

## Drugs turf wars bring gun rule to the streets

The death of Rhys Jones, a triple murder in Bishop's Stortford, a shooting in Letchworth - as Britain wakes up daily to stories of violence, Jamie Doward reveals how gangs are bringing chaos to the UK

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When Curtis Warren went down, things changed on Merseyside. Worth an estimated £125m, Warren built his massive criminal empire by importing vast quantities of drugs. He was just one of a number of the country's Mr Bigs who have laid the foundations for a gang culture that has left a series of deep scars across Britain.

Police are warning that the fire is spreading, from London, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester to smaller towns.

But on 24 October 1996, 'Cocky' Warren was brought crashing to earth. He was arrested by Dutch police while attempting to ship 1.6 tonnes of cannabis resin, 750 kilograms of cocaine and 50 kilos of heroin hidden in steel ingots into Britain. Merseyside's enemy number one - a criminal mastermind with a photographic memory that enabled him to control his empire without the need for incriminating files - was suddenly off the streets.

Sentenced to 12 years in prison in May 1997, Warren was later given a further four-year sentence for manslaughter for kicking a fellow inmate to death. He resurfaced last June when he was released, stressing he wanted to live a quiet life with his family. Barely a month later, Warren was arrested on suspicion of attempting to import £300,000 worth of cannabis into Jersey, where he is now in prison on remand.

Warren's incarceration created a vacuum at a dangerous time in Liverpool. The city had become the main route via which drugs enter northern England. Taking advantage of Warren's absence, a small number of criminal families started to muscle in on his old distribution network, fuelling a turf war that years later was to become inextricably linked to the murder of Rhys Jones. Car bombs were detonated outside leading nightclubs, and parts of Liverpool became no-go areas for the police.

As the drugs poured into the city so did the guns. 'There's always been a connection between Liverpool and Ireland,' said Neil Thompson, a former detective superintendent with the National Crime Squad who specialised in targeting organised criminal gangs. 'When the IRA was operating, there was little drug culture in Northern Ireland, but now

there's a lot more drugs going from Ireland to Liverpool and more guns, too. There's massive profits to be made and people want to protect their area.'

Ireland was not the only source of weapons. The post-Cold War world saw a surfeit of arms enter the black market through Eastern Europe. Prices crashed. 'Back in the time of the Krays only a small number of very violent gangs had guns,' said Thompson, who now runs his own security company, Red24. 'But at the end of my career in the Nineties there were loads of guns coming in from Ireland and Eastern Europe. Their availability meant lots more people had them.'

Much of the drugs money went into Liverpool's regeneration, buying up apartments around the docks. Today police sources believe the big drug barons are paying inflated prices on new developments so that they can fix the property market and keep prices artificially high. Amid the rush to build, officials were bribed to turn a blind eye if bureaucracy got in the way of profits. Several of the city's plethora of tanning salons and hand car washes became prized money-laundering operations.

Synergies quickly developed between the illegal and the legal. Legitimate businesses were used as cover for the shipment of large amounts of drugs. One Merseyside Police operation, codenamed Lima, uncovered a scaffolding business that would ship poles for fake construction jobs in Spain, only to be returned stuffed full of cocaine. The same gang also used a company importing granite kitchen work surfaces for similarly illegal purposes.

It wasn't long before the city's building boom saw the gangs, dominated by a handful of criminal families, move into protection rackets, offering 'security' on Liverpool's building sites. Firms that didn't pay quickly found their sites torched. The security firms also 'owned' the bouncers at many of the city's pubs and clubs, allowing them to control the distribution of drugs inside. Last year Merseyside police launched Operation Seahog to target the rogue security firms. In a series of dawn raids on one day in September, officers seized a large quantity of drugs, firearms, cash and stolen goods.

As the drugs and the guns sloshed onto the streets so too did the violence. The former Brookside actress, Jennifer Ellison, found herself caught in the crossfire when her then boyfriend, Tony Richardson, 28, became a target of the rogue security firms. Once, the couple's home was sprayed with bullets in a drive-by shooting. On another occasion, a gang wielding machetes attacked them when they were out in Ellison's BMW. The couple escaped only after Ellison drove her car across a central reservation. On 7 April 2004, Richardson's younger brother, Mark, was shot in the back by two gunmen, one using a sawn-off shotgun, the other a 9mm pistol, while he was in a Ford Galaxy accompanied by Craig Barker, an enforcer known as 'Burn Out Boy' because he blew up dealers' cars if they didn't pay up. Barker died from his injuries in hospital a few hours after the attack. Darren Gee, a notorious member of a leading Liverpool crime family, who was also in the Ford, escaped unhurt, vowing revenge.

It wasn't long in coming. On 18 May 2004, David Regan, a father-of-five, was shot dead on the forecourt of his car-wash by hitmen working for Gee, now serving an 18-year-jail term for the murder. Gee, from Everton, north Liverpool, who had close links to the rogue security industry, believed Regan was responsible for Barker's killing.

The battle to own the drug distribution networks filtered down from the security firms dominated by the likes of Gee to their loose network of lieutenants, the teenage gangs such as the Norris Green Strand gang, also known as the Nogzy soldiers, and the Croxteth 'Crocky' Crew, both from north Liverpool. A similar tale could be told in London or Birmingham where gangs such as the Burger Bar boys facilitate low-level drug and gun running for the bigger, organised criminal gangs.

The gangs - some members of whom are as young as 13 - are useful foot soldiers for the established criminal families. They can be used to hide guns, run drugs and intimidate shopkeepers who refuse to pay for protection. For a while the gag went that the skirmishes between the Nogzy and the Crocky Crew seemed to have come from an A Team script. 'Lots of bullets, no one hurt,' the two gangs used to joke. Then, on New Year's Day 2004, the leader of the Crocky crew, Danny McDonald, 19, was shot dead in the Royal Oak pub in Norris Green, apparently in revenge for a failed nailbomb attack he had carried out on the Dickie Lewis pub in Kirkdale, north Liverpool.

The territorial feud between the Nogzy and the Crocky crew intensified as old scores were settled. On 23 August 2006, Liam 'Smigger' Smith, a leading member of the Nogzy, was shot dead after visiting a friend at Altcourse prison.

A year and a day after Smigger was gunned down, Rhys Jones was shot dead in Croxteth Park, a relatively affluent part of north Liverpool but one bordered by the two gangs' neighbourhoods. There is speculation the killer - believed to be as young as 15 - was aiming at a rival gang member as part of his initiation, the date chosen to mark the anniversary of Smith's death. Police fear there will now be reprisals, both among the teen gangs at the bottom of the food chain and the security firms who supply them with drugs and use them to perpetuate their protection rackets.

A source in the Merseyside underworld told The Observer that one of the firms is angry it has lost a major protection 'contract' for a supermarket building site, and is now planning revenge. The head of the firm is well known on the protection scene. 'I'll be dead by the time I'm 38,' he has declared. 'But I'm taking everyone else with me.'

This 'get rich or die trying' philosophy should spark fear not just in Liverpool but the whole of Britain. A recent threat assessment by the Serious and Organised Crime Agency recognises the city's pivotal importance to Britain's drugs trade. 'All types of class A drugs are distributed from London, Liverpool and Birmingham to other areas of the UK,' the assessment states. 'However, other smaller cities and towns are becoming more prominent, and the overall picture is increasingly complex and diverse, with markets providing both crack cocaine and heroin now well established outside urban centres.'

This bleak prognosis looked eerily prescient last week, when hitmen executed three men and seriously injured two women in the Hertfordshire town of Bishop's Stortford. The killings, at a house in a quiet cul-de-sac, appear to have been over unpaid drug debts.

'The situation with guns in this country is deteriorating, there's no doubt about that,' said Roger Gray, author of *Armed Response*, an account of his time with the specialist armed response unit of the Metropolitan Police. 'We are never going to be able to turn the clock back because there are elements within society for whom the use of firearms has now become endemic.'

At the end of a month in which Britain's immersion into gun culture has become the subject of national debate, it appears violence has become a currency. It links big-time criminals like Warren to the wannabe gangsters of the Nogzy and Crocky Crew, who buy and sell the drugs and guns distributed by his successors. The unpalatable conclusion is whoever killed Rhys Jones did not act alone; he is part of a warped ecosystem spreading across Britain. One that shows no sign of dying.