

THE INVESTIGATION

How detectives secured the vital evidence to re-open the case

By Paul Peachey
CRIME CORRESPONDENT

Det Ch Insp Clive Driscoll was in church to mark the 15th anniversary of the death of Stephen Lawrence when the breakthrough finally came.

He had been standing behind then Prime Minister Gordon Brown at St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square as the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams spoke of the "fragility of our picture of ourselves as a liberal, tolerant and settled society".

Mr Driscoll, pictured, was filing out of the church when he received a message to call Ed Jarman, a forensic scientist. His lab had been running DNA tests on a bead of blood thought to have fallen from a jacket seized from Gary Dobson's home in 1993, and the results were back: the chance of it not being from Stephen Lawrence was a billion to one.

That bead of blood provided the crucial link between Dobson and his victim. Mr Driscoll described it as "one of those rare moments you get in life".

Yet it would be another three-and-a-half years before anyone would stand trial. Much had already changed since the night that an innocent young man was killed on a south London street for the sole reason that his skin was black.

After the Macpherson inquiry, ordered by the Home Secretary Jack Straw in 1997, which included the damning indictment that the Metropolitan police was "institutionally racist", the Met launched Operation Athena Tower to investigate the murder again. In 2001, the Commissioner Lord Stevens stated he knew who killed Stephen Lawrence. But the Crown Prosecution Service ruled in 2004 that the inquiry had failed to produce any credible witness or solid forensic evidence. However, another failure by the criminal justice system



(i) In 1999, the suspects were confident enough to be interviewed by Martin Bashir for a television special. Dobson later criticised Bashir for painting an unfavourable picture of the gang.

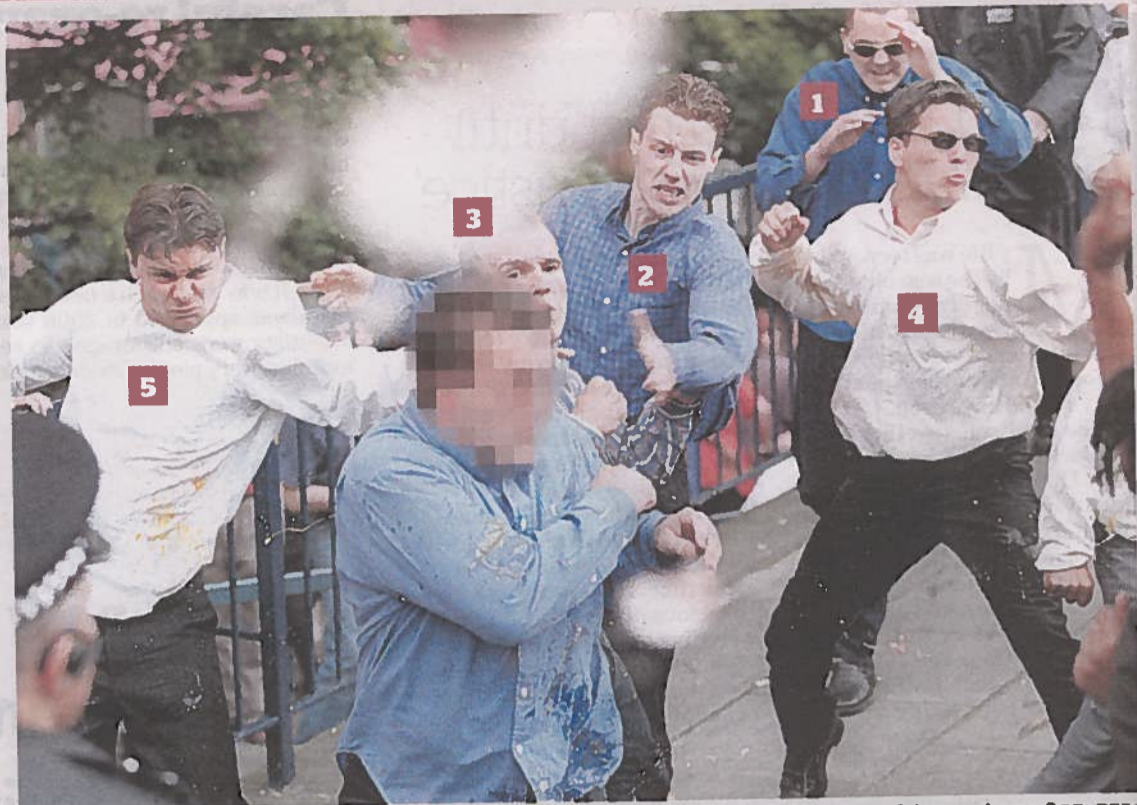
revived the case. After the Forensic Science Service failed to spot vital evidence in the 2000 killing of Damilola Taylor, hundreds of other cases were re-examined. A new Lawrence inquiry started in 2006, armed with a powerful new tool: the 2005 Criminal Justice Act, which effectively scrapped the rule of double jeopardy as Macpherson had suggested.

Later, when they launched a new investigation, Det Ch Insp Driscoll and his team had a huge task ahead. They had no new exhibits and a database with 187 names or descriptions of potential suspects. Slowly they whittled it down to 11 names - all with

links with the Acourt gang. The original suspects were among them. Running alongside those inquiries, the officers encouraged the forensic team to investigate new angles thrown up by developments in science. Hairs and fibres from Stephen Lawrence were found on the clothes of Dobson and Norris. Armed with the new evidence, police planned to arrest the two men again. Dobson was easy to find - in prison. Norris was staying in a hostel above a Greenwich pub. He was arrested in 2010.

The two men were questioned about the new forensic evidence and said nothing. The following year the Court of Appeal agreed that the evidence was new, substantial and compelling under the terms of the 2005 law, and quashed Dobson's acquittal. After 18 years, the trial was on.

THE GANG VIOLENT LIVES



The Acourt gang are pelted with eggs after leaving a public inquiry into the police handling of the case in 1998. REUTERS

Race crimes, stabbings and the criminal underworld: the lives of the accused

1. GARY DOBSON

When he was arrested in 2010 for the murder of Stephen Lawrence, he was serving a five-year jail term for drug offences. The unemployed former van driver and father of one claimed he had black friends - none of whom gave evidence on his behalf.

2. DAVID NORRIS

He was living at his parents' luxurious home when he was arrested in 1993. By the time he was arrested in 2010, he was in a hostel above a Greenwich pub. In 2002, he was jailed for a racially motivated crime after he shouted "nigger" at an off-duty police officer and threw a drink at him.

3. NEIL ACOURT

The snarling face of the gang was the man caught on police surveillance footage tucking a knife into his waistband and urging his friends to get "chivvied up" with

weapons for a night out. He was filmed saying: "I reckon that every nigger should be chopped up, mate, and they should be left with nothing but f***ing stumps." He was jailed in 2002 with Norris over the racist attack when he drove a car at the off-duty officer.

4. JAMIE ACOURT

The younger brother of Neil Acourt, he was absent from the secretly recorded surveillance footage at Dobson's house in 1994. He was on remand at the time, accused of a stabbing a man at a Greenwich nightclub. Darren Giles, who was white, was trying to stop Mr Acourt from attacking a black friend when he was stabbed in the heart and nearly died. At the trial, Mr Acourt pleaded self-defence and was acquitted.



5. LUKE KNIGHT

Acquitted when the private prosecution brought by the Lawrence family collapsed in 2006, he is thought to be living with his parents. He used to live closest to the murder scene in Well Hall Road. A local resident, who declined to be named, said: "He was a nice lad, never caused any problems."

THE FATHER: CLIFFORD NORRIS

A serious player in the south London criminal underworld implicated in allegations of major crimes involving drugs and murder from around 1987. Norris, left, became a looming presence over the police inquiry and police believe he schooled the suspects in the art of giving nothing away. His fortune has now gone. He now lives with a large dog above a hardware shop in Ashford, Kent.

Paul Peachey and Terri Jud

THE OTHERS

Acourt gang members blamed for string of knife attacks

By Satish Sekar and Paul Peachey

One alleged victim of the Acourt gang, who survived being stabbed in the stomach, said he was "overjoyed" that two of its members now faced jail.

Surdeep Bhangal, 41, was attacked with a kitchen knife outside his father's Wimpy franchise in Eltham on 11 March 1993, during a spate of racist attacks in the weeks before Stephen Lawrence's murder. He had confronted a group of abusive white

youths that he alleges included David Norris. Another member of the gang stabbed him. "The knife went in from the side of my stomach, through my bowel and missed my spine by about a centimetre," said Mr Bhangal. Police investigated the attack but no charges were brought.

Campaigners say the failure of police to act created a culture of impunity. The Macpherson inquiry report highlighted the case and said that Jamie Acourt, Norris, Neil Acourt

(i) The Acourt brothers called themselves "the Krays" and led a gang steeped in violence. The price of entry: a stabbing. A litany of violent incidents around their predominantly white estate was attributed to members.

and Gary Dobson had not been picked out during identity parades. The family of a youth killed 20 months before

Mr Lawrence blamed police and prosecutors for failing to crack down on gangs. Rolan Adams, 15, was killed in February 1991 when 15 thugs attacked him and his brother - but only one, Mark Thornburrow, was convicted of murder. He was not connected to the Acourt gang.

In July 1992, Rohit Duggal was stabbed to death by a white youth outside a kebab shop. The killer, Peter Thompson, was said to have links to the Acourt gang. The attack came a

year after the stabbing of another man outside the same shops.

Kevin London, a black teen, claimed he was confronted in November 1992 by a gang of white youths including Gary Dobson, who had a large knife. The claim came to light after the Lawrence killing. No charges were laid. In one week in March 1993, two men were stabbed in Eltham High Street, with witnesses describing members of the Acourt gang.

The following week, a white youth, Stacey Benefield, was stabbed in the chest. He identified David Norris as the attacker and Neil Acourt as being with him. Norris was the only one tried. He was acquitted.