

R v Steve Wright: Sentencing remarks

Central Criminal Court, 6th February 2026

1. Victoria Hall was a typical bright, lively teenager. Her father described her as having been a happy, loving child. She spent hours on the phone to her best friend, she was studying for her A levels, she had a part-time job, and loved to go out dancing. For reasons only you know and most people will never start to comprehend, you snatched her away and crushed that young life.
2. You are 67 years old. You are already serving a life sentence with a whole life order for five other murders of young women. The terms of imprisonment that I impose today will almost certainly make no difference. Nonetheless my duty is to decide on the proper sentence, knowing as I do so that no life sentence passed on you can ever heal the bereaved family's loss and grief.
3. In the small hours of Saturday 18th September 1999 in Felixstowe, Emily Doherty had been out clubbing but ended up separated from her friends and her husband. So she set off to walk back to where she was staying. You tried to kidnap her but she was too alert and too quick and escaped, managing to rouse a couple by banging on their front door, who then called the police. I am sure that if you had managed to abduct her, you would have killed her. That is a dreadful thing to conclude but I do so based on what you did the next night, what you did in 2006 and on the simple fact that Ms Doherty had seen your face and your car's number plate, so there is no way you would have set her free to have you arrested.
4. That same Saturday, 18th September, Victoria Hall went to her part time job then came home and got dressed up, ready to go out. She left her home in Trimley St Mary, just by Felixstowe, about 9pm and met with her friend Gemma Algar. The two of them went to the Bandbox nightclub in Felixstowe. They had a drink, they danced with each other, and at 1am they left. They went and got chips near the seafront then set off to walk home, singing as they went. They parted company

quite close to their homes at about 2.20am and that was the last time anybody, apart from you, saw Victoria Hall alive.

5. Ms Hall's naked body was found five days later in the village of Creetting St Peter, about 25 miles from her home. Expert evidence shows she must have been killed within an hour or two of being abducted, by being asphyxiated. The fact she was naked and the later discovery of your DNA material in swabs taken from her vagina and vulva show you not only abducted and murdered that child, you also either raped or sexually assaulted her.
6. I have today heard evidence from her brother Steven Hall, on behalf of himself and his father Graham. I have also heard from Ms Hall's best friend Gemma Algar and from Emily Doherty. Ms Doherty has been left with life-long anxieties about walking after dark and being spoken to by any man she does not know, and by a sense of guilt blaming herself, absolutely wrongly, for not being more insistent that the police, at the time, took her case more seriously. Gemma Algar spoke of being traumatised and changed for life. Graham and Steven Hall spoke in simple, calm words that are hard for any decent person to listen to: They spoke of the loss of Victoria's plans of university, marriage and children. The pain that has lasted for 26 years and is going nowhere. Graham Hall writes, "*I miss Victoria every day and will do so for the rest of my life*".
7. Perhaps the only thing that can be said in your favour is you pleaded guilty. Your delaying until almost the day of trial, however, meant that Ms Hall's mother Lorinda died in December last year, without knowing that her daughter's killer had finally been brought to justice.
8. The nature of a life sentence means the other terms of imprisonment for attempting to kidnap Ms Doherty and kidnapping Ms Hall have to be concurrent. That means totality and double counting between the different counts are not issues. To reflect the attempted kidnap in the total sentence I pass today, I will add an element to the minimum term.

9. Under the Sentencing Council guidelines for kidnapping I need to assess your culpability and the harm caused or, by way of section 63 of the Sentencing Act 2020, that might foreseeably have been caused. Victoria Hall died and Emily Doherty would have done had you been able to carry out your plan. Both were young women, alone late at night and therefore you were deliberately targeting a particularly vulnerable victim. That places both offences in category 1A with a starting point sentence of 11 years and a range of 8 to 16 years. The death of one victim and the prospect of the death of the other would lead me, after a trial, to impose sentences of 14 years for Victoria Hall's kidnap and 10 for Emily Doherty's, the latter reduced as it was an attempt. Your late guilty pleas mean those sentences will be 12 years and 9 years' imprisonment.

10. Guidance on the imposition of the mandatory life sentence minimum term is set out in schedule 21 of the Sentencing Act 2020. I have considered the decision of the Court of Appeal in the case of *Stewart, Couzens, Tustin and Hughes* [2023] 1 Cr App R (S.) 17. I will not add to the length of these remarks by rehearsing what is set out with great clarity in that judgement, save to highlight two points: First, schedule 21 must be applied in a flexible, not rigid, way to achieve a just result. Second, whole life terms are a sentence of last resort for crimes of the greatest gravity, and if I am in any doubt about imposing such a sentence a minimum term order is likely to be the correct disposal.

11. These crimes were committed in 1999 which means I have to first consider what the minimum term should be under the modern-day provisions of schedule 21, then consider if I need to modify that term so as not to exceed that which the Secretary of State would have chosen under the law that was in place in 1999.

12. How far your sentence for the murder of Victoria Hall should be increased because of the five later murders is not, legally, straightforward. The Court of Appeal have made clear that those later murders do not (under schedule 21) mean this crime counts as a "*murder by an offender previously convicted of murder*" because you killed Victoria Hall some years before those other victims

(see *Stuart, Couzens, Tustin, Hughes and Monaghan* [2022] EWCA Crim 1063 at 42). I am sure, however, that your situation must be made more serious by those killings, though I must be careful not to elevate this sentence to the extent I am punishing you again for offences that have already led to five life sentences. I would regard those crimes as relevant to the task I have to carry out today, and with respect I have my doubts as to whether a previous decision of the Court of Appeal is properly understood as excluding that conclusion (see *Archbold* (2026) at 5A-39 and *Darrigan* [2017] EWCA Crim 169). The Court of Appeal decision of *Ali Adam* [2025] EWCA Crim 870 (at paragraph 36) expresses, far more authoritatively than anything I say, the same doubt about that understanding of *Darrigan* but confirms that later offending can be relevant to a sentencing decision.

13. If, and I stress if, I was just applying schedule 21 I would have passed a whole life term given:

- (1) That schedule defines a child as anyone under 18, and the murder of a child involving the abduction of the child would normally be a case for that sentence. That applies here as Victoria Hall was 17.
- (2) There is very significant aggravation in the rape or sexual assault of Ms Hall.
- (3) She must have experienced mental and physical suffering for some period of time before you killed her, between about one and two hours.
- (4) There must have been a significant degree of premeditation, given the attempt the night before.
- (5) Your later conduct (however it is legally characterised) in committing five murders in 2006 aggravates your case.
- (6) There is a need to add to your effective sentence to reflect the attempt to kidnap Emily Doherty the day before. I do not add to it for the kidnap of Ms Hall as I have already taken that as an aggravating feature of her murder.
- (7) There may be some slight qualification to treating Victoria Hall as a child, as she was only weeks away from being an adult, and there is definite mitigation in your guilty plea, but those matters are far outweighed by the aggravating factors I have just listed.

14. Do I need to modify that term so as not to exceed that which the Secretary of State would have chosen under the law that was in place in 1999? In my view I do. I have read the Court of Appeal decisions to which I was directed by the Prosecution and Defence, in particular *Sullivan, Gibbs, Elener and Elener* [2004] EWCA Crim 1762. There are a number of aggravating matters under the guidance at the time, as set out in Lord Bingham's letter to judges, and they are the same as those I have already listed. I am very conscious, however, of the case of *In Re Taylor* [2006] EWHC 2944 (QB) in which Mr Justice Oppenshaw, a distinguished judge hugely experienced in the criminal law, commented that under the old system, "*whole life terms were reserved for the very few notorious multiple offenders*". I conclude that I cannot approach the sentence for the murder in 1999 on the basis I am punishing a serial killer as you were not yet that, and there is at least a steer against regarding you as such in *Stuart and others* (supra).

15. All the aggravating factors I have already listed would have led, under the old rules, to a minimum term slightly above 40 years, but given your late guilty plea I deduct one-twentieth, so 40 years is the term I will impose. Even if this was your only life sentence, given your obvious dangerousness and your age, it is extraordinarily unlikely that you would ever be released. Given the sentence already imposed for your other dreadful crimes, it is well-nigh certain you will die in prison.

16. The sentences I impose are:

- (1) For the attempted kidnap of Emily Doherty, 9 years' imprisonment, concurrent.
- (2) For the kidnap of Victoria Hall, 12 years' imprisonment, concurrent.
- (3) For the murder of Victoria Hall, I pass a sentence of life imprisonment with a minimum term of 40 years.

Joel Bennathan

6 February 2026