


Quality street

A pair of burglars posing as bogus officials, one resembling a Coronation Street soap actor, targeted a string of pensioners until an operation stretching across force borders tracked them down.

John Dean reports.

 It may have been his likeness to a Coronation Street television soap star, Tyrone Dobbs from Coronation Street, that set conman John Paul Thomas on the road to prison. However, his conviction was the result of determined police work involving officers the length and breadth of England.

Thomas, 27, and 16-year-old John Paul Connors, both from Leeds, were bogus officials whose method was to keep pensioners talking at the front door, while the other broke into the rear of the house to steal.

They have now been jailed for conspiracy to burgle, charges taking in offences committed across several force areas.

The men were caught after a car chase which began when a

sharp-eyed North Yorkshire traffic officer spotted their vehicle in the Skipton area in September 2004.

The men were wanted for a string of bogus official incidents in the area that day and, at first, it looked to detectives like a straight forward case.

In fact, it was only the start of the story as it soon emerged that the duo were wanted by forces around the country, many of them already looking for a man described by witnesses as a 'Tyrone' look-alike.

Co-ordinated

Alerted by news of the North Yorkshire arrests, the forces, among them Durham, West Yorkshire, Northumbria, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, agreed to a co-ordinated approach.

Det Sgt Kevin Moore, the Durham officer who took on co-ordination of the inquiry, is based in Chester-le-Street and like officers in other forces, he and his colleagues were aware of a series of bogus official incidents in their division and across the force area.

It was the Tyrone description circulated through the National Intelligence Model that made them realise the scale of the inquiry.

Det Sgt Moore said: 'We had established a pattern of crimes for the offences in our area. It seemed clear that these two men were doing a day's work, travelling in, committing crimes in the same area then moving on. Our witnesses were commenting on the resemblance to Tyrone. Then we discovered that witnesses in

other force areas had been saying the same thing.

'It was obvious that each force needed to support each other to construct a strong case. We had to work together. Many areas had suffered from these crimes.'

Initially, North Yorkshire planned to take forward its own prosecution against Thomas and Connors later abandoning this approach and combining its cases with the wider prosecution.

Det Sgt Alan Brown, who was based at Skipton at the time, said: 'The North Yorkshire element really happened all on one day. We were ready to charge in relation to our incidents but when we heard about the others, we did not go ahead. If we had, it would have given the impression that these



Det Sgt Kevin Moore with intelligence

two men went out on one day to commit offences, which was not the full picture. Put with other cases, it was evidence of behaviour over a period of time.

'They picked victims they knew would not make good witnesses - although they got it wrong in our case because one of the witnesses was a former North Yorkshire police officer. They were not to know that; to outward appearances he was another frail elderly person.'

Officers from the different forces channelled their information through Chester-le-Street, including evidence from the Operation Liberal team, based at Derbyshire headquarters, in Ripley.

Operation Liberal represents a dozen forces in an area, ranging from South Yorkshire to Cambridgeshire and across the Midlands, including Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

Its team was already compiling evidence on Connors and Thomas, in an inquiry led by DC Chris Greaves, a Derbyshire officer.

Liberal pooled its information with that being collected by Det Sgt Moore, who was now being assisted by fellow Chester-le-Street officer DC Marco Fantin. At one point, they were looking at about 150 crimes across the force areas.

Intelligence role

Durham Police analyst Fiona McGinn translated the intelligence into a huge roll of paper chronicling the pertinent information for each case.

Added to that was forensic information from the scenes of burglaries as well as other evidence. For instance, a car spotted in County Durham, and linked to a crime, was also reported in Leeds, where the men lived, and footwear found at the scene of one crime matched that worn by one of the two men.

There was also eyewitness evidence; many victims had given good descriptions of 'Tyroné' and were later able to pick him out using the Viper identification system, an electronic identity parade. Greater Manchester Police undertook to tell actor Alan Halsall that his screen name was being linked to the case.

The team were also able to use CCTV pictures from

Nottinghamshire Police, linking the duo to offences, as well as glean useful background from West Yorkshire where the men lived.

For Northumbria Police, the catalyst for involvement was an unconnected incident in which an elderly woman was assaulted. During that inquiry, Det Sgt Stuart Robertson, then based at Whickham, in the Gateshead area of Tyneside, checked similar crimes force-wide.

Linking in with Operation Liberal, and using a registration number from one of the Northumbria cases, he was able to confirm Connors and Thomas as his suspects. Eventually, several Northumbria cases were taken forward as part of the conspiracy prosecution.

Targeting

Det Sgt Robertson said: 'The incidents always involved distraction. They pretended to be from the Water Board, saying they needed access to the house, one distracting the householder with a conversation while the other was thieving. On one occasion, they did it to a householder and got her to introduce them to her neighbour and did it again.'

'When we realised it was bigger than Gateshead, we tried to do a Northumbria-based effort, then we heard other forces were involved and became part of the national operation.'

By the end of 2004, Thomas and Connors were being questioned at Ripley by detectives from various forces and there was enough evidence to justify a prosecution. The Crown Prosecution Service in Durham decided to take forward a single charge for each man rather than a large number of individual ones. The conspiracy to burgle charge could take in offences throughout the country and in the end, the team identified 46 burglaries for which strong evidence existed.

In the run-up to the court case, officers from each force area spent weeks visiting elderly, and often infirm, witnesses, using laptop computers containing images from Viper. The age of the victims, many in their nineties, two blind, presented problems and the police worked with social services



Meticulous investigation paid off

and medical experts to make sure they were strong enough to testify.

There were other problems: by the time the case came to court, two elderly people had died and the youngest witness, a 36-year-old woman who saw the team at work, was taken seriously ill during her pregnancy.

Finally, though, the case was ready and the team had to apply for special measures for every witness, sparing them the ordeal of going to court. The detectives believed Thomas and Connors would plead not guilty but at the last moment they changed their pleas.

In November 2004, at Durham Crown Court, Thomas, whose address was given as Glensdale Street, and Connors, of Middleton Road, both from Leeds, were described as 'despicable' by judge Peter Armstrong.

Both admitted conspiracy to burgle, Thomas in relation to ten cases, Connors to four, as well as a driving offence. Thomas, who the court heard had continued to offend while on bail, was jailed for four-and-a-half years and Connors for three years, the latter in a detention centre.

Det Con Fantin said: 'This case took over our lives. It was literally work, home, work. I believe the sentence was lenient.'

Det Sgt Moore, who agrees the sentence was lenient, believes the duo were gambling on lack of police communication to get away with their crimes.

He said: 'I think they were banking on the fact that they were committing offences in one area then moving onto another area and that we would not make the link. But we did make the link and we needed to involve as many forces as possible to show the enormity of what they were doing.'

For the forces involved, the key was working together and officers involved point to the success of this case, Operation Liberal in the Midland and Strongbow, a similar operation based in Cleveland which co-ordinates inquiries by some northern forces.

Det Sgt Robertson said: 'These individuals do travel to commit their crimes and because they travel so far and wide, you do need operations like Liberal and Strongbow.'

Det Sgt Simon Beal, a Derbyshire officer with Operation Liberal, who says plans are afoot to make it a national operation, agrees.

'A lot of our offenders travel. They think nothing of committing offences in Northumbria then travelling to Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire to commit more the same day. I have known them travel from Edinburgh to London. The bigger the distance they can put between themselves and the offence, the better they think it is for them.'

'They are thinking that the police are not joined up, that forces are not talking to each other, and that has happened in the past. With the Connors and Thomas case, by putting the offences together it was possible to show their criminality.'

