

Guest Editorial: 'Fingerprint Whorld' July 2002.

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My role within ACPO Crime, my position as Chair of the NAFIS User Board and my existing role as Chair of the National Fingerprint Conference mean that I have regular contact with latent print examiners throughout the United Kingdom. Without doubt, UK Fingerprint Experts are among the most highly trained and skilled practitioners anywhere in the World today. Recently, attempts have been made via the Internet and the news media to undermine the Fingerprint Profession, individual Fingerprint Bureaus and educational bodies such as The Fingerprint Society. Television documentaries have questioned the work of UK Fingerprint Experts and sought to create the impression that their work is substandard and cloaked in a veil of secrecy.

In the UK at this time the public has been given the impression that 'fingerprints are in crisis'. Based primarily on limited facts and ill informed comment. It is important that the bigger picture is brought into focus at this time so that those who would criticise are left in no doubt that the UK Fingerprint Profession is not only healthy, but also well equipped to remain the cornerstone of forensic science for another 100 years.

The UK Fingerprint Society, like its American counterpart, The International Association For Identification, is devoted to the theory and practice of fingerprint identification and associated disciplines in the field of forensic science. The Fingerprint Society is an educational body that has served the global forensic community for over 25 years. Its quarterly journal, Fingerprint Whorld has a reputation for excellence. Many leaders in the scientific community have offered their work for peer review and publication in the journal. The respect in which this journal is held should not be underestimated. The Fingerprint Society is not a regulatory body. It has no power to administer discipline to individual examiners. The foremost function of The Fingerprint Society is to educate.

The Fingerprint Society holds an annual conference for its membership that attracts a worldwide audience of forensic specialists. Many of the speakers are leaders in their field. When you consider the highly sensitive nature of some of the presentation material at this year's conference, it is immediately obvious that public access to such lectures cannot and should not be allowed. Much of the lecture material is either subject to sub judice laws, or was deemed sensitive in the interests of international security. Post September 11th, security must always be the primary driver in regulating who can and cannot attend such lectures. The Fingerprint Society exercised great generosity in allowing Mr Iain McKie to speak at their conference. This offer was extended in the spirit of openness and accountability. It is regrettable that media intrusion by a BBC television threatened to undermine the lecture programme. The decision to exclude the media is not taken lightly, but it is decided that they should not be allowed access to the main lecture theatre. It is important to note that the reporter had already been advised prior to the conference that it would be inappropriate to film at the conference for all the reasons mentioned above. This was ignored.

The Fingerprint Society is not a secretive organisation. It has a journal that can be subscribed to and as such can be found in many public libraries. The Society has a web site that can be freely accessed by any member of the general public. On that site you will find information about fingerprints, the science behind latent print comparison and contact addresses for officials of the committee. This is not consistent with a 'Secret Society'.

The Panorama programme of the 19th May cast doubt on fingerprint evidence associated with the Alan McNamara case. This case has never been about the fingerprint identification made at the GMP Bureau. This whole gambit of the defence has been to try to discredit the crime scene examiner. Both prosecution and defence experts agree that this is a correct identification. Alan McNamara is as only revealed as a possible suspect is when a match was found on the National Automated Fingerprint Identification System. Since the jury's verdict in this case was delivered further examination of the lift in question has identified a finger mark belonging to the householder of the burgled house. There were two lifts recovered from the victim's house, and neither showed any evidence of 'background noise'. The programme was not only biased toward the accused, but appeared to fail to analyse the evidence available in an objective manner.

My attention has been drawn to a petition circulated to many fingerprint experts both here in the UK and abroad. This paper was intended to add weight to a campaign to draw attention to alleged failures in the UK latent print examiner community. While freedom of speech and the ability to appeal and debate issues are central to the British way of life, one has to question the wisdom of such a mass consultation of fingerprint experts. It is heartening to me as a Senior Police Officer, to know that I can rely on the professionalism of UK Fingerprint Experts. They know the value of judicial process. Such is the integrity and honesty of UK Professionals that almost without exception they chose to decline to sign this petition. UK experts apply ACE-V methodology in comparing latent prints with ten print exemplars. There has never been an opportunity for the vast majority of UK Experts to make a detailed assessment of any of the original evidence in the cases being placed under scrutiny. Without direct assessment of the original data, UK experts have no grounds on which to make a comparison or to evaluate evidence. There is no question of UK Fingerprint experts being under duress to avoid comment on this or any other matter. But UK Experts realise that in order for due legal process to work, there must be in place protocols that not only protect the innocent, but also ensure that the guilty are safely dealt with. I commend their collective judgement at this time. It should be remembered that the primary purpose of any forensic expert is to educate the court and to help the jury to come to an informed decision as to guilt or innocence. Fingerprint experts should never presume to act as Judge and Jury in individual cases or to act as advocates for either one side or the other. The premise of impartiality is a core requirement for credible expert testimony, let this not be forgotten. It has often been argued that experts in the employ of Police cannot by definition be impartial in any one given case. This of course is a fallacy. For every fingerprint identification notified to a Police Officer there are instances where the same Police Officer has had to let a suspect go free because fingerprint evidence was inconclusive. It should be remembered that UK Experts in Police employment also appear for defence counsel as well.

Many latent print examiners in the UK are registered with the Council for the Registration of Forensic Practitioners. Many others are actively engaged in gaining accreditation to this body. To enhance the credibility of the assessment process every

assessment is performed by an officer familiar with the practicalities and pressures of every day life in today's forensic environment. A by-product of the assessment process is the ongoing exchange of good practice between fellow fingerprint experts and their respective organisations. The purpose of the regulatory body is to help good practitioners maintain their skills and to develop those skills throughout their careers.

The UK is fortunate to have two dedicated forensic training centres. These two centres of excellence in Durham and Hendon provide the academic backbone to the training of all latent print examiners. There are considerable resources being invested into the training schools to enable the development of new training techniques and philosophies. Modular course work for students is being introduced that will revolutionise the training strategies for trainee latent print examiners. The UK is proud to have some of the most stringent and detailed training programmes for latent print examiners anywhere. Once qualified, Fingerprint Experts are encouraged to further their education and to enrol on Diploma Courses with both Durham and London Universities.

Last year saw the inaugural National Fingerprint Conference held in Coventry. Attendees at this conference represented a broad spectrum of the fingerprint profession. This conference has been designed to offer a platform for debate and discussion among peers with a view to arriving at consensus on overall best practice in the fingerprint bureaux of England and Wales. In addition a Professional Standards Body is in the process of formation that will oversee fingerprint related issues and this group will make recommendations to ACPO Crime. Around the country more and more Fingerprint Bureaux are achieving certification to the ISO 9000 series of International Quality Standards. All Fingerprint Bureaux in England and Wales, regardless of whether they have achieved ISO Certification or not, are audited at least annually by independent assessors to ensure that work practices agree with procedures.

The fingerprint profession in the UK will continue to strive for even greater heights of excellence. No one can guarantee a profession that is free from practitioner error. Any incidence of practitioner error should be discussed openly and honestly as witnessed at last year's National Fingerprint Conference in Coventry. The Head of the GMP Fingerprint Unit described aspects of the case of Alan McNamara, being at pains to draw the distinction between the McNamara case where the fingerprint Identification was not disputed and two cases of erroneous identification where mistakes had occurred. These erroneous identifications were admitted openly and with deep regret. The investigation of these errors and their causes, and the procedural improvements put in place at GMP as a result was described to the conference delegates. This is entirely consistent with the desire of the wider profession to put in place a series of measures to ensure that the identifications produced by the UK Fingerprint service are quality assured and that the experts engaged in this field are competent to practice.

Fingerprints are not in 'crisis'. The UK Fingerprint Profession is a dynamic blend of dedicated professionals using the latest technology to ensure that the Criminal Justice System is provided with the necessary evidence to apprehend and convict perpetrators of crime. Fingerprint evidence is as valid today as it was 100 years ago and will continue to be a pivotal tool in the fight against crime.

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