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Death in custody after Cathedral 'trashing' sparks major inquiry

A major inquiry has been launched after a Sutherland teenager died in police custody following a vandalism attack on historic Dornoch Cathedral.

The Northern Constabulary issued a statement on Monday to say a man had died whilst in custody at Dingwall Police Station. They named him yesterday (Thursday) as 19-year-old Daryl Shearer "from the Sutherland area". It is understood his family live in Helmsdale.

Mr Shearer had been due to appear from custody at Tain Sheriff Court that day, but his case was never called.

A post-mortem was carried out this week in order to establish the cause of death. It is understood Mr Shearer may have been involved in a fight with other local youths prior to his arrest.

A police spokesman said: "An inquiry has been established and a full investigation will be carried out in relation to this death. Inquiries are at an early stage."

Detective Inspector Gus Macpherson, who is based at Alness, has been appointed to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death. His investigation will be overseen by a more senior officer.

A report will be submitted to the procurator fiscal and, as in all cases of deaths in custody, a fatal accident inquiry will eventually be held. A family liaison officer has been appointed to keep Mr Shearer's relatives abreast of the investigation.

Mr Shearer was unemployed. Lately he had been living in Thurso but he previously had a home on the Muirfield Estate in Brora.

Trouble erupted in and around Dornoch's town square last Friday night following a dance in the nearby social club. Police say they confiscated alcohol from a number of under-age youths and two men also received fixed penalties in relation to their antisocial behaviour.

The town's public toilets in the square were attacked by vandals, with soap dispensers and hand towel dispensers pulled off the walls. In the morning three people were discovered asleep in the toilets, having spent the night there. Dornoch Cathedral was also broken into, the van-

dal or vandals gaining entry to the 13th century building through the vestry.

Cathedral minister the Rev Susan Brown and session clerk Edward McDonald were aghast when they saw the damage inflicted on the church.

Mr McDonald had locked the building up at 5.30pm on Friday and discovered the damage when he opened it at 9am next morning.

by Caroline McMorran

Several windows were broken, though no stained glass has been damaged, protective panels around the organ have been kicked in, a fire extinguisher was let off, the office smashed up and cash stolen.

Mrs Brown said she was almost physically sick when she saw the mess because it was so wanton. Mr McDonald said it looked as if a bomb had hit the place.

A wedding which had was to have been held in the Cathedral on the Saturday had to be switched to the local Episcopal Church, St Finnbarr's.

A cleaning-up operation was mounted this week with the help of a specialist cleaning service.

Mr McDonald said on Wednesday: "There was a tremendous amount of work that needed to be done and there was no way we could have tackled it by ourselves."

"The mess was caused by the fire extinguisher being let off all over the place. It left a residue that looks like sand. There was tremendous dust everywhere, that's been the biggest problem, but lots of things have been trashed and the woodwork damaged."

"We were able to get professional cleaners in quite quickly on Monday. They came around 1.30pm and have been there ever since. They'll be finished this afternoon and the place is looking spick and span."

"The floor has been cleaned several times, but still needs to be done again. A lot of volunteers are coming in tomorrow night (Thursday) to lend a hand and give it all a final polish."

Mr McDonald continued: "There has never been any damage on this scale before. Very occasionally we've had the odd little thing stolen or damaged and a box was wrenched off the wall one time, but this is the first time that I can remember when serious damage has been done. But I don't think there is anything beyond repair."

Retired Highland councillor and former provost of Dornoch, Duncan Allan, said this week: "As a resident of the square I've experienced this behaviour for years and years and find it offensive. Gangs of youths bawling and shouting, girls screaming and usually fights breaking out."

"Knowing the people on the social club committee, I am sure that the dances are well conducted, but the committee has no control over what happens afterwards on the streets and round about. It is no good for the town at all to have this sort of thing happening."

"When dances were held that only involved local people it was quite tolerable. When people come to the dance from places like Brora and Alness, who have no respect for this area, then the result is almost inevitable."

Mr Allan added that during his time in office the public toilets had been locked up every evening, but since the last election they had remained open overnight. He said this was asking for trouble.

East Sutherland and Edderton councillor Jim McGillivray said the vandalism to the Cathedral and the trouble that broke out in the square had been discussed at a ward business meeting on Monday.

"It was discussed at our meeting on Monday morning, but ward manager Phil Tomalin was not present because of a family bereavement."

"I think the subject will be high on the agenda for our next meeting on Monday coming," he said.

"I have been in contact with the police and would emphasise that extensive investigations are under way. Regardless of the circumstances, we can only have heartfelt sympathy for relatives of the deceased."

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This was the scene that greeted session clerk Edward McDonald when he opened Dornoch Cathedral on Saturday morning. Communion silver lies scattered at the foot of the chancel steps and the floor is covered in powder from a fire extinguisher. Pictures: Andrew Smith.



The vestry was ransacked and a fire extinguisher was set off, leaving most of the room covered in powder and damaging velvet offering bags which had been uniquely embroidered by members of the Cathedral congregation. Minister Susan Brown said the offering bags cannot be washed. A sum of money was also taken, payment for a wedding due to take place on Saturday.

In this
week's NT



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