

A case study in extremism: Darley Oaks Farm

A family-run business based at Darley Oaks Farm in Newchurch, Staffordshire, UK, was the target between 1999 and 2006 of an intense campaign of intimidation and vandalism that culminated in the desecration of a relative's grave and the theft of her body.

Three brothers David, John and Christopher Hall established David Hall and Partners in 1999 to breed guinea pigs for medical research. Extremists raided the farm's breeding sheds that year, stealing 600 of the animals. The Animal Liberation Front claimed responsibility, and a new campaign -Save the Newchurch Guinea Pigs (SNGP) -was launched with the aim of closing the business.

When regular demonstrations began outside the farm, John Hall said he was prepared to work with 'civilised' campaigners. Extremists though began to threaten the Hall family and the farm's employees and suppliers, and vandalise farm property.

The SNGP website published the details of intended targets on its website and urged campaigners to contact them. Companies and individuals with links to the farm began to receive hundreds of phone calls, emails and letters containing death threats, threats of bomb and arson attacks, as well as lurid and false claims of rape and paedophilia.

Next, the extremists turned their attention to the local community. Hundreds were subjected to a surge of abuse and intimidation between 2003 and 2004 as properties throughout Newchurch were attacked and vandalised. Fireworks were set off at night. More than 450 separate incidents were logged by the police in this period.

In October 2004, the remains of Christopher Hall's mother-in-law, Gladys Hammond, were dug up and stolen from her grave in the churchyard of St Peter's Church in Yoxall. The incident made front-page national news and an investigation was launched by Staffordshire Police. Save the Newchurch Guinea Pigs, along with other animal rights groups, officially condemned the act.

In an interview soon afterwards for the BBC's Inside Out, John Hall said: "They call us scum but I wonder if they really know the meaning of the word."

The Hall family began to receive letters from an anonymous sender two weeks later claiming to have the remains of Gladys Hammond.

The grave-robbing prompted a group of locals to apply to the High Court in London for an injunction against the campaigners. The injunction would have restricted protests to once a week and imposed a 27-square-mile exclusion zone around the farm.

The appeal failed, and the exclusion zone around Darley Oaks was restricted to 100 yards.

A petrol bomb was delivered to the farm in March 2004, and several workers received death threats.

The following month, letters began to arrive from the Animal Rights Militia (ARM), who claimed to know the whereabouts of Gladys Hammond's body and threatened to kill a relative of the Hall family unless the business was closed down. The Animal Rights Militia also sent letters to the BBC and a local newspaper claiming that one sixth of Gladys Hammond's remains were buried in a sealed container one metre underground in nearby woods.

At Brakenhurst Wood, near the farm, police stopped three suspects in a car in March 2005. A spade, head torch, balaclava and camouflage clothing were found in the car. Raids on their homes and on the home of a fourth suspect uncovered computer records proving their involvement in the campaign.

After a renewed search for Gladys Hammond's body failed, the Hall family announced in August 2005 that they would stop breeding guinea pigs for medical research. David Hall and Partners officially closed in January 2006.

The four extremists pleaded guilty to conspiracy to blackmail the following April.

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Chief Crown Prosecutor for Staffordshire, Harry Ireland said, “The strength of this prosecution gave the accused no option but to plead guilty ... Their actions went well beyond lawful protesting and persuading; they threatened death and violence, damaged property and used explosive devices.”

Three of the group were sentenced to twelve years in prison. The fourth was sentenced to four years.

The girlfriend of one of the convicted extremists was sentenced in September 2006 to two years under a clause in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act for sending threatening letters to the Hall family in November 2005. She was released after eight months.

The remains of Gladys Hammond were found by police in woodland at Cannock Chase, near Hednesford in May 2006 – more than a year and a half after they were stolen.

The fourth member of the group was released from prison in May 2008, having served half her four-year sentence. The remaining three extremists were released in October 2011, having served five years.