



THE SUNDAY TIMES
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It's only Moss'n'roll

The rocker who's making
an honest woman of Kate

As good as gold

The schoolkids aiming
for Olympic glory

THE INSIDE
STORY OF A
CHILD
KILLER

At 10, he murdered a
toddler. Now Jon Venables
is back in jail. A searing
investigation into what went
wrong. By David James Smith

**A CONSPIRACY OF LIES...
A CRIME THAT WILL NEVER GO AWAY...**

THE SECRET LIFE OF A KILLER

Jon Venables, one of Britain's most notorious murderers, is now back in jail on child pornography charges. David James Smith, the writer who has followed his life from boy to man, tells the full story of his chaotic 'rehabilitation' — and how he uncovered the sex scandal surrounding Venables' care



Jon Venables was 10 years old in February 1993 when he and Robert Thompson, who was also 10, lured a small boy, James Bulger, from his mother and killed him during a prolonged and savage assault on a railway line in Liverpool. The murder occupies an unsettling corner of our national psyche. Is this what children are capable of? Nobody who is old enough to remember that crime will ever forget it.

Venables was 18 when he was freed from Red Bank secure unit in St Helens, Merseyside, in 2001, and 27 when he was recalled to prison early last year after being caught with child pornography on his computer. His new identity had been compromised at his place of work, and the police came in a hurry to take him into protective custody. An officer found him in his flat trying to remove or destroy the hard drive on his desktop PC with his offender manager (probation officer) looking on. The police later examined the hard drive for themselves and found several dozen images of varying seriousness which Venables had downloaded and, in some cases, redistributed. The worst of them depicted penetrative sex with seven- or eight-year-olds.

Everyone around him was said to have been shocked to discover that Venables was a paedophile. Nobody, apparently, had seen that coming. It is the great and enduring mystery of the Bulger case: why, among all the experts who had met him and worked with him during his years of detention, was there a consensus that Venables was rehabilitated? The risk he posed was “trivial”, said Sir Michael Rutter, one of this country’s most eminent child psychiatrists, after meeting Venables — and not for the first time, either — in the run-up to his parole in 2000. How wrong they all were about him.

I sat through every gruelling minute of the murder trial in late 1993, by then already over-familiar with the gruesome, tragic details, which I have lived with ever since. I had been commissioned to write a book about the case and went to Liverpool for the first time soon after the boys’ arrests. I remember seeing them at the local magistrates’ court, all shaved heads and shell suits.

The case has haunted me over the years. It was difficult not to become immersed in those events, appalled but gripped by what had happened, struggling to make sense of it, trying to find out why two 10-year-olds would kill.

During the trial everyone looked at the boys and made simple judgments. Jon was sweet,



Inside Venables paedo pal's lair

Robert was the brute. Jon was led, Robert the leader. But if you took the trouble to look at the facts they suggested something different — Jon showing much of the running in the many exchanges they had with adults as they walked James to his death, and Jon apparently having initiated the idea in the first place. The accounts of his teachers suggested he was far more troubled than anyone realised. Or that was how it seemed to me, then and ever since.

I heard often over the years how brilliantly he was doing in rehabilitation and, I am sorry to say, I never quite believed it. I wanted him to do well, he deserved his chance of a second life (even if he had denied life to James Bulger), but I often wondered what he was truly like and whether he was as well-adjusted as the lawyers and experts claimed. Those experts will now realise it is highly likely that Venables had an interest in



Left: a map of schools and other items were found last summer at the home of a paedophile linked to Jon Venables. Below: Denise Fergus, James Bulger's mother, leaves the Old Bailey last year. Right: Red Bank secure unit on Merseyside

child sexuality for years before it was discovered. They would agree it is also highly likely, if not axiomatic, that this interest came about as a result of some abuse or other disturbing incident, or incidents, that Venables may have suffered in his past. Had he kept a secret hidden through some or all of the years of his detention and rehabilitation?

But then this is a story with so many secrets. From the moment I heard about Venables’ interest in child pornography, I was cast back to the still-unanswered questions about the murder of James Bulger — why it happened, and the extent to which the attack may have been sexually motivated. I was reminded, too, of concerns about the way in which Venables and Thompson were overseen after their release on “life licence” in 2001, when an extraordinary bureaucracy was created just for them.

The then home secretary, David Blunkett, added his own conditions to their licence and insisted on being fed daily reports so that he could keep tabs on what the two young men were up to. The bureaucrats were so desperate to protect their projects — Venables and Thompson — and watch their own backs that they routinely deceived and withheld information about them from people who ought to have been told.

The deception was mainly intended to protect Venables’ new identity from becoming known, but has been described to me by someone close to the case as “a conspiracy of lies” that began to unravel when Venables started getting into trouble, at least two years before he was discovered with child pornography. He, too, lied to people who ought to have seen through his deception.

His offender manager gave him money out of her own pocket when he claimed to be broke (it later turned out Venables was buying cocaine and “meow meow” — mephedrone), and went round to play darts with Venables at his flat to stave off his loneliness. She noted that he was on the internet a lot. Unbeknown to her, he was also visiting Merseyside, breaking one of the key conditions of his parole, which was to keep him



away from the city where the parents of his victim still lived. He ought to have been sent straight back to prison for that alone, but somehow nobody knew what he was up to.

This has since been investigated by an independent adviser, Sir David Omand, who was asked by the justice secretary, Kenneth Clarke, to find out what went wrong. His 114-page report, published last November, is very kind and effectively exonerates all those involved, refusing to judge them with hindsight.

Venables remained free for at least two years while he pulled the wool over the eyes of almost everyone, from the justice secretary downwards. His minders during his release thought Venables was suffering delayed adolescence, that he was emotionally under-developed as a result of years in captivity. One thought he was five years behind in age development. Like a lot of adolescents, he was hard to get to open up.

One probation officer noted he did “not easily share issues. It is quite difficult to get information from him and this is not necessarily because he is resistant, but just because of the person that he is”. What kind of person was that? Someone with a secret? That idea does not seem to have

ONE FORMER MEMBER OF THE RED BANK MANAGEMENT TEAM UNDERSTOOD THAT VENABLES AND THE WOMAN HAD SEX WHEN SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ESCORTING HIM ON A ‘MOBILITY’ EXERCISE

occurred to anyone, until it was too late. Such a pattern of secrets and lies has, to some extent, defined Venables’ life.

In the course of my investigation I discovered that, not long before his release, Venables was believed to have had sex with a female member of staff at Red Bank. The incident, inevitably, had huge implications for the teenager — and those who had been charged with looking after him. Venables, around 17 at the time, was a vulnerable teenager in secure care and the staff member was supposed to be responsible for him. Instead she was accused of sexual misconduct and suspended. She never returned to work at Red Bank. The scandal has been hidden for more than a decade and many people have lived

in dread of it becoming public. I was able to piece together the events with information from high-level government officials who were closely involved, and former senior members of the Red Bank staff.

The emergence of the apparent relationship was potentially highly damaging to Venables as he approached parole. The incident ought to have been reported immediately, triggering an investigation, possibly even a police probe, into the abuse of power and breach of trust by the woman involved. Instead, a brief mention of the relationship, tucked away in a regular written review sent by Red Bank to the Home Office, was the first anyone outside the unit knew of it. When challenged, Red Bank denied trying to bury

Cover Story

what had happened and claimed they had told the Home Office earlier, in a phone call.

Red Bank was already in a state of turmoil following recent management departures and a three-yearly inspection earlier in 2000 by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), which had focused on failings and instability.

Malcolm Stevens, formerly the home secretary's professional adviser for children accused and convicted of serious crimes, had been in charge of Thompson and Venables' care from 1993 to 1998. He describes the SSI report on Red Bank as one of the worst he has ever read, and says it must have put the unit under threat of closure. Perhaps that is why they tried to keep the allegations of sexual misconduct quiet.

Because of the seriousness of the charge, and the suggestion of either a cover-up by Red Bank officials or incompetence at the Home Office, Arthur de Frisching, a retired prison governor, was called in by the Prison Service to find out what had really happened. Staff at Red Bank claimed to have notified a named Home Office official about the suspected sexual liaison in a phone call on a specific day at a specific time. However, the same official had kept a record of his own, which showed he had been visiting a prison that day — HMP New Hall, Yorkshire — and was out of contact when the call was supposed to have been made.

It is a measure of how seriously the Prison Service regarded the whole business that de Frisching went to New Hall and checked the visitors' log, to confirm the official was telling the truth. So was it a mistake or a deliberate deception by the staff at Red Bank? Senior Home Office officials later went to a meeting with the director of social services in St Helens and representatives of the SSI. There was no doubt in the minds of those who attended that there had been a cover-up.

What exactly happened between Venables and the member of staff was hard to ascertain. I was told that a local inquiry into the event reached an "inconclusive" verdict as to what happened. Yet, it seemed certain they did have sex — an incident of "sexual misconduct" was confirmed to me by five well-placed independent sources.

One former Red Bank manager who was there at the time understood that Venables and the woman had sex in one

**BULGER
KILLER
BACK IN
PRISON**
Venables, 27, broke rules o



The scene of James Bulger's murder in 1993. Below: The Sun reports Jon Venables' return to jail in March last year

DID THE INCIDENT AT RED BANK AFFECT HIS SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT? **NO PROBLEM WITH SEX WAS MENTIONED** APART FROM THE FACT THAT EVERYONE IS 'SHOCKED' HE IS A PAEDOPHILE

of the empty staff residences at Red Bank, when she was supposed to be escorting him on a "mobility" exercise, walking in the grounds of the home. The incident is not referred to in any psychiatric report about Venables I have seen. Was it ever raised in his sessions of therapy? If it was "buried", what effect lingered with Jon — the delayed adolescent, five years behind in development?

How might having sex with a "substitute parent", as care staff are described, affect his sexual development? Might it have had any bearing on his interest in child pornography? Did the fact that the incident sat there, ignored

and untreated, play its part in the post-release chaos that overtook him? All that is possible, though there is no mention of it anywhere in the Omand report.

When I contacted Sir David Omand, he confirmed he was aware of the allegations of sexual misconduct. I suggested that, surely, they were relevant to his report. He replied: "You seem to be making a meal of this."

I also asked him if there had been an official cover-up of the

incident. He insisted there hadn't, and suggested he had not referred to the alleged sexual misconduct in his report because it fell outside his terms of reference.

Omand never interviewed either Venables or his parents during his recent inquiry. He said it was enough that he had access to Venables' police statements and to the evidence at his recent trial. But this surprising omission means that he never troubled to ask Venables himself why he thought things had gone so badly wrong in his life after release. There is no problem with sex mentioned anywhere in the Omand report, apart from the fact that everyone is "shocked" when Venables turns out to be a paedophile. It was not even clear that the parole board knew about the allegation of sexual misconduct when they judged Venables fit for release in 2001, on the basis that the risk he posed was "trivial".

I also put the allegations of sexual misconduct to the Ministry of Justice, but they did not address them.

It is no exaggeration to say that the state has invested millions in the rehabilitation of Venables and Thompson. Nowadays, it costs around £200,000 a year to keep a child in secure care. Back then it was £100,000. The two boys were detained for eight years. Police spent £278,000 looking after Venables in the first >>> 27

year of his release. Venables was assigned his own police unit as his new identity was prepared, which supported him in his first months of freedom. It was there to protect him from those who would do him harm out of revenge. The risk to Venables and Thompson was constantly assessed and always judged clear and credible. The would-be avengers were ever-reminded by the continuing public presence of James Bulger's mother, Denise Fergus, her unassuaged grief settled into an unblinking desire for the killers of her son to go on and on being punished.

Denise Bulger's Mrs Fergus was then married to Ralph Bulger, was 25 years old when she went shopping in the Strand shopping precinct in Bootle, Merseyside, on February 12, 1993, with her son, James, who was nearly three. It is another myth about the case that she was actually out shoplifting. I have heard that many times over the years, but it is just not true. She was in the butcher's shop AR Tymes, momentarily distracted, when Venables and Thompson abducted James as he wandered by the open door. They were playing truant.

I was only in the shop for a few seconds. I turned round and he's gone," said Denise. "Come on baby," said Venables. They were famously caught on CCTV, timecode: 15.42.32, Venables holding James's hand as they led him through the precinct and out onto the canal tow path, and then on a meandering walk around shops and into Walton village, a journey of approximately 2½ miles. With the police station across the road in front of them and the steep bank up to the railway line on their left, they hesitated. It was the last moment James Bulger could have lived. They turned left.

The final assault began with the throwing of Humbrol paint and Duracell AA batteries, which Venables and Thompson had shoplifted earlier from the Strand. They threw stones and bricks, kicked and stamped on James, and finally dropped a heavy iron bar, a railway shingle, on him. They buried his body under some bricks so that the first train to come along cut his body in two.

At some point, James Bulger's trousers and underpants were removed. There was some inconclusive evidence that he might have been sexually assaulted. The police believed that the batteries may have been inserted into his bottom, but none were found there and both



The abduction of James Bulger (left) was caught on CCTV (below)

HE WAS TAUGHT TO HIDE HIS NOTORIETY AS THE BULGER KILLER. 'HE LIED ABOUT HIS NAME AND SEEMED IN A QUANDARY ABOUT HIS DATE OF BIRTH. WHERE WILL THIS DECEPTION END?'

boys have always vehemently denied this. Another myth is that there is a secret truth about how James Bulger died that has been kept back by the authorities. That too is wrong. Everything that was known about the murder was disclosed at the trial. But that does not mean there was no hidden sexual motive, which both boys would have had a vested interest in denying. As Dr Susan Bailey, who was Venables's psychiatrist until he reached the age of 21, reported at the time of his parole: "At no time during sessions has Jon presented with any prior or current abnormality in psychosexual development. Visiting and revisiting the issue with Jon as a child, and now as an adolescent, he gives no account of any sexual element to the offence."

After they had been charged, both boys were removed from the police cells where they had been kept during questioning, and packed off to

the secure units where they would be held every night for the next eight years: Robert Thompson at Barton Moss outside Manchester, and Jon Venables in Vardy House, a small eight-bedded unit in Red Bank.

Every detail of the two boys' lives was recorded twice daily, on running sheets, each entry signed by the member of staff who had written it. The notes were stored at the unit and copied to officials in Whitehall. I have been able to see some of those records and a selection of notes are made public here for the first time.

Here is the first entry for Venables; the first of what would eventually become more than 5,000 notes: 22.02.93. When I arrived for duty John [sic] was just going to bed and was introduced to me by *****. On her suggestion I took the boy up to his room after he had brushed his teeth and had a chat to him. During our chat John introduced me to Roland Rat, but I formed the impression he is overawed by the situation he finds himself in. From the start he was taught to lie, to hide his notoriety as the Bulger killer, even though, at that stage, his name was protected by a court order and was not known to the public. On the advice of Red Bank staff, he at first used to tell fellow residents he was a twocker (taking a car without the owner's consent), instead of a murderer.

It was not long before some staff began to be concerned, as in this note: 24.06.93. When speaking to the dentist, Jon was asked his name and date of birth. He lied as adults have taught him about his name and seemed in a quandary about his date of birth. He gave his real d of b (are we to falsify medical records too?) Where will this deception end?"

The answer was it would never end. In fact, it would only intensify as Venables had a whole new identity created for him, hurriedly, on his release in 2001, and a new type of lie to contend with his legacy life as Sir David Omand called it in his recent report which was supported by a thorough fabrication of everything from passport and national insurance number to GCSE certificates and, just as the Red Bank staff member had presciently suggested, a complete set of medical records. After his release, not even his GP knew his real identity. ➤➤➤



The lies date back to 1993 when Venables first arrived at Red Bank. Staff who worked there with him have told me what a frightened little boy he was in the early days, fearful at being removed from his family, fearful of the outside world's reaction to what he had done, afraid of being attacked or criticised by others and afraid of himself. He shared the common problems they would see at Red Bank of low self-esteem and lack of self-belief.

Venables and Thompson were treated as special cases from the start. Even before their trial, the need for long-term planning was clear. That job fell to Malcolm Stevens, then the home secretary's adviser. Vardy House was a short-stay remand unit, a halfway house for young people on their way to court. Nobody was meant to stay there more than a few weeks, but Venables ended up staying there for eight years. That decision was made by Stevens. He liked the unit and the progress Jon made there, and seemingly continued to make as time progressed. It was Stevens who put in place the ongoing, but not weekly, sessions with the psychiatrist Dr Bailey.

The notes on the running sheets betray Jon's early obsessions: "He'd play on his Nintendo all day if he was allowed to" — and his many anxieties which could make him "extremely difficult and demanding". How angry were the people in Liverpool, he would ask. Did they still want to get him? He was greatly traumatised by the trial, which was held at Preston Crown Court in October and November 1993, and concluded with the boys' conviction for murder and their names being released into the public domain.

Sir David Omand, in his recent report, notes the difficulties created by that decision of the trial judge, Michael Morland. Malcolm Stevens says it must be the worst decision of Morland's career. It certainly had a profound impact on the case, and created the need for protection from the public for Venables and Thompson that will likely last the rest of their lives. They can never stop looking over their shoulders.

Venables' lawyers have described how the naming of him by the judge greatly added to his punishment, and how his entire adolescence was haunted by fears of reprisals. He had suffered post-traumatic stress disorder over both the offence itself and the trial, and had experienced flashbacks and nightmares over the years, and persistent anguish. In one flashback he would relive the scene at the railway line, seeing James



Left: demonstrators outside court in 1993 in Bootle, Liverpool, after the arrest of 10-year-olds Jon Venables and Robert Thompson for the murder of James Bulger

Bulger's face with blood coming out his mouth. It was made all the worse by the fact that James had seemed to like Jon, he said, and had held his hand and allowed him to pick him up during the journey to his death. He had, at times since, imagined a baby James growing inside him, as if he could make amends by giving rebirth to James Bulger. It was a deeply affecting expression of remorse, but also a highly unnatural and disturbing image.

Jon's parents, Susan and Neil, were a working-class Liverpool couple. Neil had worked as a fork-lift truck driver and since been unemployed. They had both been treated for depression and were living apart at the time of the murder. During the trial, many commentators considered Susan and Neil highly respectable compared to

Red Bank, just as Ann Thompson always visited her son, Robert, at Barton Moss. The notes on the running sheets record the approving comments of the staff at their support for Jon.

By the mid- to late-1990s Venables was said to have completed his "offence related" work in therapy and accepted what he had done. He was reported to have become a model member of the Red Bank community, but staff recall he always had difficulty relating to the other offenders, mostly in their mid-teens. At first he was too young for the others; later he was too old. Instead he would seek out the company of staff. Mixing with adults made him a knowledgeable fan of the Beatles, less tuned-in to contemporary music.

Not long before Venables arrived at Red Bank it had been a more open care home where some staff lived with their families on site. In the mid-1990s a former member of staff, Peter Threlfall, was arrested over an allegation of indecent exposure in St Helens and disclosed

that he had sexually abused a number of Red Bank's young residents. In late 1997 he pleaded guilty — using his full name, Thomas Peter Threlfall — to 22 offences of indecent assault, attempted indecent assault and gross indecency, and early the following year was given a seven-year prison sentence.

Threlfall left Red Bank only months before Venables arrived, but such was the scale and seriousness of his offences that their effect, still secret, must have lingered well into the regime of Venables' time at the unit, along with some of the victims. While Venables was there, the deputy head, Nigel Print, was accused of sexual harassment of female colleagues. It was alleged that, as the home's recruitment officer, he picked out women he thought attractive and sought their company — and more — when they ➤➤➤

VENABLES SUFFERED FLASHBACKS AND NIGHTMARES OVER THE YEARS. HE IMAGINED A BABY JAMES GROWING INSIDE HIM, AS IF HE COULD MAKE AMENDS BY GIVING REBIRTH TO HIM

the Thompsons, much as they always regarded Jon as the more innocent of the pair, led astray by the thuggish Robert. But these were simple and misleading caricatures.

Sometime after the trial, I was approached by a relative of Susan Venables who told me some hair-raising stories of the carnage that could result from drinking and fighting within her family. Many of them had been in a show-band that performed at clubs in and around Merseyside. They would drink heavily, often leave children unattended, I was told, and take their arguments on stage. On one occasion one relative, a guitarist, had smashed the neck of his guitar into the mouth of another relative, a woman, in the middle of a performance.

The murder case brought Neil and Susan back together and they were a constant presence at

got the job. He left in the late 1990s following specific allegations against him. His boss, Phil Hoyland, also left in difficult circumstances in 1999, after claims of misconduct were made against him — highly disputed by him and unrelated to sexual impropriety. By 2000, when Venables' parole was approaching, the place appears to have been in turmoil, following the sudden departure of two leaders, leaving a succession of temporary heads to take turns in charge.

Malcolm Stevens remembered an incident that occurred during Robert Thompson's time at Barton Moss, where another young offender was caught leaving the room of a female member of staff during the night, when he ought to have been locked up. Stevens was quickly informed and caught the first train to deal openly with the fallout. The member of staff left immediately and there was a thorough inquiry into how and why it had happened — something that notably did not happen later with Venables when the details of his alleged encounter with a member of staff emerged.

Because I have been involved with the Bulger case for so long I have remained well connected to some of those involved, but even so there has always been an unease and nervousness among many lawyers and officials about discussing the details openly. Never more so than in this instance. I kept thinking, some men would clap a young man on the back and tell him how lucky he was, having sex with an older woman. But others would know the truth: that it could have hurt and harmed him as much as any other form of abuse.

In many ways, the year 2000 must have been a strange and difficult time for Venables. Lawyers had succeeded in setting aside the 15-year tariff (the minimum sentence) imposed by the former home secretary Michael Howard back in 1993, and the Lord Chief Justice was about to set a new one. When he first arrived at Red Bank, Jon had been the only boy of primary-school age there, and a special teacher had been assigned to work with him, in one-on-one lessons in an unused room in Vardy House, which for a long time was the boundary of Jon's world.

A close bond formed between them after seven years. In June 2000 the teacher died suddenly of a heart attack, aged 50. Jon was said to have wanted to attend the funeral but was not allowed. No doubt this teacher was a significant "substitute parent" to Jon and the unresolved grief must have affected him. A Home Office official involved in the regular reviews of

Venables' progress told me how he remembered a kind of complacency at those Red Bank meetings about Venables, and how he had now "dealt with" the crime and all the focus was on his good work and readiness for release. How could it possibly be, when Venables had committed one of the worst crimes of the last century as a 10-year-old boy, that everything was now okay? The official would often try to direct the meetings to consider the offence, or its lasting effect on Venables. But nobody else seemed interested.

Malcolm Stevens had left the Home Office in 1998, but he continued to work in youth justice and was fast becoming a leading consultant in the field. He was surprised and disappointed, reading the Omand report, to discover that the final preparations for Venables' release had still been going on after his release date. Venables lived semi-independently in a flat (one of the old staff houses converted especially for him) for eight months after his formal release in June 2001. According to Omand, the Home Office had belatedly realised, a month earlier, that Venables would need a new identity: "There was some scrambling to catch up."

A lifelong injunction protecting the boys' new identities from being disclosed in the media had been imposed that January by the high-court judge Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss. That was no surprise to anyone involved in the case — it had

In spite of the obstacles, all the reports were favourable at first. Even though Venables was considered low risk, he was actually treated as if he was high risk because of the seriousness and uniqueness of the case. This seemed to justify the massive bureaucracy: Venables had direct weekly supervision with his probation officer (later known as offender manager) who reported upwards to the local Multi-Agency Public Protection Panel (MAPPP), who reported upwards to the National Management Board (set up especially for Thompson and Venables) who reported upwards — daily at first, then weekly — to the home secretary.

Malcolm Stevens was appalled when he read of this setup (which was entirely secret until it was disclosed in the Omand report). You could not manage cases by committee. As Stevens said, everyone was covering their backs, more concerned about the potential fallout from negative publicity about this most sensitive of cases, than anything else.

Stevens was horrified to read that the bureaucrats had deliberately not told the local director of social services that he had Jon Venables living on his patch. Venables had murdered a child and that categorised him as a "Schedule One" offender, subject to the closest scrutiny for the protection of other children by social services. Instead, they did not even know he was there, not at first anyway. So when

YOU COULD NOT MANAGE CASES BY COMMITTEE. AS MALCOLM STEVENS SAID, EVERYONE WAS COVERING THEIR BACKS, CONCERNED ABOUT THE POTENTIAL FALLOUT FROM NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

always been a likely necessity, mainly to protect them from the public. But four months later it was still a surprise to the Home Office. They'd actually had eight years to prepare. Yet Venables was so ill-prepared that he had never been to a cinema, shopped for clothes or been on a bus by himself. That did not exactly enhance his chances of success in the big, wide world.

When, in March 2002, he began living independently, the authorities had already considered and dismissed relocating him abroad, and considered and dismissed placing him with a foster family — which again raises the question of where his own family were when they had remained at the centre of his life all through his years of detention. I have heard they were excluded from the parole planning.

Venables began a relationship with a woman with a five-year-old child, and kept it a secret from his supervisor for seven months, nobody knew. If social services had known about Venables, they would have been concerned for the safety of the child.

Venables claimed he had never met the child. But who knows whether he was telling the truth? Was he already, by then, cruising the internet for images of child sex? There is no evidence that anyone interviewed Venables' girlfriend after their relationship was disclosed. Was her child safe and unharmed? Nobody seemed troubled to find out. Instead, the committees sat around considering whether they had a duty to tell a future Venables' girlfriend of his true identity. They could not just erase his criminal ➤➤➤➤

record, or entirely disguise the link between his old self and his new self.

A routine CRB check — nowadays a regular requirement for many jobs, to protect fellow staff and the public — of Venables' new identity would have exposed who he really was. So he was encouraged to avoid jobs where a CRB check was required. As Omand said, this limited his opportunities to unskilled work and further fostered a life of deceit.

And yet, ironically, the more he seemed to be heading for trouble, the more the bureaucrats expressed pleasure with his progress and downgraded his supervision. It seems, looking back, that they made terrible errors of judgment. He turned 21 in August 2003 and Dr Bailey, his clinical psychiatrist since the age of 10, signed off

Management Board (NMB) discussed Venables' continual worries about money and fear of exposure, and his increasing social isolation. They heard how his offender manager had given him £30 from her own pocket. She was warned never to do that again — a highly unprofessional act, according to Malcolm Stevens, albeit done out of sympathy. The NMB reacted to the concerns by deciding it no longer needed to meet regularly.

It was in this period of reduced supervision that Venables' problems became serious. Even now, nobody knows the full story. Quite when he began drinking to excess, taking drugs, looking at child pornography, is not known. By January 2008, Venables was 25 and he had a new offender manager, who visited his flat and

subjected to a curfew. The general feeling was that these offences were typical for people of his age. But of course, there was nothing typical about Venables and, as it turned out, and really ought to have been recognised straight away as a strong possibility, this was just the tip of the iceberg. He was definitely already viewing child pornography by this time. His offender manager, meanwhile, suggested going to play badminton (a game Venables had learnt at Red Bank) and playing darts in his flat. How lonely and isolated he must have been.

He soon admitted he had lied to disguise the extent of his drug use. His offender manager said it was probably just to relieve the tedium of his life. Again, the problem was being minimised — and a terrible ongoing crime missed as a result. Venables had a one-hour psychiatric assessment. The psychiatrist concluded they did not need to see him again and he did not require medication for depression or anything else.

He faced eviction for rent arrears and court action for unpaid council tax. His offender manager noted: "It is apparent he is not being totally honest with me regarding the issues he faces regarding his finances". He is burying his head in the sand, the offender manager said.

That, of course, was precisely what all his layers of supervisors were doing too: burying their heads in the sand, not pausing to consider what else Venables might be up to. He was going to Merseyside, taking drugs, and collecting and distributing child pornography. He had also visited a social-networking site pretending to be a woman with a child and talked online with a convicted paedophile. As Omand wrote, there is probably more to that story as well.

It was on February 22, 2010, that Venables called his offender manager to report his fear that his identity had been compromised. The offender manager called the police and Venables took a hammer and a screwdriver to his hard drive. You can imagine how desperate he must have been. The game was nearly up. Visiting him in prison soon after his recall, his offender manager found him "relieved and feeling safe".

He was sentenced to two years for the child pornography offences and will become eligible for parole again this summer. I wonder, who is ever going to take the decision to release him? How will anyone ever cut through the lies and deceptions and get to the truth about Jon Venables? He has probably forgotten or buried the truth himself ■

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WHEN THE OFFENDER MANAGER MET ANOTHER GIRLFRIEND OF VENABLES AND SHE TURNED OUT TO BE JUST 17, THERE WERE CONCERNS THAT YOUNG GIRLFRIENDS WERE PART OF A PATTERN

saying he now needed an adult psychiatrist. She warned he still feared being found by people intent on revenge and she reminded his watchers of the abnormal circumstances of his "psychosexual development".

The MAPPP committee found an adult psychiatrist, but then decided it was not necessary for them to meet or work directly with Venables because of his low risk. Or was it high risk? The decision appears to have contravened the home secretary's personal condition on Venables' parole licence that he and Thompson continue regular clinical supervision.

By spring 2004, the warning signs were there. Venables was struggling with his studies and finances. As Malcolm Stevens points out, there is no indication he had ever been prepared to manage money. A year later he had dropped out of college, left his flat because of debts and was struggling to find work. In spite of all the help that ought to have been available, his descent into chaos and criminality had begun.

When the offender manager met another girlfriend of Venables and she turned out to be just 17 — Venables was by now in his mid-twenties — there were concerns as to whether "young girlfriends" were part of a pattern with him. It is not hard to see what kind of pattern was being imagined. But it was concluded that he was just having a delayed adolescence. Once again, there was no cause for alarm. The National

observed it was like a teenager's bedroom, "with clothing, food cartons etc all over the floor". The offender manager reported: "He spends a great deal of leisure time on the PlayStation and on the internet playing games... not sure of the significance of this as yet... I'm not certain what games he is playing."

His first arrest came that September. He was in a drink-fuelled fight outside a nightclub in the small hours. He claimed he was acting in self-defence and the charges were later dropped. Recall was considered and quickly dismissed — a big mistake, according to Stevens. He has no axe to grind, is not interested in the wisdom of hindsight, only poor decision-making. I know from our many conversations that Stevens cares about what happened to Venables and feels he was let down repeatedly by those charged with his care. So far as Stevens is concerned, Venables knew what was at stake and ought to have been recalled to prison straight away, if only temporarily.

Even Omand agrees that this was a missed opportunity to pre-empt the more serious problems ahead. Venables agreed to go on an alcohol-awareness course. Three months later, he was stopped and searched and caught in possession of a small amount of cocaine. Again, recall was considered and dismissed. He was