

Former customs officers face jail for illegal heroin operation

- Three guilty of allowing drug to be sold in UK
- Eight-year police inquiry began after pub 'deal'

Sylvia Jones and James Oliver

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The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Thursday July 6 2006

In the article below we said that former director general law enforcement for Customs & Excise, Terry Byrne, had said in evidence at Sheffield crown court that it was "quite normal for large samples of heroin to be allowed to go on to the streets". Having read the transcripts, we acknowledge that Mr Byrne did not say any such thing. He made clear to the court that, while he could envisage circumstances where it would be in the public interest to allow large samples of drugs to be lost, such instances would be rare and had to be justified on a case-by-case basis. He also told the court that he had no personal experience of such cases. We apologise to Mr Byrne for any distress or embarrassment caused.

Customs officers who set up an illegal operation allowing heroin to be sold on the streets of Britain have been found guilty of misconduct after an eight-year police inquiry across three continents.

The three former drugs investigators face prison after a jury heard how they allowed at least 1.7kg of heroin to be sold in Leeds and Bradford and collaborated with a drug smuggler on the run from UK justice. They also permitted heroin suppliers in Pakistan to receive a share of customs reward money funded by taxpayers as well as cash from street sales in Britain, and planned how to break rules covering informant handling and undercover smuggling operations.

Allegations against a further five officers in the north of England and a customs informant were not pursued by the Crown Prosecution Service after the long-running investigation by West Midlands police scrutinised at least 11 operations during which up to 200kg of heroin was imported into Britain during customs "controlled delivery" operations. A junior customs officer killed himself because he feared he was going to be made the fall guy for questionable operations.

Veteran investigator Peter Robinson, a senior officer who worked mainly from offices in Leeds and Manchester, John Barker, a drug liaison officer based in Pakistan, and case officer David Platt all pleaded not guilty at Sheffield crown court to misconduct in public office by illegally supplying heroin to a drug courier.

Robinson and Barker were convicted on Wednesday and Platt was convicted by majority verdict on Thursday. They were released on bail and are expected to be sentenced next month. The maximum penalty for misconduct in a public office is life imprisonment. The police inquiry, codenamed Operation Brandfield, originally started in 1998 in a central

London pub called the Smugglers Tavern. Robinson, a second customs officer and a regular participating informant met a businessman connected with recovering stolen art and offered him an extraordinary deal. They wanted the businessman to "set up" a well-known underworld family with a huge consignment of cocaine which would be imported from South America by customs and the informant.

But the businessman knew the proposal broke official rules on entrapment, informant handling and especially on law enforcement officers allowing drugs to be sold when their job was to prevent such a thing happening. He contacted police and the meeting in the Smugglers Tavern was recorded by a covert police team.

During the investigation police also uncovered a secretly recorded telephone conversation from a separate police investigation in which Robinson and Barker worked out how to bamboozle their bosses and allow a Bradford drug dealer to sell a sample of 1.7kg of heroin worth £170,000 in order to pay suppliers in Pakistan. It revealed an identical operational method to the plan outlined in the Smugglers Tavern and related to the importation of 35 kilos of heroin worth £3.5m.

The unravelling of this deal - during which Robinson and Platt mismanaged surveillance in Leeds to let a courier get away with a "sample" to sell on the streets and send cash back to suppliers in Pakistan - led to them being suspended after a police raid on Leeds customs office.

During the trial, Robinson called senior customs officers as defence witnesses. Pat Cadogan, his former boss in Leeds, claimed the taped conversation was about an idea that had been rejected when it was suggested to him. The Crown Prosecution Service declined to press charges against Mr Cadogan, and he has been reinstated. Another witness, former head of law enforcement Terry Byrne, said it was quite normal for large samples of heroin to be allowed to go on to the streets.

Roy Clarke, director of criminal investigation for the newly formed Revenue & Customs organisation, said his officers were "working hard" to learn from past mistakes. "There is a real appetite among our committed and professional officers to rebuild our reputation for excellence and integrity," he said.