

Gareth Williams was an enigma, in life and death. Investigations by the police and the security services have left us in the dark as to why the MI6 spy died. The coroner's verdict was that he was probably unlawfully killed did nothing to abate conspiracy theories.

By Michael Burleigh

The south bank district of Vauxhall is famous for two principal reasons. After long spells at 54 Broadway in Victoria and Century House across Westminster Bridge, SIS (or MI6) took possession of its new headquarters at 85 Vauxhall Cross in 1995. Staff dubbed Sir Terry Farrell's vast cream and green-coloured ziggurat "Legoland".

It is also known as Babylon-on-Thames, for there are 60 terraces, as well as cameras surveying spiked railings from every angle. Staff enter and leave as inconspicuously as possible through electronic gates.

These look on to an establishment across the road called Roman Chariots Spa. For Vauxhall is also well known as "VoHo", because of its dense concentration of gay clubs. Some of these – The Hoist and The Spike, within the cavernous railway arches – cater to a specialist clientele which may well include adventurous heterosexuals.

Their names indicate what happens within. A cottage craft industry has also sprung up in the area, including a black-painted Master of Leather shop offering bespoke harnesses and studded belts, when it opens after dark.

By some terrible coincidence, elements of these two worlds appear to have met in the macabre case of Gareth Williams. His decomposing body was found in a red North Face bag in the bath of his flat in Alderney Street, Pimlico on August 23 2010 – circumstances which have given rise to speculation that he died as a result of a bondage-related sex game.

The last evidence that he was alive was a week earlier, on August 16, when he logged on to a cycling time-trial website. The top floor flat was registered to New Rodina, a front for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, for it was used by people visiting Vauxhall Cross, half a mile across the Thames. At the time, Williams was seconded from the Cheltenham-based communications intelligence agency GCHQ to SIS in Vauxhall Cross. It is mooted that he was involved in securing the computer systems of the Bank of England from hostile cyber-raiders. He was certainly well qualified. Having passed his GCSEs aged 10, Williams graduated with a First in maths from Bangor aged 17. Four years later, with a PhD under his belt, he was recruited by

GCHQ. They sent him on an advanced maths course at Cambridge.

In many respects, the 31 year-old had a healthy extracurricular life. Raised on Anglesey, he adored the rugged outdoors. He loved cycling, climbing and fell-running and was extremely fit, lithe and strong. But he would appear to have had idiosyncratic sexual interests, though these have been downplayed by the coroner Dr Fiona Wilcox, in her narrative account of his unexplained death.

Although his friends and family have put a favourable construction on the evidence, claiming that he was generous to his small coterie of girlfriends, Williams's possessions included a woman's wig and £20,000 of carefully stored designer clothes, though not necessarily in sizes that would have fitted him. A few days before his death he attended a show by the "Trannie Superstar" Jonny Woo, who blends fashion with transvestism for a variety of clubs and corporate clients. Police investigating Williams's death also discovered a short film in which he "gyrated" for the camera, wearing nothing but leather boots; the coroner accepted that he derived a sexual thrill from women's footwear, while noting that this might not be uncommon.

Several years before Williams's death, his Cheltenham landlord and landlady had to cut through knots to free him when his cries for help led them to discover him tied up in his boxers on his bed. "Gareth, we cannot have you doing this," exclaimed a perplexed Brian Elliot. The Elliots and Williamses never mentioned the incident again, though the Elliots decided that it did not involve escapology related to Williams's secret work.

These snapshots from his private life suggest why a man in touch with his feminine side may have been unhappy at Vauxhall Cross, with its strong quotient of hard-drinking public schoolboys and ex-military types telling tales of derring-do in foreign parts. He had been granted a transfer back to GCHQ shortly before his death, and evidently felt ill at ease in London and alienated by SIS's culture of red tape.

Certainly, Williams seems to have slipped through the net of modern human resources scrutiny. Although he was as punctual "as a Swiss clock", Williams's absence – including from a meeting he was supposed to chair – does not seem to have alarmed his SIS managers, an oversight for which Sir John Sawers, the head of SIS, apologised yesterday. But just as seriously, an organisation that positively vets its staff seems to have been surprised by Williams's on-off interest in bondage and transvestism. In the past, SIS officers were supposed to report to their superiors anything which might be useful to blackmailers.

It is plausible that with SIS having to process a workforce that doubled after 9/11, no such attention was paid to a man who came in through the back door of GCHQ. How very modern, too, of his SIS line manager to claim that lifestyle and sexual preferences "would not in themselves pose a problem". One is only surprised that

they do not make available leaflets on safer autoerotic sex. Of course, people able to conduct double lives – like Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt or Kim Philby in earlier times – are as ideal for the secret services as those with unmemorable faces. But while homosexuality is unexceptional nowadays (and anyway there is no suggestion that Williams was gay), would an interest in bondage be a problem if the person sought to conceal it?

Then there is the investigation. Det Chief Insp Jackie Sebire is the detective charged with clearing up Williams's death. Although a highly experienced homicide detective, she lacked security clearance to even enter SIS's Vauxhall Cross headquarters; evidence, if one needs it, of the absurd levels of secrecy practised by Britain's deep state. This meant that Sebire's investigation relied upon the "mediation" of Det Supt Michael

Broster, of SO15, the counter-terrorism branch, which works closely with the security services. Imagine Sebire's surprise that no verbatim notes were taken of interviews with Williams's colleagues; and that the existence of nine memory sticks, and a black holdall, in or under his SIS desk, was revealed only in the final stages of the coroner's inquest. Not that other agencies are entirely blameless, since the DNA evidence seems to have been contaminated by a scientific incompetent who put his palm on the bag in which Williams was found.

In addition to clumsy obstructions in the path of the police investigation, there are several disturbing aspects of this case. The coroner was rightly mystified by how the bag containing Williams got into the bath without his leaving foot or handprints on it. Getting into the bag would have been hard enough; it would have been incredibly difficult to fit a heavy and rigid body into it. So Williams was alive when he went in.

It could be that to focus on Williams's alleged sexual proclivities exaggerates what were merely the tentative inclinations of a fundamentally private man. That is certainly how Williams's friends and family feel. After all, in 1990 the young defence expert and former RAF helicopter pilot, Jonathan Moyle, was said to have died while engaged in autoerotic strangulation in a cupboard of his hotel room in Santiago, Chile. The fact that he was wearing a nappy indicates he fully intended to live, if you think about it. Details like the orange segment in his mouth were given prominence, as if he had died in a sex game that went wrong.

But Moyle appears to have uncovered illicit helicopter sales by the Chilean arms dealer Carlos Cardoen to Saddam's Iraq. Like Neil Heywood, the Briton poisoned recently in China, he seems to have poked his nose into some very murky business with undue self-confidence. A reconvened British inquest in 1998 found that Moyle had been unlawfully killed, probably by the needle mark in his leg that was missed by the initial police investigation.

As with the death of the government weapons expert David Kelly, speculation about

another party's involvement in Gareth Williams's death will run and run. Suicide has been explicitly ruled out. After imagining that it could out-manoeuvre "Plod", meaning highly competent detectives, MI6 needs to think about how it lost track of its "vital" employee – for tracking people is what it allegedly does on a global stage – and how it can allay the understandable distress of the Williams family while helping DCI Sebire, who has every right to feel short-changed. SIS director Sawers's apology is a start, for otherwise we would be hearing much more speculation about whatever happened in Alderney Street. Does anyone remember the new dawn of greater transparency?