

John Quinn was tried in March 1957 on charges of theft and handling stolen scrap lead and brass. Although Quinn admitted he had been a professional safe cracker, he proclaimed his innocence. He insisted he had gone straight two years earlier, after he met the woman who became his wife.

The prosecution relied on the testimony of William (Billy) Dixon, who claimed that he acted as a fence for the stolen metals given him by Quinn and another man.

The “other man” wasn’t identified, and without his testimony to support Quinn’s defense that he was falsely identified as the “other man’s” accomplice, the case came down to “Quinn says he’s innocent” versus “Dixon says Quinn’s guilty.” The jury chose to believe Dixon’s testimony, and Quinn was convicted after a three-day trial in Cumberland, England. The 23-year-old Quinn was sentenced to six years in prison. His appeal was rejected by the Court of Appeals on July 8, 1957.

Quinn continued to protest his innocence, but being imprisoned hampered his efforts to find new evidence, including the identity of the “other man” Dixon said was involved in the theft and handling of the metals.

In 1962, after serving five years at Dartmoor prison, Quinn was credited with saving the life of a guard who had collapsed. He was rewarded by being released a year early.

After his release, Quinn continued his effort to find proof of his innocence. During the next four decades his quest led him to write thousands of letters seeking and following leads. In a bit of an oddity for an Englishman, he also composed several country-western style ballads that told the story of his miscarriage of justice.

Quinn’s first break came nearly 20 years after his conviction, when he learned the identity of the “other man.” That man was George Jamieson, and when contacted he acknowledged Quinn had not been involved in the theft or handling of the metals. That information, however, was insufficient for Quinn to pursue a new appeal. The roadblocks were that Dixon hadn’t recanted his testimony, and the Cumbria police that investigated the crime issued a letter undermining Jamieson’s admissions.

Quinn’s second break came in 2002 when Dixon was convicted of a series of sex

Man Exonerated 47 Years After Wrongful Theft Conviction Seeks Compensation

By Hans Sherrer

offenses he had committed during the previous 20 years. The 80-year-old Dixon was sentenced to two years in prison.

With Dixon’s credibility as a witness put in doubt due to his conviction of sexually related offenses committed over a long period of time, Quinn filed a new appeal.

In February 2003 the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) was ordered by England’s Court of Appeals to determine if Quinn’s appeal was meritorious.

When told of the appeals court’s order, Quinn said, “I might be able to get justice at last. I’m not asking to be let off. I want a retrial and the chance to clear my name. I was convicted on the evidence of a man whose word was clearly worthless.”¹

The CCRC is a government funded agency independent of the courts that reviews alleged cases of miscarriage of justice to determine if there is a real possibility the appeal of a conviction will succeed. The CCRC evaluates a case based on two standards:

- The existence of an argument or evidence which has not been raised during the trial or at appeal.
- Exceptional circumstances.

In October 2003 the CCRC determined there was merit to Quinn’s claim of wrongful conviction, and referred it for review by the Court of Appeals.

Quinn’s appeal relied on the twin prongs of Jamieson’s exclusionary evidence and Dixon’s impeachment evidence. In November 2004 the Court of Appeals announced its decision to quash Quinn’s 1957 conviction. Although material witnesses were still alive, in light of the persuasiveness of the new evidence the Court of Appeals declined to order a retrial.

After the decision was announced, Quinn said outside the courthouse, “I am at a loss for words. My family now know I have been exonerated and do not have to worry about it any more. I have lived with it for 47 years now and fought all that time. I want to thank everyone who has helped me.”² Beside him stood his wife Marian, the woman for whom he had given up a life of crime

two years before the crime was committed of which he was convicted, and his daughter, who died of cancer several months later in early 2005.

In the summer of 2005 Quinn received a letter from the acting chief of the Cumbria Police, Christine Twigg. The letter corrected a number of inaccuracies contained in a letter the department wrote in 1975 after Quinn had tracked down Jamieson. Twigg’s letter stated in part, “I therefore apologise if you believe that your attempts to clear your name have in any way been hampered by the contents of that letter.”³



John Quinn holding the letter from the Cumbria Police apologizing for his wrongful conviction in 1957. *News & Star*

The letter provided additional support to the correctness of the Court of Appeals decision that the evidence used to obtain Quinn’s conviction was too unreliable to sustain his conviction. Quinn responded to receiving the letter

by saying, “The letter made me feel great. It means I can now apply for compensation and then hopefully this whole episode will finally be over.”⁴

In the fall of 2005 Quinn announced he was working with several people to put together a musical around the songs he wrote about overcoming nearly unimaginable odds to win his case after half-a-century of effort. Quinn said, “People already all me The Mighty Quinn, so that seems like a good title.”⁵

The 71-year-old Quinn said that in commemoration of his daughter’s death from cancer, he plans to donate to a cancer research charity money raised from the show. He will also donate a portion of the compensation he is awarded for his wrongful conviction and imprisonment.

Endnotes and Sources:

1 Man’s 50-year-old conviction reviewed, *BBC News*, February 11, 2003.

2 Conviction Quashed After 50 Years, *BBC News*, November 12, 2004.

3 Pensioner Starts Fight For Police Compensation, *Age Concern England*, August 2, 2005.

4 *Id.*

5 Now John’s Got Justice, It’s Quinn: The Musical’, Phil Coleman, *News & Star*, Cumbria, UK, October 10, 2005.

