



This 'sweet old man' was known in Hackney as 'Uncle Harry'. In his spare time he molested over 30 children.

'He seemed such a sweet old man,' says Christine of the first time she met Harry Jeffries. He had just brought her son, Danny, home after playing football. 'Danny looked too clean. I asked him about it and he said he had had a bath at Harry's. I went ape, but he swore everything was okay.' 'Sweet old' Jeffries was the ringleader of a paedophile gang which preyed on children in Hackney for over ten years. They molested and photographed at least 30 children, and they are still walking free. With their links with child pornographers in Amsterdam now clear, it appears they were a key part of an international paedophile network. The ongoing scandals in Belgium and the raids on 700 French suspected paedophiles on June 17 demonstrate how widespread and organised they are.

In the 80s, the network reached the Rhodes Estate, Hackney where the gang befriended local parents. That they managed to baby-sit for some families is a measure of their success.

Chief Inspector Ian Delbarre, formerly of Stoke Newington Child Protection Team, says that paedophiles are very patient: 'There's a mistaken belief that the offences which take place come immediately after meeting the children. That certainly isn't the case. Paedophiles are quite happy to

spend a considerable amount of time, and money, befriending the child. It can take years before anything happens.'

Only in hindsight is it possible to see how Harry Jeffries fits the cliché of a 'dirty old man'. Diminutive, well-spoken, fragile-looking and in his seventies, he was known locally as 'Uncle Harry'.

Christine first met Harry through a friend who told her that Jeffries could be trusted, and that he regularly looked after her own child. It later transpired that Jeffries was abusing this boy, yet his mother continued to lie about Harry:

'I don't know why she did it; for money, for drugs or whatever. She's the most evil woman I have ever met. I lost my husband earlier that year, and she actually sat with me all night, cried with me. Yet at the same time, she knew my son was being abused.' Jo, a mother of two victims, adds: 'I even let Harry stay in my house. I hadn't had a night out in 12 years, not even to the pub. So on my birthday, Harry suggested that I go out with my husband, Pat, to the local. He seemed such a nice old man. And that night he abused my five year old daughter.' Jo only became aware of the incident when her daughter was sent home from nursery bleeding. Jo and Pat were initially suspected of the abuse. Jo explains that the woman who had already introduced Harry to Christine 'started putting it round the estate that me and Pat were the abusers. She said I took pictures while Pat did the business. She also said we prostituted our children out round the area. Within a week, no-one at our kids' school would talk to us. Yet when it came out in the open about Harry, she told me she knew he was abusing my kids for eight months.'

Many of the young boys from the area were lured into the hands of Jeffries and his cronies by the promise of acting work. A friend of 'Uncle Harry', James Chalkley,

now 67, had occasional small parts in EastEnders. He even secured a walk-on appearance for one of the abused boys in November 1990. Chalkley and Jeffries were close associates of Peter Howells, now 65, himself convicted of a serious sex offence as long ago as 1972. Howells ran an acting agency called Bovver Boots in Leytonstone. Jeffries and Chalkley would take photographs saying they were for acting work.

Inspector Delbarre says: ‘Jeffries and the others would say that the boys had to rub baby oil on themselves to enhance the pictures. Initially, the boys would rub baby oil on and they would be told they missed a bit, and so the photographers would rub it further. They would then get them to roll down their pants, until they were practically naked.’

Jo’s son, Danny, continues: ‘Harry was coming across like an uncle. He was letting us do stuff we couldn’t do in school or anywhere else. I done a photo session in his flat and he told me he would take me home to my doorstep. He then told her I was late because of a football match and he was there as a spectator and he had brought me home and that my mum had nothing to worry about. I thought it would be a good opportunity to get on AEastEnders@.

‘I thought it was innocent, wearing swimming trunks and stuff, that there was nothing wrong with doing it. But it got to the stage where he would say pull the trunks down, and say, AShow your bum a little bit, just expose a little more,@ that’s when I actually started to worry.’

Jo and her family had to flee their flat, leaving everything behind, and start their lives again.

‘Every now and then, one of the kids will remember a favourite doll and start to cry, and then it all just comes back again. Even

now, if the kids go near the state they get called slut, slag, all sorts by the woman who introduced us to Jeffries. We’re the victims, but we feel like we’re paying. Sometimes I lie there in bed and wish I wouldn’t ever wake up again. Then I think about the kids and realise how selfish I’m being.’ Of their two abused children, the daughter, now 14, had voluntarily undertaken counselling. The two younger children are, as Jo freely admits, over-protected.

When police finally raided Jeffries’ flat in Aden Grove, near Newington Green, they found hidden cameras, spyholes and two-way mirrors used for spying on boys. They also found hundreds of indecent photographs of children, many of them taken by Jeffries himself.

Detective Inspector Delbarre says: ‘Throughout the flat, in places as strange as the fridge, salt pots, behind pictures, cornflake packets- basically any place you can hide something- he had hidden negatives, photographs, everything. We recovered hundreds of photographs and negatives.’

Inspector Delbarre then had to show photographs of abused children to parents, so that they could identify them. Christine says, ‘I thought there had been an accident and then they told me who they were, and to be honest I wasn’t really sure what was happening. And then just devastation, total devastation. I just went to bits.’

Danny says: ‘I couldn’t look at my brother, I couldn’t look at my mum, I couldn’t go near anyone. I just felt dirty. I felt like scum, to be honest, I couldn’t believe that everything had just come out, I felt so ashamed inside. I didn’t know what to do. I just broke down.’

In this part of Hackney it takes a lot for a young man to admit crying; how much harder to talk about being photographed

and molested? But Danny also has a determined air, a belief that the time has come to tell the world the truth about Jeffries and his cronies. He knows that he has nothing to be ashamed of, but he and the other victims feel that the criminal justice system has failed them.

Despite all the evidence Jeffries was sentenced to only two years in 1994, on five counts of taking and possessing indecent photographs, but was found not guilty of indecent assault and walked free after just a year. None of the others got custodial sentences. Inspector Delbarre says: 'The problem was that the trial was linked to a much larger, ongoing investigation by Scotland Yard and Dutch police. Some of the names of our defendants were the same as were cropping up in Amsterdam. Some of the boys had already been interviewed three times, and then a re-trial was ordered. Most of the boys had been through enough.'

No one knows how many children were photographed and molested by the gang. Inspector Delbarre personally saw photographs of 30 boys.

But for the bravery of one young victim, the gang could still be terrorising children today. I first met Kevin, now in his early twenties, in an East End pub. Although likeable, he is an edgy, nervous. Kevin was the one who finally plucked up the courage to ignore the threats issued by the gang. He was first photographed by Harry at the age of nine.

Once the initial, innocent pictures had been taken, the child would be coerced into ever more revealing shots. 'He'd call you a little poof, or say that you're nothing, all the rest of it. Or they'd say they'd show the photos around the estate and no one would talk to me. It would always be something evil at the back of his mind.'

Inspector Delbarre explains the bullying

psychology used to ensure the silence of the children. 'First of all, your parents won't believe you if you tell them I photographed you naked; secondly, I will show these photographs round the estate to all your friends and they're going to laugh at you.' Kevin recalls another incident with Peter Howells, the boss of Bovver Boots. 'I was about ten or 11, and Howells must have been in his forties, and there was a night when he tried to put his arm round me, into me pyjama bottoms, and when I pushed him away and told Harry Jeffries next morning he found it amusing, as if to say, 'You're mine, he messed up by trying to touch you.' It's all a game to them.' Yet while Danny, Jo, Pat and Christine are still suffering, the men responsible are living life as usual. Howells fled to Amsterdam, where he lived on a houseboat, taking advantage of looser sex laws.

Chalkley has also fled from his Stepney flat to Amsterdam, where he lives with his brother. What worries the victims is the knowledge that photographs of them may even now be circulating. The police destroyed thousands of pictures and negatives, but there could be others, to haunt the victims.

Danny says: 'Every night of my life, it's always there. I can still dream now and see Harry in my nightmares- I mean, I have cold sweats ten years on. It's the worst thing that has happened to me. I wish I could turn back the clock.'

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