

# Changing sides

How can a renowned villain become an asset to the police? Tina Orr Munro reports on a man who turned his life around and is determined to do the same for others

He looks more like a city accountant, but for two decades Bobby Cummines was one of the nastiest villains operating in North London. At 16 years old he became the youngest person in the country to be charged with possession of a sawn-off shotgun and, by 19, he had been convicted of manslaughter. In all, he was responsible for a dozen or more armed robberies carried out in the seventies and eighties and spent 13 out of 20 years in jail.

Today, he still has a lot to do with the police, but in a very different capacity. “I was recently invited by Kent Police to talk to some Belgian officers. I told them it was the first time I’d been surrounded by so many police officers who weren’t all pointing guns at me.” Bobby is now chief executive of UNLOCK, a charity that he helped form which supports ex-offenders in obtaining bank accounts, mortgages and insurance. He is also often called in by local police officers to share his experiences with young people in an attempt to de-glamourise crime.

As Bobby forged his own career as a criminal, he says he could never have imagined ‘sitting around a table’ with the police discussing ways of tackling youth offending. His memories are of corrupt officers who, he says, just pushed him further into the crime world.

“My first offence was a ten bob fine for carrying an open razor, but I was fitted up. I had done everything else, but not that, so I thought if you’re going to do me for something I didn’t do, let’s see what I can do.

“It was them and us. There were so many scandals and tales of corruption

at that time. Cops were using their warrant cards like a Barclaycard and it was a case of bash ‘em up, then bang ‘em up. The police weren’t involved in community projects. Dixon of Dock Green never existed.”

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Bobby spent 13 years detained at Her Majesty’s pleasure until he ‘found education’ and turned his life around. “A judge said to me, ‘you’re too good for this, you’ve got a brain’ and I had an excellent probation officer.”

He also realised that crime had changed and he no longer wanted to be a part of it.

“I was at Parkhurst with the likes of Reggie Kray and others and they were saying, ‘when I get out of here I’m going to do a really big job’. I just thought when I get out, I was going to be on a Zimmer frame. I would be living in the past.

“Bank robberies had lost their attraction. Criminals were turning to drugs. Pals were getting shot dead by each other and by the police.

“I didn’t know what it was to go straight, but I knew when I got out I wanted to try.”

That was in 1988, a decade later he had helped form UNLOCK with a

group of other ex-offenders who had also turned their lives around. Since then Bobby has worked on behalf of the Home Affairs Select Committee and was appointed as special advisor during the House of Lords inquiry into the death of Zahid Mubarek, who was killed by a racist prisoner in his cell.

One of his roles is to accompany officers on school visits to try and deter children from the path to crime.

“Most of the coppers bring young people to us to talk sense to them. We work as a community. We’re there standing in front of the kids, next to a police officer, saying ‘if it was any good, I’d still be at it’”

He says his aim is to give them the real picture.

“We tell the kids, ‘you can do what you want, but this is what it leads to. You’ll sleep on a bed slept on by 200 others who have most likely peed and shit in it. The bloke beneath you has stinking feet and your cell don’t smell of Chanel No.5. When your best mate says he’ll look after your girlfriend, he really will look after her, if you know what I mean’.

“I tell them that if a drug dealer comes to cut up their grandmother, their mates aren’t going to hang around and help. If they want to belong to a gang, the 999 gang is the best gang in the world.

“We teach them slogans like ‘only mugs take drugs’ and ‘fools carry tools’. I get letters from teachers saying the children are still using them months after our visit.”

This preventative approach to policing is the way forward, says Bobby, and he



Illustration: Kev Speck

has no time for those who become misty-eyed thinking about the past. “It is totally different to when I was at it. Policing is far more effective now. “The way the police deal with racial incidents, rape cases and with the offender themselves has completely changed. They are more sensitive, not only to the victim, but also to the offender as they recognise their chaotic lifestyle has also made them victims. “They are more aware of the client group they are dealing with and they are more proactive in protecting the community. In my day they were just proactive in getting their arrest sheet up. Now it’s about tackling crime before it occurs.”

But they have a long way to go. The ex-armed robber says replica guns need to be off the streets. He believes

they are either coming in from Northern Ireland, through Scotland or bore them to take 2.2 bullets. “It’s £60 to buy one and £38 to get the block changed. They are so good and I should know.”

He also blames lack of discipline and political correctness for the level of youth crime.

“There are no boundaries in homes and in schools. Parents are frightened of their children. Criminals want rules. They all complain about it, but when inside they know it means they are safe. The guy in the next cell doesn’t have a knife.

“Get rid of political correctness. Tell the kid he’s a pain in the arse. I was at a meeting and this bloke was a bit aggressive. He said I was having a go at him because he was black. I said to

him, ‘I’m having a go because you’re f\*\*\*\*\* rude, not because you’re black. If you were white I wouldn’t like you either’. The whole room clapped and cheered.”

For a man who once earned a living robbing banks and hiding out from the law, Bobby has become an unlikely supporter of the police.

“The police are doing a great job with the resources they have and the negative media they receive. They’ve got to be a politician, sociologist and a psychiatrist. The majority still don’t carry a firearm and I think that is really something to be proud of. If they had had those skills in my day, they would have halved the number ending up in borstal and stopped me going into crime.”