

Paul Blackburn *'Work in Progress'*

[Too much of this book is written from my perspective - and, although I try to get involved as early as possible in a case, much of the work is done before a case reaches me. So I've asked Bob Duffield, our research consultant, to write this chapter on the intriguing case of Paul Blackburn. DJ]

I suppose it was just a matter of time before I found myself immersed in a Manchester-based story. This work has taken me virtually everywhere else in Britain. The re-investigation of Mark Cleary's conviction, for instance, had taken me back to Nottingham, where in a previous life I had posed and postured about the place as a long-haired undergraduate. And then, rather unexpectedly, I'd been off to Gloucester on behalf of Gary Mills and Tony Poole; I was in the middle of an intense bout of research in Glasgow on behalf of Thomas Campbell and Joseph Steele, convicted of the biggest mass murder in Scottish history during the course of the infamous Ice Cream wars. But then we discovered that the BBC Community Programmes Unit were on the case, and it seemed fatuous to be in competition, so I decided to put the Scottish research on hold and headed down to Manchester.

Ever since coming to Just Television in September 1992 I had been waiting for a Manchester case. I don't know the place as well as I would like to, but I think I have a feel for that vibrant and confident city and for its people, thanks to a few close Mancunian friends. I had also spent a frenetic couple of months working there on a live consumer programme for Granada Television. With the Gloucester case completed and the Glasgow one on hold, I had been fishing around for a new case. There was little that was promising in the correspondence, the daily trickle of cases that make it along the prison grapevine to our offices. But Stephen Phelps had been tipped off by Cleary's barrister, David Martin-Sperry, that there might be some mileage in the Brannan and Murphy

case. The two men had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of a gangster in a dingy Manchester night-club. Unfortunately, they had gone to the club armed with a knife and an axe - but there was compelling evidence that the victim had pulled a gun on them first and that it was a case of self-defence; if this could be proved, then Brannan and Murphy would have been wrongly convicted.

I was delegated to head off to Manchester and meet Brannan's solicitor. Many of us have different ways of tackling a case, but to me meeting the solicitor and getting hold of a full set of case papers is the essential first step. While I was in the area, I could also take the opportunity to go to Liverpool to meet Eddie Gilfoyle's family. He too was serving life, for the murder of his wife Paula, by hanging her in the garage. The jury were convinced by evidence that suggested Gilfoyle - involved in some sort of social work training - had induced his wife to take part in a 'suicide experiment', to the extent of writing out a suicide note, to help him in his studies. The case remains Britain's only recorded case of a conviction for murder by hanging.

To round off the trip - and get the best value out of my northern tour - I was due to meet Steve Haywood at Wakefield Prison. We had VO's - the official prison department visiting orders - to see Gilfoyle and, while we were about it, a man called Blackburn.

That's how Paul Blackburn came into my life. It's somehow fitting that he should have been an afterthought - his whole life seems to have been somewhat accidental.

The elements that day conspired against me. I set off from Manchester to cross the Pennines on the M62 to Leeds. As I left, the city was being battered by a terrible storm - alarms were shrilling all around from shaken premises and rocking cars. Fire engines skidded round the greasy and glistening street corners. Managing to steer the hire car clear of most of the flying objects, I reached the comparative

haven of the motorway. As the road climbed into the mountains, however, huge lumps of cotton wool came bowling out of the sky, and before I knew it the carriageway was blocked. I was stranded in a queue of parked vehicles that stretched, for all I knew, all the way to Leeds.

As ever, I was brilliantly prepared - no road map in the car, and a very distant memory of fifth-form geography. I had just assumed that I would follow the blue motorway signs to Wakefield. I managed to crawl off at the next junction, and sought directions on the mobile phone from the unflappable Emma back at base. I had almost given up hope of making HM Prison, Wakefield, expecting at any moment to join the growing number of cars abandoned in drifts on the side of the road. But thanks to the improvised drive-by-wire system with Emma at the helm, I managed to reach the M1 and then Wakefield about forty-five minutes before visiting time was up.

Things weren't going to get any easier. Steve, who I was to meet, had one VO to meet Gilfoyle, and I had one to meet Blackburn. The idea was that we'd each chat with our prisoner and swap over at half-time, thus making the most of our visit. As luck and mismanagement would have it, I had driven through the arctic snows with Steve's VO, while he had mistakenly got mine. Over the telephone we agreed that Steve should pretend to be me and that, if I ever arrived, I would impersonate him. And we'd just have to hope that prisons are sloppier about their admissions policy than they are about keeping their visitors inside.

Luckily, that seemed to be the case. I spotted Steve across the visiting hall, chatting with Blackburn. He seemed surprised that I had made it at all. I sat down for a few minutes with them, while I waited for the system to winkle Eddie Gilfoyle out of his cell. So it was that I came face to face with the man whose destiny was to haunt me for months.

Blackburn is a thin, pale man with bright-blue eyes and an unruly mess of wavy hair. He greeted me with a firm handshake and a cheeky smile; he struck me as the sort of man who survives the prison regime by challenging it with calculating insolence. I had already read a lot of Blackburn's letters from prison. They touched upon fragments of evidence, his past, his family, and so on - but the overall impression was one of outrage sprinkled with facetious remarks, mostly jokes against himself, each punctuated with a smiley-face drawing to make sure that the reader got the joke. Here was Smiley Face himself.

Anyone can lie, and appearances are deceptive, but I must say I warmed to Paul Blackburn from the outset. I can remember thinking - if you're banged up for an eternity because of a crime you did not commit, a sense of humour, or certainly of the ridiculous, is probably quite useful.

Blackburn passed another subtle test on first meeting. He didn't bang on about his innocence. In our game, it is very easy for prisoners to fall into the trap of protesting too much. Innocence is for juries to decide. What I'm interested in is the quality of the evidence which convicts someone, and the prospect of discovering new evidence. In the course of that discovery, I will form my own conclusions about the question of guilt. Having said that, what will keep me going, on cold inhospitable doorsteps, and grim no-hot-food-after-nine hotels, is the conviction that justice has miscarried. I find it less easy to go the extra mile, or two hundred miles, for a rogue who has been stitched up for the inappropriate robbery - as David Jessel says, the man who is done for the Clydesdale bank, when he has the perfectly reasonable alibi that he was doing the local Barclays at the time.

What terrible deed must Paul Blackburn have done at the age of fourteen - to keep him in prison still at the age of thirty? What enormity, committed by a child, can have induced the state to keep him confined six years longer than the average murderer? There are two answers to that; the first is because his supposed crime was a vile one - the attempted murder and buggery of a nine-year-old boy.

The second reason why he was not freed years ago is that he denies doing it.

The case goes all the way back to June 1978. I had never taken on such an old case; this re-investigation would have more in common with an archaeological dig than normal detective work. The fossil evidence was clear about one thing - Paul Blackburn was one of those people who, in another age, would have been described as 'born to hang'. By the age of fourteen, Paul was in trouble - lots of trouble. He had several convictions for assault, burglary and arson. He had burned down part of his school. For this offence, local magistrates issued an interim secure care order confining Blackburn at Red Bank Approved School.

Early in 1978, Paul's father drowned in the Manchester Ship. Drunk, he had fallen off the gangplank of his barge. Paul's brothers and sisters received the news with delight and relief. Fred, an older brother, crept

into the bedroom and said: 'You'll never believe this - but, thank God, Dad's dead.' For years they had had to endure their father's drunken thrashings, and his brutalization of their mother. Now, that shadow at least had passed. And there was more good news: secure care orders are reviewed on an annual basis, and Paul was expecting to be released from Red Bank shortly after his fifteenth birthday in of the same year. Paul was allowed to come home to attend his father's funeral, but he didn't show up, making out that he had 'caught the wrong bus.' Social work reports show that he did not grieve for his father, and that he had major problems relating to adults, and in particular men.

My researches quickly revealed that Blackburn's social worker at the time reckoned that his time at the approved school 'did not touch' Paul. He merely saw it as something to survive. The school regime was based on 'behaviour modification' - jargon for the old carrot-and-stick approach to the reform of juvenile delinquents. On the old, character-building public school model, the inmates lived in 'houses', each one split into a number of dormitories and supervised by a housemaster or housemother. Everything, every petty privilege, had to be earned through the allocation of 'points' for good behaviour. Too few points, and you would lose your home-leave weekend.

If only Paul Blackburn had managed to behave himself a little less he would not be in prison today. For it was on one such hard-won home leave that the crime was committed which horrified Warrington and put Blackburn in the frame.

It was a Sunday, 25 June, and a nine-year-old lad from nearby Sankey Keys left home for an afternoon's fishing. He took his rod, its stand, and a bag of sandwiches to join his uncle at a local pond called Geoff's Pit. I retraced the journey; these days it's a pleasantly manicured municipal area called Sankey Park, but in 1978 it was a rough trek across open countryside. The grass, I was told, came up to your waist; you could be playing soccer one moment in the street, and then hop over the fence and be in Indian country.

The boy never reached Geoff's Pit. When he hadn't returned home by nine in the evening, his parents called the police. Teams of volunteers scoured the area until dark. Hundreds gathered at first light the next day to continue the trawl. Police divers were brought in to investigate the depths of the Sankey canal - where, incidentally, the missing boy's brother had drowned a few years earlier. By late evening,

the boy was still missing. Police were beginning to suspect that he had been abducted away from the area.

But at nine in the evening on the following day, Billy Manuel and his son, close neighbours of the missing boy's family, found themselves near to Seven Arches - an impressive Victorian railway bridge over the Sankey Canal. The Manuels had refused to give up the search. They were rummaging through a disused, roofless sewage works near the bridge - a honeycomb of brick cells with interlocking walls of varying heights. From one such cell they heard a muffled noise. Billy quickly tore away a pile of bricks which was weighing down a square piece of boarding at the bottom of the cell. Underneath the board was the body of a boy - totally naked, barely conscious but mercifully, still alive. He had been lying in the pit for some twenty-eight hours waiting to be rescued, unable to move because of the brick-weighted coffin lid above him.

At the hospital, the doctors found he was suffering from hypothermia, a number of cuts and bruises, and a badly broken little finger. It was also apparent that there had been an indecent sexual assault. The boy was clearly the victim of a loathsome attack, and the police-search exercise instantly became a manhunt for the assailant. Squads of extra officers were drafted in, and the local media gladly co-operated in publishing appeals for information. Someone out there must have known, or seen, the assailant - it would only be a matter of time before the 'red-haired thug' was caught and brought to justice.

That indeed was one of the key characteristics the victim was able to report to the police - that his attacker had shoulder-length, curly ginger hair. He was aged between sixteen and eighteen and was wearing a green parka jacket with a fur-lined hood. He wore blue jeans and Doc Martens boots. The boy also told the police that the man had stabbed him with a pocket-knife. But in spite of large headlines in the local and national press, the trail went cold.

The police strategy was a devastatingly simple one. They interviewed every ginger-haired young man in an ever-expanding radius from the scene of the crime. Within weeks, literally thousands of red-headed boys had been spoken to. Warrington Police Station was clogged with queues of carrot-topped lads brought in for elimination purposes.

The problem with this approach was that the police fell victim to it. By using the media to heighten awareness of the 'red-haired thug' they

had created public pressure to apprehend this ogre; and this, in turn, brought pressure on them to lean on any ginger-haired youth who couldn't adequately account for his movements on 25 June.

This method certainly produced results. Within a few weeks the police obtained a full and detailed confession from the admitted assailant. In fact, within weeks they had obtained no fewer than three such confessions.

None of them were from Paul Blackburn.

There are times when the work consists in poring over endless documents and files, analysing witness statements, cross-checking custody records - but sometimes you have to sit back and use your sheer imagination. I had to think myself into the mind of a fourteen-year-old boy on a boring Sunday afternoon. How much grasp would I have of the timetable of an afternoon's 'mucking about'? How well would I have been able to account for my actions? There were certain landmarks in Paul's aimless day of home leave. He'd got up late on the Sunday, and strolled over to visit his oldest brother Harry. At the house, he ran into a friend called Tony Chadwick, and the two decided to go out and shoot with brother Harry's air rifle. Over the next few hours, various luckless birds and old tin cans were on the receiving end of the rifle, and the pellets made satisfying noises as they hit the waters of the old canal. But, before long, the interest faded, and hunger began to grow. They split up. Paul walked home, fixed himself a can of soup, and then - he told police - strolled out to the shops just a few hundred yards away. He hung around, smoking, in a shop doorway, before wandering back home to see if there was anything on television. Yes, I think most of us have had adolescent afternoons like that.

Paul could fix the time that he got back home with reference to what he saw on the television (this, it seems, is how the entire population defines its day - 'just after *News at Ten*', 'half-way through *Neighbours*'). At 4.30 p.m. on Sunday 25 June, when the poor boy was being assaulted, BBC1 was playing *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* - an innocent, childish extravaganza which was to dominate the eventual trial and conviction of Paul Blackburn.

Why did police light upon Paul Blackburn? He was interviewed a total of four times. For the first two, he was seen by a couple of lowly police-officers at Red Bank, where Paul, in the presence of a housemaster called Jim Dillon, had given a surly and skeletal account of his day. But then - and this is where a detailed chronology yields

such fascinating insights - came brother Fred's false confession. The police quickly rejected it. Indeed, the fool's gold of three such confessions had been rejected. It was now nearly a month since the manhunt had been launched.

The third interview was conducted by the two senior officers involved in the case. Strangely, no record was taken of any interview this time. But they returned exactly a week later, and, in the presence of senior housemaster Fred McVitie, subjected him to a formal interrogation. By now, it must have become clear to Paul that he was the principal suspect. He stuck to his account of the day's events; but the more he protested, the clearer it became that he had no independently verifiable alibi for the critical time between four and five o'clock when, the police calculated, the attack on the boy had taken place.

The only point of reference Blackburn could produce was the time at which he had got home; *Willy Wonka* was on, he said and it was 'the bit where the dwarves were singing a song in the cave, and the boat was just about to go into the tunnel.' This remembered fragment of film was to sink Paul Blackburn. Spooling back the video, the police calculated that these images must have appeared no sooner than 4.45 p.m. - so Paul was without an alibi up to that time. What's more, he had been in the area, wearing a parka. Worse, Blackburn seemed to be changing details of his account between statements, as if he was trying to squirm his way out of his inevitable guilt. All this strongly indicated a guilty mind. It was only a matter of time before Blackburn broke - or so it must have seemed to the police.

The senior detectives now pulled an ace to trump Blackburn's supposed lies. Two years earlier, when Blackburn was just eleven years old, he had admitted assaulting four younger lads along with another youth. The case had rested on file as an unpleasant episode of childish bullying - two of the little boys had been forced to strip, and Blackburn had pricked their genitals with a pin. Warrington CID now went back to the victims, and obtained evidence which cast a heavy shadow over Blackburn's psychosexual make-up. The boys added new features to their evidence, including simulated buggery and fellatio. And their new statements were unequivocal; it was the ginger-haired older lad who had initiated the torments - Paul Blackburn.

Confronted with this evidence, at 11.40 on 21 July, Blackburn broke down and confessed to attempted murder and buggery. The officers took his confession in his own handwriting. Within days he had

retracted it, saying that it was extracted as a result of a continuous barrage of threats, shouting and abuse. He would also claim that the 'special knowledge' of the attack contained in the confession had been spoon-fed to him by the interviewing officers.

So why should Paul Blackburn's case cause me to give up so many nights of my life to tossing and turning in the overheated bedrooms of this lousy, pretentious Manchester hotel? Mind you, I wouldn't stay anywhere else except this overweight, overdressed, overpriced tart of a hotel, reminiscent of a *fin-de-siècle* Parisian brothel. I fell in love with the Britannia while working on Granada's *Out of Order* programme five years ago. At the end of a foot-slogging day around the lost estates of Warrington, Irlam, Eccles, Peel Green and Bolton, the Britannia offers a warm embrace like a blousy and slightly inebriated aunt. The club in the basement, slightly encumbered for six days of the week by its name 'Saturdays', beats on relentlessly until 2 a.m. I swear you can hear it from the fourth floor - and on Tuesdays the lager is given away at a pound a pint. Nothing much has changed at the Britannia in five years - not even the midweek disc jockey. Social anthropologists [of which Bob was one, in a former postgraduate existence. DJ] will tell you that the essential purpose of ritual is to suspend the passing of time - to evoke a perfect world where things never age. It's a tricky illusion to pull off, and usually requires loud music, intoxicants and frenetic dancing to suspend the collective disbelief. Saturdays is such a timeless place, even on Tuesday night - a crossroads where sporadic flocks of hen-partying girls collide with lads on the razz, and businessmen up for a conference pair off with a couple of single mums who have managed to get last-minute baby-sitters, to flicker in the strobe-lit darkness.

But to answer my own question - why haven't I written off Paul Blackburn as a sad but dangerous young man who continues to protest his innocence because he cannot confront the enormity of his disgrace? A man, as they say, who is heavily in denial? The answer is that I do not believe he should have been convicted, and I am haunted by the fear that he is innocent.

Let's take that confession statement for a start. This is a confession made by a boy who has just passed his fifteenth birthday. Blackburn was interrogated for five hours by the two senior officers. He's a streetwise kid, but he is without doubt under considerable pressure - why else should a tough lad break down in tears, as it is acknowledged that he did? Why wasn't he allowed a solicitor, or his mother, present?

A senior housemaster was present to oversee the interrogation, but might not Blackburn have seen Fred McVitie as an authority figure, rather than a protector? Mr McVitie had almost total control over Blackburn's life - he had the power to punish, discipline, and withhold privileges. As Red Bank's senior housemaster he was almost universally feared. My own researches among former members of the staff suggested a figure very much 'of the old school'.

In the contemporaneous notes recorded by the police, McVitie at one point said to Blackburn: 'It's up, Paul, the officers only want the truth.' This would surely be taken to imply 'the game's up', or 'stop lying'. But in court this was said to be an incomplete note and that Mr McVitie had said: 'It's up to you, Paul, the officers only want the truth.'

There is a difference.

The remarkable thing about the Blackburn case is how little paperwork survives. Instead of my usual submersion in the endless files, I was forced to concentrate on the bare essentials of a mere two hundred pieces of paper. This made me scrutinize the confession itself all the more carefully. It's a strange document for an inarticulate, sullen, ill-educated lad to have written. It suggests a strangely powerful and precise vocabulary. The word 'ejaculated' is used, and spelled correctly - would a fifteen-year-old have talked in such clinical terms? Blackburn wrote that he had attacked his victim 'in a frenzy' - a good, vivid phrase, but hardly part of a normal teenager's everyday usage. ('Sorry I kicked the dog, Mum, but I was in a frenzy?')

Yet everything hung on that confession - admissions which would certainly be thrown out as evidence today. These days, it's part of the law that there should be an 'appropriate adult' present, and that interviews should be carefully and unoppressively conducted - although, typically, there is no legal definition of oppression. The care taken in the interviewing of the children convicted of murdering the toddler Jamie Bulger shows how attitudes have changed - too late for Paul Blackburn.

Another thing that didn't help Blackburn was the fact that he'd had his hair cut - twice - after the attack, and on dates which tallied with the publication in the press of artist's impressions of the attacker. But as I tracked down former staff members, a benign explanation for the haircuts began to emerge. Red Bank, as a highly disciplined regime, did not allow boys to wear their hair over their collar. There were two routes to acceptable hair length - the 'gentle' cut administered by the

housemother, or the 'brutal' cut for which you were sent to the barber. Boys being boys, fashion being fashion, and the seventies being what they were, everyone was desperate to keep their hair as long as possible, while avoiding the disciplinary scalping.

On the day before the murder, I discovered, while Paul was at Red Bank's Open Day, a passing housemaster had noticed Paul's hair and said: 'We're going to have to deal with that hair, Paul ...' Luckily, it being Saturday, there was no one available to cut it, and Paul was able to go on home leave with his hair fashionably bedraggled. But on his return, remembering the scissiors of Damocles hanging over his head, he took the opportunity of a trim - his last hope of avoiding the barber's butchery. But Paul was far from happy with the result - and went to another member of staff for a more acceptable modification. Wasn't a mixture of vanity and savvy just as likely an explanation as the sinister one - that he was trying to make himself look different from the description of the assailant?

Come to that, how well did Blackburn match the description of the attacker, anyway? This was a crime carried out in an area frequented by people walking their dogs, by rambler and fishermen, on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Yet the only person on file who actually saw and described the attacker was the victim himself. Was this really credible? Outdoor crimes in daylight, such as the Wimbledon Common murder, usually spawn a plethora of witnesses. The police had boasted in court of having taken more than two thousand statements, and having interviewed three thousand people. Where was all this material? The slim ring binder in front of me was clearly a mere abstract of the available evidence - yet it was the evidence that had convicted Blackburn. Having worked on the Cleary case, I knew only too well of the evidential land mines that lurk in evidence which the police, and the defence, deem not to be relevant.

So there was only one description of the attacker: long, curly ginger hair, aged 17-21, 5'7" to 5'10" in height, white speckled shirt, green parka, blue jeans, Doc Martens, deep Manchester accent, and carrying a white-handled pocket knife.

Blackburn was fourteen. But let's now look at what the victim said to the police: 'I know boys of just fifteen who are as big as [the attacker].' But checking the chronology, I found that this was a statement taken by the police after Blackburn, who had just turned fifteen, was arrested. It does seem a strange opinion to offer, unless the police are anxious to

cement their suspicions.

Blackburn didn't have red hair, or ginger hair. It was blond. Interestingly, a subsequent statement from the victim amends the gingeriness - which had so dominated the publicity surrounding the manhunt - to 'light ginger'. His parka was brown. He did not have a speckled white shirt, but wore instead a blue sweatshirt with a large logo of an American university. Yes, he wore jeans and Doc Martens - the national dress of teenagers. And the knife? In his confession to the police, Blackburn admitted using a large Indian knife with a carved wooden handle to assault the youth - but it was an ornamental item, whose blade would have buckled before puncturing the skin. Normally, one would accept that in the desperate circumstances of an attack, the victim is not coolly engaged in issues of comparative knife design; but in this case, the victim said he had been virtually mesmerized by the knife. He had observed his attacker 'open' it - but Blackburn's knife was not the sort that could be closed.

Wrong age, wrong clothes, questionable hair, wrong knife. Not bad for a start. But deeply frustrating. Most of the papers are lodged with various government departments - some of whom, absurdly, have been claiming that they are covered by the thirty-year-rule. There's not a lot more that I can do until I have some more evidence to get my teeth into. And for that to happen, I'm subject to the timetable of bureaucrats who may not feel the same urgency about a possible miscarriage of justice as I do. But I have already found some tantalizing leads. Weeks before Blackburn was in the frame, a lorry driver from the Newcastle area who had seen the artist's impression in the *Manchester Evening News*, immediately came forward with a vital lead. On that very Sunday afternoon he had picked up a hitchhiker in Manchester who fitted the description - long, curly hair, green parka, aged around eighteen, with a deep, strong local accent. The youth claimed to be a slaughterman on his way to Tiverton in Devon. The driver had dropped him off in Great Sankey at around three in the afternoon, near the scene of the attack. Was this man ever found, or even pursued? Perhaps the answer lies in some dusty bundle of papers, deep in a forgotten cupboard of a government department.

Something else worries me. The police religiously preserved the scene of the crime and took a number of forensic samples, including swabs likely to contain semen from the attacker. Somehow - and what bad luck for all concerned - all the crucial exhibits somehow

disappeared at the forensic science laboratories before trial. They were apparently thrown away by mistake - exhibits that might have proved once and for all the non-involvement of Paul Blackburn in this horrible crime.

It's a cock-up too far; was this shoddy, panicky investigation by the police desperate to find any local youth with the opportunity to commit the crime? Something else is already ringing alarm bells. The discovery of Paul Blackburn's sexual bullying at the age of eleven clearly confirmed police suspicions. But on one of my field trips I tracked down one of the lads who had been the victim of that bullying in 1976. He's now twenty-five, and I showed him the statement he had made to the Warrington police in 1978.

He told me that he still remembered the incident clearly, but it wasn't Blackburn, but his accomplice who instigated the bullying. 'The guy who was ordering us about had dark hair - I know him, and he still lives here in Irlam. The other one, the one with the blond hair, he was guarding me, stopping me running off sort of thing - that must have been Blackburn, although I didn't know him at the time.' This does not chime with the version the police took away when they, with Blackburn already under suspicion, went to investigate this former attack - they had Paul as the instigator.

It's one of the great bonuses of this work that you run into remarkable people who you'd never meet under any other circumstances. There are people on the Bestwood estate, during the Cleary investigation, who I am now proud and happy to count among my friends. Investigating Blackburn, I met another remarkable person. A probation volunteer called Norma Green and her husband effectively adopted Paul's younger brother, John. John got into trouble himself, and Norma found herself visiting two Blackburn brothers. Now that John is out and going straight, Norma remains as Paul's lifeline. Her investment in him has been incalculable - thousands of pounds spent trekking around the country, visiting the many prisons where Paul has been moved. She usually writes a letter a day. And yet Norma herself is quite seriously ill. She regularly has to visit hospital for special injections which marginally mitigate her agony. Like medieval scholars, I do not know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but I do know there is one living in Peel Green, Manchester.

Norma has a million stories about Paul: about his fight to survive, his paintings, his moods, his anger, his scars from countless run-ins with

warders and inmates alike, his periods of solitary in various punishment blocks and the withdrawal of privileges. Paul has refused to take sexual counselling, even though it might speed his early release - if you can call release after sixteen years early. He simply says he doesn't need sexual counselling, because he is not a sex offender.

In fact the path he has chosen is nothing less than an assault course through Hell. Child sex offenders are universally despised by inmates and officers alike. Yet Blackburn has always refused the sanctuary of Rule 43, which segregates the despised 'nonces' from the 'normal' prison population. He has told me that he will only walk out of prison as an innocent man.

Work in Progress, this chapter is headed. I hope it won't join the sad pile of reject cases. There is something deeply wrong with this case. It is a casual conviction, reached on evidence which no court today would tolerate. If we could get his case back to the Appeal Court, I believe it would genuinely shock their Lordships.

It may well be that we have enough now to prompt an official re-investigation of the case. But we need a little bit more. We need to get hold of the rest of those papers. I am convinced that somewhere, among them, lies the key that can unlock Paul Blackburn from the prison to which he was sent so long ago, and in which he is now effectively confining himself.

I won't give this one up.