

Operation Magician, 29 November 2017

The latest sting by East Lancashire had been planned for months and centred on a man who was part of a trafficking ring and personally responsible for trafficking girls from one town or city to another. Without knowing the precise details Police are confident that these girls are being sold between traffickers and the raids were expected to lead to a number of arrests and victims rescued in different locations across the country. We are reminded of a Medaille Trust case report where the DNA of a girl rescued in London was found in finger nail particles in the door of a Belfast brothel which she had been trying to scratch her way out of.

It isn't just girls who are sold for prostitution, it happens on traveller sites too there being an instance of this in North Lancashire.

The main man in the current raids was believed to be taking the earnings of ten girls who at £500 per girl per day could bring him around £40,000 per week. He was expected to be at a premise in Preston. Another premises in Preston was expected to be found empty. Victims were expected at a Blackburn premises which had been identified as a pop-up brothel and known to the police for about two months.

The way that the police had handled the situation of identifying potential victims but without acting earlier is instructive. Once identified as a potential pop-brothel, non-specialist officers had visited for safeguarding purposes and to give the girls the opportunity of accepting help. As usually happens, the girls insisted they were acting freely and didn't need help. As no crime was committed the police were powerless to do any more than provide safeguarding information with details of what to do if they subsequently decided they wanted help. It is unusual, out of fear, for girls to admit to being trafficked and some aren't even aware that they are. The girls are more likely to accept help following raids when the perpetrators are arrested and there is the opportunity for victims to talk on their own in a safe place.

Last minute enquiries by a persistent police officer at the previous 24 hours had located the girlfriend of the ring leader on Facebook. A woman who had featured in an earlier operation but had avoided being identified as a victim had been located working again in a brothel associated with this latest operation.

At around 7.00 am Mark Vaughton and Stu Peall briefed the team of highly trained police officers at the Greenbank Police headquarters and at around 7.30 am they left for Blackburn and a Preston premises in police cars and black Mariahs with specialist equipment. Present with them were NCA personnel, interpreters and Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) specialists. With the likelihood of the need for victimless prosecutions, best evidence is evidence gained on the spot -, pictures, video, audio. Such evidence is much more effective than statements of the same information and has been used effectively to get victimless prosecutions. There were mobile 'phones in the premises – one not operable but another which had been in use and might provide more evidence and more information for subsequent investigation.

In the event, the Blackburn premises was empty even though girls had been working there only a few days earlier. This does not indicate that the perpetrators had

become wary, very unlikely in the scheme of things, only that the girls had been moved as a matter of routine as is the way with the short currency of pop-up brothels. It is possible that further investigation will locate the missing girls advertised on websites trawled by the police. The girls' working names may change as they are moved from one location to another but they can be identified by their pictures. The same pictures are used sometimes, same room, same wallpaper.

The Preston premises expected to be empty was indeed so but at the main address the main perpetrator was found in bed with a girl and in the front room there was another girl was another man. Both men were arrested and the girls taken for interview with specially trained interviewers in an informal non-threatening environment in a safe place dedicated for the purpose. The girl in the front room was naked. Bruising on her body would add substantially to ABE. She was extremely distressed for reasons which would no doubt come out later.

We don't know the nationality of the girls yet and one wonders at how easy it is for the traffickers to bring them in. Many of them come to the UK under the impression that there is a legitimate job waiting for them but even those who were working as prostitutes in their home country, and expect a more lucrative existence in the UK, will have valid documentation and nothing in their appearance to attract particular attention. Some will come unaccompanied through airports and despite efforts to raise awareness – Stop the Traffik do annual training and awareness raising exercise at Manchester Airport aimed at educating the thousands of people employed there – most will be missed. At ports, the girls will pass come through in cars with no more than a passport check unless they have been marked in Europe and tracked as potential victims.

Mark updated us at the morning passed and by the time I left at lunchtime we knew that 6 perpetrators had been arrested and another man's vehicle was on the road somewhere. Subsequent Police enquiries led to the male being arrested as he attempted to board a plane at Liverpool airport with a female bound for Romania.

We arrived – Mark, Sion and myself – at the Preston premises as a police car and two large black police vans were leaving. The specialist team were about to start their search for evidence, perhaps paper evidence such as payslips or invoices. These searches are extensive and thorough but not as thorough as the case where the police are certain someone is hiding. A case was mentioned where a man had eventually been located in the hollow of a divan bed, and in another instance a dangerous dog in a kitchen wasn't enough to stop the search finding a man under the floor where a trapdoor under a mat and a table led to a mini cellar. If the police "know" someone is hiding in the premises they don't give up until they find them. In this instance the police were confident they had found everyone on the premises.

The Preston premises was a large terraced house on three levels. No-one had answered the door so the police had gained entry with their equipment which soon dispatched the lock, leaving only a barely noticeable four inch diameter circular depression as evidence. Inside were four rooms, each with a double mattress on the floor, one more room with articles bundled in a corner for ease of a speedy get away, and vacant rooms upstairs. The rooms with beds were pretty bare with cheap furniture and limited bedding. Condoms, wipes and thrush pills were laid about

untidily on tables or on the floor, along with bottles of drink and uneaten food. There were two stale wraps on a plate. One of the rooms which had been vacated had an empty wardrobe indicating that the girl who left the room was wearing just about all she possessed.

The kitchen was revealing too. The fridge indicated living on a day to day basis as if the tenants were temporary and the whole place gave an indication of neglect and very basic living. On the other hand the heating was full on. It was hard to imagine that our main perpetrator would want stay in a place such as this when the amount of money he was taking was more than enough for a life of lavishness beyond most people's comprehension. Perhaps he passed most of the money to someone higher and lost the rest in an addiction to gambling.

The windows were covered with little finesse in brightly covered drapes rather than curtains, giving the house an external appearance of temporary occupation or inhabited by someone with limited taste or who cared little for appearances. Combined with the constant passing to and fro of men one would have expected neighbours to have noticed that something was going on but neighbours care little on streets like this. Whoever the landlord was would ask few questions if he received his regular income. The legal requirement for landlords to check out details of tenants is difficult to police and counts for little.

It is rare too for punters to report concern about girls they encounter. The girls indicate coercion or anything amiss at their peril. There was one instance where East Lancashire Police discovered a love letter from a punter who was clearly under the impression he had some sort of relationship with the girl and had given her large sums of money to send back to her family in Romania. It's unlikely the money went any further than into the traffickers' hands.

That pop-up brothels still exist in East Lancashire is testimony to the arrogant over confidence of these traffickers who continue to operate despite the recent successes by the police. Surveillance indicates that there is less activity than hitherto and that the traffickers are taking rooms in hotels for a few days where they operate for a much briefer period of time and move on before the police have time to act.

The men arrested could be held for 24 hours with a 12 hour extension but after that a court order would be needed. But the East Lancashire team had done their job and a total of six men and one woman were arrested and charged with Conspiracy to commit Human Trafficking and Conspiracy to cause prostitution. There are also charges around firearms offences but not related to the Trafficking offences.

All the victims were identified as being Romanian with the exception of one who was believed to be Spanish. None accepted our help and as a result none were taken into safety.

Seven People have been charged with Conspiracy to Commit Human Trafficking, all are Romanian nationals, three local to East Lancashire with two arrested from Northampton and two from Luton which is a clear indication of the Nationwide crime of Human Trafficking.