FILE 001 · 12 CASES

SUBJECT: WHOLE LIFE ORDERS
JURISDICTION: ENGLAND AND WALES
CONTENTS: TWELVE CASE FILES, 1981–2025
RETENTION: PERMANENT

LIFE MEANS LIFE

WHOLE LIFE ORDER

The Prisoners Britain Will Never Release

CRIME NOIR

EDITION 1 · 28 NOVEMBER 2026

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EDITION

First edition. Information current to 28 November 2026.

NOTICE

This book is based on public records and published sources current to 28 November 2026. It is not legal advice. Court outcomes can change. If you find an error, write to sufimiah.pro@gmail.com.

SOURCES

Every factual statement in this book is linked to a numbered source at the end of its chapter. Annex C lists all 61 sources consulted, with their addresses and the date each was retrieved. The full research files, the case data and the build scripts are kept with the edition so that every claim can be checked.

QUOTATIONS

Quotations from judgments and sentencing remarks are reproduced exactly and briefly for the purposes of reporting and review, with the source cited. Strong language is retained only inside direct quotations.

IMAGES

No photographs of victims or crime scenes appear in this book. Any portrait of an offender is used under a recorded licence listed in the image manifest.

ONLINE

https://www.youtube.com/@CrimeNoirUK

TYPOGRAPHY

Set in Playfair Display, Source Serif 4, Inter and IBM Plex Mono. Designed and typeset in code; all motifs are hand-drawn vector graphics.

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Contents

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK 6

PART 1: THE SYSTEM 7
1.1 What a whole life order is 8
1.2 Life with a minimum term, and life without one 10
1.3 How a judge decides 12
1.4 What has changed over time 16

PART 2: THE CASES 22
Case File 01 · Peter Sutcliffe 23
Case File 02 · Arthur Hutchinson 27
Case File 03 · Steve Wright 31
Case File 04 · Dale Cregan 35
Case File 05 · Joanne Dennehy 39
Case File 06 · Michael Adebolajo 43
Case File 07 · Thomas Mair 47
Case File 08 · Stephen Port 50
Case File 09 · Wayne Couzens 54
Case File 10 · Ali Harbi Ali 59
Case File 11 · Louis De Zoysa 63
Case File 12 · Kyle Clifford 67

PART 3: THE DEBATE 71
3.1 The human rights litigation 72
3.2 Sentencing frameworks compared 75
3.3 What families and official bodies have said 78
3.4 How other jurisdictions compare 82
3.5 Life inside 85

ANNEXES 91
A Master timeline 91
B Glossary 93
C Source index 95
D Update log and corrections 99

How to read this book

This is a reference book about whole life orders in England and Wales: the sentence that means a prisoner will never be considered for release by the Parole Board. It is built from the public record. Every factual statement in it comes from a source that was retrieved and read for this edition, and each is listed with its address and the date it was retrieved.

Part 1 explains the law: what a whole life order is, how it differs from a life sentence with a minimum term, how judges decide, and how the system has changed. **Part 2** contains twelve case files. **Part 3** sets out the legal and public debate, compares other countries and describes, from official reports, what life inside looks like. The annexes contain a master timeline, a glossary and an index of every source.

Reading a case file. Each file opens with an *At a glance* panel. The account that follows is drawn from the judge's sentencing remarks or a court judgment, corroborated where possible by a second source. Victims are named only as the official record names them. The language is that of the court record: clinical, and as plain as the facts allow. Sexual offences are stated, never described. Direct quotations are exact, and none from a judge exceeds forty words.

Reading the notes. Small superscript numbers refer to the numbered sources at the end of each chapter. Sources are listed in order of first use. Most are official: legislation, judgments, sentencing remarks and government publications. News reports are used only to corroborate, and are marked as such in the source index.

What this book is not. It is not legal advice, and it offers no opinion on sentencing policy. Where people disagree about whole life orders, their views are attributed to them by name. Court outcomes can change after publication; the update log in Annex D explains how corrections are handled.

A note on content. These are true cases of murder. Some readers may find the material distressing.

READ FIRST

1

PART 1 OF 3

The System

What a whole life order is, how it differs from a life sentence with a minimum term, and how judges decide. The statutory framework, the starting points and six decades of change.

1.1

PART 1 · THE SYSTEM

What a whole life order is

In England and Wales the sentence for murder is fixed by law. A trial judge must, under section 1 of the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965, impose a life sentence on an adult convicted of murder. The judge has no discretion about the sentence itself; the decision that matters is what order accompanies it. [1]

Section 321 of the Sentencing Act 2020 requires every court that passes a life sentence to make one of two orders. The order must be a minimum term order unless the court is required to make a whole life order. A minimum term order means that the early release provisions apply once the offender has served the specified part of the sentence. A whole life order is defined in a single line: it is "an order that the early release provisions are not to apply to the offender". [2]

What the order removes

The early release provisions are those of section 28 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, under which the Parole Board may direct the release of a life prisoner once the minimum term has expired, having considered in essence the risk the prisoner poses to the public. Where a whole life order is made, the Parole Board has no such power. [1]

The only legal route out of custody that remains is section 30 of the same Act. It allows the Secretary of State to release a life prisoner on licence at any time if satisfied that "exceptional circumstances exist which justify the prisoner's release on compassionate grounds", after consulting the Parole Board unless consultation is impracticable. [1,3]

When Mr Justice Wilkie sentenced Thomas Mair in 2016 he described the effect plainly: the prisoner would be released, if ever, only by the Secretary of State exercising executive

2

PART 2 OF 3

The Cases

Twelve people who were ordered never to be released, from 1981 to 2025. Each file is built from the sentencing remarks or a court judgment, with every fact sourced.

CASE FILE 01

Peter Sutcliffe

DECEASED
DIED 13 NOV 2020

Thirteen murders and seven attempted murders of women in Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, 1975 to 1980.

CASE CLOSED

AT A GLANCE [1,2,3]

CONVICTIONS	Murder of thirteen women (convicted by a jury); seven attempted murders (guilty pleas)
COURT	Central Criminal Court (Boreham J), 1981; whole life term set by the High Court (Mitting J), 2010
DATE OF SENTENCE	22 May 1981 (life); whole life order 16 July 2010
SENTENCE	Life imprisonment; High Court directed in 2010 that the early release provisions should not apply
STATUS AS AT 28 NOVEMBER 2026	Died in hospital while a prisoner of HMP Frankland, 13 November 2020.

1 The offences

Between July 1975 and January 1981 Peter Sutcliffe killed thirteen women and attempted to kill eight more, in Yorkshire and Greater Manchester. [1,4] The High Court recorded that he habitually carried a ball-pein hammer and a sharpened screwdriver, set out to kill lone women, and that all the murders were pre-planned. [1]

The thirteen women he murdered were Wilma McCann (Leeds, 30 October 1975), Emily Jackson (Leeds, 20 January 1976), Irene Richardson (Leeds, 6 February 1977), Patricia Atkinson (Bradford, 23 April 1977) and Jayne Michelle McDonald, aged 16 (Leeds, 26 June 1977). [1] They were followed by Jean Bernadette Jordan (Manchester, 1 October 1977), Yvonne Anne Pearson (Bradford, 21 January 1978), Helen Maria Rytka (Huddersfield, 31 January 1978) and Vera Evelyn Millward

(Manchester, 16 May 1978). [1] After a gap of ten and a half months he murdered Josephine Whitaker (Halifax, 4 April 1979), Barbara Janine Leach (Bradford, 2 September 1979), Marguerite Walls (Farsley, 20 August 1980) and Jacqueline Hill (Leeds, 17 November 1980). [1]

The court's findings record head injuries in almost every case and stab wounds in most; one victim was strangled. Jayne McDonald, who was 16, died from head and stab injuries. [1] The High Court found that his treatment of many victims evidenced "sexual or sadistic conduct", and that in several cases bodies were moved from the scene. [1] The women who survived his attacks included two aged 14 and 16. [1] He was arrested on 2 January 1981 in the company of a woman, Olivia Reivers, whom he did not harm; he later admitted that he had intended to kill her. [1,3]

The evidence in detail

According to RTÉ, he was caught when police checked his car and found that its number plates were stolen; detectives later discovered a hammer and a knife nearby. [3] In police interviews he said that anger at a woman who had humiliated him in 1969 had grown into hatred and obsession, and of Josephine Whitaker, the first of his last six victims, none of whom were prostitutes, he said: "I just wanted to kill a woman". [1]

RTÉ reported that police had interviewed him five times by the summer of 1979, but had been misled by a hoax tape and letters from a man claiming to be the killer. [3] At his trial at the Central Criminal Court in 1981 he pleaded guilty to seven attempted murders, and the sole issue on the murder counts was diminished responsibility. [1,2] He told three defence psychiatrists, who diagnosed encapsulated paranoid schizophrenia, that a divine voice heard in a graveyard in 1967 had given him a mission to kill prostitutes. [1] The prosecution case was that he had told something close to the truth in interview and could not have believed that his last six victims were prostitutes;

the jury rejected the defence and convicted him of thirteen murders. [1,2]

Boreham J passed life sentences on 22 May 1981 and recommended a minimum of 30 years, while expressing the hope that life imprisonment would mean precisely that. [1,2] In 1997 Boreham J wrote that life should mean life, but the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham, recommended 35 years because Sutcliffe's mental state had been disturbed; no Home Secretary ever set a tariff. [1,2] He was transferred from prison to Broadmoor Hospital in 1984 after a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. [3,4]

What the judge said

> *the interests of justice require nothing less than a whole life order. That is the only available punishment proportionate to these crimes.*
>
> COURT OF APPEAL (LORD JUDGE CJ), R V COONAN [2011] EWCA CRIM 5[2]

Because no tariff had ever been set, the Secretary of State referred the case to the High Court under the transitional provisions of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. [1] Mitting J held that the number of victims alone justified a whole life term, rejected the argument that mental disorder had lowered culpability because it would go behind the jury's verdict, and found it more likely than not that a Home Secretary would have set a whole life tariff. [1] On 16 July 2010 he directed that the early release provisions were not to apply; the Court of Appeal dismissed Sutcliffe's appeal in 2011. [1,2,4]

4 Today

He returned to mainstream prison in 2016 and was held at HMP Frankland. [3] The Prison Service confirmed that HMP Frankland prisoner Peter Coonan, born Sutcliffe, died in hospital on 13 November 2020, and that the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman had been informed. [3] He had tested positive for Covid-19 and had underlying health conditions; he was 74. [3]

APPEALS AND REVIEWS ON RECORD

1 R v Coonan (formerly Sutcliffe) [2011] EWCA Crim 5: appeal against the whole life order dismissed. [2]

SOURCES — All retrieved 28 November 2026

1 R v Coonan (formerly Sutcliffe) [2010] EWHC 1741 (QB). The National Archives, Find Case Law. https://caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ewhc/qb/2010/1741

2 R v Coonan (formerly Sutcliffe) [2011] EWCA Crim 5. The National Archives, Find Case Law. https://caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ewca/crim/2011/5

3 Yorkshire Ripper Peter Sutcliffe dies in hospital. RTÉ News (news report). https://www.rte.ie/news/uk/2020/1113/1177897-peter-sutcliffe

4 Yorkshire Ripper loses release plea. The Irish Times (news report). https://www.irishtimes.com/news/yorkshire-ripper-loses-release-plea-1.861167

THE RECORD CONTINUES

Every claim in this book has a source.

Annex C lists every document consulted for this edition, with its address and the date it was retrieved. Find Crime Noir at https://www.youtube.com/@CrimeNoirUK.

CORRECTIONS: sufimiah.pro@gmail.com

CASE CLOSED