



[Victim: Josh Hanson]

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Investigation into the murder of Josh Hanson

DCI Noel McHugh tells us the story of the investigation:

As a detective every so often you encounter a criminal who feels 'just beyond your grasp' and for three-and-half years O'Brien was mine.

It has been heart-breaking and overwhelming and all-consuming for myself and my team over the last almost four years. It has taken its toll and I say this knowing - of course - that the impact on Josh's mum Tracey and sister Brooke has been incomprehensible. But I am incredibly proud of what my team have achieved, working alongside Josh's family, and the extraordinary and outstanding work that has taken place to convict O'Brien.

Every murder scene is tragic; you visit as senior investigating officer knowing of course that someone lost their life there. But to a police eye, you look for opportunities. I remember meeting Josh's mum for the first time at the scene and out of the corner of my eye I saw a refuse van emptying street bins. I had to do a double take as this was a Sunday morning. The bin men were stopped, in the hope they may have emptied a bin containing the murder weapon. Unpleasant, but critical specialist search officers then sifted through the rubbish. Nearly four years later, O'Brien stated he threw the knife in the sea at Camber Sands.

The road remained closed whilst a very cool German Shepherd was put to work searching for blood. It seemed like the dog knew he was in charge as police and public alike looked on in awe at his expertise.

Seizing CCTV from the bar was so crucial to our investigation we raced our engineer across London on blues and twos – we know attempts were being made to destroy it. This fast response meant we could quickly prove O'Brien's identity as the man we sought via fingerprint work on the cups he drank from that night. At that stage we didn't know a great deal about him but, call it instinct if you like, somehow this felt different from other murders.

I made a very quick decision to publicise O'Brien's image along with a reward for his capture. Our first breakthrough came when staff at the pub he had visited following the murder recognised him and called one of my DCs Sam Vennart to say he was staying at a local caravan park in Camber Sands. You wonder do appeals like that work but clearly they do and I'm so grateful to those people throughout the investigation who did take the time to call in. Even if they come to nothing, we'd rather have 20 well-intentioned calls than none; never assume someone else will call in instead of you.

There followed painstaking and time-consuming work to examine CCTV in and around the caravan park and try to work out if he was there, what car he had travelled in. We found a black VW Golf that fitted. That enabled us to track its movements and then what O'Brien did in the time following his attack on Josh.

What we saw was astounding; you would never know this man had just killed another in cold blood. O'Brien was seen casually enjoying a curry with a friend, posing in front of a mirror, even getting the left-overs in a bag to go and then spending a couple of hours at Ashford Designer Outlet. You'd

think a man in his position might quickly grab the first thing on the shelf and make off, but no, as CCTV shows, he carefully selected and tried on trousers and shirts, even asking a shop assistant for help with collar sizing at one point. Always paying in cash – he was careful about that!

We were a sniff away from finding him at this point; maybe 12 hours behind him at Ashford. But of course by then he had fled the country. The fact he is a man who can arrange at the drop of a hat for a privately hired plane to whisk him away without a passport speaks volumes about his connections and criminal links. How many of us would even know where to start in chartering a plane?

It was a theme throughout the investigation, O'Brien's ability to travel on false documentation and undetected through countries, using private planes and highly encrypted phones costing £3,000 apiece. He had no job in the UK, no bank account; he spent his summers in Ibiza and had returned home just a couple of weeks before Josh's murder. Most of our manhunts last a few weeks or months, and the suspect might flee to another county in the UK, relying on family and limited funds – not O'Brien.

The hunt was on and we followed up every single potential sighting, you just never knew. Some were frustratingly intended to distract and mislead the investigation, by tying up our resources to follow a line of enquiry that came to nothing. But they were far outweighed by the many many well-intentioned calls and lots were very credible – Xmas 2017 we had news he was at a tanning shop in west London. It sounded unbelievable he could be so close to home but CCTV showed a man who looked very similar to O'Brien. Extensive work would discount him.

As we know, in Prague his temper boiled up, leading to his arrest for a scuffle in a nightclub, a mistake on his part, or maybe not. He was so confident and arrogant when arrested, it was clear this was no big deal for him. He was bailed – it was a low level offence – but fingerprints were taken and later proactive computer searches we requested revealed his true identity.

While frustrating we were so close, we had new images we could publicise and they showed a man who looked really fit and strong. He had boxing gloves on him when arrested and this gave us leads to follow up in local gyms plus we traced a barber who had cut O'Brien's hair several times – O'Brien said he was Australian but didn't have the accent to match. We also found the tattooist he had visited to cover up his existing tattoos. We still hadn't got our hands on O'Brien but it was progress and it was hope. Every little bit of information we obtained helped us build up a picture and was another piece of the puzzle towards finding him.

There were several arrests along the way. The man who chartered the plane and accompanied O'Brien out of the UK was later convicted of importing 100kg of heroin and cocaine, along with 30 of those encrypted phones. The

pilots were convicted in the Netherlands of importing more than 90kg of heroin. O'Brien had some interesting friends.

Throughout this period the support we had from the NCA and law enforcement authorities across the world, including Federal agents in the United States, was incredible. We kept up the publicity drive, using every opportunity to appeal and get O'Brien's image out there, creating a hostile atmosphere to make him such a hot commodity those supporting him would turn their backs on him. I am sure he felt that and perhaps that's what led to that final call.

Late on Thursday 21 March this year I was called by O'Brien's brief, based in the UK, saying O'Brien was considering handing himself in and wanted me to travel to Budapest to personally meet him. My immediate thought was why? - really, he could have walked into any police station and handed himself in as one of the world's most wanted men. Was this a trick to waste our time and resources getting out there only to find he was long gone somewhere else?

Then it changed and we were told the meet location was now Romania. We were then able to alert the Romanian authorities who did some brilliant work and they got him – detained with three mobile phones and counterfeit documentation.

We'd told Josh's family something might be about to happen that weekend and then we were able to update them that after all this time finally O'Brien was in custody. For me those three-and-a-half years until we got him were a lens into the pain a family without justice can suffer.

Extradition was swift. O'Brien was accompanied back to the UK by Met officers and I watched his plane land before going to meet them. It was mixed emotion when I finally saw him in person. A bit of nervousness, a bit more of the 'why' – I'd watched that CCTV a hundred times, I still couldn't work out why he did what he did – and a bit of yes, finally! And just taking stock of him as a person; he looked huge, fit, a real presence. Josh never stood a chance.

He was taken to Heathrow police station and I personally charged him, not something a DCI would normally do but I had to complete the story. He didn't react, didn't say anything.

We were quietly confident but not complacent about the weight of the evidence against O'Brien. Court was the first time we heard from him when he took to the stand. He claimed Josh was staring at him and he feared he would be attacked. He said he possibly saw something shiny being passed to Josh – no one else saw this and neither was it supported by CCTV.

Court was also the first opportunity I had to take stock of how we'd got here and just the amazing work that took place across the world that led to that

moment.

It's been a long and complex investigation and we feel it. During the last almost four years, officers have joined my team, been promoted, retired – and two DCs died suddenly of cancer within six weeks of each other, DC Vennart who had taken that initial break-through call, and DC Bernie Looney, another hugely valued colleague and friend. So during the trial I had a lump in my throat as I heard evidence gathered by amazing officers who are no longer with us.

The Met, you have all been amazing and this success is down to your brilliance. It was a tough period but we got through it because every officer and member of staff in the Met is committed to solving crime and getting justice for grieving families and my team's work continues with the, sadly, several other murder cases we are working on. As I end this blog, we have just charged three with a new murder, a stabbing in W3 - another family wrecked through mindless violence.

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