

Circle of hell

LAWYERS acting for Simon Hall, who to everyone's amazement lost his appeal against conviction for the 2001 murder of 79-year-old Joan Albert (*Eyes passim*), are seeking to persuade the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) to re-examine the troubling case.



As regular *Eye* readers will know, a wealth of forensic evidence taken from Mrs Albert's Suffolk home pointed away from Hall, now 34, to other intruders being present that fateful night. Hairs, fingerprints, blood and footprints from the murder scene were no match for Hall and the case against him depended entirely on bitterly contested fibre evidence; his conviction being the first to rely on solely on such evidence.

It has now emerged, however, that there was no attempt to match any of the DNA or other forensic material to others who were viable suspects – and were indeed interviewed by police – at the time. So lawyers will next month urge the CCRC to look again at the wealth of forensic material to see if it can be matched to any other suspects. They will also be asking it to study CCTV footage from various locations which they believe could support Hall's alibi.

Simon Hall was only put in the frame because his mother used to care for Mrs Albert. He had an alibi for all but about half hour of the night and early hours when Mrs Albert was killed. He was pubbing and clubbing with friends in Ipswich before dropping one of them off at 5.30am and arriving home at about 6am.

Hall's wife Stephanie is now encouraging MPs to raise the case in the Commons and is asking awkward questions about why Keir Starmer, as director of public prosecutions and head of the Crown Prosecution Service, sought to contest Hall's appeal last year. She accuses the QC of hypocrisy because in 2007 Starmer took part in a BBC *Rough Justice* documentary about the case, where he aired his concerns. Then he said the case was peculiar because "there is no particular reason to suspect he is guilty of this offence... There is one crucial link and that's the fibre evidence, and that's what holds the whole case together. It's a very odd case, it's circumstantial. Break that central piece of evidence and the case falls apart."

The court of appeal was indeed presented with new evidence – from one of the UK's top forensic experts, Tiernan Coyle – which did appear to "break that link". The three appeal judges said they accepted that the fibre evidence at Hall's original trial was both "incomplete" in its description and analysis, and "wrong" in its identification of green polyester fibres (Coyle found they were in fact black and far more common than suggested). Despite this they were still "quite satisfied" that the scientific support from crown (ie Starmer and CPS) experts that Hall was the source of the fibres at the crime scene was "compelling".

How they concluded this when the crown, at the 11th hour of the appeal, dismissed Coyle's discovery of tiny polyurethane foam fragments (missed completely by experts at the 2002 trial) as contamination from police officers, beggars belief. Not least this is because contamination by police raises the real possibility that the flock and polyester fibres which damned Hall were also the result of police contamination.

Coyle was so astounded by the appeal ruling that he took the unprecedented step of writing to Andrew Rennison, the new forensic regulator, whose job is "protecting the integrity of the criminal justice system". He said he believed there had been a serious miscarriage of justice. The regulator passed his concerns on to the CCRC, who on the basis of Coyle's findings had sent the case back to the appeal court in the first place. So while Hall prepares to spend his 11th year in jail, his prime years lost behind bars, his case simply goes full circle.