

IN THE CROWN COURT AT NOTTINGHAM

Gary Hardy

Stephen Houston

Ronald Knowles

Jason Hill

Sentencing remarks

Jason Hill

Jason Hill, I will deal with you first. You are in a unique and very different position. You were not part of the conspiracy. You were a customer of it. You kept in your safe 2 converted self loading Ekol Gediz pistols, a magazine, compatible ammunition and a silencer.

These are not the first firearms to have been in your possession as shown by footage of you and Hibbert discharging both blank and live firing weapons, but these are the subject of the count that you face.

These weapons were in your possession for short duration and there is no evidence that they had been discharged.

On the guidelines, your case falls within medium culpability because of the ammunition; there was some degree of planning in the collection and retention of weapons in a safe hidden in your garden and because I judge it to fall between categories A and B.

In terms of harm, it is category 2. This is because the nature of the weapons means the risk of death, severe harm or serious disorder was high - these were guns designed to kill: these were self-loading pistols with compatible ammunition which itself was

converted in a way to achieve maximum effect; the guns were also converted for use with a silencer. If used as it was intended they would be, the risks were high.

The Starting point on this guideline is 10 years and the range is between 10-12 years. That starting point is increased by your possession of 2 weapons. I have already taken account of the modifications in assessing harm so do not double count them as aggravating features.

The sentence is aggravated by your previous convictions which include PWITS class A drugs and which predate your trip to Astley Court by about 5 weeks. You were therefore on a suspended sentence at the time. Furthermore these were weapons held in furtherance of other criminal activity, namely your drug dealing. It is not therefore right to say you have no relevant convictions.

Your best mitigation is your age. You are now 23 but you were 21 at the time. Although an adult, it has long been recognised that young men do not have the maturity to fully evaluate the consequences of their decisions. Immaturity is a factor which can reduce culpability, as I find it to do here. You have no convictions for weapons.

The balance of the aggravating and mitigating factors brings me back to a little above the starting point and so the least sentence after trial would have been 11 years.

I give you 25% for your plea of guilty. Your denials at trial were to being part of the conspiracy; you did however accept possession of the weapons and entered your plea when it was first available to you. This would mean a sentence of 8 years and 3 months.

You are currently serving a life sentence for murder. You will not be eligible for release from that until you are in your 50s. The sentence I pass will be consecutive to that, as this is wholly different offending of a very serious nature. This means that when you are eligible for release from your sentence by the parole board, you will then remain in custody until you have served $\frac{1}{2}$ of this sentence before then being considered for release. Because of this I am satisfied that there are exceptional circumstances which allow me to disapply the 5 year minimum and allow me to make a substantial reduction for totality.

The sentence (on count 4 – possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life) will be 4 years' imprisonment consecutive to the life sentence you are serving.

Hardy Knowles and Houston

Between you, you had agreed to convert blank firing pistols into firearms and you were then responsible for their sale to criminals who you intended would be able to use them to endanger life. They were sold as part of what have rightly been described as “assassination kits”.

You were in business together. You each brought your own set of skills and contacts to the enterprise.

Ronald Knowles, you were the armourer. At your home address of 27 Milton Drive in Alfreton, you made the firearms, converted blank cartridges into bulleted cartridges and you manufactured compatible silencers. Your craftsmanship was of high quality. You converted blank firing Ekol Gediz pistols by removing the dummy barrels and replacing them with hollow ones which were sleeved into the chamber block and secured with an epoxy resin. The new barrels would block the vent but you added further epoxy to make sure of this. A thread was added to the end of the barrels so that sound moderators could be connected. The slides were painted black to give the weapons the appearance of genuine handguns and the serial numbers were ground off. These were self-loading pistols, meaning bullets could be fired in quick succession without a pause to reload. The expert evidence was that these were high quality conversions.

Your conversion of blank cartridges into live firing ammunition was also of good quality. You used H&N Grizzley pellets as the projectile. These pellets were designed to expand on impact, thereby maximising damage.

The sound moderators did not work in the sense they did not reduce the noise but they were nevertheless part of the kits you created. Of course, the fact they did not work would not necessarily be known to those looking to buy them. The addition of a silencer adds a sinister appearance to the weapons but also demonstrates the sort of character you intended to sell to.

Gary Hardy, you have a background in high level organised crime. That is clear from your previous convictions and the sentence you received for drugs supply. In your evidence to the jury, you put yourself forward as a broker, putting people and deals together. This is what you brought to the conspiracy. I am satisfied that you put this agreement together: you were the common link between Knowles and Houston; it can only have been through you that they met in the first place. I am satisfied that you also oversaw operations. Your in-person meetings with Houston and Knowles were frequent and your contact on the phone was extensive. Whilst your address featured as an important location, you had no reason to think it was under surveillance. You thought you had been careful enough by keeping yourself at arms' length, leaving others to physically handle the guns and meet with Morrison. You were careful not to incriminate yourself – your discussions were in person or by telephone call rather than through potentially retrievable messages; you did not go to the workshop yourself; you did not meet with Morrison on either of the two occasions he attended your address; you caused Ronald Knowles to collect a box from the farm shop to package the guns rather than use the clearly accessible boxes from your garage. When there was concern over Jason Hill's arrest, you were kept apprised and only attended later at what I am satisfied was a short crisis meeting on 27th July.

Steven Houston, you were the distributions arm of the business. You were at GH's address when Morrison attended in April and you were clearly concerned about his silence after his arrest. This is because Morrison was a courier you had arranged through Velizar Georgiev. On 19th June 2023 Jason Hill and Luke Hibbert attended your address in the late evening. This was to collect at least one of the firearms recovered from his safe but a few days later. You had extensive contact with GH and received RK at your address on at least one occasion.

The essence of a conspiracy is that participants are culpable for the nature of the whole operation as it was known to them. Each of you contributed in different but important ways, and in the knowledge of what others were doing.

Turning to the Guidelines, this was a business which at its core involved the sale of firearms to criminals; the purpose was to make money; an intention to endanger life is an additional feature although it is in many ways implicit in the transfer of firearms with ammunition. It is why the starting points are so high. In my judgment the guidelines applicable to count 1 are to be applied as these best reflect what this conspiracy was about.

Gary Hardy and Steven Houston, I find each of you to fall within High Culpability – Hardy, you were the head of the enterprise, putting it together as you did, and keeping an eye on operations; you were more than an introducer. Houston you were in charge of distributions; you were a key facilitator. In your cases, there was significant planning, which planning included steps to evade detection as I have already outlined. I am also satisfied that your expectation was to receive substantial financial advantage; this is because not only had a large number of weapons been sold but this was an ongoing enterprise, only brought to an end by police intervention. I am satisfied that your expectation was for it to continue beyond July.

Ronald Knowles, you were the lead armourer but in the sense that you were the only armourer. Your role in the transfer of firearms was to do the conversions in the first place, and you did so for payment. You had no discernible role thereafter. Count 3 better reflects your function but you knew what you were signing up to and were an integral and necessary part of the wider conspiracies, and you fulfilled that role without hesitation. In my judgment, you fall below Hardy and Houston. Yours was a significant role with an expectation of significant financial advantage and some planning. I find you to fall within medium culpability.

In terms of harm, 4 converted firearms were recovered from 2 addresses in Coventry, an address in Wolverhampton and in London. Each of those had compatible ammunition and three of them also had sound moderators. Ammunition but no gun was recovered from another Wolverhampton address and from a vehicle in Colchester. Two more guns were recovered from Jason Hill's address together with a magazine, ammunition and a silencer, and 4 completed kits were seized from James Morrison. These 10 recovered weapons had been converted and then supplied, or were about to be supplied, through your operation.

A further indication as to the scale of the operation is derived from what was recovered from Ronald Knowles' vehicle in his efforts to dismantle the workshop once GH had been arrested. These exhibits are evidence of conversions already completed: in particular 29 converted bulletted cartridges, 36 blank-firing dummy barrels of which 19 were from Ekol Gediz pistols, which barrels I infer had been replaced by hollow ones to make viable firearms. The items recovered also demonstrate that this was an ongoing concern, with more than 600 blank cartridges, airgun pellets, 4 unfinished sound

moderators, 2 blank firing pistols and the components of another, together with a magazine also recovered.

In my judgment, this was a large scale and highly sophisticated enterprise, which involved a large number of weapons; it had lasted a significant period from at least November 2022 and was intended to continue for longer; the reach of the operation extended to Essex, London, Wolverhampton and Coventry, and weapons which were seized had been recovered in connection with serious criminality.

It is my finding therefore that this was an operation falling into cat 1 harm.

The Starting point for a 1A offence is 20 years with a range of between 16 and 28 years' imprisonment. For 1B, the starting point is 14 years with a range of 12 – 18 years.

This guideline applies to either the manufacture or the transfer of firearms as discrete offences. Your business model meant that firearms were not only transferred by you but had been manufactured in the sense that you were also responsible for their conversion from blank firing pistols. Your convictions on count 3 show your agreement to that, and count 2 reflects the additional intention that these weapons would be available to criminals to endanger life. I will not pass consecutive sentences because the three counts reflect different stages of the same thing but those stages go beyond the simple transfer of firearms and so the starting point must be adjusted upwards to reflect this.

The guidelines identify the supply of compatible ammunition and silencers as an aggravating feature as well as the risk of harm to others. These are factors I have already considered when identifying the sophistication of the enterprise and I have already said that the sentences will be aggregated to take into account of the risk to others identified in count 2. I do not therefore double count these as aggravating features.

Count 2 is a scheduled offence for the purposes of a life sentence and extended sentence. A significant risk of serious harm is inherent in the offence and whilst your criminal pasts increase that risk, when looking at your ages, health and the sentences I am bound to pass, I do not find that either life sentences or extended sentences are necessary.

Gary Hardy

There are other aggravating features in your case.

You are 62. You have old convictions which I ignore. Your conviction in 2004 for perverting the course of justice reveals a menacing side to your character; I did not accept for one minute your account that this was a friendly chat with a juror you accidentally bumped into. In September of that year you were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for class A drug dealing in what was an organised criminal enterprise of which you were the head figure. The length of that sentence alone informs me of your criminal pedigree. Although there is no evidence that you were involved in crime outside these conspiracies, it is against this background that you were able to offend at such a high level.

You were also on licence for part of the indictment period and you maintained a veneer of respectability for your probation officer. You were recalled upon your arrest and so any time spent in custody will not count towards your sentence. This is a consequence of the licence regime and I would not usually make a reduction to take account of this but your trial was delayed for reasons outside your control and so I do reduce the sentence by 2 years to reflect the time between trials that you would otherwise have served. Of course, had you pleaded guilty, your sentence would have started much sooner.

In mitigation, I have read the medical report prepared by Dr Mattu. There is no need to repeat the conditions you live with but I do accept that your symptoms are likely to be more pronounced in a custodial environment. You have a family and I saw for myself the strength of the bond with Leanne who will be affected by your sentence. You have proven yourself to be a model prisoner and have put your personal skills to good use.

Steven Houston

There is no evidence of hierarchy between you and GH. If he put this agreement together, you were nonetheless a heavily invested partner with a more hands on approach. I see no reason to distinguish between you.

There are also aggravating features in your case:

You are 65. Your convictions are not as serious as those of GH but do show you to have been a violent offender.

On 23rd May 2022 you were given a suspended sentence for an offence of ABH. Your conviction puts you in breach of this. Given the length of sentence I am bound to pass and given the period of suspension has now long lapsed, I shall not have this breach put to you but will treat it instead as an aggravating feature.

I am also satisfied in your case that you were involved in other serious crime. Velizar Georgiev operated a substantial industrial cannabis grow within your compound. His evidence was that you and he were partners and that although he was the expert, you insisted on keeping some control. You did not challenge this. Of course, I do not sentence you for this drug dealing but I do find you to have a close connection to other serious criminal activity as an additional High Culpability feature.

Once you became aware that the police were onto you, you delayed them for as long as you could so that you could set your phones and destroy what might incriminate you.

The mitigation in your case is found in your health and personal circumstances. I do not mitigate the offence for remorse; it has come far too late in the day and only when sentence is inescapable.

I have read the letters from your family members and I recognise the effect your remand into custody has had, and that this sentence will have, on them. In particular, your children Ella and Aaron who have their own complex needs.

You have a long standing injury to your arm and this has been more profound since your arrest and remand into custody. You have made good use of your time in prison.

Ronald Knowles

Whilst your involvement in the manufacturing arm of the business was an integral part of it, I accept that you then had little if any involvement in what then happened to the

weapons, beyond providing them for distribution. To that extent you were less involved than the other two on this count.

Your efforts to clear the workshop and both burn and remove the evidence is an aggravating feature.

You are 64. Your convictions go back to the 70's and 80's and so are old enough to be ignored. Indeed you had been out of trouble for more than 24 years and had since led a more productive life. However, the fact this offending was a course of conduct means this factor has more limited weight in mitigation.

I have read your letter and those from family, friends and colleagues. I have also read the medical report which outlines your history. You have achieved enhanced status, are the A-wing liaison representative and have made good use of your time in custody with courses.

I accept that you are someone who holds a genuine belief that you are able to help people with cancer and other problems, and in that belief, you do what you can for them. This speaks to your character.

In terms of credit for your pleas. You are entitled to 25% credit for your guilty plea to count 3. Whilst the magistrates found identified that a guilty plea was likely, this was not an unequivocal indication. You did however plead guilty to this count at the first opportunity at this court.

In relation to counts 1 and 2, I am told that there were discussions between counsel but your pleas were not forthcoming until after the trial had started. The guidelines identify a reduction of up to a maximum of 1/10 on the first day of trial which should normally be decreased further even to zero where the plea was entered during the trial. In your case, although your counsel specifically asked me to say that the trial had started, the trial proper had not, and so I will give you 10%. Until then, your case, as set out in the defence statement you served, was that you were not involved.

I must pass the least sentences that I can, having regard to the seriousness of your offending and balancing the aggravating and mitigating features. That sentence will be loaded onto count 1 and concurrent sentences will be passed on counts 2 and 3. [You will serve up to half of that sentence in custody and then be released on licence].

Gary Hardy

Count 1 (conspiracy to transfer firearms) - 23 years

Count 2 (conspiracy to possess firearms w/intent to endanger life) - 16 years

Count 3 – (conspiracy to convert firearms) – 5 years

Steven Houston:

Count 1 - 25 years

Count 2 - 16 years

Count 3 – 5 years

Ronald Knowles:

Count 1 - 15 years = 13 years and 6 months

Count 2 – 12 years = 10 years 9 months

Count 3 – 5 years = 3 years 9 months

HHJ Watson

27th June 2025