outdoors and didn't frequent the cinema, whose mind would have impressed the psychoanalytically-initiated as a fertile soil for such an attack-fantasy. Add to this the imitative trait known as the 'copy-cat crime' – based on the replication of incidents reported by the media or by rumour, as seen in the case of the Sheffield playground slashers, perhaps – and you have a fine recipe for localised hysterical mania.

This may be convincing as far as it goes. What it fails to reveal is how a whole town – and then several more – can succumb to the spell cast by a few hysterical imaginations until all react to the same non-existent 'common threat'. To gain currency, the Slasher myth must have had a general appeal; it must have expressed some fundamental fear-motif.

Victorian commentators lovingly derided the great panics of the past – for example, they were obsessed by the absurdities of the 16th and 17th century witchcraft epidemics to a degree that was self-revealing – and tended to formulate easy answers as to how these arose. It was all hysteria evolved from gross superstition and credulity... and credulity was the product of ignorance plus lack of correct religious training. To a Charles Mackay – author of Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds (1841) – the Halifax Slasher would have implied poor education and deficit of moral virtue – a worthy contribution indeed to "the great and awful book of human folly."

Today the Victorian viewpoint seems ludicrously inadequate, yet we cannot claim to have replaced it with anything more substantial

orously—scientific phrases such as 'mass hysteria' which really mask our ignorance. Like our forefathers, we harbour the assumption that hysteria is founded upon credulity or upon some inherent (and reprehensible) weakness of character. Thus mass hysteria has no meaning outside of the psychiatric. The few non—psychological studies of 'flaps' or panics indicate that they are of more value than this. Dr Stuart McFarlane has explored Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970) not so much in terms of psychosis or neurosis but as a mechanism for adjusting social tensions in close—knit communities. Drastically reducing his thesis: witchcraft accusations arose from societal stresses born of a clash between received ethics like the duty of charity to the poor and the new, harsh economic facts of life; the process engendered a current of guilt and fear in which the role of certain people within the community underwent a dangerous reinterpretation. And these individuals were labelled as witches. This does not 'explain' the violence of the panic, the accusations and legal measures introduced to restore rationality, nor why belief in witchcraft went on for as long as it did. But it should remind us that where a sudden group—reaction focusses upon some unusual and anomalous phenomenon, the flap is likely to stand for an attempt at expression or adjustment.

Homicidal manicas are fun to believe in if they are not too real. The Maniac who is supposed to haunt London Underground stations and push unsuspecting people beneath oncoming trains is a cosy nightmare because he is contemporary folklore; his pseudo—existence — the way in which we uncritically accept him solely on the testimony of a 'friend of a friend' — shows how apt we are to look for homicidal maniacs to believe in. Even the most terrible psychopath — a Yorkshire Ripper, a Son of Sam — has a kind of repellent fascination; we don't want to meet them personally, yet experience a kind of thrill from reading or thinking about them. So much so that when a likely minor felon comes along we may want to adapt him, give him some titillating label that turns him into an excitingly—menacing figure. Jack the Snipper may have to become Jack the Ripper.

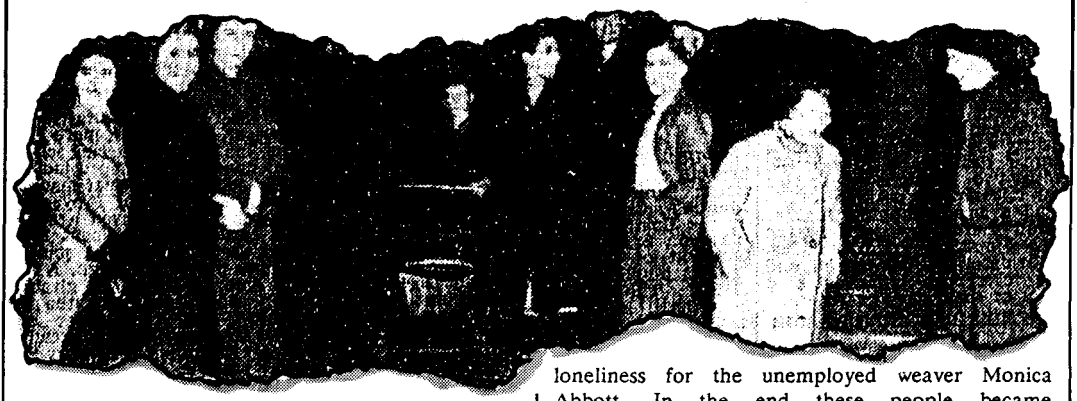
The Slasher, said Prof. Flugel, is "a sexual pervert troubled with a milder form of Jack—the—Ripperism, with all the elusiveness of the mass—murderers." It is easy to forget the emphasis on that word, 'milder'. Despite scant evidence that a Slasher graduates from skirts and coats to bodies and throats via training sorties on escalators or in crowds, there is a tendency to think that his relative restraint is a delusion — that the Skirt Snipper and the Yorkshire Ripper share more than a fondness for misusing sharp instruments. We become fixated by the man's potential for harm. So far he has cut a few blouses and bloodied a few wrists; but surely he has more in mind than that? The Halifax Slasher, as investigating officers agreed in moments of calm, was not a homicidal maniac and threatened more than he performed: yet the public became inspired to treat him as if he were a maniac. Sporadic press references to Jack the Ripper were not accidental.

Why should we want to terrify ourselves through these distorted, part—imagined, larger—than—life apparitions? Because the Maniac is a stimulant; suddenly, thanks to him, life becomes more unpredictable, more urgent. We feel, perversely, more alive and more dynamic.

He has personal and private uses, customized applications, as well. Through the Maniac a select few can become momentarily more important; their undistinguished names are in the papers, their unheeded or unremarkable words are quoted for a mass audience. They

ention. For once they emerge as somebodies, not mere units in the machine – millgirls, grocery store managers, cork warehouse hands...

"You may think that in some cases persons were actuated by sheer wilfulness, or a perverted desire to gain cheap publicity or a form of hysteria induced by some neurotic condition or by a combination of such mentalities," Mr Curtis told the court at the committal of Beatrice Sorrell, Leslie Nicholl and Winnifred McCall on 14 December. "...Persons possessed of silly notions of gaining cheap publicity by posing as public martyrs and cheating and alarming the public would be well advised to rid themselves instantly of such notions which might only expose them to scorn and ridicule and bring them to the justice they so well deserve." Granted, some amount of personal responsibility was attached to the process of coming forward as a victim; quite likely, too, there were personal factors which predisposed certain folk to victimhood – the 'nerves' spoken of by some of the self-confessed self-mutilators and by Mrs Lodge especially. Perhaps the culprits should have exercised sufficient self-control as to "rid themselves instantly of such notions". But once the Slasher-Maniac image had been established in the public consciousness, there had to be public martyrs. What was the use of a maniac-slasher if nobody was prepared to say they had been slashed?



The Slasher was an image force-fed into the minds of thousands and one to which a tiny minority proved ultra-susceptible. The confessions paid tribute to the publicity given to this razor-man after a style all too predictable and repetitive: "I was very distressed and had been reading about the slasher stories," (Woodhead); or again, "...I read a lot in the papers about people being slashed... This seemed to get on top of me..." (Lodge), and "I don't know what made me do it. I have been reading the papers and it has got on my brain," (McNeeney, Oldham). The decision to pose as a Slasher victim may not have been a fully conscious one, but he was there to serve in moments of persecution and dissatisfaction. He was a ready-made way of getting back at the boyfriends who had deserted Sorrell and Woodhead, a protest against loneliness for the unemployed weaver Monica Abbott. In the end these people became Slasher victims in a more genuine sense because when the time arrived for redress, they were the obvious ones to punish. But they did not invent the Slasher; they only used someone or something that already existed.

The Halifax Slasher was a mass-promotion. He was a cure for unacknowledged boredom and could be used in any number of ways. For once everyone might become a detective, a patrol-man – no anonymous social unit as usual, but an important, active personality making a vital contribution to the community that was more dramatically satisfying than the mundane paying of rates or patronizing of local charities. The 'Courier' worried about the thousands of gallons of petrol (not to say physical energy) which the vigilantes used up, but it is probable that they secretly regarded it as a cheap enough price to pay for being part of this great movement. Few pre-planned exercises could have enthused the whole town so utterly, nor drawn the community closer together. In this sense, the Slasher panic had its positive side, creating the same sense of union against a common threat that would soon be manifested during the air raids of World War II.

And as we have seen, the mystery assailant's multi-purposes included an outlet for protest or unrest. Urban problems normally accepted as inevitable or otherwise completely disregarded – the lack of adequate street

the sprawl and decay of some parts of town – abruptly became critical issues because the Slasher relied upon them for his success. The sense that he was 'hitting out' against society was innate to all psychological interpretations of the man; Dr Glover defined his motivation as one of "a whole class of what I call 'social perversion', destructive acts in which the motive seems to be one of unconscious revenge against women or sometimes against society in general." Psychologist Peter Fletcher similarly saw the crimes as being directed both inward (towards the Slasher's own needs) and outward at the environment: "a symbolic act – a means of producing revenge against society and of producing a sort of feeling of omnipotence." All this assumes, of course, that the Slasher was a real person with needs to express. If we dispose of that idea – and the evidence indicates that we should do so – it follows that the anarchic, outwardly-directed revenge on the environment came from his creators: the mass-believers who relied on him to express their wish to rebel and their own will to power.

Everyday life is comfortable and enjoyable; occasionally, though, people need something more than that, if only as a temporary holiday. And paradoxically, it can be the things which most threaten our security that provide these short breaks by reminding us how vulnerable we are.

Earlier I said that I found no marked reason for Halifax of 1938 needing to direct its rage or discontent against itself through a fantasized mystery assailant – nor indeed any particular cause for rage or discontent. Taking the preceding paragraphs as a key, one can only speculate on what the Slasher may have expressed.

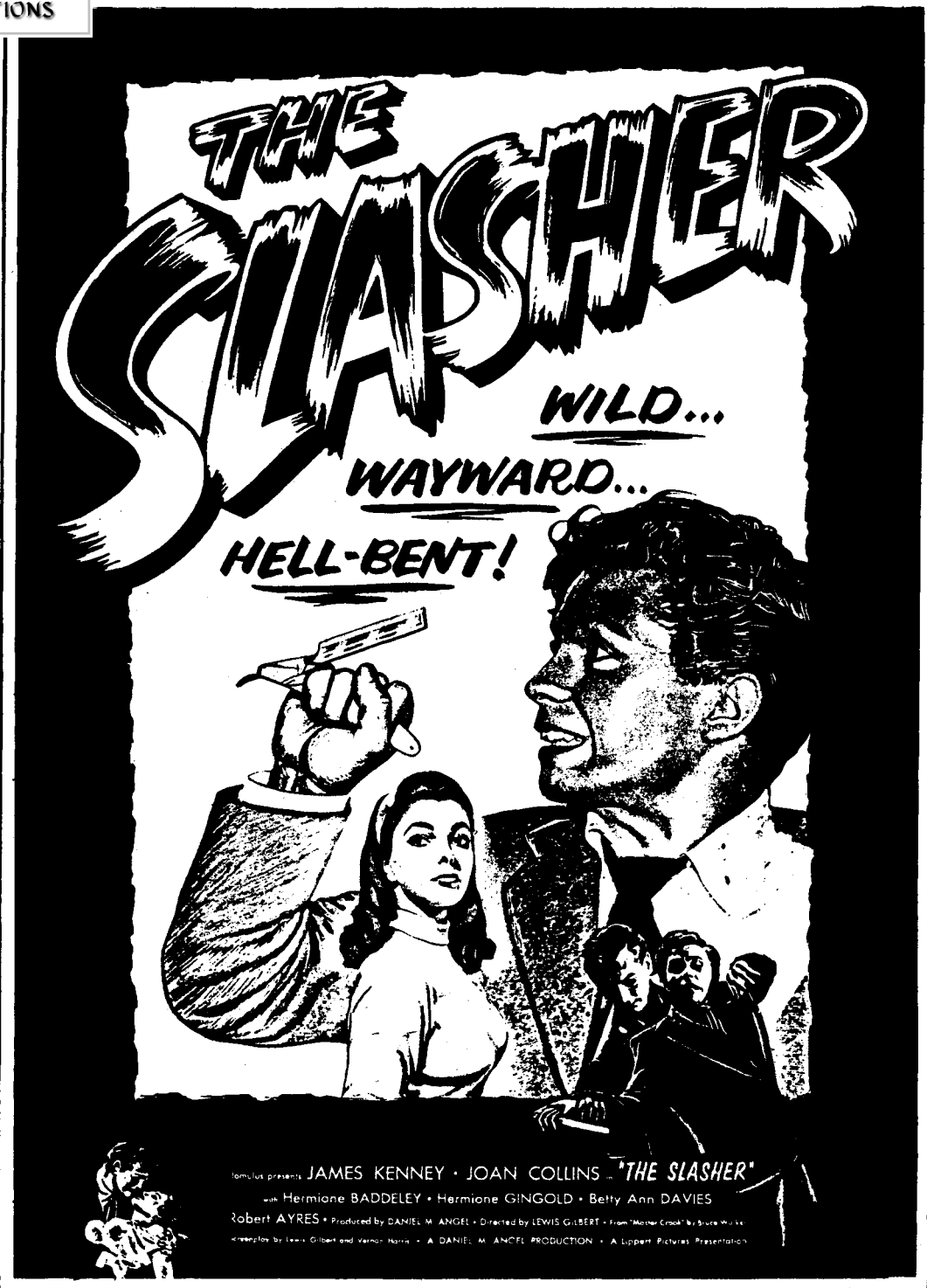
It is fairly certain that people at this time sensed their vulnerability and that violence of one kind or another was on their minds as the long winter nights drew in. A number of reports may have alerted them to the existence of a real-or-conjectured wave of crimes against the person across the North and it is worth recalling that (according to the 'Yorkshire Evening Post' of 30 November) the police felt the slashings had their foundation in the unsolved murder of 8 year-old Phyllis Hirst at Bradford some weeks previously. "The brutal nature of this crime, they believe, was calculated to unsettle the balance of people with neurotic criminal tendencies," noted the 'Post'.

The focus upon sharp implements as the specific weapons of the terror was understandable. Besides the timelessness of the fear they evoke, such instruments have associations which guns, poison and ropes somehow lack. "You must rembember," warned Dr Glover, "there is a special fascination about knives and razors (due to their symbolism) just as on the other hand we find people who have a horror of knives, which possibly covers... an unconscious desire to slash." On a more practical level, the popularity of ordinary razor-blades as weapons was well-established; they were the most readily-available, easily-concealed tools for individuals bent on private vendettas and also for organized terror-and-intimidation campaigns waged by professional criminals such as the London gangs tackled by C.I. Salisbury. Finally, it may not be a coincidence that Graham Greene's novel 'Brighton Rock', in which razorings play a small but horrendous part, was first published in the 'Slasher Year' of 1938. From these elements there could have evolved another symbol, a collective image of all the faceless and violent men on the streets: the Slasher.

The speed with which people took up arms against the Slasher – the sticks and pepper-pots appeared within days of the earliest reported slashings, or before the image of the assailant was fully-developed – might suggest that folk were half-expecting to be attacked prior to the onset of the myth. The Slasher, then, was a specific form of the criminal enemy whom events were promising might materialise at any time. And equally amazing – perhaps the most striking aspect of the Halifax scare – was the spectacularly swift way in which it collapsed. Seeing how the town swung from the heights of panic to virtually complete normality inside a span of 48 hours, it may be tempting to think that the deflatory process was due entirely to the paternal interference of Scotland Yard.

Certainly the Yard's reputation (which more or less warned people that play-time was over and that the joke had gone too far) plus the no-nonsense style of its two representatives had a veritable cold-water effect. Yet this hypothesis does little justice to the role played by the local forces – the Waddington

Advertisement from 1952. Although post-dating the Halifax scare, the popularity of such a film indicates the hold which the Slasher-persona exercised on the imagination. It may not be entirely coincidental that Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, in which razorings play a small but horrendous part, was first published in the 'Slasher Year' of 1938.


THE SLASHER
WILD...
WAYWARD...
HELL-BENT!
Tomclus presents JAMES KENNEY • JOAN COLLINS in "THE SLASHER"
with Hermione BADDELEY • Hermione GINGOLD • Betty Ann DAVIES
Robert AYRES • Produced by DANIEL M. ANGEL • Directed by LEWIS GILBERT • From "Master Crook" by Bruce Walker
Screenplay by Lewis Gilbert and Vernon Harris • A DANIEL M. ANGEL PRODUCTION • A Lippert Pictures Presentation

coincided with, but was not due to, [illegible]l of Salisbury and Stuttard – and it ignores the fact that the scare was already dying on its feet. Slasher-mania was suffering from the pressure of its own excitement. There were signs that it was becoming unbelievable; there were too many obvious false alarms, too much evidence of rumorised distortions and neurosis, while the news of reports from other parts of the country had its own credibility-eroding effect. Quite likely, by the start of December Halifax was tired of the Slasher and was looking for a convenient place to drop the whole thing. The Yard's presence and announcement provided the obvious excuse: a subconscious wish to respond obediently to the authoritarian order to do so.

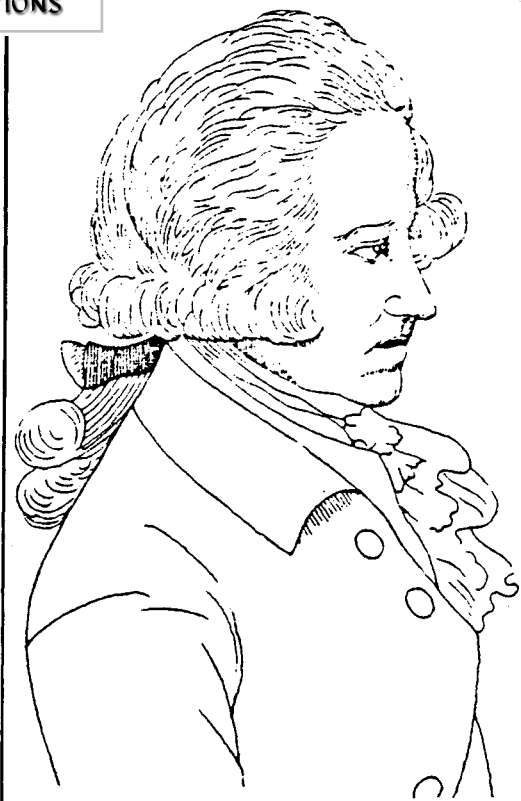
There is some truth in the 'Courier's prediction that the Slasher scare would henceforth be seen as a nearly-literal nine days' wonder. Halifax people with whom I spoke were mainly dismissive of its importance. "A case of mass hysteria," said one; "there wasn't anything in it," voted another. Even so, there was the occasional hint of local pride, too; the Slasher was someone who had brought the town to national prominence, and no-one would begrudge him his place in the folk-history of Halifax. In a more general sense, however, the affair can be regarded as one of the most remarkable sociological case histories of recent years. For the Halifax Slasher was not a one-off phenomenon or strictly local instance of the 'folly of crowds'. The very fact that the scare had its historical precedents suggests that this example of the 'Mystery Assailant syndrome' in action needs to be understood – the more so as, sooner or later, the Slasher or someone like him will be back in our streets and in our imaginations.

The story of the Monster, terror of late 18th century London, provides a near-perfect analogue with the Halifax Slasher cycle, but for the difference that he was caught and punished – or rather, a 23 year-old artificial flower-maker named Renwick (or Rhynwick) Williams had that dubious honour. From May 1788 to April 1790 the Monster outraged the city with a series of minor yet insulting attacks upon women which usually took the form of his waylaying them on their doorsteps and stabbing their thighs and buttocks, although in one incident he was alleged to have cut off a girl's hair and tied it to the door-knocker. Here again we find a drastic reaction to an essentially minor threat (which extended to the way in which the elusive perpetrator was labelled as a 'Monster') with an escalating sense of anxiety and vigilante spirit.

"The Monster is now a mischief of more than common magnitude," thundered one newspaper of the day. "It is really distressing to walk our streets towards evening. Every woman we meet regards us with mistrust, shrinks from our touch, and expects a poignard to pierce what gallantry and manhood consider as sacred." A reward of £50 (later £70) was offered by the socially-concerned art collector John Julius Angerstein and St Pancras residents formed an association "to nightly patrol the streets... from half an hour before sunset, till eleven at night, for the public safety, and especially to guard that sex, which a Monster or Monsters in opposition to the dictates of nature and of humanity have dared to assault with wanton and savage cruelty." Cartoonists delighted in depicting ladies looking to their own protection by having milliners fit them with copper petticoats.

The attack on Anne Porter which eventually led to the Monster's arrest on 13 June 1790 – she was turning in her doorway, felt a blow on her hip and saw a man walking leisurely away – had the same casual quality typical of the Halifax incidents. In retrospect, it seems doubtful that Williams was the Monster or only one of a large number of men who habitually pestered women on the London streets – for here again the Monster was not so much a person as a collective symbol for a particular form of contemporary violence. The case against him wasn't strong; he had a modestly-solid alibi for the night in question. However, he appeared to fit all the requirements of the man the authorities were looking for and after a well-attended trial (hampered by the judge's doubt as to what the Monster could be charged with, the case being so unique) Williams was sent to Newgate for six years. He is last heard of giving a ball in his cell at which 20 couples danced to a flute and two violins – "In the merry dance the cuts and the entrechats of the Monster were much admired" – before taking a cold supper with select wines. The guests left at 9pm; Williams had to stay behind.

Under one popular tag or another these mystery assailants are always with us. At the turn of the century 'Jack the Cutter' haunted Chicago's streets stabbing the shoulders or lower parts of unwary pedestrians with a sharp knife; it won't surprise readers to hear that the wounds were never serious, nor that the culprit always took to his heels at once. "Despite a hue and cry 'Jack the Cutter' has always made good his escape," reported the 'Illustrated



Renwick Williams, 23, a Welsh artificial flower maker and former ballet-dancer, was convicted of being 'The Monster' – a buttock-slasher who terrorised late eighteenth-century London. He served six years in Newgate Gaol. [Illustration from Chas. Gordon, *The Old Bailey & Newgate*, London 1902.]

Police News' of 3 February 1906 when describing how the phantom stabber had just logged seven female victims all in one day, "and the police have no clues as to his identity beyond the theory that he is a lunatic at large." Well, that must have seemed obvious.

Then there was the Connecticut Jabber who between 1925 and 1927 managed 26 attacks in streets, stores or public libraries, striking "with almost clock-like regularity" every three months or so by sinking a sharp-pointed instrument into women's breasts and then running off. Superintendent Patrick Flanagan's death was blamed upon the strain of trying to catch the man. But the mystery assailant doesn't need a knife or a razor to inculcate panic. Over 43 bizarre days from 22 December 1933 to 3 February 1934 towns in Botetourt County, Virginia were exposed to a spate of incidents – 16 verifiable ones, perhaps more – where an unknown person or persons sprayed a peculiar, nauseating and unidentified gas into people's homes causing severe symptoms which included headaches, facial swelling and constriction of mouth and throat muscles. These and other details related by Michael Shoemaker in 'The Mad Gasser of Botetourt' (Fate Magazine June 1985) present many clear points of comparison with what we have read about in the Halifax cycle. It was another case of nocturnal winter-time attacks replete with vague reports of suspicious figures running from the scene and ambiguous clues (a nail removed from the window of a stricken house, prints of a woman's high heel and so on). With the community on the defensive, families began to stay with relatives until – despite medical evidence that the attacks may have been genuine – there was speculation that the unaccountably-uncatchable gasser might be a figment of the imagination. The same doubts arose as escalation set in with neighbouring Roanoke Co. becoming subject to 'gasser' reports. Ten years later, Mattoon in Illinois experienced an outbreak almost identical down to the nausea-paralysis of victims, explanations of hysteria, running men and heel marks, though Mr Shoemaker observes that here sensational journalism may indeed have created an hysterical response.

And mystery assailants – slashers, rippers, gassers and snipers – are only types of a sporadic flap phenomenon whereby some anomaly seems to pose a crucial threat to a community... and then evaporates, leaving only red faces in its wake. What do we learn from all these irrational stories? Definitely much more than the suggestion that across all times and in the most unlikely-seeming places people can be smitten by mass hysteria. It simply won't do to adopt a Victorian attitude which implies that the victims of the Halifax, London and Botetourt scares were guilty of mass credulity which turned them into children starting at shadows on the wall of a giant nursery that was an entire community. We need to understand how and why.

We need to understand how and why because today's media reports tell us we are living in a golden age of violence. Never have we felt so vulnerable to muggers, rapists and other 'grievous bodily harm' merchants. The facts are all there : this is the reality of it.

But the facts were all there in 1938 as well. The Slasher could be back among us before we know it.

...LY COURIER AND GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER ... 1986.

7: In memoriam

The Halifax Slasher 1986

Halifax has not forgotton the Slasher – not quite. In September 1986, after the 'Evening Courier' generously mentioned that I would be interested in hearing from anyone old enough to recall the scare of 1938, I received around a score of letters from senior citizens who had lived through that uncanny episode in the town's history. Their personal reminiscences contained a few details not found in published Slasher accounts – for instance, references were made to an unfounded rumour that a certain person, father of one of TV's biggest celebrities, was apparently under suspicion of being the mystery assailant – which was more than I had hoped for. But far more forcefully, each correspondent reflected in his or her own way the atmosphere of excitement, terror and tension which prevailed over those few weeks nearly half a century ago. What follows is a sample of those private impressions.

Apart from being locally known for the huge volumes of Christmas cards he has made on behalf of various charities, Albert Paradise is a most useful man to ask about Halifax's early 20th century history – especially where it relates to Stainland and Holywell Green. Of the Slasher panic he writes:

I was then 22 years old and working at a carpet mill down West Vale. It was night when I left the mill – nearly eleven; all the streets were deserted. As I was waiting for my bus a face kept peering round the corner and it was a man with a light raincoat.The tale was going round that the Slasher wore a white raincoat. Anyway, the bus came and I was glad to get away home to Stainland.

All the buses were nearly empty as the people were afraid to go out at night... and even the fish and chip shops were very quiet and losing trade. One shop in Halifax did very well selling walking sticks which were outside with a notice on: 'Slasher Sticks'. It was even a joke on the stage and I remember going to the Halifax Palace Theatre – Jenny Howard, one of the radio and music-hall stars, walked on stage and looked round and said, "Is the Slasher following me?" A lot of people carried sticks and some iron bars to protect themselves and even pepper and hatpins in their bags.

Not a few informants emphasised how common it was to see blunt implements or improvised weapons being carried at the height of the scare. "I was 16 at the time and remember my mother taking me and meeting me from work with a poker wrapped in a newspaper," says the authoress of an unsigned letter. "People carried all kinds of things and no-one dared go out. It was terrible... and so many people under suspicion who had nothing to do with all this." Mrs Margaret Costelloe (even younger at the time – just 14 years old) speaks of women coming to work at Dean Clough armed with pepper-pots "and boys used to see the women home." It was on the steps of the same Dean Clough in Crib Lane that the soft-footed Slasher grappled with Mrs Kenny before outdistancing the pursuit. "That was why I left," concludes Mrs Costelloe, "and got a job nearer home in Holywell Green."

As the panic escalated, others found themselves caught up in events which became increasingly disturbed and disturbing. When she was 18 or 19, Mrs M. Mitchell

was courting... and we were coming home one night – we had been to the pictures... when all at once a cry went up: "The Slasher!" and within five minutes there gathered an ugly crowd of at least 200. They had a man cornered, pinned up against a wall, and I actually believe if the police hadn't arrived they would have lynched him. Then my late husband (then my boyfriend) was going home after leaving me another night, very late, when he realised he was being followed by two men (plainclothes police). They followed him right home, then asked him where he had been. He was wearing a trench raincoat fashionable at the time. The 'Slasher' was supposed to have that kind of coat... People really were getting afraid before they knew the truth. It was nearly as frightening as the 'Ripper'... I

■ Civilian 'vigilance patrols' at Crib—lane, 29 November 1938.

;h I could remember more, but I'll never forget that night coming home from the films...

And Mr H.Bellfield relates:

I myself was involved in a funny way, but it could have been quite nasty. One Saturday night about ten, a police sergeant came to our house and asked me if I would come to the police station and bail out a friend of mine who had been in a bit of trouble just at that time. While making our way to the station a local picture house was loosing after the show. Now, my escort was Sgt. Lee, a big and powerful man, and I was wearing a very light raincoat like the Slasher wore when he was supposed to attack his victims. Of course, the people seeing me with the sergeant and the light raincoat thought the Slasher had been caught and they started to shout and boo and it looked like getting out hand. So the sergeant kept close to me and told the crowd I was not the Slasher, but was helping a friend who was at the station. Anyway, we got to the station, but quite a lot of people followed us. When we got inside my friend had been bailed out by someone else, so the police took me another way home...

It was very bad for the womenfolk who dared not go out alone and at times a lot of our neighbours, husbands, sons, formed little bands – vigilantes – and escorted them to work and shopping... it was a terrible thing at the time.

That refrain again! Mr Bellfield's mention of vigilantes brings us to the reminiscences of folk who were actively involved in the various civilian anti-Slasher measures. As a member of the Halifax Fire Brigade, Mr Wilfred Haigh was at the centre of the carefully-organized emergency network that monitored the safety of the streets after dark, and his letter presents an intriguing picture of how the media came to react to the scare. He opens with some remarks on the double-attack at Barkisland which served as a curtain-raiser to what was to occur in Halifax proper:

One of the two young ladies... was engaged to a member of the Brigade. She rang her boyfriend from the Halifax Infirmary, so we knew all about it within the hour. After a report next day in the local paper the affair blew up into a national sensation. Panic spread throughout the town, pubs were almost empty, cinema and theatre audiences down to a mere handful of people, many dances and social functions were cancelled and postponed. Men escorted their wives, sisters or girlfriends to and from work and the streets were almost deserted.

The Fire Brigade employed a middle-aged woman as cook and for a week we escorted her from home and back with a spanner, tyre lever or length of lead piping. Bands of vigilantes searched the streets armed with a hideous variety of weapons ranging from Indian clubs or spiked maces...

It was unsafe to be out on the streets alone, One had only to run after a bus and someone would shout, "That's him!" and start a hue and cry. One day I was off duty and I parked the car in a cul-de-sac near my parents' home. It was a racy six-cyl. SS, forerunner of the Jaguars, and with orange body and brown wings. It aroused the suspicions of the beat-bobby, who rang in to report its presence to police HQ. Fortunately, the switchboard operator recognised the registration number and description and was able to allay the policeman's suspicions. Notwithstanding, the officer called round to check, and warned me to choose a less suspicious parking spot. That evening my girlfriend and I went to the cinema in Huddersfield for safety's sake.

Fleet Street had a field day and for a week the best hotels were full of reporters. It was said that drinks were freely available to anyone who had a story to tell. One of the first things that Chief Inspector Salisbury did was to prohibit press reporting and that put an end to the affair.

Patrolling the streets by night wasn't without its compensations or its lighter moments. From the point of view of Mrs E. Cawood (who was acquainted with one of the women who subsequently confessed to having rendered a false Slasher report) and her friends, it was "just an adventure". Tom Naylor, a 66 year-old cricket fanatic – he is, incidentally, the author of 'Yorkshire Cricket Diary' and 'Cricket Hotch-Potch' – even manages to make it sound like fun:

I was in my nineteenth year at the time and as a six-feet Vigilante, member of the Rover Scout Troop, I had the delightful privilege of escorting a most charming young lady through Halifax's main cemetery on my way home from work every evening! Needless to say, it was a most pleasurable occupation! Despite my physique, I invariably carried a

stick. During that last week in November of 1938 I was certainly fully occupied watching the progress of the England tourists in South Africa, recording details, escorting girls (in a gentlemanly manner, of course) and following my scout activities, not to mention my clerical occupation and night classes!

One particularly foggy evening I was hooked up with a fellow Rover Scout dressed as a woman in order to trap the 'Slasher'. We were walking across the North Bridge, Halifax, and the young man was about to leave me to walk down a very dark passage. I was about to follow when I heard my father and mother call out rather alarmingly from the other end of the bridge: "Tom! We've seen you – whatever are you doing with a girl like that?" They were very Edwardian-minded! I had some explaining to do when I arrived home some hours later!

Despite its 98,000 population, it was impossible to live in Halifax and not be affected by the Slasher on some level or other. As we have just heard, you might go in fear of him, become involved in the hunt for him or be mistaken for him; it was also likely that you would be living close to the scene of his depredations and recognise his victims as your neighbours, as indeed did Mr Harry Lambeth who sent me a sketch of Thackray Street where he was dwelling when "the lady at Number 24" – Mrs Cannon – was reportedly attacked. "Most of the houses were of the back-to-back type," he explains, "and their toilets were on the street in the same block as the dustbins or middins, as we called them... When ladies or children used the toilets after dark the menfolk stood guard at the entrance; the street was very dark, as we only had old gas-lamps."

An important point of dissension at Mrs Cannon's trial was whether or not she had caused the damage to her clothing with some sharp instrument; this, of course, was precisely what Salisbury claimed she had admitted to doing. Mr Lambeth believes that it was subsequently found that the real explanation lay in the fact that she had caught her arm upon a nail driven into the wall to anchor the end of a washing line. I do not recall having seen this suggestion in press accounts, but if true it might add substance to the theory that the victim at one stage genuinely believed she had been attacked: a sort of false conclusion arising from an accidental stumble in the dark, perhaps, and equally accidental contact with the nail as she fell. And if this is what transpired, it would support the view that her disputed 'confession' was deservedly ignored by the Bench, albeit for quite different reasons.

Besides mentioning a fresh case of a woman slashed (?) in broad daylight while walking down Gibbet Street when a running man banged into her, Mr Lambeth adds another unpublicized detail missed by the Yorkshire Ripperologists who probed Halifax's past for gory analogues. Though no blame can be attached to the town for the fact, one of its less wholesome former inhabitants was none other than the notably-psychopathic John Reginald Halliday Christie, latterly of 10 Rillington Place, London, and executed on 15 July 1953 for the murders of at least six women.

I am also grateful for Mrs Dorothy Pitchforth's recall of details impinging on the two Mary Sutcliffe incidents: attacks crucial to the development of the panic and which may be seen here from the different perspective of someone virtually on the spot.

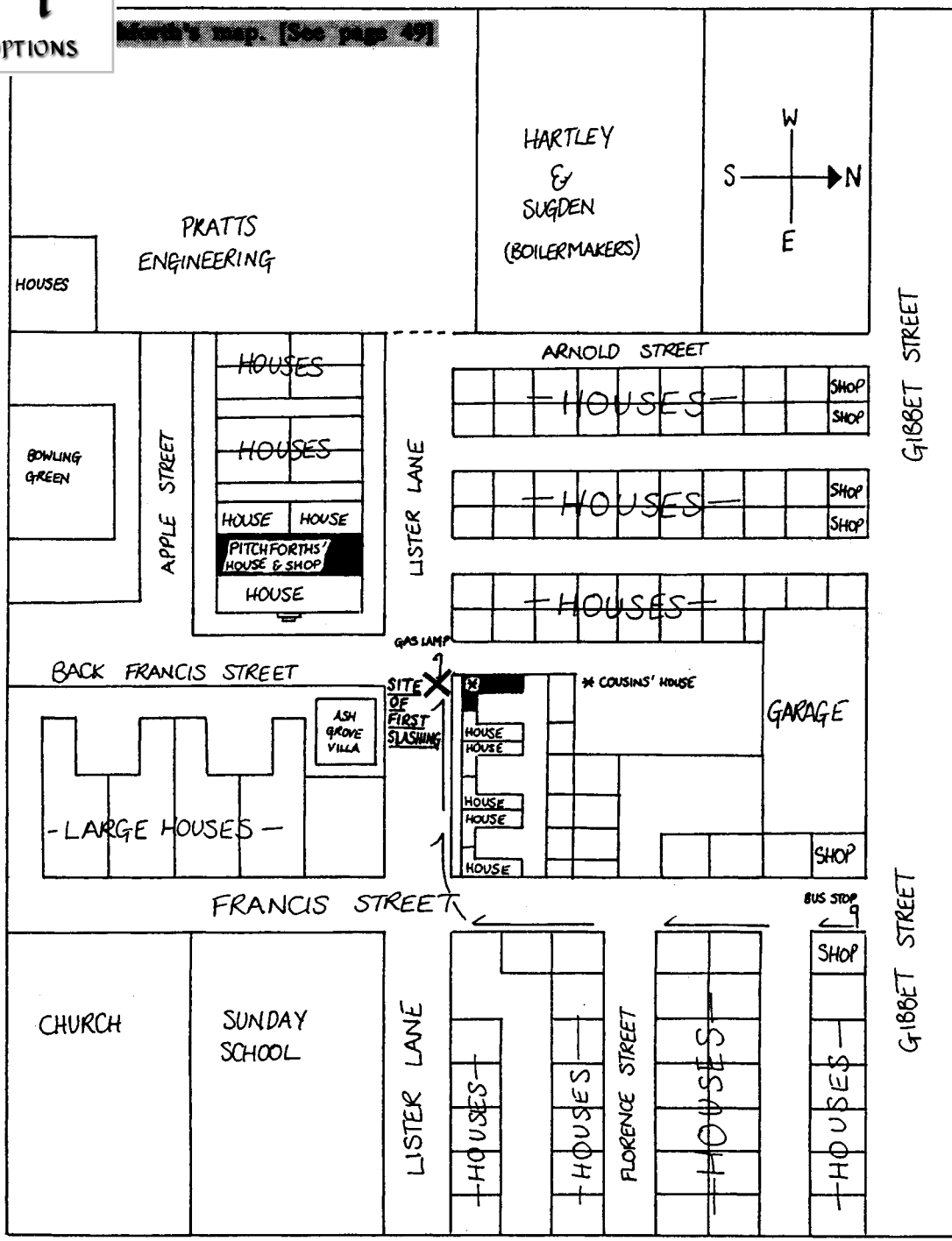
Mrs Pitchforth was born in Halifax, but her family moved to Blackpool soon afterwards. On their return in 1936, when she took employment as a weaver, they found that

Halifax was a very quiet town, really, you could go anywhere after dark and not worry – it was quite safe... We started work at 7am and I can't ever remember being frightened anywhere, so it was a totally new experience for me.

With the advent of the Slasher all that changed:

At that time I was a keen cyclist and wherever we went – when we met anyone we knew – all over Yorkshire and Lancashire they used to say, "Here come the 'Slashers'". It may have been a bit of a joke when we were away from Halifax, but people believed the danger here. The streets were empty at night. If women came to our shop for anything, their husbands or big sons came with them and it was a common thing for them to carry their poker with them in their hand.

As the main text has tried to show, the alteration came about after Mary Sutcliffe was slashed while walking by a lamp-post in Lister Lane. The Pitchforth family could scarcely have been closer to the scene:



The Slasher allegedly waited underneath the gas lamp marked next to Mrs Pitchforth's cousins' house and there slashed Mary Sutcliffe. But the cousins, whose room looked onto the scene of the alleged slashing, saw no such disturbance.

time I was about 18 years old and lived at home with my mother and father who had the off licence and grocery business. The shop faced into Lister Lane and the living rooms were in front and behind. My aunt, uncle and cousins lived just a little below on the other side of the road and the alleged assault was said to have taken place by the lamp-post just outside their front door. On the night concerned my father was clearing up in the shop; it had to stay open till 10pm in those days. I think it was about 10.10 or 10.15 when it happened. My father didn't hear anything. My two cousins slightly older than me were in the small front bedroom about three yards at the most from the lamp-post. They were doing each other's hair at a small dressing-table with mirror in front of the window; they didn't see or hear anything; and I had been out with a friend in town and caught a bus, which I alighted from in Gibbet Street (at Francis Street) and came along... and would have been there at the time 'it' took place , so we were pretty sure that if there was any such slashing it wasn't done there. When I came up, there was no-one about.

Mrs Pitchforth's map shows that her route from the bus stop led her straight past the gas lamp where Mary Sutcliffe claimed to have been slashed. This and the proximity of the other members of the Pitchforth family to the incident-spot makes it hard to see how they could have failed to notice something - if there was anything to notice. Mrs Pitchforth continues:

People in the area - indeed, in all parts of Halifax - were really frightened to go out and it really hit our evening trade. At that time I was a weaver and started work early and my father used to take me down to work in his car. If he ever went anywhere and walked in the dark, he carried an Indian club, the type used for swinging exercises, in his pocket.

Later there was another scare; someone ran into the shop and shouted, "He's run through one of the passages and gone on the Bowling Green", so my mother rang the police. They were quite stern with her and said, "Who was it? - How did you know it was him?" and all sorts of searching questions - and really she didn't know anything at all except that a stranger had run into the shop... At that time not many people had phones and we had a sign on the wall saying that people could use ours - it was at the top of the cellar steps and not in the private house at the top of the building, so that would explain how people knew we had a phone. Someone said that the Slasher was wearing a fawn raincoat and anyone out in one became an object of suspicion afterwards.

The police do not seem to have shown much interest in Mrs Pitchforth's assertion that the Sutcliffe attack could not have taken place without her cousins becoming aware of it. Was there more to this episode than the newspapers found to print - or was there less? Whatever else is true, it gave a certain impetus to the Slasher panic, yet that subtle process had swung into motion eight days before on the dismally-wet November night when two Barkisland girls took a short cut down Ripponden Bank on the way to their evening classes. By way of conclusion, here is a summary of an article in the 'Evening Courier' one week after my appeal for information appeared. The title is, 'I was the Slasher's first victim', and the speaker one of those two Barkisland girls recalling the occurrence which first alerted Halifax folk to the fear that some furious spirit-of-the-night was abroad amongst them:

I was with a friend and we were on our way to an arts and crafts class. Someone jumped on us from behind and my head was slashed with either a knife or a razor. I still have the scars and the hair has never grown on the part of my head where I was cut...

The article states that she has never told her children about her experience:

I just don't like to talk about it, but I think they may know something of what happened. Older people in Ripponden still remember the incident. That was the beginning of the Slasher scare. After that other people also said they had been attacked by the man, but I think my friend and I were the only genuine victims. It was a horrifying experience. I felt as though I was fighting for my life.

Local history is often the sum of individuals' private memories and interpretations. That these people can recall the past so vividly is a testimony to the power of the Halifax Slasher. Rationally and literally he may not have existed; yet nonetheless he reached out and touched their lives.

8: Chronology

[HC = Halifax Daily Courier & Guardian
YEP = Yorkshire Evening Post
YO = Yorkshire Observer
SS = Sheffield Star
BC = Barnsley Chronicle]

Wed. 16 Nov. 1938	Gertrude Watts and Mary Gledhill (the 'Barkisland Girls') attacked at Ripponden Old Bank with 'hatchet' or 'mallet'	HC & YEP 17 Nov; YO 18 Nov
Fri. 18 Nov. 1938	Manchester report: Wm. Mason slashes typist's face during Two Minutes' Silence	SS 18 Nov; HC 12 Dec
Mon. 21 Nov. 1938	Halifax: Mary Sutcliffe attacked in Lister Lane c.10.10pm – first Halifax Slasher incident	HC 22 & 23 Nov; YEP & YO 22 Nov
Wed. 23 Nov. 1938	Bradford slashing panic	YO 24 Nov
Thu. 24 Nov. 1938	Halifax: Mr Clayton Aspinall attacked behind School of Art – £10 reward announced. Attacker receives 'Halifax Slasher' label	HC & YEP & YO 25 Nov
Fri. 25 Nov. 1938	Halifax: Mrs Annie Cannon attacked c.6.20pm in Highroad Well district	HC 26 Nov & 15 Dec; YEP 26 Nov
	Halifax: Mrs Alice McDonald attacked at 6.55pm, Rugby Terrace district, Ovenden	HC & YO 26 Nov
	Elland: Mr Percy Waddington attacked at 9.55pm	HC 26 Nov & 3 Dec; YEP 3 Dec
	Halifax: Mrs Hilda Lodge attacked in Green Lane close on 10pm. Clifford Edwards mauled by mob in mistake for the Slasher.	HC & YO 26 Nov; HC 15 Dec
	Sowerby Bridge scare	YO 26 Nov
	"When will the mystery attacker strike next?" Beginnings of vigilanteism – women chaperoned. Are there two Slashers?	HC 26 Nov
Sat. 26 Nov. 1938	Huddersfield: Jack Townend fights attacker at Longwood, 6.15am	YEP 28 Nov
	Elland: raincoat clue found at the Old Earth RU club	HC 28 Nov

	Halifax: baker Leslie Nicholl's apron cut by Slasher in Aspinall Street, c.7.30pm	HC 28 Nov & 14 Dec; YEP 14 Dec
	Halifax: Mrs Margaret Reynolds attacked at Caddy Field, 11.30–12.00pm	HC & YEP 28 Nov
Sun. 27 Nov. 1938	Halifax: Beatrice Sorrell slashed in Bedford Street North c.7.30pm	HC 28 Nov & 14 Dec; YO 28 Nov; YEP 14 Dec
	Mytholmroyd: in Twine Lane Lily Woodhead attacked at 10.10pm	HC 28 Nov, 14 & 15 Dec & 16 Jan 1939
	15 year–old Fred Baldwin mistaken (?) for Slasher and beaten up at Copley	HC & YEP & SS 6 Dec; YO 7 Dec
	Reward upped to £25; patrols increased. Allegations of adverse affect on trade and "wild rumours". New description issued	HC & YEP 28 Nov
Mon. 28 Nov. 1938	Mrs Constance Wood attacked in Long Lover Lane, Pellon at 6.45am	HC & YEP 28 Nov
	"Who is Shielding the Terror Man?"	HC 28 Nov
	'Parrot–nosed' man reportedly terrorising Wincobank, Sheffield	SS 30 Nov
Tue. 29 Nov. 1938	Salisbury & Studdard arrive in Halifax	HC & YEP 29 Nov
	Halifax: Mary Sutcliffe slashed for second time, 4.55pm. Has Slasher a rota of victims?	HC & SS 29 Nov
	Halifax: Winnie McCall attacked, 6.45pm	SS 29 Nov
	Halifax: Mrs Kenny attacked in Crib Lane, 7.20pm	HC & YO & YEP & SS 29 Nov
	Wigan: at Platt Bridge Winifred Walsh is attacked in her backyard	HC & YEP & SS 29 Nov
	Manhunt now compared with that for Jack the Ripper. Patrols swell; protection urged for bye–election; thin attendance at public functions	HC & YEP 29 Nov
	Reports of attacks at Stavely, Doncaster, etc	SS 29 Nov
	15 year–old boy attacked in Bradford	HC 6 Dec

	Two 14 year–old girls attacked in Manchester and Bradford	YEP & News Chronicle 30 Nov
	Hilda Sharrock found bound and gagged at Rufford	YEP 30 Nov
	Elland: at 9.15pm the raincoat is identified. At 11.55pm Percy Waddington confesses to having made a false slashing report	HC & YEP 3 Dec
Wed. 30 Nov. 1938	Halifax: Nellie Widdop attacked by a "dark figure". Police rule this out as a 'Slasher' incident	HC 1 Dec
	Carlton: 15 year–old boy admits to having made false report of attack	HC & BC 10 Dec
	Slasher believed to be inactive, but may strike again. 'Lurking men' reports	HC & YEP 30 Nov, 1 Dec
	More cases: Giggleswick, Glasgow &c.	HC & SS & YEP & News Chronicle 1 Dec; YO 30 Nov, 1 Dec
Thu. 1 Dec. 1938	Percy Waddington charged with having effected a public mischief	HC & YO 3 Dec
	Confessions of false reporting from Sorrell, Lodge and Nicholl	HC & YEP 14 & 15 Dec
	May McNeeney committed to Quarter Sessions on public mischief charges at Oldham	HC & YEP 1 Dec
	Slasher reports from Shepherd's Bush; confessions from Huddersfield &c.	News Chronicle 2 Dec
Fri. 2 Dec. 1938	"Carry on, Halifax": formal announcement that the scare is over. YEP reports new case at Bournemouth	HC & YEP & SS 2 Dec
	More confessions (Glasgow &c.)	
	Doncaster slash attack is immediately refuted	The Times 3 Dec
Sat. 3 Dec. 1938	Percy Waddington committed to trial at Leeds Quarter Sessions	HC & YEP & SS 3 Dec
	Monica Abbott remanded at Blackburn	HC & YEP 3 Dec
	Manchester coroner hears of 'slasher' suicide	SS 3 Dec

Dec. 1938	Winnifred McCall confesses to having made false report	HC 14 Dec
Mon. 5 Dec. 1938	Halifax said to be back to normal; scare dying away	HC & YEP 5 Dec
Tue. 6 Dec. 1938	Wm. Spencer fined for assault on Fred Baldwin at Copley. Outside Halifax several more legal actions are taken – various people bound over at Blackburn	HC & YEP & SS 6 Dec; YO 7 Dec
Thu. 8 Dec. 1938	Question on Slasher investigation in House of Commons	HC 8 Dec
Sat. 10 Dec. 1938	15 year–old Cudworth boy bound over for false report at Barnsley. Monica Abbot bound over at Blackburn	HC & BC & SS 10 Dec
Wed. 14 Dec. 1938	McCall, Nicholl & Sorrell all committed to Quarter Sessions. DPP Prosecutor Curtis describes "snowballing" of reports	HC & YEP & SS 14 Dec; YO 15 Dec
Thu. 15 Dec. 1938	Lodge committed to Quarter Sessions. At Todmorden Lily Woodhead is found to have absconded	HC & YEP 15 Dec; YO 16 Dec
Fri. 16 Dec. 1938	Cannon committed to Quarter Sessions; Bench Chairman issues warning on prejudging guilt	HC & YEP 16 Dec
Tue. 27 Dec. 1938	During Otley Street, Bradford brawl a man flourishes knife and proclaims himself to be the 'Slasher'	YO 13 Jan 1939
Mon. 9 Jan. 1939	Percy Waddington bound over for three years at West Riding Quarter Sessions	YEP 9 Jan 1939; YO 10 Jan 1939
Tue. 10 Jan. 1939	Hilda Sharrock bound over at Preston Quarter Assizes for false report	HC 10 Jan 1939
Fri. 13 Jan. 1939	Lily Woodhead arrested	HC 16 Jan 1939
Mon. 16 Jan. 1939	Lily Woodhead committed to Quarter Sessions trial	HC & YEP 16 Jan 1939
Mon. 23 Jan. 1939	At Halifax Quarter Sessions Sorrell, Lodge, Nicholl and McCall are committed to prison; Cannon's case is dismissed	HC & YEP 23 Jan 1939
Mon. 27 Mar. 1939	Lily Woodhead is bound over on two years' probation	YEP 27 Mar 1939

Additional references

The main reference materials for the Halifax Slasher were the daily editions of the newspapers listed above for the period October 1938 – January 1939. Additional material was taken from the News of the World, Reynolds's News, Evening News, News Chronicle and The Times over more or less the same span.

The following may be of interest to anyone wishing to pursue the 'Mystery Assailant syndrome' in a broader context:

On mystery assailants generally

Fortean Times no.45 (Winter 1985): 'Phantom attackers' issue (available from FT at 96 Mansfield Road, London NW3, price £1.50)

Michael Goss: 'A cut below the rest', Men Only 47:6 pp.8–10, 12

" " : 'The maniac on the platform', Magonia 19 (May 1985) pp.3–6, 22

Michael Shoemaker: 'The mad gasser of Botetourt', Fate Magazine June 1985 pp.62–68

Paul Sieveking (ed): 'Man bites man' (London 1981)

On 'The Monster' – ie Renwick Williams

L. Benson: 'The book of remarkable trials and notorious characters... 1700 – 1840' (London 1871)

Charles Gordon: 'The Old Bailey and Newgate' (London 1902)

William Jackson: 'The new & complete Newgate Calendar' (London 1818)

Andrew Knapp & William Baldwin: 'Criminal chronology' (London 1810)

Camden Pelham: 'The chronicles of crime or, the Newgate calendar' (London 1886)

'Sylvanus Urban' (ed): The Gentleman's Magazine (1790) – see issues for July, pp.660–662 and December, pp.1143 ff.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Bob Rickard and Mike Dash of Fortean Times; Staff of Halifax Central Library; the Editor and Staff of the Halifax Evening Courier; Yorkshire Evening Post; Inspector Shackleton, Halifax police, and Chief Superintendent Cooper, West Yorks. Metropolitan Police.

The following Halifax residents generously contributed their reminiscences: Mr H. Bellfield; Mrs E. Cawood; Mrs Margaret Costelloe; Mr Wilfred Haigh; Mr Harry Lambeth; Mrs M. Mitchell; Mr Tom Naylor; Mr Albert Paradise; Mrs Dorothy Pitchforth

Cover illustration by Brian Watson
Maps drawn by Richard Furlong

FT

OPTIONS

BACK ISSUES AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

■ £1.75 / US$3.00 each ■ 4 issues £7.00 / US$12.00 ■ 8 issues £14.00 / US$24.00 ■
■ OP1: £1/ US$2.50 ■ OP2: £1.50 / US$3.00 ■ PQ: £1.80 / US$3.00 ■

FORTEAN TIMES: 96 MANSFIELD ROAD, LONDON NW3 2HX, ENGLAND

★FT1-30 — Out of print.

★FT31 — The Chinese Wildman; Gateways to mystery; the Touch of Death; UFO muggers; Mystery maned big cats in USA; ball lightning; synchronous names; little people; and fake doctors.

★FT32 — Canadian blob fall; mystery big cats in USA, UK and Australia; Gateways (pt.2); occult murder; fairy tales come true; child sacrifice; Chinese and Indian Forteana.

★FT33 — The Enfield Poltergeist; mythology of UFO abductions; Gateways (pt.3); mass hysteria at Nottingham; simulacra; coffin stories; giant snakes; Eastern European UFOs; Jeoff Watson's Nessie pix; and Chinese Forteana.

★FT34 — Congo dinosaur hunt; phantom hitch-hikers; lake monster names; interview with Dr Jean Bolen on synchronicity; the Welsh 'puma' and other big cats; beached whales; animal saboteurs; nature follows art; ice falls; inept crimes; Trashkashic records; odd Irish doings; and giant squids.

★FT35 — The Myth of Darwinism; an SHC from 1744; the Run-Runamo Runes; Far Eastern Forteana; spontaneous combustions; antiquities; strange trees; magic fuels; frog and stone falls; mystery big cats; bizarre bacteria; TV science; occult murder; and Fortean travel in USA.

★FT36 — Anomalistics; photos of Jesus; *Gent's Mag* extracts; hermits and wildmen; strange tales; toads in holes; bleeding statues and visions; the Buddha's UFO; DIY surgery; coin, ice and sand falls; ASSAP and CSAR; jellyfish in the sky; Forteana from China; USA monitor lizards; and Nessie.

★FT37 — Australia's lizard monsters; energy from space; encounters with Greek gods; interview with Dr Rupert Sheldrake on a *New Science of Life*; a female prophet; Irish oddities; mystery USA kangaroos; UFO hallucinations; falls of crabs, frogs, peas and fish; visions, stigmatics and fasting; plants in odd places; UK bear scares; talking polts; homing rings; and family incarcerations.

★FT38 — Psychometry of cattle mutilations; isotope myth; synchronicity of clowns and 22; two BVM visions; talking polts; recent discoveries of old and new species; objects penetrating brains; double image; strange fires; Rasta folklore; comix columns and letters.

★FT39 — Robert Anton Wilson on Synchronicity in *Finnegan's Wake*; SHC survivor Jack Angel; entombed toads; *Gent's Mag* extracts (pt.2); homing wallets; mystery cats; snippers and snatchers; Chinese hair-clipping panics; death tableaux; ice falls; updates; columns, letters and comix.

★FT40 — more *Living Wonders* (rat kings, hibernating birds, winged cats, falls of wheat and tadpoles, dinosaur survival, animal loyalty, long returns, avian abductions, etc); chronology of the Exmoor Beast; *Gent's Mag* extracts (pt.3); name synchronicity; Chessie, Chinese hair clipping panics; End Times Bulletin; ball & bead lightning; snakes & bugs in tummies; unconscious births; Japweed; cornfield holes; ice falls; Vatican-masonic links; Creatures from the Black Lagoon; and lots more in this thick 72-page issue.

★FT41 — our tenth anniversary special issue. 76 pages of articles by the Bords, Christie, Clark, Coleman, Costello, Evans, Fideler, Heuvelmans, Hoffman, Keel, Michell, Moore, Pennick, Persinger, Rickard, Shephard, Shiels, Westrum and X. Art by Emerson and Pokkettz.

★FT42 — another jumbo 76 page issue (now become standard) to include our Strange Days section, a news roundup of the whole spectrum of strangeness. Plus Michael Persinger interview; giant squid hypothesis for lake monsters; a new regular feature gleaned from William Corliss' *Science Frontiers*; Exmoor Beast; fire nanny case; world sightings of the Blessed Virgin; bleeding statues; coffin humour; mermaid controversy; appalling bad luck; and the east London fishfall.

★FT43 — critique of the Cottingley fairy photographs; hypothesis of the two Christopher Columbuses; lightning at York Minster; human horns; modern folklore; strange trees; drunken animals; Forteana from France, Iceland and the Philippines; recent polts and ice falls; Polish Blessed Virgin appearance; *Science Frontiers* and lots more.

★FT44 — Thomas Short, 18th cent. portent chronicler; Chinese falls; lycanthropy and ergotism; fairies; UFO hypotheses; spontaneous combustion in objects and humans; earth divot mystery; British mystery big cat survey; African Forteana; Indian wolf boy; a teleporting astrologer; falls of sand, fruit, nuts and fish; plus a general round-up of weirdness in Strange Days.

★FT45 — phantom attackers; stoned on Annie Taylor; *Gent's Mag* extracts (pt.4); the 1913 airship scare; recent feral humans; Forteana from Finland and the USSR; moving statues in Ireland; the giant cat carcases from Scotland; the Japanese mystery mushroom cloud; burial mix-ups; terrible bad luck; stone eater; talking bear; and the usual world survey of enigmas.

★FT46 water monsters of Canada, continental Europe and around the world; mystery of a new Nessie photo plus commentary on some old ones; digital photographic retouching; Chinese folk magic; SHC on TV; a festival of fetishism; swarms; Exmoor Beast; ruined city discoveries; curse of the crying boy; cultish curiosities; historical revisionism; Cromwell's giant porter; and a great deal more.

Occasional Papers

★OP1 — WILDMAN. A compendium on the Chinese equivalent of Yeti and Bigfoot, translated specially from the Chinese. 'A Challenge to Science' by Yuan Zhenxin and Huang Wanpo; 'I Witnessed a Wildman Mother and Child in the Chestnut Forest' by Fan Jingquan; 'Does the Flying Saucer Exist?' by Zhou Xinyan; also 'A Brief Bestiary of Chinese Hill-Monsters' compiled by the booklet's editor, Steve Moore.

★OP2 — TOAD IN THE HOLE. Source Material on the entombed toad phenomenon, 1685-1879, with selected eye witness observations, illustrations and copious footnotes. Compiled by Bob Skinner.

★PUZZLING QUESTIONS — some observations on the history of prodigies. A gripping account of society's reaction to, and use of, prodigies, including Fortean phenomena, in the last two thousand years, by John Nicholson, one of England's few remaining pamphleteers. (Published by Bozo Publications, not FT.)

FT OPTIONS

The HALIFAX SLASHER

The long dark nights of November 1938 brought unimagined terror to the 98,000 inhabitants of Halifax. The West Yorkshire town was thrown into a state of panic by a razor-wielding maniac who materialised suddenly out of the blackness, inflicting a lightning-swift attack on his random victims before melting back into the shadows.

Unpredictable, unreasonable, unidentifiable and above all uncatchable, this mysterious phantom of the nocturnal streets became known as THE HALIFAX SLASHER.

Police declared the attacks had never happened. Slashermania was explained away as a remarkable case of mass hysteria.

THE HALIFAX SLASHER is a real-life mystery story: a crime thriller with no real villain and no crime actually committed. Its author argues that 'mass hysteria' explains nothing of how the Slasher came into being and what he meant, and suggests that – set against a rising fear of urban violence and disillusionment – the Slasher could be back amongst us at any moment.

Michael Goss is a freelance writer living in Essex. Described by Fate Magazine as "one of the best new writers on the paranormal", he has covered a wide range of anomalous subjects and published several books. His work appears regularly in BBC Wildlife, Fate, The Unknown and in Fortean Times, the world's foremost journal of strange phenomena.

UK price £2.50