

**GREAT ESCAPES** THEY DID THE CRIME BUT DECIDED AGAINST THE TIME – **BEL JACOBS** UNLOCKS A TALE OF FLEEING CONVICTS

# Making a break for freedom

The glamour of the great escape, even when perpetrated by criminals, is undeniable. A new book, *The E... List* by Paul Buck, recounts escapades when chancers broke out of jail and into criminal history. There is military-style planning and perseverance: the old man in a Mini Metro, snatched by escapees John Kendall and Sydney Draper in 1984 and left bound and gagged in Sheffield with £40 in his pocket for the trouble. Then there is the Woman of the Underworld, Zoe Progl, who, in 1964, became the first female to break out of Holloway and then spent a fortnight with her baby daughter on a caravan site in Paignton, Devon.

'The vast majority of prisoners are resigned to do their bid,' said three-time jail breaker Alfred Hinds. 'Some will escape if the chance is handed to them. But all they want is a brief taste of freedom: the chance to spend a few days with their wife or girlfriend. It usually is a brief taste because they're not organised and it's almost a relief to them when they're recaptured.' Here are three extracts from the book about escapees who, for different reasons, captured the public's imagination:

## PUBLIC ENEMY NO.1

Conman **Gerard Chapman** was the criminal for whom the term 'Public Enemy No.1' was coined in the 1920s. He escaped several times, raising cheers in picture-houses when newsreels reported his escapades.

Chapman lived the high life in Manhattan with fine clothes and expensive women. Educating himself with music and literature, he was known as the 'Count of Gramercy Park'.

His first escape had the touch of a showman about it. Caught after a robbery with his criminal mentor George 'Dutch' Anderson, they were taken to the main New York post office for questioning. In the middle of the interrogation, Chapman yawned and stepped from his chair, dashed to the window with a 'Sorry, gentlemen', went out on to the sill and was gone.

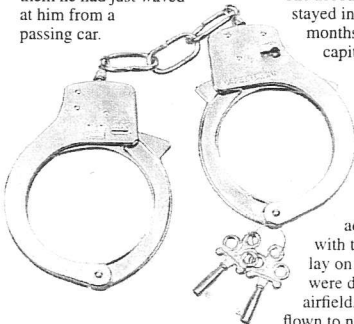
Everyone rushed to the window and looked 25m down to the

street. Then a detective noticed a cleaner in the opposite building pointing frantically to the side of the window. Chapman had moved along the ledge to come back into the building via another window. He was recaptured four offices along. Such was the adulation for the man that bouquets arrived daily while he was in custody – right up until his execution in 1926.

## A REAL HARD MAN

Villain-turned-actor **John Bindon**, who helped give the 'hard man' archetype its cinematic image in 1970s Britain, recounted how, in his earlier days, he was being transferred by prison bus from one borstal to another with his friend Alan Stanton when Stanton, who had small wrists, managed to slip out of his handcuffs and abscond out the window.

Few other details are known, other than the escape was in 'the middle of London'. We also know Stanton immediately stole a car, for he is reputed to have driven past the prison bus, catching the eye of Bindon, still seated at his window. When the officers asked where 'the little one' had gone, Bindon informed them he had just waved at him from a passing car.



## GREAT TRAIN ROBBER

Just after 3am on August 12, 1964, the door of Great Train Robber **Charlie Wilson's** cell in Winson Green prison, Birmingham, was unlocked and three men in black masks entered. Wilson was tossed a bundle of clothes and hurriedly dressed in a black roll-neck sweater, dark trousers, plimsolls and balaclava. They walked down the corridor,



Picture: Tony Fincher/Getty

**No joke: Recaptured in 1968 in Canada, Great Train Robber Charlie Wilson (left) is brought home by Chief Superintendent Tommy Butler**

passing the elderly guard who lay unconscious, having been coshed, bound and gagged, before going downstairs.

The intruders, who had opened the locks of the various doors on the inward journey with duplicated keys, systematically closed all the doors behind them. Once outside, they kept to the shadows, making for the 7m-high wall. The four men went up a rope ladder, dropping into a builder's yard next door, crossed another wall to a towpath beside a canal and left in two waiting cars.

It took three minutes from leaving his cell for Wilson to land outside the walls. From here on, one account has it that Wilson stayed in a London flat for some months. Many villains in the capital didn't want to know where he was hiding, as it gave them 'a kind of responsibility', noted gang boss Joey Pyle.

Another story suggested once outside the prison Wilson climbed into an adapted petrol tanker with two rescuers and they all lay on mattresses while they were driven to a deserted airfield, from where he was flown to northern France.

On the other side of the world, Bruce Reynolds, the train robbers' leader, still not arrested at that point, said: 'His success filled me with pride. We'd fussed the Establishment yet again.' Wilson was recaptured in Canada four years later and was returned to Britain to serve out his sentence.

■ *The E... List* by Paul Buck is published by Pennant Books, £15.99.

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