

CONVICTED



FACE OF THE BOMBER ▲

Sentenced to 25 years, terrorist James McArdle served only two—he was released in a prisoner amnesty aimed at restarting the peace process.

FAINT FINGERPRINTS ▼

These police photographs show the actual meal voucher and rain-soaked copy of Truck and Driver on which the bomber's thumbprints were found.



The Docklands bomb

When a massive IRA bomb ripped through Canary Wharf, it shattered not only windows in London's Docklands, but also a fragile Northern Ireland peace process. The detectives who spent two years on the trail of the bomber nicknamed him the "Triple Fingerprint Man" after the forensic evidence that eventually led to his conviction.

"We were working late, tapping away at our terminals, when there was a tremendous flash and a huge boom and we were all knocked down onto the floor. The water pipes exploded, shards of glass went everywhere, and the office filled with dust and smoke."

The blast that threw George Sparks across his office came from a huge bomb in a truck parked 1,650 feet (500 m) away. It exploded at 7 PM on February 9, 1996, killing two and injuring nearly 40 people.

It ended a ceasefire that had kept mainland Britain free of Irish Republican bombs for 17 months.

London's Canary Wharf was a prime target for the IRA—it was a symbol of corporate

wealth, and Europe's second-tallest office building. It lay just outside a security cordon that protected London's financial district. Nevertheless, the blast wrong-footed British security forces. "We were taken completely by surprise," one of the spokesmen confessed.

Scotland Yard's antiterrorist squad had little to go on. The scene of crime was just a huge crater alongside the South Quay train station. The only obvious lead was a uniformed police officer's description of the vehicle. He had spotted it while helping to clear the area after telephoned warnings. From his account, forensic artists drew a picture of the truck—a Ford flat-bed that had been modified to carry cars. When newspapers

◀ THE HUNT FOR EVIDENCE

After receiving a tipoff, police searched nearby waste grounds. They found a discarded trailer, piles of garbage, and a tire full of evidence.



published the picture, 850 people called the police with information. The 199th caller had seen the truck parked at an industrial estate 10 miles (16 km) away, in the days before the blast. He said that two men had unloaded a trailer it had been carrying, and the trailer was still parked in the same spot.

Investigators rushed to the patch of waste ground. Beside the trailer they found a tire containing tachograph charts, magazines, a set of Northern Ireland license plates, and other bits of garbage. The tachograph chart gave them a vital early lead. It had recorded speeds, stops, and starts, and enabled police to trace the truck's movements back to Carlisle, in the north of England. Bought at an auction there four months earlier, the truck had then been driven to Northern Ireland. Helped by the license plates, as well as



GANTRY CAMERA ▲
Surveillance cameras mounted over British highways enabled police to retrace the truck's route from the Irish ferry to Canary Wharf.

trapes from CCTV cameras on highway bridges, investigators learned that the transporter had made a return trip to the mainland a month before the bombing. They also discovered that the bombers had stayed twice at the same Carlisle motel.

Though its rooms had been cleaned many times since their stay, fingerprint officers dusted them anyway. They collected 100 fingerprints, and took prints from the motel staff to eliminate them. After fuming an ashtray with superglue (see p. 19), one print stood out—it didn't match those of any of the cleaners.

270 miles (435 km) south of Carlisle, technicians in Scotland Yard's fingerprint lab had been minutely scrutinizing

garbage found near the trailer. After two months of work, they at last got a result. They had used DFO and ninhydrin (see p. 18) to treat a meal voucher from the ferry that brought the truck over from Northern Ireland. It bore the faint print of a thumb—the same thumb that had gripped the ashtray in the Carlisle motel.

Physical developer (see p. 19) revealed another thumbprint, on a magazine that had been left out in the rain for two weeks. This print matched the other two. The bomber was no longer such an enigma, and investigators nicknamed their suspect the "Triple Fingerprint Man." Elated by the discoveries, they ran a computer comparison with fingerprint records. It was negative. The IRA had chosen their bomber with care—he had no criminal record. The investigation stalled.

Then, in April 1997, an SAS raid in South Armagh, Northern Ireland, captured an IRA active service unit who had been carrying out sniper shootings. One of the arrested men was James McArdle, a bricklayer and driver from the village of Crossmaglen. In a routine check, his fingerprints were compared with those of the Docklands bomber. They matched—McArdle was the Triple Fingerprint Man.

His trial, in June 1998, made public the details of the deadly plan. The car transporter had traveled to England in January 1996 to visit a used-car auction. This had established an alibi for the bombers as legitimate motor traders, and was also a dry run for the bombing. The tachograph that led investigators to Carlisle was a prop, added to help them look convincing.

On the bombing trip itself, empty spaces in the transporter were packed with more than a ton of explosives—mostly a ground-up mix of fertilizer and sugar, with a small trigger charge of Semtex plastic explosives.

The fingerprint evidence was enough to convict McArdle, and on June 25, 1998, the Triple Fingerprint Man received 25 years for conspiracy to cause explosions.

DOCKLANDS DEBRIS ▶
The IRA bomb caused \$225 million worth of damage to Docklands' buildings. Store owner Inam Bashir and his assistant John Jeffries died in the blast.

