

Hunting for Guns

BY MAX DALY

In April, 2010, during a police chase of a junior member of the notorious London Fields gang, through the streets of Hackney in northeast London, the Croatian-made submachine gun's journey of violence came to an end. Made in the 90s for use by special forces in the Bosnian War and capable of firing 800 rounds a minute, the Agram 2000 was found in a rucksack, dumped by the fleeing teenager in a garden in Blanchard Way, London Fields.

The Agram had been used in a murder that had become headline news seven days previously. Schoolgirl Agnes Sina-Inakoju, an innocent bystander, was hit in the throat by one of the bullets from a short burst of fire through the window of a takeaway shop in Hoxton, south Hackney. Agnes died in hospital 36 hours later. The shooter, Leon Dunkley, had been targeting rival Hoxton gang members rumoured to be in the shop at the time.

Like many firearms in the UK's illegal gun market, it wasn't the first time the Agram

had been used. It had already been fired six times in a turf war between rival Turkish drug gangs across five London boroughs within the space of 15 months. At some point the gun was sold by the Turks across the ethnic divide and into the midst of another simmering feud, between rival black gangs in Hackney. The next time the Agram surfaced, Agnes was killed as she waited for her pizza.

Like the humans who use them, every gun has a fingerprint and a story to tell. Each bullet fired, each cartridge ejected, hides microscopic evidence that can be linked by police ballistics experts not only to a particular type of firearm, but to the unique barrelling of a single piece of weaponry. So police are able to map, fairly effectively, the movement and activity of an estimated pool of around 1,300 active firearms being used by British criminals, chiefly in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool.

Over a decade ago, a gun used in a shooting in Britain would have probably been broken up and disposed of straight away. But the tightening of anti-gun laws has meant that good quality, modern firearms are hard to come by for criminal gangs who need to back up their drug businesses with lethal firepower.

Although gun crime is falling and stands at a relatively low level—there were 8,135 firearms offences and 30 gun murders in England and Wales between 2012 and 2013, compared to around 9,000 gun murders a year in America—the hunt for firearms, by police and criminal gangs, is an intensive one. Street crime gangs need firearms as much as the unarmed British police fear them, and both sides are highly resourceful in achieving their aims.

This is not America, where box-fresh guns rapidly filter into the criminal underworld via corrupt gun dealers, theft, legitimate “front” buyers and private gun sales. At the moment, 3D guns are useless to criminals because they are prohibitively expensive. In Britain, criminals, as they have done so in order to keep ahead in the drug trade, have had to improvise.

Weapons are recycled and shared, most commonly within trusted criminal networks. Gangs stash guns in safe houses—often in the homes of girlfriends and in children's bedrooms—ready for quick access by nominated gang members. When a disgruntled gang member gets refused entry to a nightclub and returns to shoot the doormen, he will have gone to one of these safe houses to pick up his gun. If weapons get too hot, they will be

The Agram 2000, a Croatian-made submachine gun, which was originally used in the Bosnian War in the 90s. Photo courtesy of the Met Police



sold on to other criminal groups, who may have little idea about a gun's history.

Gangs also have the option of renting guns through a middle man. The illegal gun trade is so claustrophobic that police know of two cases, in Manchester and Birmingham, where rival gangs have rented the same weapon from a third party armorer for use in tit for tat shootings.

"One self-loading pistol was being used on different occasions by members of rival gangs in Manchester. The gun was available from a third party, beyond the usual situation, where it is under the control of one specific individual or gang," says Paul James, a former murder squad detective and National Ballistics Intelligence Service expert, who now runs *Arquebus*, a consultancy specialising in firearms forensics.

"We're seeing the same guns being used over and over again. It's not about how much they cost, it's getting hold of them. They are a prized possession, so people won't get rid of them. But they put themselves in jeopardy by keeping them," says James.

Being caught with a gun that has been used in past shootings can lead to heavier sentences at court. A gun with a history can also open up new avenues of investigation for police by linking individuals to crimes and establishing connections between criminal outfits.

Not only are they forced to share or rent guns, but gangs are increasingly reliant on an array of non-lethal firearms that have been adapted by underworld gunsmiths, using lathes and milling machines, to fire live rounds. Most common are reactivated Second World War and Cold War weapons, and converted blank-firing handguns (originally made for military re-enactment groups or as Olympic starting pistols). Also popular is the Russian-made *Baikal*, a gas pistol whose barrel can be easily converted from its intended use to fire CS gas to fire live rounds. Like many of these 'junk guns', it's illegal in Britain and is smuggled in via Lithuania.

It was an Italian-made *BBM Bruni Model 92* handgun, a blank-firing replica of a Beretta that had been modified to take 9mm bullets, that was in part to blame for the England riots of 2011. The specialist police firearms unit that shot and killed Mark Duggan had been following him because he'd just gained possession of the Bruni from a drug dealer's girlfriend.

During the rioting that ensued, one of the most memorable images was of Tyrone Laidley, a member of Birmingham gangsters the Johnson Crew, firing shots at a police helicopter. The guns connected to

the shooting were a smuggled Hungarian-built *FegArmy* handgun and an antique 19th-century French-made *Saint-Étienne* army revolver. The gun waved about by one of the Muslim fanatics who beheaded soldier Lee Rigby in 2013 turned out to be an unloaded *World War One* pistol.

Peter Squires, a professor of criminology at the University of Brighton who specialises in firearms, told me: "The tight gun control regime we've had in the UK has resulted in substantial displacement away from regular firearms. Instead we've seen the creation of a multi-layered 'junk gun' market, guns well below the threshold of decent firearms. In this market, because of the shortage of decent, factory-quality handguns in criminal circles, we find firearms that are low-powered, worn out, inaccurate or antique, firearms that are converted, reactivated or stolen."

In 2011, police found a gang's gun stash, which consisted of two *Pirates of the Caribbean*-style flintlock pistols, some flare guns and a *Jesse James*-style revolver, hidden in a London council estate. One of the biggest weapons caches discovered in recent times in Britain, a haul of 30 firearms unearthed in *Waltham Forest* in April, revealed a motley mix of museum-dodging, junk weaponry that US criminals would have laughed at. A reactivated *Uzi* aside, the cache consisted of an array of replicas, air rifles, antiques, converted gas pistols and a US-made *Thompson* submachine gun—a weapon used in the *St Valentine's Day Massacre* in 1929.

Because of the lack of easily available guns, becoming an armorer can be quite lucrative. In April, former army sergeant Paul Alexander, who lived a life of luxury in a £2.5m farmhouse with tennis courts and swimming pool set in four acres in the village

of *Bardfield Saling*, Essex, was given a second life sentence after continuing to mastermind the sale of hundreds of converted blank-firing weapons to criminal gangs from his prison cell. Alexander, who used corny aliases such as *Bourne* and *Bauer*, was originally jailed in 2008, after he supplied the gun to the *Croxteth Crew* who shot dead schoolboy *Rhys Jones* in *Liverpool* in 2007.

Liverpool is the main exporter of guns across the country and it's the only area that is bucking the trend on junk guns. Experts suggest this is the case because of the city's proximity to Ireland and links with America. In 2010, American *Steven Greenoe*, a former US marine who once worked as a bodyguard for *Madonna*, was arrested after smuggling more than 60 high-powered weapons, including brand new *Glocks*, in his luggage.

Greenoe was jailed for ten years along with his UK contact, English recruitment consultant *Steven Cardwell*, who led a double life as an underworld gun dealer. *Cardwell* acted as an essential intermediary, the court heard, receiving the weapons before transferring them to his gangland contact for onward sale. Most of the guns remain at large and police have so far linked them to a murder in Scotland, an attempted murder in Manchester and a robbery in *Liverpool*.

Police appear far more adept at stemming the gun trade than the drug trade. It's a clear example of how enforcement, coupled with forensic technology and old-fashioned detective work, is working. But ultimately, it's the gangs, despite some of the desperate measures some will go to in order to get hold of a firearm, who have chosen to limit gun homicides. Even the school-age gangsters selling drugs and marking their turf know that gunshots are bad for business. *WCB*

A still from police footage of Tyrone Laidley, a member of Birmingham gangsters the Johnson Crew, firing shots at a police helicopter during the UK riots of 2011. Photo courtesy of West Midlands Police

