

Security guard in Wales cleared of manslaughter in death of shoplifter

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On July 30, 2009, Aaron Bishop died after he was hurled to the ground by four security guards and forcefully put into a “chokehold”. The 23-year-old had allegedly stolen a £35 bottle of aftershave from a Debenhams retail store in Swansea, Wales.

Following his death, one of the security guards, Sam Bawden, aged 25, was charged with manslaughter. On September 30, Bawden was cleared of the charge by a crown court jury in Swansea.

Bishop died after staff in the Debenhams CCTV control room alerted security, stating they had seen him steal the aftershave and leave the store. The four security guards followed and grabbed Bishop on a gangway leading to the adjacent car park. They forced him to the ground, each pinning down a section of his body.

According to witnesses, Bawden held Bishop around the throat with his arm in a “headlock” for 10 minutes or so. As he was being held down, unable to move freely and unable to breath properly due to his being choked, Bishop began to lose his life, screaming to be released. A Home Office pathologist found death had occurred “after a struggle against restraint apparently including pressure to the neck”.

How did this young man find himself being brutally subdued and choked to death at a shopping centre?

After leaving school, Bishop joined the army at 17, serving in the Welsh Guards. Barely an adult, he served in various imperialist adventures overseen by the Labour government of Tony Blair, and would have been brought face to face with the many brutalities of war and illegal occupation. By the time he was discharged in 2005, he had already served tours in Belize, Iraq, Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone. As a soldier, Bishop had also participated in the Trooping the Colour ceremony in London and served as a Guardsman at a residence of the Queen, Windsor Castle.

He was due to return to Iraq for another tour in 2004, but

broke his arm just a few weeks before he was set to leave. The solicitor for the prosecution, Peter Harrington QC, said in court that Bishop had “gone off the rails” after he was not able to be posted to Iraq. He was discharged from the army in 2005 and served a jail term for an offence sometime after.

He had a number of short-lived jobs, but at the time of his death faced life as an unemployed young man in Swansea, a city renowned for large areas of high unemployment and grinding poverty. From imperialist war abroad and the harsh environment of army life, he was now confronted with the hardships, uncertainties and brutalities of everyday life under capitalism.

The past several decades have seen an explosive growth in the presence of the private security sector in the UK. One can see security guards everywhere—in shops, hotels, offices, health clubs, schools and universities. More than half a million people are estimated to be employed in the £6 billion UK private security industry, one of the very few sectors enjoying economic growth.

A 2004 study by the Confederation of European Security Services, into the private security industry in the 25 European Union states, found that there was one private security operative for every 401 people living in Britain. According to a 2008 study, in the UK 1,500 firms employed 250,000 people in private security (more than in any other European Union country).

Private security is very big business. The British Security Industry Association reports that its “members provide over 70 percent of UK security products and services, with a total turnover of £4.33 billion”.

The guard allegedly responsible for the death of Aaron Bishop was employed by Professional Security Management Limited, a Swansea-based firm.

After stating that Bishop was seen on CCTV shoplifting the £35 item, the prosecuting barrister, Peter Harrington QC, told the court, “The cost proved very high indeed”. One of

the security team was Sam Bawden. Harrington said he “used wholly inappropriate, excessive and unlawful means of restraint. He held him around the throat and continued despite members of the public screaming at him to stop. It was clear that Mr. Bishop was in serious distress. But Bawden maintained a firm grip around the throat and when police arrived, Mr Bishop was dead”.

The court heard that shoppers witnessing the incident were shocked, appalled and incensed. One of them, Mair Lang, said she heard someone shout, “Get him!” and then saw four men on top of another man who was lying face down.

Another witness, Alison Whitehouse, said she saw Bishop gasping and saying, “Please help me”. She said Bishop’s face had turned blue and he was frothing at the mouth.

Harrington told the court, “Mrs. Whitehouse said, ‘Please let his head or neck go. He can’t breathe’. The truth is these were the last moments of his life”.

The barrister said that Bawden’s response to her was: “Stop chosing [complaining]. If you couldn’t breathe, you couldn’t talk”.

According to numerous witnesses, Aaron Bishop’s head had noticeably changed colour and had turned blue/purple due to the enormous pressure being exerted against his neck. So discoloured was his face that one witness even mistook Bishop, a white man, as black.

Harrington said another shopper, Samantha Gregory, had become so angry at the way Bishop was being manhandled that she “wanted to kick the defendant in the head because he looked so pleased with himself”.

Gregory said, “His head was purple. He was being restrained by the neck and that was what was blocking his airways and changing his colour”.

Two of the guards were holding his legs, a third was holding his arms and Bawden had held him around the neck, recalled Gregory. “The man being restrained was not doing much physically”, she said.

Harrington said that when Gregory asked Bawden to release his grip, he “smirked” and appeared to tighten his grip. Gregory said, “I then think a manager approached me and told me that they were trained in restraint and they knew what they were doing. That made me really angry because I’m trained in restraint and I know you do not restrain someone like that”.

The barrister told the jury that witness Ieuan Jones heard Aaron Bishop say, “Let me go, phone the police”. When Jones asked Bawden to let Bishop go, said Harrington, he was told, “Mind your own business”.

In his testimony to the court, Tony Williams, one of the four guards, said he had been employed as a security guard for 18 years, the last 13 of them at the Quadrant Centre.

Williams said he had been questioned by police after the death of Bishop, and an officer mentioned “positional asphyxia”. Williams said this was the first time had ever heard the expression and that his employers had not provided training in the subject.

Questioned by the defence, Williams was asked why the guards held on to Bishop as he struggled to free himself. Williams replied, “We never give up. It puts the wrong message out, that if you shoplift and put up resistance you will get away”.

The manager of the Quadrant Centre, Allan Wallace, who witnessed the death of Aaron Bishop, was asked why the witnesses responded in the way they did. He replied, “Some people will go to the defence of someone without knowing what has happened. It’s natural that people will stop and watch and some will take the side of the underdog as they see it”.

Notwithstanding the court’s verdict, a young man lost his life over the alleged theft of a £35 bottle of aftershave from a multibillion-pound company. That such a grisly event can occur indicates how society is becoming ever more brutalised, as the gap between the mega-rich and the rest of the population widens.



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