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Lawrence murder: Evidence 'missed by forensic experts' 14 years ago

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Stephen Lawrence: Forensic evidence found in his clothes

Key forensic evidence may have been missed by scientists investigating the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence 14 years ago, it emerged last night.

Clues which could have helped detectives charge and convict his killers were contained in clothing submitted to forensic teams by police.

Last night the full scale of the blunder began to emerge in the wake of news that fibres have been found linking Stephen to those allegedly responsible for his death.

The discovery so long after the killing is said to have "horrified" senior officers at Scotland Yard.

Sources insisted that forensic experts rather than police appeared to be to blame for the errors and an internal investigation is likely.

The development comes 24 hours after the Daily Mail revealed that the five original suspects could be re-arrested and possibly face a murder trial

The forensic discoveries were made during an exhaustive review of the case.

Using new techniques, independent forensic experts have found fibres from Stephen's clothes on those thought to have been worn by the suspects on the night of his murder.

It is understood they have also found fibres believed to be from the suspects' clothes on Stephen's bloodied garments.

Tests are also being carried on DNA traces found on clothes seized during the initial police investigation.

And it is understood a new witness has come forward with evidence.

Police have not ruled out the possibility that a sixth man may have been involved in the murder.

Forensic errors have blighted some of Britain's highest profile murder investigations, including inquiries into the death of Rachel Nickell on Wimbledon Common in 1992 and the killing of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor in 2000.

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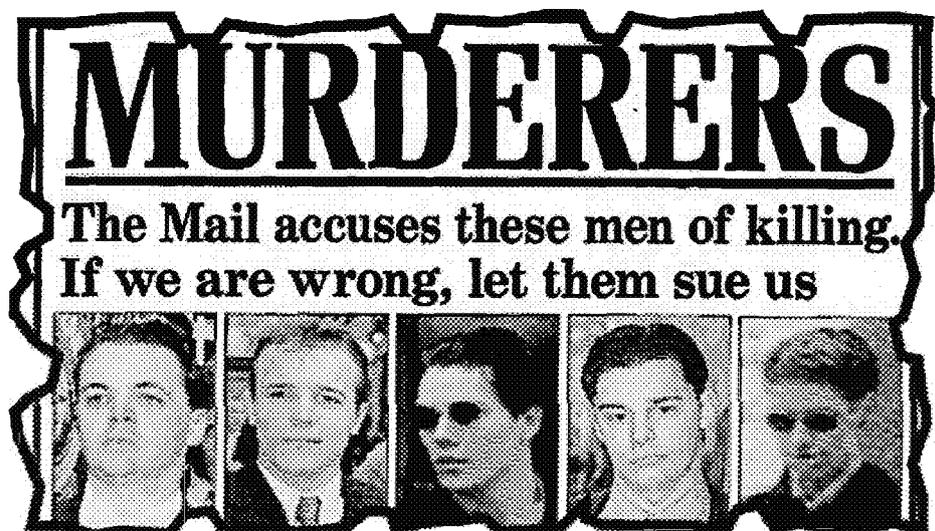
Despite official words of caution from Scotland Yard yesterday, there is growing confidence behind the scenes that officers may still be able to prove who murdered 18-year-old Stephen in Eltham, South-East London on April 22, 1993.

Gary Dobson, Neil Acourt and Luke Knight were acquitted of murder in 1996, when a private prosecution brought by the Lawrence family collapsed.

The case against two other suspects, Jamie Acourt and David Norris, was dropped before it reached court.

Yesterday Detective Chief Inspector Clive Driscoll, leading the new investigation, said a forensic review of the Lawrence case began 18 months ago and still has "many months" to go.

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Landmark: The Mail, February 14 1997

Trying to dampen rising expectations of a breakthrough, he told the BBC: "We will be as thorough as we can be. It's on-going and has many months to go."

Yard chiefs had hoped to keep news of the forensic findings secret.

But in recent weeks speculation of a major twist in the case has been mounting in police and legal circles.

Stephen's mother Doreen was recently informed of progress in the case.

The Crown Prosecution Service is aware of developments and has retained the services of a top QC to advise lawyers and police on evidence-gathering strategies.

Each of the original five suspects is expected to be arrested, probably next year.

Following abolition in 2005 of the double jeopardy rule, which prevented a defendant being tried twice for the same crime, the five could feasibly be put in the dock.

The developments are dramatic in a case which three years ago appeared to be as good as closed.

Then the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Ken Macdonald QC, told detectives there was insufficient evidence to bring fresh charges despite a £30million inquiry by the Met.

In February 1997, the day after an inquest jury decided Stephen was unlawfully killed "in a completely unprovoked racist attack by five white youths", the Mail took the landmark decision to publish the names and photographs of the five suspects under the headline "Murderers".

The paper challenged the five to sue for libel if they believed they could clear their names.

Last year Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair insisted the case was still open.

"The force will never let up, certainly not on my watch, in our endeavour to bring the perpetrators to justice."

In a statement yesterday, Scotland Yard said: "An opportunity to see if the forensic work can be revisited in the light of new technology is standard practice and is being adopted in the murder of Stephen Lawrence.

"As a result of a forensic opportunity coming to light, new DNA samples are being taken from individuals who may have come into contact with Stephen at the time, or prior to his death, such as his family, police officers, ambulance and medical staff."

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