Powder Wars

The Supergrass who Brought Down Britain's Biggest Drug Dealers

Graham Johnson

Mainstream Publishing eBooks

POWDER WARS

THE SUPERGRASS WHO BROUGHT DOWN
BRITAIN'S BIGGEST DRUG DEALERS

Graham Johnson

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Epub ISBN: 9781845968939
Version 1.0
www.mainstreampublishing.com

First published in Great Britain in 2004 by
MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING COMPANY (EDINBURGH) LTD
7 Albany Street
Edinburgh EH1 3UG

ISBN 1 84018 793 X

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Contents

1

The Early Days

Paul Grimes was born on 26 May 1950 in a post-war prefab on a Liverpool street that had been flattened by Hitler's bombers ten years earlier. At the age of ten, he was introduced to organised crime by his grandmother, Harriet Mellor. Fresh faced but streetwise, Paul was recruited as a decoy into a notorious firm of professional shoplifters run by his grandma.

Foul-mouthed Harriet was a 16-stone gang boss who drank Scotch neat and was known on the street as 'The Fagin'. She sat at the head of three prominent Liverpool crime families: the Grimes, the Mellors and the Moorcrofts. Amongst their inter-married members were some of the most notorious and prolific gangsters in Britain.

Billy Grimwood was a rising star on the national crime scene and a close associate of the London-based Kray twins and their clubland enforcer Johnny Nash. He was a criminal all-rounder: armed robber, hijacker, protection racketeer, killer, warehouse raider and safe-cracker.

Grimwood had married into Harriet's clan after falling for her daughter Joan, an expert 'carrier outer' in the family's shoplifting crew. Ambitious and smart, Grimwood soon became Harriet's underboss. The fearlessly violent six-footer had graduated from petty crime (in 1954 he was jailed for stealing a £90 tape-recorder from an office) to hard-core safe-blower and nightclub impresario.

In June 1960, the same month in which his nephew, Paul Grimes, was being introduced to the family business on a

shoplifting spree, the 29-year-old Grimwood was sentenced to three years for hiding three ounces of gelignite in the coal-bunker of his two-up, two-down terrace. The sticks of explosive were leftovers from the gang's most recent safe-blowing operations. But for Grimwood, doing time was not particularly bad news. Being sent to jail was a holiday, especially from his wife, who regularly laced his evening meals with rat poison in the hope that he would die. Long-suffering Joan rightly suspected her husband was a serial adulterer.

In Liverpool's Walton Prison, Grimwood was already a living legend. Amongst the cons it was widely believed that he was more powerful than the governor. Grimwood controlled the allocation of the best cells and privileged jobs. During his sentence he smuggled in a television set (stolen from Liverpool docks) and opened up a gangsters' cocktail bar in a basement cell. He fixed it for cons like armed robber and contract killer Charlie Seiga to join him in his exclusively luxurious I wing. In his book *Killer*, Charlie Seiga recalled:

> I had only been there a few days when a con swaggered into my cell as though he owned the place: 'Get your gear packed, you're coming with me.'
>
> He then introduced himself as Billy Grimwood. I was taken over to I wing. I could see at once that Billy Grimwood had everything under control; all the cream of the top villains were there. I was introduced to a lot of the cons and offered a drink of anything I wanted. I couldn't believe how it was on I wing – it was like a little nightclub. Most of the cons were selected by Billy. Our cells were left mostly unlocked and we had a big TV. Remember this was 1963.

> Billy Grimwood was a real hard-case. He never trained like most cons do; he was just a naturally fit person. When fighting, he was so fast no one stood a chance with him, but he was dead fair in his ways. I have seen men who have tried to take him out, but they never could. He was the hardest fella I had ever come across at the time.

When he wasn't in jail, the sharp-suited Grimwood acted as a mentor to Paul, grooming his nephew for life as a one-man crimewave. In later life, Paul would repay the honour by acting as his minder and bodyguard.

Grimwood's safe-cracking team consisted of Paul Grimes' father, Harold, and his uncles, Ronnie and Ritchie Mellor. Harold Grimes had married Harriet's second daughter Doreen and, by default, into a life of villainy. He regularly escaped the clutches of the police investigating the growing trend of high-value safe burglaries by jumping ship onto a whaler bound for the North Atlantic, sometimes for two years at a time. Clad in rain-lashed oilskins and a sou'wester, he laid low, safe in the knowledge that the long arm of the law did not stretch as far as the fog-saturated ice caps of the Arctic.

Billy Grimwood and Harold Grimes made criminal history in 1969 when they stole £140,000 by tunnelling inside a Liverpool city-centre bank. Grimwood and Grimes were the first British criminals to use thermal lances to burrow through a strong-room door. The infamous 'Water Street Job' was masterminded by Grimwood and underworld hombre, Tommy 'Tacker' Comerford, who would later go on, according to Customs and Excise, to become Britain's first ever large-scale drugs baron.

Though the gang spent two days over the August bank holiday tunnelling into the bank from a nearby bakery, Grimwood and Grimes insisted that they only be brought in for the pièce de résistance. They were probably the only

criminals in Britain able to operate the burners effectively and their bargaining power paid off. Grimwood and Grimes were the only two members of the gang to evade capture.

Although Grimwood was pulled in for a grilling, he did not fold under questioning. Comerford received ten years in jail for his part in the heist, which sparked a wave of copycat raids in the capital and elsewhere. The judge commented: ‘This was top-level, professional organised crime, carried out with the most modern sophisticated equipment and with all the planning and precision of a commando raid.’ Scores as lucrative as the Water Street Job did not happen everyday.

On routine safe-cracking raids, the backbone of the gang was Ritchie and Ronnie Mellor, who, despite being Harriet’s beloved sons, ceded day-to-day operational control to Grimwood. Former boxer Ritchie Mellor was known in the underworld as ‘Dick the Stick’ on account of his dexterity at opening doors and windows with a short crowbar he concealed up his sleeve.

Dick the Stick would later perfect his breaking-and-entering skills as leader of the ‘Hole in the Wall’ gang – a fast-moving gang of warehouse raiders he set up with nephew Paul Grimes. Again, on the instructions of Grandma Harriet, Dick mentored Paul and recruited him regularly into his criminal enterprises.

His brother Ronnie Mellor was a psychotic shooter-merchant and compulsive commercial burglar. He was thoroughly untrustworthy and was held in contempt, though not to his face, by many of his underworld peers. One former safe-cracker partner recalled: ‘If honour and trust were the measure of a man, there would be difficulty finding Ronnie Mellor under a microscope.’ Utterly faithless, Ronnie was caught burgling his best pal’s house after he had suggested the man go out for a drink.

Despite his shortcomings, Ronnie’s wanton brutality had allowed him to gain control and run his own ‘team’ independently of the family for a while. He appointed his

son, also named Ronnie, as his right-hand man. ‘Young’ Ronnie Mellor – dubbed ‘Johnny One Eye’ by gang members because of a debilitating cataract in his left eye – grew up with Paul Grimes and was able to pass on his extensive knowledge of crime. He taught him the value of savage violence as a tool for doing business and later invited Paul to be an accomplice on an underworld hit.

In 1990, Ronnie was jailed for ten years after masterminding a £135,000 cocaine importation from Amsterdam. On his release, he moved into kidnapping and ‘taxing’ drug dealers. He was later jailed for three years.

The Moorcroft family married into Harriet’s firm following the union of a capacious thief and home-breaker called ‘Big’ Christy Moorcroft and her third daughter Roseline, a shoplifter. Their son, ‘Young’ Christy Moorcroft, followed in their footsteps and was a criminal associate of his cousin Paul Grimes.

Finally, there was Snowball, a younger member of the family, less equipped to deal with violence, but who nevertheless grew up to be a professional thief, armed robber and drug-dealer. Of them all, Snowball was closest to Paul Grimes and predictably the pair enjoyed a long-lasting partnership-in-crime.

As for brothers, sisters, in-laws, cousins – all were mixed up in the rackets in some way: whether it was fencing stolen jewellery, card-marking a safe full of cash ready for the taking or stashing a lorry load of swag ‘zapped’ from Liverpool’s booming docks. They may not have been an Italian crime family but Harriet’s crew was nevertheless a self-contained, highly organised crime gang turning over tens of thousands of pounds a year at a time when the average wage was £10 a week and the average post-war worker relied on hire purchase to buy a Hoover.

It was an ideal breeding ground for a wannabe gangster. By the age of 12, Paul Grimes was a veteran of some 20 organised shoplifting sprees, meticulously masterminded by

his grandmother Harriet. Paul was learning fast that crime paid if the criminal committing it paid special attention to the planning, preparation and execution of the crime in hand.

PAUL: She was not like a normal grandmother, Harriet, in all fairness. She ran her shoplifting routine like a professional team, as ruthlessly as any of the safe-cracking and armed robbery gangs that were all the go at the time. She had a bit of a dig on her and all, too. So no one stepped out of line. If you did, you got whacked. No back answers.

She took me out grafting when I was ten. She made me wear short pants. I wasn't on my own. It was a family outing: Harriet, her three daughters Joan, Roseline and my mam Doreen came along and their friend called Carli. Was a pure firm, nonetheless. They were dressed up to the nines: hats, fox furs, the pure works. Each of them had a specific role on the team. It wasn't like the smackheads and that out grafting these days. It was more like a military operation. For instance, Roseline was just there to memorise the faces of the floorwalkers – they were the store detectives. She took it pretty seriously. Remembered what they wore, so if the floorwalkers appeared in the aisles, Harriet's mob were straight onto them – was Game Over for them, in all fairness, all the time.

I noticed that Harriet even found out when the floorwalkers sloped off for a sly ciggie. As they smoked, she went to work clearing the shop out. If they went to the toilet, they'd come back to major crime scene.

My grandma was a 'wrapper'. That just meant being able to compress several items of clothing into a ball very quickly. But there was a bit of an art to it, in all fairness.

We went into a department store called T.J. Hughes. I paid close attention to what was going on.

She swiped four woollen suits off've a rail and wrapped them into a tight ball. Roseline bagged them into a big, glossy paper bag and left it on the floor by a rail. Later, when we were off the scene, my Auntie Joan, who was Billy Grimwood's wife, picked it up and carried it out. That was her job – a carrier-outer. To her, it was no different than working in a factory.

Right over to the kiddies' clothes section then. To ordinary folks and that we just looked like a respectable family out shopping, in all fairness. Harriet made me try on school uniforms while they cleaned it out. That was my introduction into organised crime.

Following his apprenticeship as a shoplifter, Paul was taught how the men of the family went about their business as blaggers, safe-crackers and commercial burglars. He was given a ringside seat at their monthly planning meetings around a flimsy Formica table in the prefab's cramped kitchen.

Jostling for space and hunched over the crude drawings laid out before them, the chain-smoking gangsters sat awkwardly on spindly dining-chairs and discussed getaway routes, the amount of gelignite to be deployed and the drop-off point for the fences on completion of the job, if there was anything aside cash involved.

Paul soaked it up. He was impressed. Grimwood was a striking figure. When the conversation got heavy, like when his father Harold revealed how Grimwood had killed a rival gangster and buried him on a nearby wasteground, his uncles would tell him to 'fuck off' for a while. But mostly it was routine business, like the systematic robbing of Liverpool docks.

To Grimwood's crew, having Liverpool docks on their doorstep was like having a free cash machine at the end of the street. It was a constant source of plunder. A wide-open,

eight-mile-long warehouse stuffed with treasures beyond their wildest dreams. Lorry loads of whisky, mountains of coffee, transporters piled high with new cars, holds full of fresh produce, clothes, televisions, leather shoes, canned foods, fertiliser, electrical goods – you name it, Britain's ration-starved, consumer-hungry black market couldn't get enough of it.

The icing on the cake was that waterfront robberies were largely risk free. The docks, in the local parlance, were totally 'boxed off' – the workers who ran them were on the take and 'onside'. Dockers, lorry drivers and security guards were mostly friends and family into making a few quid by putting up tasty work, turning a blind eye and 'rolling over' on put-up raids.

Grimwood robbed the docks blind. And when the money ran out he robbed them some more. As fast as he could clean them out, ships from the four corners of the Empire and the factories of Northern England filled them up again. Seemingly, the warehouses never ran dry. It was a dream enterprise and it was big business.

In the oak-panelled cabin boardrooms of the marine insurers, from the Liver Building to Lloyds of London, eyebrows were being raised at the horrific attrition rate; not that the plunder was a new phenomenon. The large-scale organised ransacking of stores had started ten to fifteen years before during the Second World War, when the US Army had been forced to create special cadres to stop the raiders stealing army cigarettes and looting bombed warehouses. But by the 1950s the problem was putting the economic viability of Liverpool's port at risk.

To beat the raiders, exporters like Timpson's shoes began splitting up their cargoes – left feet in one ship, right on another, so that the hijackers were left with lorryloads of stolen but unsellable single-foot shoes. In a desperate bid to stop the haemorrhaging, the electrical goods company Remington removed the magnetic motors from their top-of-

the range razors and stored them in separate warehouses, miles apart from their plastic cases. But the raiders simply slipped the cargo handlers bigger bribes to pinpoint the exact locations of the various components, so that they could be robbed piecemeal and reassembled later.

Finally, in the mid-’60s, faced with huge losses from theft, the Port Authority of Liverpool invested millions of pounds into containerisation – the transport of cargo in relatively secure steel containers. But the mobs simply switched from robbing the fenced-in dock areas to the hundreds of less-secure holding warehouses that funnelled unpackaged goods into them, scattered all over the northwest. It was no surprise that the Grimes family prefab became an Aladdin’s Cave of stolen goods.

PAUL: There were racks of new American suits in the wardrobes and crates of single malt Scotch off’ve the docks, three-deep up the walls. When televisions came out there were blocks of them up to the roof. You had to climb over them to get out the door. Bowls full of jewellery had off from the safes and that spilled over under the bed. It got so chocca that we were forced to move into our grandma’s house. There was no room for us to sleep; the place was so rammed tight with swag.

Grimwood was the top boy. He was a blagger. Ronnie was a grafter, into warehouses and factories and that. Grimwood wore a tuxedo, even if he was going down to the local boozer and that. He was that rough, in all fairness. He used to stand over his wife while she ironed his white shirts. If it wasn’t done right, he’d throw it back in her face and call her a piece of shit.

It was a bit thingio, in all fairness. But it’s one of them, isn’t it? What can you do, when you’re just a kiddie? But on the street everyone loved him. The dockers loved him because he always boxed them off if he had a good touch

off’ve one of their tips. The card-markers loved him; if he blew up a safe it was get paid for them. And the crews loved him because he put dough in their backbins and stopped other villains from robbing it off them.

He was like a peacemaker for the underworld. Got a beef with a rival door team? Go see Billy, he’ll straighten it out. Got a witness giving evidence against you? Have a word with Billy. He’ll make sure they don’t turn up in court. But if you fucked up, Billy wouldn’t think twice about shooting a guy.

Don’t know how many people he plugged during his life but I remember my dad and the crew talking in the kitchen about him – pure hushed tones and all that – about killing a villain who had done his head in over something or other. Pure double-clicked the poor cunt. End of. Buried him on the kiddies’ playground up the road.

They sat round the kitchen table setting up jobs, saying: ‘What do we need?’ Everyone had their own tools. Grimwood always had the jelly [gelignite]. To explain the tools and the mad vans they used and that, they pretended that they were a firm of steeplejacks, on the way to knock down a chimley [chimney] and that. That was their cover.

To make it look legit, every now and again they were forced to put in tenders for legit demolition jobs. One time they actually won a contract – to pull down Liverpool’s overhead railway. Shocked they were. It was a big contract. It was in the papers that they’d won it. Billy was on a downer about it. It meant that the crew might actually have to do some proper work. They tried very hard to *lose* that contract, believe you me.

There was villains coming and going all day and night. Talking about how they’d had this lorry off or how they’d broken into such and such a bonded warehouse. Some of them were pretty heavy, in all fairness. Pure players of the day. May have only been in our kennel, but in criminal terms they were sitting at the top of the tree where the fairies

lived. If you were running with Billy's crew, then you'd made it. There were hijackers who'd just had off a lorry load of ciggies, someone who touched lucky on a warehouse full of canned salmon or meat. All that carry on.

I looked. I listened. Was only one topic of conversation, to be fair. Crime. Even for the kiddies. But I didn't learn a lot, to tell you truth. A lot of it was in my genes already. By the time we got to bed, the police would be round, kicking in the doors and all of that ballyhoo. You'd be asleep in bed, the next thing the door was being kicked in, the busies were turning the place over looking for this and that.

If my dad was on the run, my ma had to graft all the time to keep us afloat. In the day she shoplifted and that. In the evenings she would be at home fencing the gear and, of a night, she went out. She ran a few *shibeens*. They were illegal nightclubs, which were all the go at the time. She was a very busy woman, to be fair.

Paul's schooling in the dark arts was made easier after his normal education was abandoned at an early age. Born with the debilitating bone disease osteomyelitis, he had been in and out of hospital for leg operations since he could walk. Harriet and the family simply saw the down time as an opportunity for him to learn how to be a gangster.

Despite his disability, Paul was a natural fighter with a stocky build and an abnormal tolerance for pain. He quickly became the 'cock' of his Mount Vernon neighbourhood. He noticed, like Grimwood, that fear was an effective instrument for managing the ragged unpredictability of street life. There was also the respect premium that accompanied his willingness to do business with bare knuckles, forgoing cutters, lead pipes and pickaxe handles – the fashionable weapons of choice at the time.

At the age of ten, on 26 August 1960, Paul was arrested for the first time for 'schoolhouse breaking and stealing',

and a second charge of intent to steal. He was fined £2 at Liverpool Juvenile Courts. It was the first of 38 convictions Paul would clock up during his criminal career, including 25 for theft, 4 for firearms offences and, incredibly, only 1 for violence.

One month before his 11th birthday, Paul picked up his first probation order, for two years, after burgling an office. At 12 he was sent to a remand home for 28 days for a string of offences including shopbreaking and stealing, house burglary, theft from a motor vehicle and larceny.

Shortly afterwards, Paul was arrested for stealing vanloads of newspapers and organising crews of lads to sell them on street corners. Then he joined a team of teenage jewel thieves and commercial burglars that targeted posh houses, tobacconists and warehouses.

The average score was between £350 and £500 a time and the gang were pulling off three to four jobs a week. It was big money. To show it, Paul dressed in the most expensive Italian suits of the day. He should have been watching The Beatles in the Cavern Club like a normal teenager. But as soon as night fell, his gang would go to work, cutting holes through shop ceilings with his dad's safe-cracking tools, crudely disabling alarms and 'copping' [grabbing] for the till and the stock if there was time.

Still only 12, Paul was caught, convicted of burglary and sent to approved school for the first time.

At 13, Paul was convicted of burglary once more. He was caught red-handed after falling through the floor of a tobacconist's shop and severing a gas pipe that triggered an alarm. He was sentenced to 12 months at St George's Approved School.

On his release he was convicted of warehouse breaking and sentenced to another year at St Joseph's Approved School in Nantwich, Cheshire. In an unusual act of familial compassion, grandmother Harriet travelled from Liverpool by public transport to visit him. She realised that she had

created a monster and to Paul's astonishment urged him to go straight when he got out. This was no big deal. Paul was indifferent to it all. He wasn't passionate about crime; he just did it because that was the way he'd been taught to get through the day. Some kids grew up wanting to be gangsters. Some got a buzz out of it. But to Paul Grimes it was just stuff, it was just business. Mixing with villains young or old, there was an odd detachment about him: impressed by nothing or no one, but cool as ice on the job, and never folding under questioning. That made him ambivalent to Harriet's request, not really caring whether he carried on getting up to no good or went straight.

For the remainder of his sentence Paul just sat back and enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the reform home, nurtured by the Christian brothers who were in charge. On his release, Paul was fixed up with a job selling meat from a handcart. Then he landed a job at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool. He loved the work and was beginning to enjoy his cosy, hassle-free life as a straight-goer. But it was short lived.

One day two managers inquired whether he was part of the infamous gangster family with the same name. Paul responded by knocking them out with his fists and walking off the job. Paul claims that on the way home, as he walked down a dark entry, he was ambushed by a vanload of policemen. He says he was given a going-over with their truncheons and as he lay bleeding in the central gutter, the standard-issue boots rained down on his face.

It was clearly a set-up, he thought. But fair enough, he figured. He had known there'd be comebacks. It went without saying that hotel managers were well connected with the local police and, after all, he had made a holy show of them – making them lie down and go to sleep under the giant crystal chandelier in the grand ballroom, in front of their stunned staff and distinguished guests. But surprisingly, when he was taken back to the main Bridewell

station, Paul was charged with attempting to break into a lock-up. He was being fitted up, but there was no use crying. In January 1967, Paul was sent to a short-sharp-shock detention centre for three months.

PAUL: It was a pure sinker, in all fairness, when I got there. I was looking forward to the brothers again and that. Bit of a relax in the countryside and what have you. Throwing bricks at the cows and that. But borstal was a different thingio altogether. It was all about violence. There was a daddy and all that carry on.

The rule – the rule, if you will – was that you got battered on the first morning by him. Pure not going to happen that, by the way, I thought. Big lad, to be fair, the daddy was. From Stoke and all that. But not going to happen, all the same, thank you very much.

Comes morning, I was waiting for his good self, the daddy. But they did nothing. Instead they picked on two coloured fellas who I'd arrived with. Was a bit of a go around with them, the usual caper. Bullying and all. Can't abide that, by the way, bullies. I stood there watching, to sort of protect the black lads. Not being very arsed about the whole skenario, to be honest. Waited for it to finish. Patiently, if the truth be known. Said fuck all. Then I gets hold of this daddy and sticks his head down the toilet. Is right, Daddy, I thought. You have been made to look a pure cunt now. In front of your little team and all. So I trust that will be the end of these games and so on. For good measure, I battered one of his mates. Not totally goodo but just sound enough to let them know that there was a real gangster in town now, if you know where I'm going. Ended up all right there then.

Couple of screws didn't like what I'd done to their cock. He was their hero and all. Kept order. Maintained the status quo and so on. But, in all fairness, you can't please everybody,

can you? Just can’t, can you? Ended up being left alone after that. Got on the weights and all that.

2

The Oslo

At 17, Paul stepped up a rung on the crime ladder: he moved into the nightclub scene. He was hungry for independence, desperate to forge his own criminal destiny away from the shadows of the family. Paul was also keen to shed his teenage tearaway image. Organised graft may have been pulling in hundreds of pounds a week, but the scallywag in him could not resist the lure of small-time yobbery.

He had become addicted to joyriding, a newly fashionable crime amongst teenagers that mirrored the rise in mass car ownership. Paul justified its pettiness by targeting expensive cars and selling off the accessories he found inside – a boot full of golf clubs here, a van load of tools there. But nightclubs were a different ballgame altogether. They could be a passport into organised crime proper, a rite of passage into the big time – if he played his cards right.

By a twist of fate, an opportunity soon presented itself. Two up-and-coming gangster families that had joined forces in a bid to challenge the old order were putting the squeeze on a profitable seafarers' club on Liverpool's Dock Road. The Oslo was far from premier league in nightclub terms – it was situated 'off the strip' just outside the city centre in the largely rundown but industrialised waterfront area. The clientele were rough and rowdy, mainly vodka-swilling sailors from northern and eastern Europe, fresh in from the Baltic and the Black Sea. The female punters were no better, mainly prostitutes and *Letter to Brezhnev*-style good-

time girls looking for a cheap night out in exchange for liaisons back aboard ship.

But for all its downsides, the Oslo nightclub was a cash cow – a money-spinning goldmine packed to the rafters seven nights a week with currency-rich sailors desperate to blow their wages on a good time. The punters may not have been A-list, but they were prepared to pay in excess of £20 for a bottle of vodka, which at the time normally cost only £6. In the Wild West atmosphere, the owners were guaranteed to shift spirits by the crate load all night long, all day long.

Furthermore, from a criminal's perspective, the Oslo was wide open. It was a clean enterprise owned by legitimate businessmen. No gangsters were involved. Tucked away among the waterside warehouses and seamen's missions, the venue had largely escaped the attention of the city's villains, who didn't even go in there for a drink. Why bother? There was little posing potential to be had in front of a crew of drunken Russian deckhands. And if gangsters did visit the Oslo, it was definitely off limits as a 'den for meets', where business could be discussed openly. Unusually, the licensee wasn't even paying protection money. And the door, the club's security, was largely hood-free, run by 'ordinary, working fellers' moonlighting on the side to make a bit of extra cash. One was a mechanic for Mercedes Benz, the other was a taxi driver. In short, the Oslo was a gangster's dream.

Paul Grimes began drinking in the Oslo in 1966 – he even listened to England win the World Cup against Germany on the specially drafted-in wireless behind the bar. He was captivated by the Oslo's edginess: the beer-and-short soaked carpets, the scantily clad women reeking of cheap perfume and exotic duty-free cigarettes and the explosive mixture of battle-hardened bar-room brawlers ready to go off at any moment. For a young hood it was paradise. He felt older and respected.

Women were impressed by his sharp suits and seemingly endless thick roll of fivers and tenners. Paul revelled in the fact that he looked like a million dollars stood next to sailors from places where the ‘heigth’ [*sic*] of fashion was a Red Army demob suit or a pair of navy blue overalls. The teenager was pulling a different woman every night. Paul felt at home in the Oslo. It suited his rough-and-ready tastes. He had never quite fitted in to the candle-lit cabaret club scene that was all the rage at the time. The icing on the cake was that there weren’t any rival gangsters to challenge his hard-man autonomy in the Oslo. But that was soon to change.

The Ungi and Fitzgibbons families hailed from a nearby dockside district called Dingle. The Ungis were descended from Filipino sailors and the Fitzgibbons from Irish immigrants. But in the melting pot of Liverpool’s slums they had formed a strategic alliance based on close familial and marital ties and driven by a desire to be the number one mob in South Liverpool.

Over the next 30 years they would outgrow their own parochial ambitions and develop into a national syndicate with international links, attracting the interests of Britain’s top serious-crime policemen and intelligence agencies. On the face of it, to the outside world some of the members remained no more than petty, unpredictable criminals with a penchant for street-gutter violence.

In 1969, 18-year-old Tony Martin Ungi was sentenced to borstal for killing 16-year-old drinker John Bradley at the All Fours Club in Liverpool. Ungi slashed the main artery in his victim’s neck with two broken pint glasses. Twenty years later 23-year-old Colin Ungi was jailed for five years after blowing the head off his best friend Nathan Jones with a sawn-off shotgun as they played around whilst smoking cannabis.

The family history was littered with scores of such incidents, most of which went unreported, but such bouts of

inexplicable violence formed their power base. On the streets, they were feared. This fear was systematically exploited to racketeer. By the mid-’90s their hunger for power had landed the Ungis at the centre of one of the bloodiest gangland feuds in British criminal history.

On 1 May 1995, the then family leader David Ungi, a 36-year-old father-of-three, was mown down in a hail of automatic gunfire as he drove his ‘super low-key’ VW Passat through the streets of Toxteth. The bullet-proof jacket he routinely wore – even to pop down to the local 24-hour garage to buy a pint of milk – offered him little protection. Ungi’s death was the result of a long-running feud with a cocaine-smuggling gang run by a crack-addicted multi-millionaire drugs baron called Johnny Phillips.

Phillips was the Number Two in an international smuggling cartel run by Curtis Warren, a Toxteth scally who had risen to become Britain’s biggest ever drugs dealer. After switching headquarters from Liverpool to Holland in the early ’90s, Warren had charged the 35-year-old bodybuilder to oversee the British arm of his drugs operation.

Warren, known on the street as Cocky Watchman, immediately threw his weight behind Phillips’ war with the Ungis. From his Sassenheim mansion Dutch police phone taps caught Warren plotting attacks on the Ungi family HQ near Park Road in Liverpool.

‘It is very easy for me to throw 20 kilos of Semtex into Park Road,’ said Warren ominously. ‘If they touch my brother then I would throw 50 kilos of Semtex into their mother’s house.’

The enormity of the threat coupled with the notoriety of its source proved to law-enforcement agencies and to the underworld how seriously the Ungi mob was being taken.

The street war between the Phillips and the Ungis raged on. Sixteen months after David Ungi was killed, Phillips mysteriously died of a heart attack in a ransacked, blood-stained safe house on Merseyside. Rumours abounded that

a secretive underworld hit squad known as ‘the Cleaners’ – who specialise in assassinations made to look like accidents – had been contracted to do the job.

Ungi’s hit sparked a tidal wave of revenge killings, gun incidents and mini-riots, followed by a string of over-the-top East End-style underworld funerals. David Ungi’s was attended by 600 mourners. The cortege was a long procession of 31 black limousines followed by 30 private cars, including a flatbed truck laden with floral tributes spelling out the word ‘Davey’ in yellow carnations. The arrangement was crowned with a dove, and a photograph of the late businessman formed the centrepiece. Up to 1,000 people lined the streets to watch three hearses, two packed with flowers and the third carrying the coffin, and another floral tribute in the shape of a boxing ring, enter Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church, ironically close to where Ungi had met his death. The route was secured with a fleet of police armed-response vehicles, snipers and officers equipped with Heckler and Kosh guns. A private security team, run by a notoriously shadowy ‘security consultant’ called Kenny Rainford, kept order with a small army of doormen.

The increased security was not an overreaction. Jailed gang boss John Haase, a long-running rival of the Ungi family and ex-business partner of Paul Grimes, had reportedly been planning a hand-grenade attack on the funeral. Despite being behind bars on remand for an £18 million heroin ring, Haase had allegedly instructed his lieutenants to purchase the bombs. To his anger they refused to carry out the attack because they felt it was disrespectful to blow up a dead man and his mourning family. Haase later denied the plot, claiming that the rumour had started after a car boot full of grenades and Semtex had been found near the Ungis’ Black George’s pub HQ and were wrongly linked to him.

In the run up to the big day, tension was heightened after several senior members of the family were arrested. David Ungi's two younger brothers, Brian and Colin, were arrested in connection with a revenge shooting on a rival gang boss and on the eve of the funeral, in an operation to smash a national drugs ring, police arrested Ungi's uncle Brian Fitzgibbons, 47, and charged him with conspiracy to produce and supply Ecstasy. It was not disputed by any side that David Ungi was clearly one fatality in a long-running gang war.

However, the immediate sequence of events which led to his death were far less dramatic. They revolved around a low-level dispute between the gangs over the rights to use a local pub which the Ungis had unofficially taken over one year earlier. It was a classic Ungi tactic. Move in on a nightclub or a pub, take the premises over and turn it in to a powerbase from which to direct crime. Ironically, it was the same *modus operandi* which had brought them into conflict with Paul Grimes 30 years earlier.

PAUL: The Oslo was a rough house, full of hell-raising seafarer types, and brasses and all of that to do. There was a lot violence all the time. But it didn't matter. I fucking loved it in there.

You could stench the atmosphere. A pure cocktail of sex and roughness. I was made up because I was knees deep with a different pay-per-view girl every night. I was 17.

But as well as the good times there was always business to be taken care of. One Sunday night I was in there having a drink. Suddenly, I hears the wife of the owner scream, blood curdling and all, too. So I jumps up and has a peep into the porchway. Norman the doorman was getting purely filled in by a team of local gangsters.

I noticed that they were well dressed, this little firm. But only young lads, they were – 18, 19, 20. Bit older than me,