

## ***FINCH – THE REMORSEFUL DAY***

**Tim Coghlan, proprietor of Braunston Marina, a canal marina near Rugby (which was used in the filming of the Inspector Morse episode ‘*The Wench Is Dead*’) attended the recent sentencing of the serial narrowboat burglar, Anthony Ernest Finch, at Oxford Crown Court...**

*The gaudy, blabbing, and remorseful day  
Is crept into the bosom of the sea;*  
Shakespeare – Henry V1 Part 2, Act Four, Scene 1

It was nearing ten o'clock in the morning, the hour when the stark modern Oxford Crown Court would begin its day in earnest. There was a flurry of activity in the central atrium between the several courts that led off to left and right, and which would soon devour the mass of gathered humanity. The concourse with its long rows of seats, could have been mistaken for a regional airport lounge – there was even a glass-fronted boutique-style cafeteria called ‘Rumpole of the Bailey’. (The courts are not without their sense of humour).

But this was also a criminal court, and the evidence was not hard to find - the dashing omnipresence of the black robed clerks, and seated all about, the wigged barristers in huddled whispered conversations with their anxious clients, who would soon be facing the full rigour of the Law. A mobile phone rang near me, and one of these clients, a large bouncer-type of about thirty in his new football-manager style suit, answered it guardedly. He too had not lost his sense of humour – his mobile tone was the *Inspector Morse* theme - appropriate as this was after all Inspector Morse’s court.

Given the notorious Oxford traffic, I had arrived in very good time to make sure I did not miss seeing sentence being passed on the pestilent Finch. But more than this, I just wanted to see for the first time with my very own eyes, this phantom serial burglar who had caused such havoc on the canals over so many years, including numerous break-ins to boats moored at my own marina. I had waited for a long time for this, and I wasn’t taking chances.

I even had time for a coffee in that Rumpole cafeteria, where I noticed more barristers, who seemed anxiously reading their briefs, whilst hastily devouring bacon butties. I was minded of those lines in Gilbert & Sullivan’s *Iolanthe* ‘Ere I go in to Court, I shall read my brief through, said I to myself said I.’ Nothing had changed in a hundred and fifty years. Indeed I began humming the appropriate opening lines of their ‘Trial by Jury’

Hark the hour of ten is sounding!  
Hearts with anxious fears are bounding!  
Hall of Justice crowds surrounding,  
Breathing hope and fear.

Soon, at the very same time, the operetta for real would begin.

As a spectator, finding out anything about the goings-on at a court is always somewhat hit and miss. I was therefore reassured when I saw on the Court notice board:

### **Court 2 10.00AM**

In the matter of Anthony Ernest Finch: Consideration of Pre-sentence Report and Sentencing.

As seems standard court procedure, there were two other matters listed for hearing in Court 2 at the same time. So when we would be called was a matter of speculation, and no one could tell me. But at least we would be called at some stage, and somewhere in the basement Finch was waiting in his cell.

Now with only ten minutes to go, an announcement came over the public address; ‘Defence counsel for Finch report to Court Reception immediately.’ It was repeated again, and then twice again a few minutes later. Then a gowned court clerk, a short thin woman in her forties came scurrying amongst us. ‘Is there a defence for Mr Finch?’ she called out a number of times, to the crows’ nest of barristers who seemed to take no notice of her – concerned as they were with picking over their own carry-on. I felt I had to do something, so I went and told her that Mr Finch had always conducted his own defence, and I suspected he would be doing the same today.

She seemed startled by my reply. Was I his solicitor? Then her words stumbled as she noticed my blue Braunston Marina jersey, complete with logo. Who was I, and how did I know? I explained all briefly, and suggested she confirm this with Mr Finch, who no doubt was down in the cells. I did not want an adjournment on this account. She thanked me for my information, and then scurried away with the speed with which she had arrived.

The big event of the day was the hearing relating to a major Oxford drugs bust, which the police had imaginatively code-named ‘Operation Lambretta’ – perhaps there was an Italian Connection. Once the case was called, it seemed to empty much of the concourse, including our *Morse* theme friend. Court 2 had proceeded with one of the other listed cases, and I noticed that I was now the only person left sitting directly outside that court. The clerk whom I had spoken to, happened to come out of the court, and seeing me there alone, suggested I might as well go in, to save her coming out again. There seemed no sign of anyone involved in the third item listed for hearing, and I appeared to be the only member of the public concerned with ‘the matter of Anthony Ernest Finch’.

It was my first venture ever into a crown court – in my fifty five years to date I had lived free of fighting wars or doing jury service, or having any other cause to come to a crown court. What I transpired to be watching was a pre-trial review of a female accounts clerk who was charged with defrauding her employers, a medium sized Oxford business, of some £10,000. She was not required to sit in the dock at this stage, and was in the public gallery at the back only a yard from me and on the same bench. She was about 28, tall, semi-obese, with short hair, and well-bitten-short and fat ring-less fingers. Her clothing comprised a mauve designer romper suit. As far from us as possible sat two men in their early fifties in dull old fashioned suits, who must have been representatives of her erstwhile or present employer. Perhaps the good lady had not resigned, and was suspended on full pay until proven guilty; and if not, would be back with a case for reinstatement – and then accept a fat pay-off for not doing so, a sort of Passing Go in real life.

The centre of the court seemed another world with the protagonists dressed in their ancient attire, and performing a timeless ritual of pageant and procedure, which the public had long ceased to believe in or fear. The defence and prosecution barristers in their wigs and gowns were arguing interminably over when they would both be ready for the trial. Finally they agreed on three months time as being the earliest, because of the need to exchange and examine piles of prosecution documents – even though it transpired that these barristers were members of the same Oxford chambers, and thus worked in the same building. The judge, who was no doubt used to these tortuous legal procedures in the name of Justice, indifferently agreed and made his order. ‘Case adjourned. All Stand.’ The judge then left the court – by his private exit stage left. With a smirk I could clearly hear, the accused female then left court, free for another three months, when at enormous public expense her case would be heard, and she would no doubt get a slap-wrist suspended sentence. In the meantime she would live off benefit and cream cakes.

The court quickly emptied of all but myself, a young female reporter from the *Oxford Examiner* in the row in front of me, the lady-clerk, a couple of officials and the prosecution barrister of the previous case, who it transpired was to conduct this one as well. The clerk stood to her feet and said in a loud voice, towards the back of the almost empty court, ‘In the matter of Anthony Ernest Finch!’ A door I had failed to notice at the back of the court, to what transpired to be the recessed dock, was opened from the other side.

In came a private security guard of about thirty in his number one dress, followed by the villain I had waited nearly fifteen years to see. Finch was everything I had expected – I recognised him immediately from the

'wanted' posters – the short, wiry man with an upside-down pear-shaped head, balding flaxen hair and those small dark staring eyes I had looked at so often in the police photograph.

And yet he seemed none of it. After four months on remand, with good food and plenty of rest, and time well-spent in the prison gym, the sixty one year old vagrant tramp was now well groomed and smartly turned out in high-street designer casuals. I wondered if, freshly laundered, these were the clothes he was arrested in, as it was his regular habit to steal clothes from boats, as needs must. I thought of that line from Shakespeare's profound play on the inadequacies of justice, *Measure for Measure*, 'Every true man's apparel fits your thief.'

I had hoped to see Finch at least handcuffed to his guard, given his previous escapes from the police, when trying to arrest him. But that day he was good as gold. He and his young guard almost seemed like friends. How could this be the same man that had caused so much mayhem and led the police and justice system on such a song and dance, and for so long?

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Why, when and how Finch came to the canals I have never been able to ascertain. Public information about his past is almost non-existent, other than that he was born in Lowestoft in 1941. Rumours have it that he was once in either the French Foreign Legion or the Spanish Foreign Legion, or both – he allegedly speaks some French and is fluent in Spanish - or in the SAS, or again the Parachute Regiment. He must have been in one of these cadres to have learnt his survival skills for living rough and evading his captors. He is said to have been married and even had a child, but if either existed, he has long ceased contact with them.

Somewhere in his life he took to the bottle, which was his undoing. He became a vagrant and a total recluse, losing all ties with his family and anyone he had ever known. The canals provided him with all he needed to survive – by breaking into poorly secured boats in order to steal drink, food, clean clothing and bedding. If money was there, he seldom touched it, as he never went near a pub or shop. His only saving grace was that he was never violent – even though he was once convicted for possessing a firearm.

His 19 previous court convictions, beginning in 1968, reveal an extraordinary pattern to his life, which ranges in a swathe between London and Lancashire, but of late mainly focused on Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire:

1968 - Bolton Magistrates Court – petty burglary – fined.

1972 - West London Magistrates Court – petty thefts over the period 1971/2 – probation

1972 - Preston Crown Court – two counts of burglary – 3 months jail sentence

On release and for the next three years or so he is alleged to have joined the Spanish Foreign Legion.

1976 - Bedford Crown Court – theft – 9 months jail sentence

1980 – Northampton Crown Court – house breaking plus various canal-boat breaks-ins - 2 years jail sentence

1982 – Bicester Magistrates Court (near Oxford) – 6 canal-boat break-ins with 15 further offences taken into consideration – 3 months jail sentence

1984 – Knutsford Court – Cheshire – 2 crimes (details not available) – 2 years jail sentence

1985 – Oxford Crown Court – crimes (details not available) – 2 years jail sentence

1986 – Shrewsbury County Court - 3 crimes including possession of a firearm – 18 months jail sentence

1989 – Warwick Crown Court – crimes (details not available) - 21 months jail sentence

1990 – Chorley Court (Lancashire) – “Burglary with intention to steal – ‘non-dwellings’” (i.e. canal-boats) – 18 months probation order

1990 – Congleton (Cheshire) – 2 counts of theft – 2 year probation order

1992 – South Warwickshire Magistrates Court – 3 counts of theft including theft to dwelling – 3 months jail sentence suspended for 2 years

1993 - South Warwickshire Magistrates Court – 4 counts of theft. 3 months jail from above plus 6 months new.

1994 - Daventry Magistrates Court – 12 counts of theft. Probation order.

1995 - South Cheshire Magistrates Court – 3 counts of theft. Conditional discharge.

1995 – Reading Crown Court - House breaking. 65 break-ins to canal boats taken into consideration. (The police were at last getting wise to confronting him with other canal-boat crimes.) – 2 years jail sentence

1998 – Warwickshire Crown Court – 2 counts of ‘burglary and theft to non-dwellings’ i.e. canal-boats at Calcutt Marina. 130 other offences taken into consideration – 3 years jail sentence.

2001 – Northampton Crown Court – 1 count of house breaking and 2 break-ins to narrowboats. 100 other offences taken into consideration – 2 years jail sentence.

My first awareness of the gentleman’s existence was in the summer of 1988. I was then in the process of buying Braunston Marina, which was in receivership and in a bad state of decay. The departure of disillusioned moorers following the appointment of the Receiver, had been hastened by a spate of break-ins to boats which had Finch’s hallmark. It was cold-comfort to Braunston Marina, that when those same boats moved to other marinas, they were broken into again – because once Finch knew how to get into a particular boat and what was in it, he would come back time and time again – regardless of where it was moored. Despite the alcoholic consumption, his memory remained elephantine.

Once I had acquired the marina, for some odd reason, Finch seemed to leave the Braunston area alone. There were reports of him down on the southern Oxford, the Grand Union towards Warwick. Then in the bitterly cold snap of January 1989 – when the canal was frozen hard he gave himself in, and not for the first time. And herein lay the root of his problem with the powers that be, whose task was to make punishment to fit the crime. (Pace Gilbert & Sullivan.) Here was a man confessing to numerous offences to ‘non-dwellings’ – even though many of his victims lived on their boats – because he wanted what was supposed to be punishment – a warm bed, hot showers and regular food. And because he had given himself in and not been arrested, and confessed to every crime he had committed, his sentence would be substantially reduced. Warwick Crown Court sentenced him to 21 months in jail, but he was out by the end of that year.

Once free, he moved north to the Cheshire area, where he occupied himself for the next year or two. Whenever the police finally caught up with him, the judges set him free with probation orders, which he took no notice of.

However, by the summer of 1992 he was back to his old game in our territory and with a vengeance. This time his patch was the seventy mile canal corridor that stretched from north of Oxford to Market Harborough. His mobility was astonishing – sometimes ten or fifteen miles would be covered in a night - as

evidenced by what the police termed 'incidents'. When caught that year he was given a three month sentence suspended for two years, and was back in business within days.

The winter of 1992 / 3 was the worst for us, with break-ins to boats in the marina almost a weekly occurrence. As Braunston lay about mid-way along his patch, and for a quarter of a mile the canal towpath was fenced against the marina, making this an ideal place in which to trap him, the police tried on a number of occasions to do so, in which we fully co-operated. But Finch must have possessed a sixth sense of danger. One of our moorers, whose narrowboat had been broken into three times and lay close to the canal, allowed the police to fit a special alarm that would ring at the Daventry police station if the boat was broken into again. But this never happened. A boat was moored outside on the canal as a tempting target, on board which the police lay in wait for two nights - but he did not come by. On several occasions our own staff stayed up all night on a strategically placed boat, waiting for him, with the police alerted to come immediately they were called. But nothing happened. Instead evidence was later found that he had worked out a detour route using the abandoned railway line running some 200 yards to the south, where he also used an old culvert under it for shelter and to hide by day.

This spate of mayhem continued until about the spring of 1993, when the police finally caught him and he received a nine month jail sentence of which he served a mere four – and then he was at it again, with a smack wrist probation order from Daventry Magistrate Court when arrested in 1994.

The only real relief we had was in 1995 when he received a two year jail sentence at Reading Crown Court. He was out in the year and there then followed his longest spell on the run. For two and a half years he was at it. It was like dealing with the Scarlet Pimpernel – he was sought here, there and everywhere. The police resorted to helicopter searches on several occasions following sightings. There were narrow escapes, with him once jumping into the canal and getting away on the other bank. He seemed unstoppable.

Then he was caught by chance. A farmer discovered him sleeping off the effects of alcohol in his barn close to the Grand Union Canal, near Long Itchington, in Warwickshire. The farmer had the sense to call the police without arousing Finch. The police were there in no time – they knew by the description who he was. Surprised and still very much the worse for wear, Finch came quietly.

When questioned by the police, Finch made no attempt to disguise his crimes. He admitted to over one hundred and thirty boat-break-ins – his incredible memory simply astonished them - where the boat was, how he got in, and what he stole, even the brand names of red wines he drank there and then. In this, he admitted to every break-in at Braunston Marina in the last two and half years bar one. That I remembered thinking at the time did not have his hallmark – there was malicious damage, and Finch never did that. He also made a casual remark to the police that he did not go to that part of the marina because it was well lit and there were always people about. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment, and with his usual exemplary behaviour in jail, he was out in half of that.

Within days, he had fled his hostel accommodation and was back on the canals and breaking into boats. In the time he was away, we had picked up his comment, and had well-lit the rest of the marina, with trip-on lights at main entry points. On this spree, he left us alone, bar one break-in in the middle of a winter. His rampages elsewhere went on for nearly two years, during which he broke into hundreds of boats. All efforts by the police and the canal community to catch him failed. Ironically, it was only the Foot & Mouth epidemic in the spring of 2001 that persuaded him to give himself up. With the towpaths closed, he stuck out like sore thumb, and with the boats unused there was no food or drink when he broke into them.

Towards the end of April, he walked into Daventry Police Station and gave himself up. In so doing, he made a remark to the effect that he thought he could be of considerable assistance to the police in clearing up their unresolved crime records in the previous year. He also said that the final straw was finding a copy of *Endeavour* the bulletin of the Northampton Branch of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA), on the saloon table of a narrowboat he had broken into. There on the front cover was his picture and story and instructions on what to do if he were spotted. He even presented that copy to the police.

We had all hoped that this time, the Law would see sense and lock him away for a long time, but we were to be disappointed. Once again he had given himself in and confessed to one count of house-breaking in the Hemel Hempstead area, and 2 break-ins to narrowboats. He also asked for one hundred other offences to be taken into consideration, and promised to reform and give up his alcohol. The judge was sympathetic and gave him a mere two years jail sentence, to which he added the remainder of his previous sentence on which Finch had been given remission and as usual almost immediately broken his conditions of parole.

This time we were assured it would be different. But right on cue, on the 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2002, fifteen months to the day after he had given himself in, our ivory tower penal system released him back into the community. He was to be given hostel accommodation and dollops of that modern panacea of all our troubles - counseling... However he ran away almost immediately, and within days of his release, we received a warning call from the local British Waterways office that he had broken into 13 boats in the Crick area, and could be heading our way.

However Finch's luck was running out. His last rampage had resulted in 'wanted' posters being everywhere. His face, dress and his vagabond ways had become too well known. And he was becoming careless. He began openly travelling by day, and he was spotted a couple of times examining moored boats toward twilight to see if lights were on, with a view to returning later. Responding to the latest outbreak of break-ins, our local IWA branch was quick to remind those who might have forgotten. They ran a campaign in every way they could - regardless of the gentleman's human rights. A stalwart member, who had had his boat broken into three times before - he had even attended Finch's Northampton trial for the pleasure of seeing him sentenced - was quickly round the boat yards with the news and copies of Finch's photograph.

The IWA's gallant action was long before the police considered they had enough evidence to issue a warrant for his arrest. The gentleman had learnt from prosecution statements made at his last trial, to avoid leaving fingerprints or DNA samples on the boats he broke into. Any evidence he might have left when forcing hatches, was washed away by the heavy autumnal rain. It left the police without the proof they needed, although his signature was on every boat he broke into.

The IWA campaign resulted in a boater spotting Finch on the weekend of 9<sup>th</sup> November on the South Oxford at Enslow. A quick discreet mobile call to the police, and they waited for him at Lower Heyford, in which direction he was heading. They arrived in sufficient force to ensure that this time he did not get away. In their mind was his famous narrow escape a few years before when arrested at Braunston Turn, and when in a sudden moment he managed to run away - removing his clothes as he fled.

When caught, Finch gave his name as Harold Summers with a 1944 date of birth, but the police were not taken in by his cunning attempt at deception. He was put first into Banbury Jail and then back in the very prison he left a mere four months before - and which he had no doubt intended to see the back of for a year or two. For Finch it was third time unlucky. He had never been arrested like that before, and always enjoyed a few years on the run, causing havoc to the boaters and wasting vast amounts of police time.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> December, he appeared before Banbury Magistrates Court, where he was charged with two counts of breaking into narrowboats on the 28<sup>th</sup> August and 2<sup>nd</sup> September. One was a narrowboat called *Sally Annie*, lying at Thrupp where he stole food to the value of five pounds. He immediately pleaded guilty, and his case was passed on to Oxford Crown Court for tougher sentencing. This was heard in January, when he again pleaded guilty and asked for 19 other burglaries to be taken into consideration. (They were only the break-ins he had carried out on the South Oxford Canal in Oxfordshire. Other police forces felt there was already enough evidence there and that it was a waste of police time to add their tally, which must have been sixty or more.) Before passing sentence the judge called for a pre-sentencing report. With that in mind the Court would adjourn until February. To date, I had followed events from afar, but this time I intended to be there, to see the man for myself and witness our fine justice system in action.

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Before standing up to address Finch, the court clerk reached into the large box of tissues she brought with her and gave a big blow. Obviously the cold February snap was playing havoc with her delicate sinuses. Perhaps Finch, who was on his feet was glad not to be out there. In an ancient ritual, whose need seemed spurious, she then addressed him, 'Are you the defendant, Anthony Ernest Finch?' 'I am' he replied. 'You may be seated.'

For the first time I had heard him talk. There was something of a Lowestoft accent still there, the sound rising like a bull quietly baying. For a man who had spent days and perhaps weeks at large not speaking to anyone, he seemed singularly assured. The police told me that once arrested, he was so happy to talk for hours about all his exploits. He seemed almost relieved to be in company and enjoyed being the focus of attention. He was always so matter of fact, and there seemed no intention to brag. He would never admit to a break-in he hadn't done.

Then the clerk announced 'All rise!' The same judge who had dealt with the alleged office-girl fraudster, returned to the platform from his private entrance. I began humming to myself the grand entry of the judge in *Trial by Jury*, 'All hail great judge, to thee we sing our praise.' Once he was seated, we were all allowed to sit again.

There followed a brief discussion between the judge and the clerk about Finch representing himself. The judge then addressed Finch and asked him to confirm that he wished to defend himself, which he said in quite emphatic terms he did. (To his credit and great deal of saving to the public purse, Finch saw these people as a total waste of time.) Then Counsel for the Prosecution picked up one of the many lever-arch files he would be using that day in the six cases scheduled for hearing, and outlined the long litany of Finch's crimes. This was his twentieth 'court appearance' – the true number was nearer sixty if you took in magistrate court hearings, pre-trial reviews, trials, and sentencing. In the case before the Court, the total value of goods he had stolen from his 21 admitted offences came to £550. This averaged a mere £25 per break-in. Nothing was said about the damage to boats, which we have found averages something like £500 each, nor the pain and distress it caused to the victims. (I once sold a boat for an elderly couple because of the wife's fear of returning to it after Finch's visit. A regular habit of his was to stay on board and sleep off the effects of his drinking, if he thought he was safe until the next night – and whilst there, to make full use of the facilities. Amongst his more bizarre antics was to do the washing up afterwards, leaving it to drip dry.)

I was waiting for the Prosecution to come to the big bit, when he would call for the maximum sentence to get rid of this menace to society for as long as possible. But somehow it just did not happen. Instead he went on to the pre-sentence report, which he described as 'a very good report'. Finch, it read, was full of remorse for all he had done, drink was his undoing and he had agreed to go on an alcohol rehabilitation course, and he had been a model prisoner whilst on remand – all of which he had said and promised and done many times before. I had thought it the responsibility of the Counsel for the Defence to 'restore burglars to their friends and their relations' – but not the role of the Prosecution. No wonder Finch did not bother with a defence.

Now it was time for the Defence. Finch was on his feet. At last some real drama, such as you see on afternoon television, I thought. But again I was to be disappointed. Finch said that all he wanted to say was in the letter he had written to the judge. This was passed by the clerk to the judge, who taking hold of it, said he had already read it. Then, perhaps in deference to the Defence, he flicked through it again – pages of small light blue letter writing paper, with a large immature joined-up handwriting in ballpoint ink. I could almost read the words from the back of the court. Perhaps remorse figured prominently in it. But what was written in it, I, his victim and the only member of the public besides the reporter from the *Oxford Examiner*, were not allowed to know.

The judge then addressed Finch saying in a tone which almost suggested regret, that he had no choice but to give him a custodial sentence. But before doing that he wanted to know how much of Finch's last sentence he still had to serve for his re-offending whilst on parole, and how much time he had already spent in jail on remand. Neither the clerk nor the Prosecution seemed to have that answer to hand. So the judge said he

would retire from Court, whilst this was established. ‘All stand’, shouted the clerk, and we all did, as the judge made his private exit.

Like a concert conductor between curtain calls, I wondered what the judge would do whilst off stage, likely as he could be needed back at any time. Meanwhile the clerk and Prosecution began their deliberations in earnest, whilst the rest of us wondered quite what to do next.

Suddenly Finch’s eye met mine – we were only yards away. Then he pointed to the Braunston Marina logo on my jersey, and made signs as if to say, ‘Are you from Braunston Marina?’ I gave him the thumbs up, and he gave me a nod and half a smile. His Alpha Security guard seemed not the slightest bit interested, indeed he appeared to be starting to nod off. For a moment I thought of speaking to Finch, and he seemed to wish to do the same – like brothers in arms meeting during a truce in battle, before rejoining hostilities. But I hesitated thinking I might find myself in contempt of court. Then just at that moment the clerk and the Prosecution came walking down to see Finch.

They told him what they made it, which he immediately said was incorrect. He knew to the day when he was arrested and released, and what he had done and what he still had to do. After double-checking they agreed with him, and in an absurd moment it was smiles all round, as the defendant determined his sentence.

It was ‘All stand’ again, and the judge in his splendid wig and fine crimson robes, returned to his seat. ‘The defendant will remain standing!’ shouted the clerk. Finch stood and looked at the judge, with a face that betrayed no emotion – he had been there so often before and knew the drill. ‘*Be ‘umble, Uriah!*’

The judge went through it all again, about his good behaviour on remand, his true remorse and his desire to mend his ways. And most importantly his agreement to undertake an alcoholic-rehabilitation course whilst in jail. What struck the judge most was that only £550 had been stolen in total during his twenty one burglaries. (Perhaps his mind was going back to the earlier case of the alleged office-girl fraudster who had scooped £10,000 in her first hit, or the millions of pounds in drug money involved in Operation Lambretta. Maybe he had a point.) Nevertheless he had to pass a custodial sentence of one year, to which would be added the eight months remission from his previous imprisonment. Finch then no doubt worked out at lightening speed the exact day in November when he would be released. At best we would have nine months of peace before he would be at it again.

I had hoped at least for a dramatic ‘Take him down!’ from the judge to the Alpha Security guard. But there was nothing of the sort, not even a message of sympathy from the judge to Finch’s victims. Once ‘All stand’ and the judge had left, it all seemed to end so informally, like people wandering out of a meeting. Finch chatted amiably to his security guard - who by this time seemed to have properly woken up - and they made their way in their own time to the door down to the cells.

The reporter from the *Oxford Examiner* had in the meantime turned to me and asked me why I was there, and for a comment on the outcome. I replied by saying I wondered which planet the judge lived on, as it was certainly not the real world. No account had been taken of Finch’s victims nor the enormous amount of police time wasted in pursuing him. What had happened to ‘three strikes and you’re out’ and the tough treatment for serial criminals? Finch would be out in November and re-offending within days. We would be going through it all over again, because the Law would not lock away this menace to society, and give us protection from him.

As I spoke, I felt surprised at how fluently I had replied. Then I had a feeling of déjà vu. I had made exactly the same comment to the press about the Northampton judge, when Finch had been sentenced less than two years before. For how long did this Gilbert and Sullivan court-operetta – where the punishment did not fit the crime - need to go on?

She began texting her piece to catch the afternoon edition, and we were now the only ones left in the courtroom. What had happened to the third listing for the morning’s hearing was not made clear. The row of

black lever arch files stood ready on his table for the prosecution's afternoon session – he was having a busy day – but otherwise the Court was adjourned for luncheon.

I walked out into the concourse, which seemed almost empty. Operation Lambretta was obviously keeping everyone else occupied – no early luncheon for them. I thought of a coffee in the Rumpole cafeteria. Then like Morse I felt an overpowering urge for a pint at the nearest of his pubs to where I was parked at Oxford Marina on the Thames below Isis Lock. Thoughts turned to The Perch at Bisney – ‘a drink to think’ – and then a walk along the Thames towpath down which Finch would have made his way to Reading. With its bleak water meadows on this bitter winter's day, and distant views of Victorian North Oxford and *The Dead of Jericho*, it was a place that suited my mood.

I passed a sign saying ‘Barristers Robing Chamber’, where no doubt the prosecution was changing for luncheon, and wondered how the defence was getting on in his ‘borrowed robes’. Then down the stairs and out into the street and the brightness of the day, with the low winter sun straight in my eyes. To the left and up the hill were the ancient colleges, which produced the barristers to spend their days in the world behind me, dealing with and dependent for their earnings on the likes of Finch – our finest minds, in their ancient wigs and gowns, who needed three months to read a few files on an alleged office-girl's fraud. Morse once said in despair, ‘I apprehend them, and you release them.’ I knew what he meant.

I turned to the right and away from ancient Oxford, towards the urban brutality of its inner ring road. Once on it, I passed the Oxford Tertiary College, where a group of ‘low-achiever’ youths were vandalising its entrance sign. They looked menacingly at me as if to say, ‘Dare take us on. Just try and use your mobile.’ I gave them a wide berth and moved hastily on.

When I found a quiet spot I rang our local bobby – who had worked so hard for more than a decade in trying to apprehend Finch – to tell him the outcome. ‘One bloody year,’ I said, ‘and I reckon he will be out and at it again by November.’ ‘That's a result in today's sentencing,’ was his reply. ‘He could have got off with probation!’

I crossed the footbridge over the railway to the south of Oxford station, which had featured in *The Jewel that was Ours*. It still had the same menacing melancholia, intensified by the full blast of the cold east wind. Then on to Oxford Marina, where its owner had asked me to come and look at a narrowboat with him with a view to our selling it on brokerage for one of his customers.

In Morse-mood, memories came back of the last time I had done this. The owner was a senior don at Lonsdale College, who carried out psychiatric tests on live animals, and had received death threats from an extreme animal rights group. Bizarrely, he had named his narrowboat *Zoologica*, which was proudly painted in large letters on each side of the boat. Once the threat was known, the marina – in a noble act of self-preservation for its staff – had moved his boat to the very furthest point from the office in case it was blown up – possibly when the engine was started with the owner on board. With some trepidation I had inspected the boat for a booby-trap bomb linked to the control panel, but could find no evidence of tampering. Then I lifted the engine covers nearest the point where the driver would be standing when starting the engine, and again there was nothing. I had a delivery crew move her up to Braunston. She was subsequently sold, and without revealing my hand, I tried to persuade the new owner to change the name, but he said he liked it – it had hints of Noah's Ark, and he liked animals. Then he set off for London, where he proposed to moor her, going via Oxford. Who said Morse's Oxford was unreal?

The village of Bisney remains a miracle of Oxford survival, an ancient settlement on a little piece of rising ground above the Thames flood plain to the north, and only a good walk from the city centre. It is still countryside and to prove it, there is only an unmarked lane leading to it from Oxford's main exit road to the west. Once on that lane and free of traffic, I turned on the radio to Classic FM's *Lunchtime Requests*.

By chance the piece chosen was the conclusion of Wagner's first *Ring Cycle* opera *Das Rheingold* – that part when the gods triumphantly enter their new Valhalla. This they had built by giants, and paid for in gold which they had stolen from the dwarf Alberich, who had previously stolen it from its rightful guardians, the

Rhine maidens - who live innocently in the depths of that river. When Wotan, king of the gods, hesitates to enter via the rainbow bridge over the mighty Rhine Gorge, his wife Fricka asks him why? 'Mit bosem Zoll zahlt' ich den Bau'' is his reply – 'With unclean wages I paid for that building.' Even the gods are thieves. And as they enter their new home, seemingly all-powerful, Alberich' curse on the Ring is already beginning to wrought their destruction. The opera concludes with the lament of Rhine Maidens, heard in the waters far below:

'Traulich und treu ist's sur in der Tiefe:  
falsch und feig ist, was dort oben sich freut!'

(‘Now only in the depths is there tenderness and truth: / False and faint-hearted are those who revel above.’)

These Rhine Maidens alone will survive the apocalypse that is to come, and unlike the boaters, their stolen gold will be returned to them. As the Mikado put it, 'Virtue is only triumphant in theatrical productions.'

I had arrived in The Perch's car park before the piece had reached its crescendo conclusion. So I sat in the car looking across at the Thames in full flood after the heavy winter rains, and only a hundred yards away. Morse would have enjoyed the Wagnerian irony - although he would have preferred the Solti recording, with Kirsten Flagstad as *Fricka*, whom he regarded as the greatest twentieth century Wagnerian soprano. I might have disagreed, but there would be no difference of opinion on the pint that was now long overdue.

I returned to Braunston Marina to tell my tale to those who wanted to hear it. I even did some real work. Then I felt the need to be outside and alone again. I wanted to revisit all the places that were associated with Finch's visits – where the police had sat all night trying to catch him, his culvert hideaway, the narrowboats he had broken into. Then I walked down to the Braunston Turn, where the Grand Union Canal meets the Oxford Canal, and where twice he had been so nearly captured. I turned left down the South Oxford Canal towards Oxford, a route Finch would have taken so many times before. The sun was now setting over the Warwickshire Plain that fell away to the westward. I climbed a canal bridge to watch it, and thought of our remorseful man somewhere in a prison cell, and for the next nine months away from all of this. At least he would be missing the summer. Then those lines came to mind that Morse had recited to Lewis on his last case, from his favourite poet A. E. Housman:

*Ensanguining the skies  
How heavily it dies  
Into the west away:  
Past touch and sight and sound  
Not further to be found  
How hopeless under ground  
Falls the remorseful day.*

Lewis would have observed that Finch and Housman shared the same initials 'A.E.'. It was time for another pint. Three locks up the Braunston Flight, the canal-side Admiral Nelson beckoned. Morse would have approved.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Postscript:** On the morning of Friday 31<sup>st</sup> October, Finch was released on licence from his Oxfordshire jail – his due date was the 2<sup>nd</sup> November, but as that was a Sunday, he went two days early – so he never even made November. He was driven to Northampton, where he had a two o'clock appointment with his probation officer, and where he would also be offered hostel accommodation, whilst he rehabilitated himself into the community. He never kept his appointment with his probation officer and never went near the hostel. By that night he was at large, in breach of his conditions of early release and wanted by the police. Within days they wished to interview him in connection with a number of 'incidents'. Finch had done bird, and now this bird had flown! He was *Last Seen Wearing....*

JOHN – ON FRONT COVER PLEASE:-

The picture you used for the back cover of David Blagrove's book, which you have, plus a hologram of Finch's face per the police photograph emailed with this lot. Leave the design to you, including title and name per below.

**Finch: The Remorseful Day**

Tim Coghlan

A publication of The Inspector Morse Society

JOHN – ON FRONT INSIDE COVER PLEASE:-

**AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The events recorded here relating to Anthony Ernest Finch are accurate 'to the best of my knowledge and belief.' I have not sought to add or embellish this strange story in any way, much of which is known to me at first or very close second-hand. I have used Finch's correct name, but otherwise changed all other names of persons and where appropriate, place names as well.

I would like to thank the many people who have helped me in compiling and editing this story, particularly David Blagrove, Leo McNeir, Kay Williams and Rose Kentwell. However, the interpretation of events and the views expressed here are entirely my own.

I would also like to thank Anthony Richards, Chairman of The Inspector Morse Society for encouraging me to write this and my previous account of actual crime on the canals, *The Case of the Stolen Narrowboat* - both of which the Society has kindly published.

I would also like to thank *Morse* author Colin Dexter for his inspiration to me, which is obvious; and the pleasure he has given myself and so many others through his books and the associated television productions.

Finally I must thank our local policeman, who best remains anonymous, and to whom I am honoured to dedicate this account. He exemplifies all that is best in the British Bobby on the Beat. For well over ten years, we have been chasing Finch together, although we have never had the satisfaction of actually catching him. I am sure there will be many further opportunities...

Tim Coghlan,  
Braunston Marina, Northamptonshire.

November, 2003

**JOHN – ON BACK INSIDE COVER PLEASE:-**

All correspondence for  
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Cover Picture: Canal scene at Braunston (by kind permission of James Stadnick) with superimposed police  
'mug-shot' of Finch

Back cover: John Thaw as Inspector Morse in the canal episode *The Wench Is Dead* (by kind permission  
of Carlton TV)

John – you can add all your disclaimers here, plus your details.

**JOHN – ON BACK COVER PLEASE:-**

Photograph of Inspector Morse – make sure you keep the narrowboats in if you have to crop it. (I will be  
emailing this to you on Wednesday.)