

A 'Royal Theft' In Idyllic Kandy 1961

The Police Investigation

Police Case Files - 1

There is no substitute for good, old fashioned police work, talking to people, asking questions, taking note, & doing the leg work

Kandy 1961.

The hilly town of Kandy in September 1961 was very much an 'easy going' idyllic town, a far cry from the robust, bustling, congested township it is today. Well known for the exotic Kandy Perehera (pageant) and the iconic, sacred Temple of The Tooth. A town of moderate pleasant temperatures, the colonial era Queens Hotel, the picturesque Kandy Lake and the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens just a few kilometres away. In September 1961, the streets would have been deserted during the chilly nights and a quiet would have settled over the entire township 'after dark'.

Such was the setting for one of the most daring robberies in Sri Lanka's recent history. An act that robbed the nation of an irreplaceable item of history. The robbery of the last Sinhalese King's crown from the Kandy Museum, very late at night took place as the single security guard was (probably) asleep. In that era the security guard would have been a non-uniformed 'watcher' with no security training as we have come to expect to day. The museum itself was adjacent to the highly revered sacred Temple of The Tooth and the wider population's belief was, no one would dare cause any harm to anything which the temple protected. That assumption did not, of course, matter to career thieves who held nothing sacred.

The Theft of The Royal Crown

The jewel encrusted, pure gold crown of the last Sinhalese King, Rajasingha 11 (1635-1687), was exhibited in a glass case within the Kandy Museum. That crown was stolen in September 1961. The thief entered the museum from the tiled roof in the dead of night to execute his notorious deed. The curator of the museum at the time, Mr. Bandaranayake, was probably the first person to discover the crown missing the next morning.

The Criminal Investigation Branch gets involved.

The Kandy Police were duly informed of the theft and commenced their local inquiries. A few days later, Inspector Rodney Kittulegoda from the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) Colombo, was initially assigned to the Kandy police to help them in the investigation. However, by October 1961 a full-scale joint investigation was led by the CID into the case. CID Inspector Vere De Alwis (photograph left) and Inspector Kittulegoda were assigned to lead the investigation. Both inspectors were later promoted to the rank of Superintendent. Sergeant Sediris and the other police officers who participated in this case of national importance are acknowledged for their excellent, diligent service.



In the very early stages, the local Police and the CID were leaning towards a belief that the crown may be hidden somewhere within the Temple grounds. It was incomprehensible that such an irreplaceable item would be stolen with the intent of sale or profit. It was beyond the norms of routine investigative work for the police to execute any intrusive search warrant on the sacred temple buildings or grounds without any concrete evidence or permission from the senior monk(s). Mere theories would not have been entertained as an excuse for any intrusive searches.

The First Break Through

It was a Sunday morning in October, Superintendent De Alwis recalls, when sergeant K. P. Sediris approached him with reliable information claiming that the crown had been brought to a house in Kelaniya. De Alwis lost no time in pursuing that 'tip off' and proceeded to Kelaniya with sergeant Sediris. The investigators carried out a search on the house of a person named L. E. Perera who was not in the house at the time, however, his wife was present during the search. The search provided an early breakthrough as the two officers found, hidden in a vase, cut pieces of gold and some ruby precious stones, believed to be from the stolen crown.

De Alwis, Kittulegoda (who had joined the CID lead investigation team by then) and Sediris followed up the Kelaniya house finds and consulted the Director of the National Museum of Ceylon, Mr P.E.P. Deraniyagala who, sadly confirmed the pieces of gold were indeed that of the 350-year-old crown, of the last Sinhalese King of Kandy. Superintendent De Alwis recalls the Director was emotional and had tears in his eyes as he verified the evidence and contemplated the great loss of such an iconic item of national importance. How these pieces of evidence came to be in the vase is revealed later on in this narrative

The Man Hunt - First Covert Operation

The Police/CID Inquiries for L. E. Perera from Kelaniya revealed he was remanded in custody in Galle for other offences. Perera was a former employee of the Postal Department and his services had been terminated for the theft of money orders from the postal service. In short: he was known to Police and had a criminal record.

Kittulegoda and De Alwis visited the Galle Magistrates court and met the Magistrate in chambers to brief him on their interest in Perera and made a request that Perera be released on personal bail, to enable the CID to apprehend him upon release for questioning. The Magistrate fortunately agreed to the CID request.

Kittulegoda and De Alwis attended court 'undercover', dressed in sarong and shirt, blending into the general public in the public gallery to await the granting of bail to Perera. The offender appeared to be delighted at being granted bail and was allowed to leave the court. Unknown to him he was followed by the two CID officers who had also organised for an unmarked police car, a Renault Dauphin car, to be on hand as they 'tailed' Perera on foot. The car was driven by another police officer in 'civilian' clothes. The two officers were sure Perera would be looking for transport to Colombo as he headed for the bus stand to await a bus to Colombo.

In the meantime, sergeant Sediris had joined Kittulegoda and De Alwis in Galle and was allocated the role (undercover) of approaching Perera at the bus stand saying he needed one more passenger for a private hire vehicle waiting to take him to Colombo. Sediris played his role well and Perera agreed to accompany him in the private vehicle for a measly sum of rupees, deliberately quoted as an offer that Perera could hardly refuse. When Perera entered the Renault car, officers Kittulegoda and De Alwis were already in the car masquerading as other passengers. Thus a smooth and clever plan of 'nabbing' Perera was executed.

On the way to Colombo the officers started a conversation about the theft of the crown, the gold and the precious stones found, initially Perera made no comment on the conversation and played 'dumb'. However, it was not long before the officers revealed their identity to Perera, who must have got quite a shock at being duped and realised he was literally under the arrest of four CID officers. His denials led the officers to stop by the revered Kalutara Bodhi Temple and they asked Perera to swear at that sacred location that he had nothing to do with the theft. Perera was visibly shaken at his predicament.

The officers continued the drive to CID Headquarters Colombo and under further questioning Perera finally revealed the names of two other known criminals involved. In Sri Lanka there is a category of offender referred to as an Island Reconvicted Criminal-IRC; the two names given by Perera were of two such IRCs, namely; Keerthipala and Henderick Singho. Perera was unaware of their whereabouts or addresses. However, CID searches through police records revealed that Keerthipala was remanded in custody for a series of other offences, and due to appear in other courts therefore questioning him in custody would not be feasible. Any plan to have him released was not viable either given the series of other charges. They decided to focus on Henderick Singho as the priority suspect.



Bomure' site of the capture of the last King of Kandy (1798-1815) on 18th Feb. 1815

The Second Covert Operation

Since Henderick Singho was an IRC an examination of his police records revealed he was a Tuberculosis patient who was drawing an allowance for Tuberculosis rehabilitation from the Government. Diligent police work revealed that he drew that monthly government allowance from the Akumbara sub-post office in the Matale District. The sub post office allocated three days of the month when a person could access their Tuberculosis allowance. The police now had a regular place where the suspect would attend, albeit on any three days of a month.

The team decided that they had to take the Post Master into their confidence and attended a remote village in the Matale area to meet the Post Master. The Post Master knew the suspect from his regular visits and told the investigators that Henderick Singho would regularly have breakfast/cup of tea in a small 'kaday' almost opposite the sub post office when he arrived to collect his allowance.

Any outsiders seen in a remote village would raise the curiosity of the inhabitants (quite a normal curiosity in any village- particularly in that era) and the officers spread a cover story that they were gem prospectors scoping the area. The officers were also aware that the locals would be in fear of an IRC and took care in their undercover planning not to arouse any suspicions in the locals. The officers dressed in sarong and shirt and divested themselves of anything that might blow their cover. The officers, at first, hung around the 'kaday' having a cup of tea or a meal hoping for the suspect to make an appearance.

The team then decided they had to 'stake out' the sub post office from a loft above the 'kaday'. Officers De Alwis and Sediris would do the surveillance from the loft and Kittulegoda would stand by in the car out of sight nearby. The team would be in place early morning and remain hidden till the sub post office closed in the late afternoon. There were no toilets facilities on the stake out and the officers used old drink bottles to urinate into as they patiently awaited the suspects appearance. Another officer hung around the 'kaday' to carry any messages to Kittulegoda – you might say he was the 1961 model of a 'mobile phone' in the operation!

The arrest and interrogation of a prime suspect

Two days later, Henderick Singho finally turned up to draw his allowance and the team arrested him without any incident. He was escorted to their vehicle close by and taken to the Opalgala Estate in Matale. Superintendent De Alwis had made prior arrangements with a good friend of his Mr. Wilmot Samarasinghe, Assistant Superintendent of the tea estate, who had permission from his Superintendent Mr. Jonklass to house the team and the suspect or a few days.

Patient, persistent questioning of Henderick Singho over many hours followed in the estate bungalow and the team finally made a breakthrough as Henderick Singho gave them details on how he assisted a person named Keerthipala to steal and dispose of the crown.

CID officers were trained in and practiced the skilful method of persistent, persuasive interrogation. To have physically harmed the suspect would have been counterproductive and the suspect could 'clam up' in fear or in deliberate retribution to thwart the inquiries. That is not to say there were no threats (dire warnings?) made to Henderick Singho as to how much trouble he was in and what ultimate prison sentences he could be facing.

The police soon found out that Keerthipala was also a known IRC. The CID team finally had their confirmation as to who actually broke into the museum and took the crown that night in September. It was established that Henderick Singho and Keerthipala were co-conspirators in planning the theft of the crown. An anecdote to the crime is; according to Henderick Singho, Keerthipala defecated at the scene of the crime and had done so at other crime scenes. This behaviour is not unique to Keerthipala alone, and in the global sphere of criminal behaviour this type of behaviour is known to occur.



Frangipani flowers.



The Ambalama (resting place) Kdugannawa pass

What happened to the crown?

The CID team learnt that Keerthipala first transported the crown to a village in Kegalle where it was crushed/flattened, perhaps some rubies were taken out at that time. The crown was then taken to L.E. Perera's house in Kelaniya where it was cut into small pieces with a large pair of tailors scissors. The gold of the time would have been a 'soft' gold and cutting it up would not have been a major obstacle. The rubies were extracted at Perera's house too. Keerthipala paid Perera cash for the services rendered in the disposal of the crown.

The Police had a suspicion that the rubies and pieces of gold found in the vase at Perera's house was given to Mrs Perera by Keerthipala. There was a belief that Mrs Perera was having an affair with Keerthipala.

Henderick Singho's evidence also led the CID team to interrogate a jeweller in the hill country town of Hatton. The jeweller had smelted the gold pieces and made finger rings. Interestingly, the jeweller inscribed the word 'Sri' on the side of the rings. He knew from where the gold was obtained and perhaps it was his way of commemorating the item lost to the nation forever. The jeweller was arrested and charged accordingly.

The court proceedings and sentencing.

Finally in 1962, Supreme Court Justice D.Q.M. Sirimane presided over the matter in the Supreme Court Kandy. Ironically the case was heard in the ancient Assembly Hall which is located between the Temple of the Tooth and the museum. Almost on site of the crime.

Entered into evidence (amongst other evidence) was an old book supplied by Mr. P.E.P. Deraniyagala, Director National Museum, on aspects of the crown. At the time the law allowed confirmed historical documents to be tendered in evidence. The principal accused were convicted of the crime and sentenced to 14 years Rigorous Imprisonment. There were no charges laid against Mrs. Perera



Mr. Bandaranayake, the curator of the Kandy Museum was able to obtain a replica of the stolen crown for display in the Kandy Museum. That replica is most likely the one on display at this time in Kandy. The stolen crown was of the 'open petal' design – the Palpethi design. Similar in design to the last King of Kandy's crown currently on display in the Colombo Museum pictured above.

References.

The details of this case were primarily obtained during a series of conversations with Rtd: CID Superintendent Vere De Alwis and with reference to his police notes whic he has to this date. His efforts are sincerely appreciated.

Stefan D' Silva
August 2021



Bible Roak - Batala Gala viewed from Kadugannawa pass