



For most of us, it's an almost legendary crime. For Nick Reynolds, it marked the start of an extraordinary childhood

# MY DAD, THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBER

AS TOLD TO CRISPIN ANDREWS

**On August 8, 1963, a gang of 15 men stopped the Glasgow to London mail train near Cheddington, Buckinghamshire, by tampering with a signal. They stormed on board, stole a record haul of £2.6m cash (the equivalent of more than £40m today)—and claimed a place in history.**

Soon afterwards, gang leader Bruce Reynolds went on the run with £150,000, his wife Frances and his toddler son Nick. Fifty years on—and just a few months after Bruce's death—Nick takes up the story... ▶

The robbers unload the cash, as re-enacted in a forthcoming BBC drama, starring Jim Broadbent

**“WE LAID LOW IN ENGLAND**

for about a year after the robbery, at friends' houses in the country and at a place

Dad bought in Albert Mews, London. But he always planned to go abroad. It was what he did after a big job—usually to the south of France. This time, however, we had to get further away. By April 1964, 11 members of the gang had been caught and given severe sentences of up to 30 years in jail. Dad's face was all over the papers.

So he headed out to Mexico—flying from Belgium to avoid the authorities, using a fake name and passport—and Mum and I joined him shortly after.

In Mexico City, we were legit. The locals accepted Dad's story that he was a successful British businessman. After all, he had the money to prove it. And though he'd had a few disguises over the years—a beard, bald head, long hair—people recognised him by his glasses, so all he had to do was take them off. He bought a franchise to sell Dunhill products—a straight job—and we rented a penthouse apartment from the president of the Bank of Mexico's son.

**“Cowboy novels inspired my dad to be the criminal lunatic that he was”**

Life on the run was one big holiday. My memories are like watching a badly edited Super 8 film, but I can recall watching, through the glass bottom of a boat, Dad scuba-diving off a reef in Acapulco. And I can remember him deep-sea fishing for marlin, and jumping off the diving board at the Acapulco Hilton pool. He was a living, breathing action man. My best friend.

With Dad confident that the police didn't know where we were, we drove all over America, following routes through the Wild West that outlaws like the James gang had once taken, and we went to places like the Alamo and Tombstone, Arizona, where the Gunfight at the OK Corral took place.



**“Dad's face was in all the papers”:** the picture of Bruce Reynolds released by police

Reading cowboy novels as a kid had inspired my dad to be the lunatic criminal that he was. His nickname was John West. He could break open safes like sardine cans. Three months before the train robbery, his gang robbed a payroll truck at Heathrow, getting away with £62,000. He did it for the buzz as much as the money.

**I OFTEN HAD A NEW PASSPORT.**

‘This is your name now,’ I was told. But it never really bothered me. One time I got separated from my parents at a festival and the Tannoy announced that a little boy who didn't know his name was lost. My parents knew it was me. I did know my name, I just didn't want to tell anyone.

We were in Mexico for three years, then Dad's fellow gang member Buster Edwards came to visit. People started wondering why my dad had such a cheeky chappie for a friend. Nigel Havers with Del Boy didn't add up. And the British police had traced calls from Buster's wife to Mexico, so when Buster later gave himself up, the press speculated that he had been out there with Bruce. One night, we upped sticks and legged it to Canada.

In Montreal we stayed with Charlie Wilson, another train robber. Charlie had three girls, so I had company, and we were settled for about a year. But an alarm bell went off in Dad's head, when he went in three times to get Canadian citizenship and they were messing around, saying they couldn't find his application form. We scarpered overnight.



**Nick Reynolds, Bruce and Nick's sculpture of Bruce at an exhibition in 1999**

Not long afterwards, Charlie had 50 Canadian Mounties outside his house. Also there, to bring Charlie back to Britain, was my dad's nemesis, Detective Chief Superintendent Tommy Butler—Scotland Yard's old Grey Fox, who was leading the hunt for the robbers.

Next, we went to France, then back to Britain, to Torquay. Dad needed money and thought things had died down enough for him to sneak in, do a job and then clear off again.

**BUT SIX MONTHS LATER, IN NOVEMBER**

1968, I opened the front door one morning and about 100 policemen came steaming in. Someone had recognised Dad.

I was seven. Tommy Butler let me have a final word with Bruce. ‘Dad's been a naughty boy and is going away for a long time,’ he told me.

Then they took him off. I was sitting in the back of a police car with my mum, crying her eyes out. She thought he was smarter than the Old Bill, and had a charmed life. He got 25 years. The same as a murderer. ▶

ALEX WOODS/REX FEATURES

◀ My life was messed up. I'd lost my dad. My mum cracked and was never the same again. I was sent to a boarding school—Dad had some money tucked away and Mum sold her story to the papers for £30,000—where prefects threw darts at you. I even had a new name. Having a villain for a father wasn't cool then. Had anything gone missing, the train robber's son would have got the blame.

Yet, though Dad ended up doing ten and a half years, he pretty much programmed me to be the person I am today. He sent postcards from prison telling me about the latest art: I'm a sculptor. He loved music and built me a guitar in the prison workshop: I'm in a band, Alabama



Nick at his father's funeral, March 2013

3 [most famous for "Woke Up This Morning", the theme song for *The Sopranos*]. We're rereleasing a cover of the song "Have You Seen Bruce Richard Reynolds?" for the 50th anniversary of the robbery, actually. He wanted to join the navy, but his eyesight wasn't good enough. I spent seven years in the navy as a diver in the late Seventies and early Eighties.

Everything he wanted to do but couldn't, I've done—the best way I could get him to be proud of me.



## MEMORIES OF THE ROBBERY

### "I FOUND THE ROBBERS' LAIR"

**JOHN MARIS WAS A HERDSMAN AT LITTLE LONDON FARM, NEAR OAKLEY, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

Four days after the robbery, I was in a field with the cows when I decided to look round the neighbouring Leatherslade Farm. The previous week, I'd seen a Land Rover full of men going up there, even though the owner, Mr Nixon, had sold up and moved out. I'd assumed they were builders. But now the police said they were looking at farms within 30 miles of Cheddington as potential gang hideouts.

The curtains were blacked out. There was a coil of rope outside the door and a lorry under a tarpaulin. I just knew this was the hideout.

I told the police, but nothing happened. Then, that evening, a car whizzed towards Leatherslade and tooted



Den of thieves: the hideout is discovered

three times. I rang the police again and this time two officers did arrive. Within hours, the police and press were all over the place.

The robbers had fled, but they'd left fingerprints, along with mail sacks and bank-note wrappers. I got an £18,000 reward. It bought me a house and put my two children through university!

I also got threatening letters. One had a coffin with my name on it. My wife and I bought an Alsatian and I hid some pickaxe handles. Luckily, I didn't have to use them.

It's since been reported that the robbers were planning to burn down Leatherslade. If I hadn't found it when I did, the Great Train Robbers may have escaped prosecution.

DAILY MAIL/REX FEATURES

### "I WAS A LOCAL BOBBY"

**ROY WILCOCK WAS A RECENTLY QUALIFIED POLICE CONSTABLE, WORKING IN AYLESBURY, SOME TEN MILES FROM CHEDDINGTON**

We were sent out in teams of six to look for the suspects, with booklets containing their photos. You had to watch who you showed them to, or some busybody would tell you that some local so-and-so looked like one of the robbers. Everyone in Aylesbury wanted to know what was going on. You couldn't even go for a drink without people throwing questions at you.

REX FEATURES



Nicked: robbery suspects at Linslade Magistrates' Court

After Leatherslade was discovered and most of the suspects were captured at various locations, I took two of them to Linslade magistrates' court for their first hearing. Feeling right sorry for themselves, they were. A photographer took a shot of us that ended up in the *News of the World*. I've still got the cutting.

DENNIS OULDS/GETTY IMAGES; BUCKS FREE PRESS

### "I PHOTOGRAPHED THE CRIME SCENE"

**BARRY KEEN, FORMER BUCKS HERALD SNAPPER**

Maurice Cousins, the *Herald's* lead photographer, got a tip-off at 6am: there'd been a train robbery—get over to Cheddington. He took some photos of a broken train window and came back to Aylesbury, not realising what he had. Then the national press arrived and I went out to get some more pictures of the scene.

Obviously, it was our lead story that week. But the day the police found the hideout, I was in a nearby village, taking a picture of a donkey that drank gin and orange. I'd taken the van, so Maurice and the reporters had to get cabs out there. I followed. The police wouldn't let us inside, but we got shots of the hole in the lawn where the gang had tried to bury the mailbags.

By the third week, the police had made more arrests and the town was buzzing. They'd got £30,000 of the stolen money back too.

It was the biggest story I ever covered. We were very much a local paper and, by week five, the town centre's projected redevelopment was on the front page.

Aylesbury is known for ducks and the Great Train Robbery. It was great to be part of it. ■

