

MURDER AT YEW TREE FARM

MICHEAL FARRELL looks into the circumstances surrounding the murder of newspaper boy Carl Bridgewater.

Between the Birmingham pub bombings trial and the Guildford Four scandal there is yet another case which suggests that there has been a consistent pattern of allegations of confessions being fabricated by the West Midlands police over the last 15 years: The Carl Bridgewater murder case, which by coincidence has a number of Irish connections, is that case.

November 24, 1983, a 22 year old prisoner climbed on the roof of Gartree prison in Leicestershire and unfurled a home-made banner saying: "Spencer killed Carl. We are innocent". The prisoner was Michael Hickey, jailed for the murder of 13 year old newsboy Carl Bridgewater near Birmingham, five years earlier.

Michael Hickey stuck it out on the prison roof through the bitterly cold winter of 1983-4 and finally came down on February 21 when his mother, Ann Whelan, pleaded with him after he had become frostbitten. At 89 days it was the longest roof-top protest in Britain prison history. It was Michael Hickey's second time on the roof. He and his cousin, Vincent Hickey, jailed for the same murder, had spent three weeks on the roof of Long Martin prison in March 1983 as well.

Child-murderers usually get a rough time from fellow-prisoners and Michael Hickey had been beaten up and ostracised after he was first convicted in 1979. But throughout his 89 days on the roof of Gartree he never went without a hot meal as other prisoners passed up their own food to him despite tough penalties imposed by the prison authorities. It was their way of showing they had come to believe he was innocent.

Gerry Conlon of the Guildford Four knew Michael Hickey in prison. "Some prisoners claim they are innocent after they are



convicted," he says, "but very few keep it up for more than 18 months. And nobody goes on the roof for 89 days unless they are innocent." He believes the two Hickeys and their co-accused, Jimmy Robinson, are innocent and he says most prisoners and a lot of prison staff believe it too.

Carl Bridgewater was delivering newspapers at Yew Tree Farm, Wordsley, about 10 miles from Birmingham, in September 1978 when he was blasted in the head with a shotgun at close range. He had disturbed someone raiding the big rambling farmhouse while the owners were out. The casual brutality of the

murder shocked the whole Midlands area and the police were under pressure to find the killers.

At first police suspicion began to focus on Bert Spencer, a local ambulanceman and former antique dealer, who worked part-time for neighbouring farmer Hubert Wilkes - who also owned Yew Tree Farm, though not the farmhouse. Spencer had worked and shot rabbits on both farms and the young newsboy knew him, which might have provided a motive for the otherwise senseless murder. The police had earlier speculated that the murderer knew the boy and had killed him to avoid being identified. A witness claimed he had seen a man in a blue uniform drive away from the farm after the murder. But there was nothing definite and one of Spencer's workmates provided him with an alibi.

Then, two months after Carl's murder, a gang armed with a shotgun raided Chapel Farm at Romsley, 20 miles away. The police traced the getaway car to the girlfriend of Vincent Hickey (24), Michael's cousin, and arrested her. The Hickeys were a tough second generation Irish family with a record of petty crime in the Midlands area and the police were looking for Vincent. He gave himself up and when it was obvious they knew he was involved in