

The Oyston Files

Andrew Rosthorn

Darwen, Lancashire: Red Sea Books, 2021, £16.99, h/b

Nick Must

At a macro level, this is a fairly simple story: Owen Oyston, a multi-millionaire supporter of the Labour Party,¹ was subject to a politically motivated smear campaign that lasted nearly two decades. Andrew Rosthorn identifies the three main instigators and manipulators as being a pair of Tory grandees – Sir Robert Atkins, MP for South Ribble² and Lord Peter Blaker, MP for Blackpool South³ – and one of Oyston’s main business rivals, Bill Harrison, a Conservative-supporting property developer, caravan park owner and grocer. The end result was a miscarriage of justice and the imprisonment of Oyston for six years.

However, at the micro level – the way the details are presented in this book – the reader can rapidly become overwhelmed by the interweaving plethora of names, dates and nefarious deeds done. For example, see if – in just one reading – you can get a clear idea of the interconnecting relationships from this, which comes at the beginning of chapter two:

‘The reporters David Graham and Bob Satchwell, and their crusading editor Barry Askew, examined Sir Douglas Osmond’s careful description of how Bill Harrison used the pliant Conservative leader of Lancashire County Council to bend Chief Constable Stanley Parr to his will.’

In fairness though, we are at least being given a clear indication – and at an early stage – as to the complicated nature of what we are going to learn. It is

¹ A supporter very much from the capitalist-friendly, right-of-centre within Labour.

² Sir Robert Atkins went on to represent the North West of England in the European Parliament. In 2008 *The Times* revealed that he had used his MEP expenses to pay for the trip to his son’s wedding in America (the justification being that this had luckily coincided with an invitation from the Republican National Committee). See: <<https://tinyurl.com/fdrd9se8>> or <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tory-mep-sir-robert-atkins-flew-to-wedding-on-expenses-p95vv3qfhf8>>.

³ Peter Blaker was a ‘former diplomat’ who served in Thatcher cabinets and would later, due to ‘knowledge of defence, foreign policy and the world of intelligence’ be ‘the only Lords member of the Intelligence and Security Committee’. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3ynnbcjic>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/lord-blaker-conservative-minister-who-was-wary-of-the-soviet-union-and-opposed-nuclear-disarmament-1776511.html>>

abundantly clear that the author, Andrew Rosthorn, is intricately familiar with the subject.⁴ Indeed, Oyston is reported to have admitted to Rosthorn 'you know more about me than I do myself'!⁵ Not only is Rosthorn very familiar with the man at the heart of the story, he has been on the ground and interviewed many people. Footnotes on pages 141 and 149 say 'Interview with author October 5, 1994' and 'Letter to author July 11, 1988', confirming that he has been working on this for an extremely long time.

It therefore shouldn't come as much of a surprise that, for at least a brief section of the book, Andrew Rosthorn becomes a part of, rather than a teller of, the story. Like the plot from a Len Deighton or John le Carré spy novel, phone calls between the people planning to bring down Oyston were being recorded by the participants themselves – or bugged by third parties – left, right and centre. In one of these transcribed phone calls, a pair of the conspirers discuss how much information they think Andrew Rosthorn has about their machinations.⁶ (The two were Christopher More, a private detective, and Michael Murrin, owner of a fish and chip shop in the village of Longridge, near Preston. Although Murrin did much of the leg work in the smear campaign, he was merely acting as a front and the finance for the plot actually came from Bill Harrison.)

However, a problem this reviewer has perceived is that the author does not take a step back from his intricate knowledge and consider the uninitiated reader. That is not to say that *The Oyston Files* is unfathomable; I just think it would greatly benefit from having some kind of Shakespearean-style *dramatis personae* at the beginning. The index is however extensive, including listings for even the briefest of mentioned figures: from 'Big Sam' Allardyce (the Blackpool FC manager), via the Mujahideen to the Yorkshire Ripper.

Also included in the index are the names of two Conservative Prime Ministers – John Major and Margaret Thatcher – but this is not merely because two of the conspirators were members of their respective governments. Robert Atkins, for example had 'planned [Thatcher's] successor John Major's campaign for the Tory leadership'.⁷ In the main text of the book, a tentative connection is made between Bill Harrison (the financial backer of the smear campaign) and Airey Neave (who had been instrumental in elevating Margaret Thatcher to the

⁴ He has thrice written for this journal on the subject (see *Lobsters* 34, 35 and 51).

⁵ See
<<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/6204384.newsman-rumpus-oyston-probe/>>.

⁶ This is on p. 223.

⁷ pp. 35-36.

leadership of the Conservative party). Rosthorn then tries to connect this to why Thatcher and several other senior Tories had stayed at Harrison's home:

'Harrison's friendship with Airey Neave may have been the reason why, during the 1983 Tory conference at Blackpool, Bill Harrison hosted Margaret Thatcher and her entourage at Greyfriars Hall, a huge Edwardian home two miles north of Preston.'⁸

I think the reason is more likely to have been that Harrison was a prominent local Tory, naturally had a big house, and was desperate to impress the 'great' and the 'good'.

As well as the text in a way suffering from Rosthorn's over-familiarity with the subject, there are other instances where he stretches a point in an effort to make a connection and there is a prime example of this in the foreword. The fact that an orphaned child chose to commit suicide at a location that was actually a significant distance from Claughton Hall (the castle-like home of Owen Oyston) is made to look like it was a deliberate signal that Oyston was responsible:

'In 2018, one of the four children orphaned in the death crash that led to years of hatred, committed suicide. Her body was found hanging from a tree in a wood on Wolf Fell, barely ten miles from Claughton Hall.'

The phrase 'barely ten miles' is certainly doing a lot of lifting here but, again, I don't think this detracts significantly from the story being told. The average reader will be able to delineate between the more journalistic aspects and the un-garnished truth – and they'll only have to do that very occasionally throughout the book.

The whole animus between Harrison and Oyston originated when Harrison's daughter was arrested following a road traffic accident in which two young women had been killed.⁹ It would seem that Harrison successfully prevented his daughter from facing the full extent of the legal consequences of her actions. An investigation into the events was subsequently run by a local newspaper. Then, because Oyston was a major advertiser with that paper, Harrison mistakenly came to believe that Oyston had 'nudged' the editor in the

⁸ p. 82

⁹ Regarding the death of the young women, Rosthorn's second sentence of chapter one explains it thus:

'At 3:20 a.m. on Sunday, August 10, 1975, two young mothers *walking home after a night out in Blackpool* were killed by a Ford Escort driven by the daughter of a millionaire.' [Emphasis added] It would be a 5 hour walk to their home in Preston from Blackpool; they were most likely trying to hitch a lift. That would make it more understandable as to how a car came to hit them, if they were thumbing a lift at the side of the road.

right direction and was, thus, the cause of further embarrassment for the Harrison family. Throughout all this, there were multiple instances of odd behaviour from the investigating police force and the prosecuting authorities. This is from chapter 3:

'The file [on the fatal car crash] was handled by senior officers who unusually sent it from headquarters to the chief constable's home in Holly Road, Blackpool, *where it stayed for four days.*' [Added emphasis]

The cops were definitely up to something and, whatever it was, the truth of the matter was kept from the public – who obviously had a right to know.

It should also be pointed out, however, that Oyston was anything but a saint and could certainly hold a grudge. Rosthorn describes how the millionaire, well into his middle age, still hated his childhood school: he bought the abandoned Roman Catholic school buildings 'just for the pleasure of knocking them down'.¹⁰ At his trial, under questioning from Helen Grindrod, QC, Oyston testified not only:

'It may seem pompous but I didn't have tremendous difficulty in having friends or girlfriends. There was no need to take advantage or force sex upon any of them.'

but also:

'I've always had a great respect for women I've owned Miss World.'¹¹ Pompous, indeed. More than a little like Donald Trump and, similar to the 45th President of the United States, pretty much beyond parody.¹² Oyston was also keen to clarify that he'd first met the alleged victim when he was 'about 58' and she was 15 – but that he had gallantly waited until she was 16 before starting a relationship with her.¹³

Parts of the Oyston back-story also sound as if they are from the Donald Trump school of exaggeration. Allegedly, 'In 1960 he left London with seven pounds in cash and four gallons of petrol in his Jaguar'.¹⁴ A Jag sounds like a fancy car to have, if you're that broke; why not sell the car and have more

¹⁰ p. 38

¹¹ pp. 374-5

¹² To his credit, Oyston didn't use the Trump tactic of saying of the accuser that 'she wasn't my type'. (See, for example: 'Trump's repeated defense against assault accusations: call the accuser unattractive' by Laura McGann for *Vox*, 25 June, 2019 <<https://www.vox.com/2019/6/25/18744356/donald-trump-jean-carroll-not-my-type>>.)

¹³ This morally questionable but, nevertheless, legal explanation comes on p. 387.

¹⁴ p. 39

money?

Looking beyond these character flaws, the conspiracy against him is well established by Rosthorn's account. There are even hints that the intelligence services were involved. As well as Lord Peter Blaker having 'longstanding connections at the Foreign Office and in British Intelligence',¹⁵ the main conspirators were definitely adopting military/intelligence tactics in their surveillance. This is confirmed by the revelation that, 'Oyston was now Murrin's key target *codenamed 'T1'* in correspondence.'¹⁶ [Added emphasis.]

Michael Murrin may well have been familiar with the use of codenames but he was truly awful at collating and analysing information. The majority of chapter five shows exactly how poor. Here's Murrin, in one of the recorded phone calls, talking with Peter Dugdale from the *Lancashire Evening Post*:

'Well, let's put it this way. Every piece of information I have on him I run through a system. So, I take it from one source, I take from another If it comes from a third source, then I think there's something in it. And then I put it out to independent verification.'

So he says! But this is contradicted by Murrin's wild claims that Oyston was involved in child sexual abuse and producing pornography involving children. Murrin brought this up in one of his phone conversations with Dugdale: 'The source of information just told me that it was actually children up there' and he also, later, spoke to his chief backer (local businessman Bill Harrison, who seemed much more cautious about this kind of accusation):

Murrin: 'Those reports concerning child pornography'

Harrison: 'Yes?'

Murrin: 'They refer to actually having children on the premises.'

Harrison: 'Yes, but have they proof?'

Murrin: 'Um.'

Harrison: 'Do they have proof?'

Murrin: '*Well, that's what we're working on.*' [Added emphasis.]

But Murrin had already been quite forthright on the issue to Dugdale, so why didn't he tell his financial backer the same thing? The obvious answer is that the accusation was completely untrue. In yet another phone call, Murrin described information from one of his sources:

'But he's saying quite adamantly that Oyston was saying that he had photographs showing 'C' in compromising situations.'

¹⁵ p. 97

¹⁶ P. 46. This also prompts the question: if they had to number their targets, how many others were there and who were they?

This was pure third party info: why would Murrin and his cohorts believe this stuff? Murrin, talking to another acquaintance: 'It's one of those maverick operations of mine that sort of got out of hand, to be honest with you.' One can't but conclude that he was a terrible choice as a front for the campaign against Oyston. Here's Murrin again, to the same person:

'Yes, he'd have been better off paying me, wouldn't he? This is one of the ironies, you see, because I said to Judith, if he'd approached me in 1982 and said, "Look, Murrin, here's ten grand – now sod off and buy yourself a house on the south coast", I would have gone.'

So Murrin, the moral crusader, admitted he'd have gladly been bribed. It's so incredible it verges on the hilarious! The line from Murrin that finally did make me laugh was this (where he was speaking directly to Andrew Rosthorn):

'I don't want a picture going out to the public of a vendetta having been waged against Oyston with me having been used to run that vendetta by Harrison because that would not be a correct picture.'¹⁷

Perhaps he should have tried harder not to make it look that way in the first place. When Murrin is a co-defendant of a large libel suit brought by Oyston our sympathies are triggered somewhat when he claims:

'I am penniless. I have been told I am going to be committed to prison for non-payment of £1113 in business rates. I have lost my shop. All my possessions have been sold by the village auctioneer. All I own is the clothes I wear and the shoes I stand up in. I expect to be jailed for my rates before I can face up to this libel hearing. I didn't really expect to finish up in this situation.'¹⁸

And, *if* this statement is true, amongst the conspirators Murrin had the least to lose but lost the most. He was exploited by those much more wealthy and powerful than himself, because they did not want to risk the consequences.

One of those consequences that the public had to bear was that the smear campaign also led to the waste of a significant sum of taxpayer money. Chapter eleven details Operation Angel, just one of the police investigations into Oyston, his acquaintances and their interconnected business dealings which:

' . . . was to last for six years and would involve two chief constables, three commerce branch chiefs and 36 detectives who eventually visited

¹⁷ p. 194

¹⁸ p. 222

Germany, Spain, Jersey and the Isle of Man at a cost of £25 million.'

Extensive time, money and travel was wasted for diddly squat result because:

'The only persons convicted of any offences in Operation Angel were four small businessmen and two minor council officials. All but one of those convicted had already been reported to police by council officials before Operation Angel began.'

A total of nine people either had the case against them dropped, or were cleared by court hearing. Of the small number who were convicted, two received conditional discharges. The desperate attempts to nail any Oyston-associated person even veered into the slightly comical, including:

' . . . a woman Tory councillor who had insisted on telling a detective that he would find that a carpet in the deputy Labour leader's house matched a carpet in the town hall.'¹⁹

Oyston had multiple business interests: from his property empire, through radio and cable television stations, to a modelling agency. It was the last of these that would be most directly used in his orchestrated downfall. Model Team, as it was known, had originally been started by one Peter Martin – an ex-cop, private investigator, all-round thug and misogynist.²⁰ At a later stage, Martin's stake had been bought out by Oyston, but he had been retained to run the business on the day-to-day basis (doing so with an equally unsavory cohort named Michael Thompson). The major reason for Oyston's interest in Model Team was undoubtedly that, as was testified at his trial, he had a penchant for young women; certainly women of legal-age, but women many years younger than himself.²¹

This links to the theme I touched upon earlier, of possible intelligence involvement. It struck me that the way 'Thompson and Martin were using Model Team as an extortion firm'²² might not be too dissimilar to how the Gemini Health Studio 'massage parlour' was used by the Military Reaction Force in Northern Ireland.²³ My attention was also grabbed by the fact that,

¹⁹ This particular peach is on p. 173.

²⁰ For a succinct profile of Martin, see '20 years for "most evil and cunning paedophile"' from the *Irish Times* of 13 September, 1996
<<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/20-years-for-most-evil-and-cunning-paedophile-1.85706>>.

²¹ See footnote 13.

²² p. 239

²³ A decent introduction to Gemini is at <<https://tinyurl.com/4665z2x9>> or <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/much-of-the-truth-about-the-british-army-s-dirty-war-in-the-north-in-the-1970s-is-likely-to-remain-buried-1.190628>>.

'some of the models, when questioned, had made allegations of rape and indecent assault against other businessmen, although the Crown Prosecution Service declined to prosecute'.²⁴ Which would indicate to me that Owen Oyston was singled out for special treatment.

This brings us to the denouement: the trial of Owen Oyston on charges of indecent assault and rape. I won't go into too much detail here, as I think I have already quoted extensively from the book and do not wish to deny readers the finale. Suffice it to say that it is surely shown that the police and prosecution made it impossible for the defence to adequately argue the case for their client. The only two final points I will elucidate relate to the jury's deliberations and the withholding of evidence from the defence.

Rosthorn reports that, after a total of 7 hours of deliberation, the jury returned verdicts of not guilty on the first charge of rape, guilty of the charge of indecent assault and that they were 'unable to reach a verdict' on the second rape charge (all three having been alleged by the same young woman). Having been directed by the judge, Mr Justice McCullough, to 'try to reach a verdict on [the remaining charge] which at least *ten* of them could agree', it only took them a surprising 'fifteen minutes' to return with 'a *unanimous* verdict: guilty'.²⁵ [Emphases added]

So, within just a quarter of an hour it went from a situation where the jury could not agree on a verdict, they were given the leeway by the judge to be a majority of ten, and suddenly all twelve were unanimous. Surely that raises questions about the jury's deliberations within those fifteen minutes. What can possibly have been discussed in such a short space of time that would have so rapidly brought unanimity?

Lastly and, indeed, in the very last chapter of the book, Rosthorn demonstrates that the police deliberately withheld evidence from the defence team. If this hidden evidence had been used by the defence at the trial, alongside other evidence available at the time, it would have immediately indicated that the case against Owen Oyston, as presented by the police and the CPS, could not be proven.

Andrew Rosthorn's book therefore shows that Owen Oyston suffered a miscarriage of justice.

²⁴ p. 242

²⁵ p. 411