



R v Headley

Sentencing remarks of Mr Justice Sweeting

Bristol Crown Court 01 July 2025

Ryland Headley, you have been found guilty by the jury of the murder of Louisa Dunne and of her rape, offences committed on the same occasion and as long as 1967. I want to say something at the outset about the woman you killed.

At the time of her death on 27th or 28th June 1967, Mrs Dunne was a 74-year-old widow, living in her own home at 58 Britannia Road, Easton, Bristol. She had lived in this house for many years.

She was born in 1892. As a young woman she was involved in the birth of the labour movement and its mission to improve the lives of ordinary working people. Mrs. Dunne had been married twice in her lifetime. Her first husband, Edward Parker, was a notable figure in Bristol, serving as an Alderman and being a "leading light in the Labour Party". He died in 1945. This marriage produced two daughters, Iris and Edna. Her granddaughter, Mary Dainton, recalls that her mother spoke of Edward's deep love and affection for Louisa. Their home was a hub of "social and political activity" during this period. After Mr. Parker's death and some years later, Mrs. Dunne remarried John Dunne, a widower from Ireland who worked as a Night Watchman for the Bristol Corporation. He also predeceased her, passing away approximately six years prior to 1967.

Mrs. Dunne had established friendships and routines within her community. Her best friend of around thirty years was Alice Clarke who was herself a widow and lived in Easton, Bristol. Due to Mrs. Clarke's reduced mobility, Mrs. Dunne would typically visit her at least once a week, usually in the early evening. On the evening of 27th June 1967, the day before her body was discovered, Mrs. Dunne visited Mrs. Clarke from approximately 5:20 p.m. and left in "good spirits," saying that she would go home to bed. Mrs. Clarke believed Mrs. Dunne did not have many other close friends but said that "a few of her close neighbours would go into her to see that she was alright".

Kathleen Haines, who also lived in Britannia Road, had known Mrs. Dunne well for about thirty years and always spoke to her in the street. Violet Fortune, who lived next door at 60 Britannia Road, had been Mrs. Dunne's neighbour since 1957. Mrs. Fortune considered Mrs. Dunne to have

"always been a good neighbour". They had a routine whereby Mrs. Fortune would leave the previous day's newspaper on the front garden wall for Mrs. Dunne each morning.

Mrs. Dunne led a simple life, supported by her old age Pension and supplementary allowance. She did not possess "any amount of money in the house" nor any "valuables". Her few treasured possessions included her books and the deeds to her house.

The collective concern of her neighbours on the morning of June 28th, 1967, when she had not been seen and her window was, unusually, open, speaks to her place in her community.

You broke into her home, you sexually assaulted her, and in doing so, you caused her death. You may not have intended to kill but you planned to rape her and you brutally attacked her when you did so. You met her screams and struggles with force sufficient to kill.

Diligent work by the police and forensic evidence, particularly the DNA match, definitively linked you to this crime after decades when you must have thought that you had avoided detection. The palm print found at the scene, now identified as yours, provided further evidence of your presence and attempts to gain entry through a window. I commend the Crown Prosecution Service, the police and the forensic scientists for their hard work and professionalism in investigating and bringing this case to trial.

The nature of these offences demonstrates a complete disregard for human life and dignity. Mrs. Dunne was vulnerable. She was a small, elderly lady living alone. You exploited that vulnerability. You treated her as a means to an end. The violation of her home, her body, and ultimately her life, was a pitiless and cruel act by a depraved man. The rape of Mrs Dunne before her murder places the offending in the most serious category. You violated the sanctity and safety of Mrs Dunne's own home, where she had every right to feel secure. The method of killing, by strangulation and pressure to the mouth, causing injuries to her face, eyes, and neck indicates a high degree of violence and cruelty. She must have experienced considerable pain and fear before her death.

In the course of the trial the court has heard evidence about your subsequent criminal conduct, specifically the rapes and burglaries committed in 1977 and between 1973 and 1978. These offences, involved the invasion of other elderly women's homes and sexual assaults. They reveal a chilling pattern of behaviour. While these later crimes cannot be regarded as aggravating the offences for which you are now to be sentenced, the statements of Kathleen Boss and Lily Bradbrook brought home to everyone who heard them read out in court the ordeal that you must have put Louisa Dunne through before you killed her. You appear to have shown no remorse or shame for any of your offending.

The enduring, devastating, and intergenerational impact on Mrs Dunne's family, as set out by her granddaughter, is also a powerful aggravating factor, showing the true measure of the harm you inflicted. The death of Louisa Dunne has had a lasting impact on her family. Her granddaughter, described how her grandmother's brutal rape and murder left her mother "very ill" to the extent that she never really recovered. The crime clouded the rest of her life as well as the lives of her

sister, her aunt and her son. The fact that the crime was unsolved and you remained at large for so long compounded their suffering. Mrs. Dainton also spoke of the "stigma attached to rape and murder," which led people to "withdraw" from her family, forcing her to suppress emotions for decades. She spoke of the emotional toll this has taken on her personally since you were arrested, causing her to feel "sad and very tired" . It is a particular sorrow for the family, as she said, that "all the people who knew and loved Louisa are not here to see that justice is being done".

At the time these offences were committed in 1967, the role of judges differed from today. Then, judges would give advice to the government as to the "tariff"; the minimum period of imprisonment that should be served for punishment and deterrence before a prisoner could be considered for release. However, under the current law, it is now necessary for this court to set a minimum term for your imprisonment. In doing so I must have regard to the tariff which would have been imposed by the Home Secretary under the earlier sentencing regime. I am grateful for the assistance and research of all counsel. The tariff which would have been set was lower than the minimum term which would be imposed today.

I have taken the rape into account as a feature which makes the murder all the more serious and I do not therefore impose any separate penalty.

For the murder of Louisa Jane Dunne, the sentence must be one of life imprisonment. Having considered all the aggravating features of this case, including the impact on Louisa Dunne's family who have waited decades for justice, the minimum term I impose is 20 years less time on remand of 223 days giving a term of 19 years and 142 days.

It is normally necessary to explain the effect of such a minimum term in detail but given your age of 92 and for all practical purposes, I can do so in very short terms. You will never be released, you will die in prison.

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