

Born or Bred?



60
1914 15. (A) When American was drafted
(A) KRAY (B) Present address
(C) (D) *FRANCE*

THEATRE OF WAR
1st Lt. *(D) France*
WALSHING DATE

James Kray
Louisa Kray
John Kray
Alice
E. Kray
Alfred



Born or bred?

Paul McNeil asks whether criminals like the Kray twins are created by circumstance or family links

On a cold December day in 1816 John Kray (the great great grandfather of the Kray twins) and his fellow apprentice brass finishers followed a surging crowd through the streets of Clerkenwell. These were the "Spenceans" calling for the destruction of machinery and the sharing of land and property, to be able to live "as free as cats". The group had been infiltrated by government spies, and John Stafford, the Spy Master, led 80 constables to arrest their leaders. During the action a constable was stabbed, and a splinter group surged away to the Tower of London to seize the armoury, and light the fire of revolution in the capital. The garrison of the Tower was called upon to join them, but the hard-nosed Guardsmen, fresh back from fighting the French, just laughed in their faces.

Frustrated, a revolutionary leader led a group into a gun shop, ransacked and looted it and shot a bystander. As the violence escalated the casual followers of the revolution melted away and the remainder were dispersed by the Lord Mayor at the head of the City Militia, capturing a number of their leaders. At their trial four middle class ringleaders walked free thanks to clever lawyers and the jury's suspicion of government spies, but a sailor who had been present at the gun shop incident was hanged. The lesson for John Kray was that if you were a big enough fish and had the right lawyer you could walk away on a technicality. If you were poor you would go to the gallows even if you didn't pull the trigger.

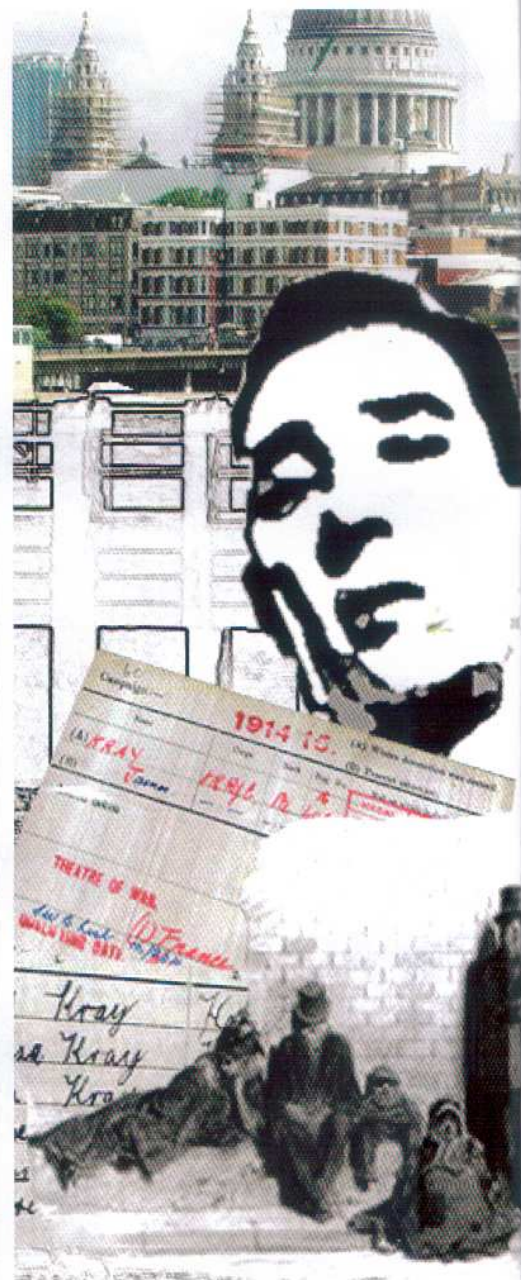
In 1818, at St James Church, Clerkenwell, John Kray married Maria Etteridge; they were to have six children over the next 20 years. John managed to keep his family together with a roof over their heads and food on the table, with enough for a regular drink at the gin shop.

Living conditions in Goodmans Yard within sight of the Tower were harsh, one 13ft by 11ft room in the roof of the house, a fireplace, and a

window. Here lived John and Maria and five of their children. Their only furniture was a bed, a couple of chairs and a table. Yet it was luxury compared to starving on the streets.

There was a charity school so the children would have a chance to read, write, and do sums. One autumn afternoon Mary Ann Kray (the great great grandaunt of the twins) was in the school when the quiet was broken by the uniformed figure of Officer Lea, the local policeman, who spoke to the teacher then marched out with a frightened and crying Ned Cook by the collar. The year was 1832, and a macabre story of murder would emerge.

Caroline Walsh, an old Irish street seller, had gone missing that year and her granddaughter Ann Buton, searching for her, turned up at Goodmans Yard. She bought a quart of gin and a quart of beer for Ned Cook's mother Elizabeth Ross (the Kray's neighbour) and got her to admit to having sold a bundle of the old lady's clothes. Ann Buton went to the police to make a complaint, but they took no action until Buton pestered a local magistrate and Officer Lea was dispatched to arrest Elizabeth Ross and Ned Cook on suspicion of involvement in the old lady's disappearance and, because he was required to keep them in custody, Lea was compelled to take young Ned Cook to the cells as well. Young Ned confessed to Officer Lea that old Mrs Walsh had drunk some coffee with his mother then fallen asleep on their bed. His mother put one hand over Mrs Walsh's face, the other on her chest, and leaned on the stricken woman. His father stood with his back to the grim scene, leaning out of the window smoking his pipe. His mother carried the old woman's body downstairs. The next morning he went to the basement privy where, feeling his way around in the dark, he found a large sack, and protruding out of the top of it was the head of Caroline Walsh! He fled the basement, and at midnight



that night he saw his mother carrying the body in the sack to be sold to the anatomists for dissection. Elizabeth Ross was found guilty of murder and condemned to be hanged at Newgate in front of a howling crowd, and her body given over for dissection to the college of surgeons, the same men who had bought the murder victim from her. But for her son's testimony Elizabeth Ross may only have been convicted of theft for the sale of Caroline Walsh's clothes.

The lessons for the Krays would have been plain; your neighbour could kill you for the clothes you stood up in, dispose of your body and very likely get away with it if nobody "talked"... equally you could be hanged by your own children and the poor could not expect to be helped by the police, unless, like Ann Buton, you fought hard for it.



Time moved on but the Kray parents could still frighten their children saying that Elizabeth Ross the body snatcher would come and put them in a sack to sell to a surgeon if they didn't behave.

Feral children roaming Whitechapel in Dickensian packs, picking pockets and stealing from market stalls, grew into surly teenagers in gin palaces, where acts belted out bawdy songs accompanied by the audience's cheers, nudges and winks. These were the Whitechapel Loafers, buying gin by the pint. They grew into the local bullies, each holding sway over a court of houses.

A strong, hard working family would rise above all of this, but in 1844 John Kray died of "a diseased brain", a euphemism for delirium tremors, the psychotic result of alcohol addiction, a sign within the Kray genetic line of a propensity for chemical dependence and

addiction. Maria now had little income for food or rent and faced the prospect of being cast out on the streets. Fortunately Mary Ann Kray, the family's eldest daughter, had married William Golbourn in 1843. The Golbourns had lived among the Huguenot silk weavers in Bethnal Green for generations, as gas lamp lighters, and straw bonnet and shoe makers. They took in the Kray children, splitting them between different households – but there was no room for Maria, who now worked as a charlady, cleaning shops and pubs making enough to afford "tuppence" a night in the lowest lodging houses. When the work stopped Maria was forced into the charity refuge before her bronchitis meant she was turned away and forced into the Whitechapel Workhouse where she died on February 23, 1878.

John Kray the elder brother (the twins' great great grandfather) was taken in by the Golbourns, working with them as a gas lamp lighter, while his younger brother James moved in with his sister Mary Ann's family at Birdcage Walk, Bethnal Green, working as a cigar maker. Lamp lighters held a certain mystique; gathering in pubs at the end of their rounds, ladders stacked in the yard, to drink, smoke, and weave yarns of the dark deeds they had seen. At Christmas they regaled the grander households with songs of the lamp-lighter's life in return for a Christmas box. John loved the life and stayed in it as a local character for more than 20 years. His children took up boot-making, labouring, and cork-cutting. The families were taking different routes but still supporting each other.

Both John and James became unemployed; lamplighters were replaced by a clockwork ignition device and James was pushed out by the big tobacco companies and mass production. They both took up labouring in the 1870s and 1880s before getting back into their chosen professions, James had always managed to get a better income by running a small business. John, had greater local "celebrity", but would never be able to accumulate any savings to give a good start to his children.

This meant that James' sons went into professions with a degree of responsibility requiring good literacy and numeracy such as school keepers, soldiers, postmen – and James's youngest son even moved into the art publishing world eventually becoming a lithographic printer, a skilled trade with good prospects, building a business that he passed on to one of his sons. James Senior lived into his 70s. And his

descendants moved to the leafy suburbs of West London, and even Australia.

By contrast John died in his 50s and his children continued in trades that required no educational skills. John's son Frederick, a boot maker, married a widow, but moved out of Shoreditch to Hampstead. John's eldest son James (the Kray twins' great grandfather) stayed in Shoreditch, but lost his job as a cork-cutter around 1911, and ended his life at 65 stoking boilers in the local hospital.

His son James William (the grandfather of the Kray Twins) worked as an electrical apprentice then overseer, managing staff at the age of 17. In 1901, James lied about his age, married a docker's daughter five years his senior, lost his job and became a labourer then a market flower seller, living with his wife and several children in one room in Hoxton. At the outbreak of war he joins the Kings Royal Rifle Company and, like his cousins, fought in France, was wounded and

discharged with his scars and medals. Coming back injured from the horror of the trenches to a single room full of children, with no prospects, he went back to selling and fighting in the markets, earning the

nickname of Mad Jimmy Kray. Drinking would eventually take its toll; he died in 1949 of a heart condition aggravated by past heavy drinking.

It was in this atmosphere that Charlie Kray (the Kray twins' father) grew up, roaming the Home Counties "on the knocker", buying jewellery to sell on in London. Although a drinker, he didn't share his father's reputation for mindless violence... and having seen his grandfather die of cancer while breaking his back stoking boilers, Charlie developed two strong traits; the first being a determination to make money for his family, the second a disrespect for authority. He felt that he owed nothing in life to the authorities. He had made his way from poverty to survival on his wits.

His view of his call up to World War Two was that as the Germans hadn't done anything to him, why should he do any violence to them?

On October 24, 1933, came Reggie and Ronnie. Their parameters were set by a father who was seldom there but whose actions spoke clearly – defying authority to make money conquered poverty. And then there were the tales of the grandfather who was Mad Jimmy Kray, whose reputation meant fear and deference across the neighbourhood. Another relative, the boxer Jimmy Lee, trained the boys to fight.

“And then there were the tales of grandfather Mad Jimmy Kray whose reputation meant fear and deference”

Add to this a genetic disposition to violent mental disorder under the influence of drink or drugs, aggravated in Ron's case by childhood diphtheria, plus their, albeit uneducated, intelligence and respect for money and it starts to become obvious why they became the criminal figures they did.

But the Krays only became the giants of the criminal world when they started controlling politicians through sexual blackmail, making it decidedly difficult for the police to successfully prosecute them.

Dreadful as all this sounds it illustrates how ambitious men will find a way to succeed in any arena, and why it is so important that young men can see a legitimate way of competing with their talents outside of the narrow confines of crime in an impoverished and disaffected community.

It also shows that small choices can have big consequences; if John Kray lived with a different part of the Golbourn family and had become a tobacconist rather than a lamplighter, would the Kray Twins have followed their cousins into Art Publishing (ironically their prison paintings now sell for thousands of pounds)?

If James Kray had not died in poverty, worked to death shovelling coal, would his son Mad Jimmy Kray have kept off the drink and kept his job in the electrical works before coming out of the army as a skilled man, ready to use his son Charlie's business acumen to run a business that would have rivalled Alan Sugar in the electrical goods market?

And if Ronnie Kray had steered clear of drink and drugs would he and Reggie have turned the "firm" into a respectable business?

The line between business success and criminal excess is a narrow one... the Medicis in Florence went from hanged thugs to financiers and Popes.

The lessons are that education and opportunity must be open to all, that violent criminals are not afforded the protection of people in high places, and that the police don't leave a law and order vacuum on the streets to be filled by ambitious gangs.

None of this, of course, excuses the violent excesses of the Krays and the fear and violence they used to run their criminal empire.

But we should see that society must learn from the mistakes of the past in order to prevent them in the future.

About the Author

Mensa member Paul McNeil is a genealogist who runs a business helping people to trace their ancestry in an entertaining and enlightened way. You can find out more at Paul's website at <http://www.timedetectors.co.uk>