



How an iPad dug up from the Thames solved museum thieves' murder plot

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## [How an iPad dug up from the Thames solved museum thieves' murder plot](#)

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**A Ming vase stolen from a Swiss museum. A shooting at a comedian's house in Woodford, east London. The robbery of a luxury apartment in Sevenoaks, Kent.**

These seemingly unconnected events were all part of a web of international organised crime that police untangled after a six-year-long investigation.

A key piece of evidence – an iPad, found under an inch of sand on the foreshore of the River Thames just downstream from the O2 Arena.

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Its discovery was pivotal to the investigation that has led to three people being found guilty at the Old Bailey of the near-assassination of one of Britain's most notorious armed robbers.

When found by a police officer with a metal detector on a cold November morning last year, the iPad was found caked in mud having been underwater for more than five years.

Forensics were able to clean it and open the Sim tray – which still contained a pink Vodafone Sim card.

Call data that was subsequently salvaged provided damning evidence on three men – Louis Ahearne, Stewart Ahearne and Daniel Kelly – who were all also involved in a heist at a museum in Switzerland a month earlier.

"I've questioned this a lot," Det Supt Matthew Webb ponders. "Is it calamitous blunders tripping them up or was it just they were so blasé they wouldn't get caught?"

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## **A 'meticulously planned' assassination plot**

The Ahearne brothers and Kelly first caught the attention of police after gunshots pierced the silence of a late summer evening in an affluent Woodford area on 11 July 2019.

Six bullets tore through a glass conservatory at a luxury property owned by comedian Russell Kane that had been rented out to Paul Allen.

One severed one of Allen's fingers, the other went through his throat and became lodged in his spinal cord, leaving him struggling to breathe and bleeding profusely.

"He's been shot, he's been shot!" Allen's partner, Jade Bovington, screamed.

As she frantically called an ambulance, neighbours and a private security guard heard the cries and

rushed to render first aid.

One eyewitness described seeing an unidentified man vault a low wall, run between some bushes and get straight into a waiting vehicle which immediately sped off.

To this day, Allen relies on a wheelchair, paralysed below his upper chest.

Allen gained notoriety as one of the ringleaders of what remains Britain's biggest ever armed robbery. In 2006, Allen was part of a balaclava-wearing gang toting guns including an AK-47 assault rifle who threatened to kill staff at the Securitas depot in Tonbridge, Kent. They [stole £53m in Bank of England cash notes](#) – leaving behind £154m which would not fit into their lorry.

Allen fled to Morocco four days later, but was arrested in Rabat alongside friend and fellow robber [Lee Murray](#), who remains in jail in nearby Tiflet. In January 2008, Allen was extradited to the UK and subsequently sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Allen was released in 2016 and moved back to his roots in south-east London. But he relocated to Woodford with his partner and two younger children after a gunman opened fire at him and his pregnant daughter in the [doorway of their Woolwich home in September 2018](#).

Ten months later, Allen almost died after those two bullets hit him as he stood in the kitchen of his Woodford haven.

Prosecutors argued the Ahearnes and Kelly were equally culpable in the plot to murder Allen – which involved a hired car, surveillance and unregistered pay-as-you-go phones.

“This was a meticulously researched and planned assassination attempt by a team of men well versed in the level of criminality to pull it off,” prosecutor Michael Shaw KC said.

In discovering how the three knew where to find Allen, police would uncover their criminality stretched into mainland Europe.

## **The Geneva job and the Mayfair hotel sting**

Just one month before the shooting, the Ahearne brothers and Kelly stood outside the Museum of Far Eastern Art in Geneva equipped with a sledgehammer, angle grinders and crowbars.

Within seconds of forcing their way through the front door, they shattered glass casings housing 14th Century Chinese Ming Dynasty antiques. Three items were seized – a rare pomegranate vase; a doucai-style wine cup and a porcelain bowl – and had a combined insured value of £2.8m.

In their hurry to flee, Stewart scraped his stomach against the sides of the hole the gang had made in the front wooden door – leaving traces of his DNA. He also hired the getaway car, a Renault Koleos from Avis at Geneva Airport. Louis was caught on CCTV filming the inside and outside of the museum the day before the raid.

Within days of returning to south-east London with the stolen goods, the trio set about attempting to dispose of the items they had pinched.

The brothers flew to Hong Kong with Kelly as they tried to sell one of the stolen items at an auction house.

The auction house tipped off police in London, who were able to send undercover officers posing as art dealers to catch some other gang members in a sting operation as two of them tried to sell another plundered item which had been concealed in a JD Sports bag.

During a seven-week trial at the Old Bailey, prosecutors argued that international burglary proved the Ahearnes and Kelly were “at the top end” of criminality.

But little did police know while pursuing the stolen antiquities, the three would leave behind near-enough similar clues to give away their presence in the Woodford shooting.

## **The hire car and the Oasis purchase**

In the hours after the shooting, the crime scene in Woodford was forensically examined. Six bullet casings fired from a Glock self-loading handgun were found, as were scuff marks on the property’s rear garden fence from the direction the shots had been fired.

DNA samples collected from the fence were found to most probably belong to Louis and Kelly.

Trawling through CCTV footage, police were then able to identify the number plate of a silver-grey Renault Captur owned by hire company Avis.

Records showed it had been rented by Stewart from a Dartford branch two days before the shooting, and returned the following day.

Further CCTV checks revealed that 90 minutes before the shooting the Renault had pulled into a Shell garage on Shooters Hill Road, near Greenwich Park.

“They stopped at a petrol station because Louis Ahearne was thirsty,” Shaw told the court.

“The problem with petrol stations is they have very good CCTV,” Shaw added.

Two days prior, Kelly and Louis had been driven by Stewart in the same Renault Captur to Ide Hill Hall, a 16th Century mansion converted into luxury apartments in Sevenoaks, Kent.

Posing as police officers – with a blue flashing light on top of the Renault – the trio and another man forced their way into the gated property and stole designer items.

They were later convicted at Maidstone Crown Court of burglary and the attempted burglary of another apartment.

The following day, 10 July, Stewart was said to have used the Renault to drive around parts of east London including Bethnal Green, Snaresbrook – and Woodford.

A closer look at traffic cameras showed the Renault following a silver Mercedes that belonged to the Allens.

But detectives would have to wait more than five years to learn how the men knew Allen's whereabouts.

## Uncovering the truth from the Thames

In October 2024 – four months before the Old Bailey trial started and not long after being extradited from Switzerland back to the UK – Louis issued his defence statement which contained one intriguing detail.

He stated that, while heading back to Woolwich, the Renault had stopped at John Harrison Way. Louis said he hoped CCTV would be recovered from the street which would show him “getting some air” while Kelly disappeared in the direction of the Thames.

Det Supt Webb recalls: “We knew the vehicle had stopped in John Harrison Way and that Kelly got out of the vehicle – but no more than that. Didn't know where he went, didn't know what happened – just John Harrison Way.

“Straight away, we were thinking if somebody wants to discard something critical it's probably going to be a firearm.”

Louis's defence statement drew attention to that stop which led to the iPad being discovered in the River Thames – which infuriated Kelly, who only found out just before the trial began.

On the second day of the trial, footage from a prison van caught Kelly shouting “how is the snitch life treating you?” at Louis.

Kelly and Stewart sat in the dock in silence throughout the trial, and declined to give evidence, having both previously expressed fears over their safety. Louis implied to jurors that it was Kelly who had pulled the trigger in the Woodford shooting.

But Det Supt Webb said the iPad was the key to unravelling it all.

“Talk about people being flabbergasted and gobsmacked,” he recalls. “Det Insp Matthew Freeman called me and said we have gone to the Thames and found an iPad.

“I can't repeat the words I used but my jaw dropped. What a beautiful piece of the puzzle to put together.”

Call data showed both the iPad and an iPhone 6 belonging to Kelly had contacted a select few numbers, including the Ahearne brothers.

The Sim card was also linked to GPS tracking devices which were found inside a car when Louis and

Kelly were arrested in August 2019.

Email accounts were then linked to Kelly and a close associate. From that, police were able to examine 59 Amazon and eBay purchases – some included unregistered Nokia burner phones used to communicate in the murder plot.

The Sim had been in use until it vanished from the network shortly before Allen was shot.

## ‘You keep scratching, you keep finding’

The three men – shown to be experienced international criminals – had been undone by tenacious detectives who found their throwaway piece of tech.

They were each [found guilty on Monday of conspiracy to murder](#) and will be sentenced on 25 April.

But Det Supt Webb suggests these verdicts are far from being the end of their deep investigations.

“It is one of those cases where you keep scratching and you keep finding,” he adds.

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### Date Created

March 25, 2025

### Author

admin