



On the night of Friday, March 14, 1952, a gang led by Niven Craig (*above*) drove to Waltham Abbey on the outskirts of Epping Forest in Essex bent on house-breaking and robbery. Parking their Buick in Tennyson Avenue (*right*) so it was just out of sight, the five masked men walked some 100 yards down the main road — Honey Lane — to No. 55 on the opposite side

where the Whitens family were asleep. Shortly after 2 a.m. Mrs Whiten was woken up by someone speaking to her and poking a pistol in her face. Leaving one man to keep watch on her, the others went to the other bedrooms and did the same to her husband and sister. All were then tied up, the men demanding the keys to the safe.

## November 2, 1952 – Bentley and Craig

In the early hours of March 15, 1952, a big noisy car drove into Tennyson Avenue, Waltham Abbey and woke one of the residents. Wondering quite what was afoot the woman got up and saw five men get out of the strange car and walk around the corner into Honey Lane. A few minutes later Mrs Beryl Whiten of 55 Honey Lane, Waltham Abbey, was shaken awake from her sleep into the glare of torches in her eyes as she lay in bed with her two children. She soon became aware of no fewer than five men, each wearing a gangster style trilby hat and a scarf as a mask. One of the five pointed a Luger automatic pistol, and demanded the keys to the safe. It was not very long before the rest of the household was awoken, firstly her husband, Herbert Whiten, in the adjoining room, and then her sister, Miss Betty Freeman.

As the keys were not at home, they were unable to give the gunman the items he sought. The Whitens, their young children and sister, spent a terrorised half hour as the five intruders tied them up and searched for alternative items to steal. In the end the robbers made do with taking £4 in cash, a cigarette lighter and some 'Scroll' brand ball-point pens, the whole lot costing less than £6.10s. (£6.50p)

The five then left the house and drove off in their American Buick but the car crashed and turned over shortly after the robbers left. A police area car crew found it at 3.15 a.m., three miles from Waltham Abbey in a ditch adjoining a notoriously fierce double bend on the borders of Chingford.

Another police car travelling down South Street, Enfield, disturbed three men walking

from the direction of the Lea Valley Road (and the car crash). All three ran into the shadows. One of these, local villain George King, 28, was picked up and linked by fingerprints to the Buick and, by possession of one of the still-rare ball-point pens from the Honey Lane robbery. He was also already wanted for a £6,651 mailbag robbery in Bruce Grove, Tottenham, on February 29th, and had eight previous convictions. Considered by some of the policemen who knew him as 'London's No. 1 Gunman', he had only been released from a seven-year term for shop breaking in January 1951.

Having got the car and linked it to King, it was a natural progression to try and contact the registered keeper and then the new owner and question them about the crime. The first was 27-year-old Cyril Burney and



According to the report in the Press the following day, the robbers had backed the car into the drive of No. 55 to enable one of the men to climb on the roof to cut the telephone wire. Malcolm

Springham, left, brought down his 1953 Buick Riviera for us to picture it on the same spot. Bryn Elliott, right, explains what took place 60 years ago to James Norton who now resides in No. 55.

The keys were not in the house so, after having cut the telephone wire, the robbers departed having taken £4 from Mrs Whiten's wallet, a Ronson cigarette lighter and several of the then-new ball-point pens. Later that night Police Constable Leonard McCartney found the black Buick overturned in the ditch (right) alongside a tricky double bend, some 120 yards north of the Fox pub on the Sewardstone Road, some three miles from Honey Lane. At the same time another police car was driving along South Street in Ponders End near Enfield, when its headlights revealed three men walking along the road. When the policemen stopped to question them, two of the men ran off but George King was caught. He appeared in court in June and was sentenced to 12 years' although he died three months later.



The tree is badly scarred from many accidents on this notorious bend on the Sewardstone Road.

the second was 26-year-old Niven Craig. Both of them were known in police circles and they both went on the run.

George King, who was identified at Waltham Abbey by Betty Freeman, was dealt with alone for both of the crimes some time before the other two were traced. After being committed for trial at the Essex Assizes from Chingford Magistrates' Court, he was found guilty and sent away for 12 years on June 18, 1952. George King only served three months of his term as he died in Pentonville Prison on September 11, 1952.

Three days later, on September 14, Craig and Burney were arrested in Bayswater. Craig was found in possession of a loaded gun and extra loose ammunition. Dealt with at the Central Criminal Court, Niven Craig received a sentence of 12 years' imprisonment on October 30. In the court at the time was Niven's mother and younger brother, 16-year-old Christopher. It is said that Christopher was deeply shocked at the treatment his brother received and harboured a deep hatred for all policemen, and particularly for the Waltham Abbey police after this second run in with them. It was said that the first brush with the law in the town had resulted in the arrest of one of the gang for a raid on the premises of Betser's, a wholesale tobacconist and confectioner in Rue de St Lawrence. Niven Craig's defence had included both a denial of involvement and a veiled suggestion that Christopher was one of the untraced robbers in Honey Lane.

*Bryn Elliott, Police Historian,  
Waltham Abbey, 2011*

When he sentenced two men to twelve years' imprisonment for armed robbery and robbery with violence yesterday, Mr Justice Hilbery told one of them, Niven Scott Craig, 28:

'You are a young man determined to indulge in desperate crime. I do not remember in the course of some seventeen years on the bench a young man your age who struck me as being so dangerous as you.'

The judge had been told at the Old Bailey that when police went to arrest Craig and the other man, Cyril Burney, 27, in Kensington Gardens Square, London, Craig put his hand under his pillow where he had a fully-loaded automatic pistol. Detective-Sergeant William Lewis jumped for the bed and took the pistol from Craig's hand.

Craig and Burney were said by the prosecution to have been in a gang of five men, masked and wearing trilby hats, who broke into a house at Waltham Abbey, Essex, where they robbed Herbert Whiten of £4 and a lighter after using violence.

Speaking of Mrs Beryl Whiten, wife of the victim of the robbery, the judge said to the jury: 'You may think it enough to frighten the life out of any woman being awakened in the middle of the night by a torch shining in

her face, and finding a man with a gun in his hand and five men in all in the room in masks and hats pulled down — and she a lone, defenceless woman.

'But that is the way today,' Mr. Justice Hilbery went on, 'and almost every day we read in the papers of men in the country behaving this way. The cowardice of it revolts any decent person.

'But we must not, in deciding a case, allow our anger and horror and contempt for that sort of thing to weigh our judgment in a particular case,' the judge said.

Craig, who was also charged with possessing the pistol, had said he got it in Italy with 200 rounds of live ammunition. Commenting on this the Judge said:

'For a mere souvenir one would not require live rounds, and Craig had said that he kept it because he was interested in shooting.' Of Craig's excuse that he had no chance to unload the gun before he returned to the room of his girlfriend, the judge said:

'To unload it is a demonstrative way of making the thing harmless, but he said out of consideration for her nervousness and sensitiveness he did not unload it in her presence.'

The jury might think that Craig when in the witness box answered some questions with 'impudent indifference' the judge said.

When the jury had found Craig and Burney both guilty of armed robbery and robbery with violence and Craig also of possess-

ing the gun with intent to endanger life, the judge told Craig: 'You are cool and cold-blooded. I believe that if you had the opportunity to do so you would shoot any police officer who was attempting to arrest you or any lawful citizen who tried to prevent you from doing some felony.'

'I think you would do it absolutely coldly and utterly regardless of the pain you were inflicting' said the judge. Craig smiled when sentenced and appeared absolutely unconcerned. He cried out loudly before being sentenced: 'I am definitely not guilty of this charge and I shall appeal.'

The judge quietly told him he would find all the necessary papers for an appeal in his cell.

To Burney the judge said, 'You, too, are dangerous.'

Detective-Inspector Garrod put before the court a long record of Craig's criminal career from 1940. A field general court-martial sentenced him to five years penal servitude in 1947 for holding up drivers of Army vehicles at pistol point and stealing their vehicles in Austria. His Army character was described as very bad.

Inspector Garrod said Burney was sentenced to five years' in 1948 for store breaking, when eighteen similar cases were taken into consideration. He had been released two months before the robbery at Waltham Abbey.

*Daily Mirror, October 31, 1952*



Niven Craig and his accomplice Cyril Burney were traced to a room in one of the cheap hotels in Kensington Gardens Square in Bayswater. Craig attempted to pull out his gun but was overpowered and on October 30 received a sentence of 12 years. The fourth Honey Lane robber was never caught although it has been speculated that it was Craig's younger brother Christopher. In any event, it was the catalyst to what took place four days later in Croydon.