



JUDICIARY OF
ENGLAND AND WALES

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-v-

Craig COLLIER

In the Crown Court at Leeds

Sentencing Remarks of the Honourable Mr Justice Saini

9 December 2021

1. Craig Collier, on Friday 3 December 2021 you were convicted by a jury in the Crown Court at Leeds of the murders of Samantha Mills and Reece Schofield (Counts 1 and 2). The jury also convicted you of arson with intent to endanger life (Count 7), and of perverting the course of justice (Count 8).
2. It now falls to me to sentence you for these offences. You are 35 years of age.
3. I have received very helpful sentencing notes from Prosecution and Defence Counsel and my attention has been drawn to the relevant provisions of the Sentencing Act 2020 (the 2020 Act) as well as the material guidelines concerning the relevant offences and certain case law.
4. I have also been assisted by the characteristically moderate and measured submissions in mitigation made by your Leading Counsel, Mr Tehrani QC, who has represented you with skill throughout these proceedings.
5. Mr Moulson QC read to me the moving VPS from the surviving victims Ashley Khan and Katie Bland, as well as the statement from Teresa Thornton, Sam's

mother), and Ashley Thornton (Sam's youngest brother). Sam was one of a kind, a person would put a smile on everyone's face

6. Reece's mother, Lisa Schofield, bravely read to me her own very touching statement in open court. Reece had a difficult childhood but was making real steps towards gaining access to his young daughter, Ayla, and getting his life back on track. His death has shattered the lives of his family.
7. One cannot begin to imagine the trauma all of these people have suffered. Sam has left a number of young children. The trauma suffered by Reece's and Sam's loved ones was compounded by the fact that they were not able to visit Reece and Sam as they lay in hospital in comas, because of the Pandemic. They were to die before their relatives could see them.
8. Where I state factual findings in these sentencing remarks, I am sure of those facts based on the evidence I heard at trial and the jury's verdicts. In particular, my sentences reflect the fact that the jury did not find you intended to kill those at the property when you started the fires. I turn to the facts.
9. At around 6am on the morning of 23 March 2021, the fire brigade was called to attend a number of vigorous fires burning within a large apparently derelict house at 17 Clare Hill in Huddersfield. 17 Clare Hill faces the Cambridge Hotel where you were residing at that time with your partner.
10. There were six persons in the property: Sam and Reece (the murder victims), Katie Bland, Ashley Khan, Patrick Corbally and Chloe Macfarquahar (the survivors). Fire crews were called and duly attended and did what they could to save the six people trapped by the fires. Some of those in the attic managed to break and climb out of a Velux window in the attic and onto the roof of the property.
11. Three of those seeking refuge during the fire, Sam, Reece and Katie did not make it to the temporary safety of the roof. All of them were rescued, at that time alive, from within that attic bedroom as a result of the bravery of the fire crews.

12. Despite the best efforts of all concerned with their rescue and subsequent medical attention, Sam and Reece died on the 26 and 29 March 2021 respectively. The cause of death in respect of each of them was inhalation of the products of combustion giving rise to extreme respiratory and cardiac failures.
13. Katie Bland, the third person rescued from the inside of the property, was admitted to intensive care and survived the effects of the fires upon her albeit with continuing effects.
14. I will return in due course to the outstanding acts of bravery by the fire officers.
15. You were the person who called the fire brigade to the property from your room in the Cambridge Hotel across the road from 17 Clare Hill.
16. However, that call was the commencement of a despicable subterfuge which I will describe in more detail in a few moments.
17. Turning to events just before you started the fires, at around 5.30am you had joined the group of 6 who were partying at Clare Hill. Substantial amounts of drugs and alcohol had been consumed by those present. The group had moved to the attic roof room area of the property at the time you left the property, around 5.50am. You ignited two mattresses as you left. First a mattress on the floor immediately below the attic room and second a mattress on the ground floor.
18. There was a third fire on a chair on the ground floor hall area, but I cannot be sure on the basis of the fire expert evidence that you started that fire. It may well have been ignited by heat from the ground floor mattress fire.
19. It will be never be known why you started these fires, but it is clear on the jury's verdicts that you did not intend to kill those at the property but did intend to cause them at least really serious harm.
20. Unbeknownst to you, your departure from the property and return to the Cambridge Hotel were captured on CCTV from several cameras.

21. By the time the partying group smelt the fire in the attic it had made its way up through the house and filled the whole house with smoke.
22. Having started the two fires, you saw them take hold from the window of your room. You called 999 at about 6.01am to report the fire (having just tried to call Ms Bland). In the 999 call you alerted the operator to there being a fire at the relevant premises but told her that you did not think anyone lived in those premises. That was plainly false. You had left the property just minutes before knowing full well that the six were in the attic at the time you started the fires.
23. Maintaining these lies you also said to the 999 operator that: "I've just looked out of my window this morning I've just woke up, I looked out the window I can see it there's smoke there's fire there's literally big flames".
24. You then left your room at the Cambridge Hotel, went to the roadside and were spoken to by Police Officers, including PC Mee who recorded what you told her on a body-worn video camera.
25. You began to tell a further series of lies about the circumstances which gave rise to the fire. You told PC Mee that a male involved in smashing a mirror earlier went into the property and then five minutes later the fire started. Rapid police inquiries revealed that you were claiming that a male called Sholan James had started the fires.
26. Later that morning, continuing with these lies, you provided a signed witness statement to the Police indicating that Sholan James was responsible for setting fire to the building. You stressed to the Police when you made that statement implicating Sholan James that there were no errors in it. You omitted to mention that you had been in the property shortly before the fire.
27. Mr James was arrested, interviewed, and detained in custody overnight. One can imagine the distress he must have suffered being accused of murder and attempted murder. In interview, Mr James denied any and all involvement in the incident. CCTV analysis revealed that Mr James was right. However, that CCTV also showed that you were present at the premises just before the fires

were started.

28. Once confronted with the CCTV you then changed your story, admitting for the first time being at the property, but you claimed there were no fires at the time you left.
29. I now turn to the issue of the sentence under Counts 1 and 2, murder.
30. In respect of your murders of Sam and Reece, there is only one sentence that the law allows to be passed.
31. That is a mandatory sentence of imprisonment for life. I am required to specify the minimum term, pursuant to Schedule 21 of the Sentencing Act 2020, which must elapse before you can be released on licence.
32. The first step, in determining the minimum term, is to identify the appropriate starting point. This is a double murder case. I see no reason on the serious facts of this case, including the combination of offences, to depart from the normal statutory starting point of 30 years.
33. Having chosen that starting point, I am required then to take into account the aggravating and mitigating factors in your case to determine the minimum period.
34. Your previous convictions have been drawn to my attention by the Crown. Although you have not previously committed offences of the gravity of the present case, it is clear you have a significant criminal record. However, the only potentially relevant matters are a conviction for arson when you were 14 (to which I attach no weight) and a s.18 offence of violence (to which I attach some but little weight).
35. I consider the following aggravating factors are present:
 - (i) First, your convictions for arson with intent to endanger life and perverting the course of justice. These are in their own right very serious offences. I will pass concurrent sentences (as agreed by Counsel) in respect of these offences, but they are factors which aggravate the

minimum term. I will address these separately further in due course.

- (ii) Second, although I accept that there was not significant planning or premeditation by setting 2 fires, both of them in locations in 17 Claire Hill below where the group were present, there was in my view a clear element of determination and thought given by you to the setting of those fires. I am sure that you took care to set each mattress separately alight using a lighter or matches.
- (iii) Third, the victims were clearly vulnerable by reason of their consumption of drink and drugs.
- (iv) Fourth, the deceased persons must have suffered real terror and physical pain and suffering as the fire took hold and they could not escape.

36. Before turning to mitigation, I must identify the sentences for arson and perverting the course of justice since they will be factored into the minimum term, taking into account totality.

37. As regards the arson Count 7, this is a Culpability 1, Category 1 Harm case. There was an intent to endanger life and serious physical and psychological injury. There was also aggravation in the consumption of alcohol. I accept there was no premeditation but some determination and care in creating the fires. In its own right, this Count merits a sentence of 10 years and I will impose that as a concurrent sentence of that term.

38. As regards the perverting the course of justice count, that type of offence undermines the whole process of justice and is of a nature that an immediate substantial custodial sentence would have been justified, if this matter had stood alone. I have had regard to the seriousness of the alleged criminality of the person you accused, the persistence in your conduct (in making both an oral and sworn written statement) and the effect upon the falsely accused person who was arrested and detained in custody. Having started these fires and realizing the enormity of what you had done you created a story which would point away from you and towards a wholly innocent man as the perpetrator. Unless the CCTV had caught you and exonerated Mr James, I am sure you would have continued these lies in the criminal proceedings to which he would have been

subject. Alone, Count 8 merits a sentence of 3 years' imprisonment and I impose such a concurrent sentence.

39. Pausing here, it is clear to me that the aggravating features of your offending justify an increase from the 30 year starting point, before turning to a consideration of the mitigating features. I turn then to mitigating factors.

40. The following mitigating factors are argued on your behalf:

- (i) First, as I accept, the jury found you had only an intention to cause serious bodily harm rather than to kill those in the property.
- (ii) Second, the lack of premeditation.
- (iii) Third, within minutes of starting the fire, you appear to have regretted your actions and sought to some extent to mitigate the substantial harm you had caused by first trying to alert those within the building and then calling the emergency 999 operator twice. You also provided some assistance to the fire service in identifying in precise terms how many people were in the building at a time when they were considering returning to the property.

41. I give each of these factors substantial weight.

42. Reliance is also however placed on what your Leading Counsel has said are your mental health conditions. They are said to lower your degree of culpability.

43. Your Leading Counsel has fairly accepted there is no concrete evidence in support of this submission. I have been referred to information obtained by your legal team from discussions with the mental health team at Leeds prison. On the basis of the limited information available to me, I accept that you suffer from some form of psychosis. I note your drug regime, and your evidence at trial of an earlier diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. I do not accept there is sufficient evidence of any alcohol-related disorder.

44. Although I have no medical evidence as to how in specific terms your mental

disorder explains why you started the fires, or your level of appreciation of your actions, your Counsel invited me to reflect your mental health difficulties with some level of relatively minor reduction in the minimum term. I accept that submission.

45. Standing back and having regard to all the factors to which I have made reference, the appropriate minimum term in your case is one of 30 years. I consider on the facts, the balance of aggravating and mitigating factors ultimately leads me back to the starting point.
46. This minimum term has been arrived at taking into account my duty to reflect all of your offending in accordance with section 322 of the Sentencing Act 2020.
47. I have also stood back to consider what is a just and proportionate sentence, bearing in mind the principle of totality.

Mr Collier please stand up:

48. I sentence you to life imprisonment. The minimum term you will serve is one of 30 years. As regards Count 7, I impose a concurrent sentence of 10 years' imprisonment. As regards Count 8, I impose a concurrent term of 3 years' imprisonment.
49. It is important that I emphasize, so that you and the public can understand the position, that the minimum term is just that - a minimum period. That means it is a period which cannot be reduced in any in way.
50. After you have served 30 years, I must inform you that there is no guarantee that you will be released at that time, or at any particular time thereafter.
51. After the 30 year period has been served, the Parole Board will decide if you are fit to be released.
52. If and when you are released, you will remain subject to licence for the rest of

your life and may therefore be recalled to continue your life sentence if you reoffend or otherwise breach the conditions of your licence.

53. It is in these ways that a life sentence protects the public for the future.
54. You will receive credit for the days that you were remanded in custody which are 258 days.
55. The statutory surcharge will be added to the record.
56. Finally, I would like to recognise the firefighters in this case as deserving of special commendation. Firefighters Alexander Hogg and Adam Washington were first on the scene, and had to tackle three fires in a smoke-filled building with no visibility.
57. Putting their own lives at risk, Mr Hogg and Mr Washington undertook acts of substantial bravery in rescuing those in the building.
58. I also wish to recognize the outstanding work of the police service in investigating and bringing this case to a conclusion. This team consisted of DCI 5839 Sharron Kaye (Senior Investigating Officer), DI Phil Davis (Deputy Senior Investigating Officer), DS 2995 Lisa Watts (Officer in the case), Maddie Wilson (Casebuilder), James Malsbury (CCTV Co-ordinator), DC 5006 Beth Andrews (Family Liaison Officer), DC 5318 Lee Swift (Family Liaison Officer).