

# Murder of Rachel Nickell

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*"Rachel Nickell" redirects here. For other uses, see [Rachel Nichols \(disambiguation\)](#).*

Rachel Nickell	
<span></span>	
Born	<div>Rachel Jane Nickell</div> <div>23 November 1968</div>
Died	<div>15 July 1992 (aged 23)</div> <div><a href="#">Wimbledon Common</a>, London, UK</div>
Cause of death	<a href="#">Murder</a> by stabbing
Nationality	<a href="#">British</a>
Known <span> </span> for	Murder victim
Partner(s)	André Hanscombe
Children	Son

The murder of **Rachel Jane Nickell** took place on 15 July 1992, on [Wimbledon Common](#), south-west London, and resulted in a highly publicised and controversial investigation.

Nickell was walking with her son on Wimbledon Common when she was brutally stabbed and [sexually assaulted](#). A lengthy, expensive, and controversial investigation ensued, during which Colin Stagg was charged and [acquitted](#) before the case [went cold](#). In 2002, with more advanced and refined forensic techniques available, [Scotland Yard](#) reopened the case, and on 18 December 2008, [Robert Napper](#) pleaded guilty to Nickell's [manslaughter](#) on the grounds of [diminished responsibility](#). Napper, who had already been convicted of a 1993 double killing, was told by the [Old Bailey](#) judge that he would be held indefinitely at [Broadmoor High Security hospital](#).

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## Assault and murder[\[edit\]](#)

At the time of her death, Nickell was living near Wimbledon Common with boyfriend André Hanscombe, a [motorcycle courier](#), and their son Alexander Louis, who was born in 1989.<sup>[1]</sup> After the birth of their son, Nickell became a full-time mother. She and Hanscombe had settled down to family life with their son and a dog, Molly. On the morning of 15 July 1992, Nickell and the then two-year-old Alexander were walking the dog on Wimbledon Common. Nickell was attacked; her attacker cut her throat, stabbed her and sexually assaulted her, with Alexander present.

A passer-by found Alexander clinging to his mother's blood-soaked body, repeating the words "wake up, mummy". Police were initially confused about a receipt stuck to Nickell's forehead, but soon found that her son had put it there.

## Investigation[\[edit\]](#)

[Scotland Yard](#) officers of the [Metropolitan Police](#) undertook the investigation. Although 32 men were eventually questioned in connection with the murder, the investigation quickly targeted Colin Stagg, an unemployed man from [Roehampton](#) who was known to walk his dog on the Common.

As there was no forensic evidence linking Stagg to the scene, the police asked [criminal psychologist](#) Paul Britton to create an [offender profile](#) of the killer. They decided that Stagg fitted the profile and asked Britton to assist in designing a covert operation, "Operation Ezzdell", to see whether Stagg would eliminate or implicate himself. This operation was later criticised by the media and Stagg's trial judge, Mr Justice Ognall, as a "[honeytrap](#)".

## "Operation Ezzdell"[\[edit\]](#)

Using the [pseudonym](#) "Lizzie James" an [undercover](#) policewoman from the Metropolitan Police's Special Operations Group ([SO10](#)) contacted Stagg, posing as a friend of a woman with

whom he used to be in contact via a lonely hearts' column. Over a period of five months she attempted to obtain information from him by feigning a romantic interest, meeting him, speaking to him on the telephone and exchanging letters containing sexual fantasies. During a meeting in [Hyde Park](#), they spoke about the Nickell murder, but Stagg later claimed that he had only played along with the topic because he wanted to pursue the romance.<sup>[2]</sup> Britton later said that he disagreed with use of the fantasy-filled letters and knew nothing of them until after they had been sent.<sup>[3]</sup> "Lizzie" won Stagg's confidence and drew out his violent fantasies, but Stagg did not admit to the murder. Police released a taped conversation between "Lizzie" and Stagg in which "Lizzie" claimed to enjoy hurting people, to which Stagg mumbled: "Please explain, as I live a quiet life. If I have disappointed you, please don't dump me. Nothing like this has happened to me before." When "Lizzie" went on to say "If only you had done the Wimbledon Common murder, if only you had killed her, it would be all right," Stagg replied: "I'm terribly sorry, but I haven't."<sup>[4]</sup>

Believing, on the advice of the [Crown Prosecution Service](#), that there was sufficient evidence to convict Stagg, the police arrested and charged him on 17 August 1993 with Nickell's murder.

Several detailed accounts of the covert operation have been written. Britton's book *The Jigsaw Man*, devoted extensive space to it, while a conflicting account can be found in *The Rachel Files* by Inspector Keith Pedder, who was technically the third in command of the investigation, after Superintendent Bassett and Chief Inspector Wickerson, but had day-to-day command of the operation. Stagg's own version is included in *Who Really Killed Rachel?* co-written with [David Kessler](#).<sup>[5]</sup>

Britton claimed in his version of events that he did not have anything to do with Stagg's initial interrogation at the time of his first arrest (after which Stagg was released), but only the undercover operation, leading up to Stagg's second arrest when charges were brought.<sup>[6]</sup> However, Pedder contradicts this in his account: "Before starting the interviews, I therefore rang Paul Britton at the Towers Hospital in Leicester and asked if he would want to give any specific advice as to how I should approach him."<sup>[7]</sup> Pedder also claims that this consultation process was by no means a one-off, but rather went on throughout the three days that Stagg was held and interrogated: "Throughout the interviews, as and when Stagg's behaviour appeared to be contradictory, and in some cases downright confusing, I would ring Paul Britton; according to him, Stagg's denials were indicative of his cunning and basic intelligence."<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Trial**[\[edit\]](#)

During the [committal](#) hearing Britton claimed that "Operation Ezzell" was meant to present the subject with a series of psychological "ladders" to climb rather than a "slippery slope" down which a vulnerable person would slide if pushed. The defence argued that Britton's evidence was speculative and supported only by his intuition.

When the case reached the [Old Bailey](#) Mr Justice Ognall ruled that the police had shown "excessive zeal" and had tried to incriminate a suspect by "deceptive conduct of the grossest kind". He excluded the entrapment evidence and the prosecution withdrew its case. Stagg was formally acquitted in September 1994.

## Aftermath<sup>[edit]</sup>

An internal review estimated that the pursuit of Stagg had cost the Metropolitan Police Force £3 million<sup>[9]</sup> and that vital scientific information had been missed. Stagg decided to sue the police for damages totalling £1 million following the 14 months he spent in custody.

Stagg has co-written and published two books about the case, *Who Really Killed Rachel?* and, more recently, *Pariah* (with journalist Ted Hynds), the latter appearing on the same day as the real culprit Robert Napper's appearance in court to enter a plea.

In 1996, despite Justice Ognall's previous criticism of "Operation Ezzell", [Essex Police](#) mounted a similar operation, "[Operation Century](#)", as part of their investigation of the "[Rettendon Triple Murders](#)" case. It too proved unsuccessful and highly controversial.

An episode of the TV comedy series [Bottom](#), entitled "[Bottom's Out](#)", due to be broadcast around the time of the murder, was postponed for two and a half years as it was set on Wimbledon Common.<sup>[10]</sup>

"Lizzie James" quit the police force in 1998, eventually taking early retirement.<sup>[11]</sup> With the support of the [Police Federation](#) she, too, sued the Metropolitan Police for damages arising from the investigation. In 2001, shortly before it was due to be heard, her case was settled out of court and she received £125,000. Her solicitor said: "The willingness of the Metropolitan Police to pay substantial damages must indicate their recognition that she sustained serious psychiatric injury."<sup>[12]</sup>

The payout to "Lizzie James" was widely criticised by various sources, particularly as Nickell's son had been granted £22,000 (less than a fifth of the amount paid to the undercover detective) from the [Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority](#).<sup>[13]</sup>

Britton was charged with professional misconduct by the [British Psychological Society](#) but, in 2002, in lieu of any substantive hearings, further action was dismissed due to the time delay in bringing proceedings. Britton's lawyer, [Keir Starmer](#) QC (who was later appointed the [Director of Public Prosecutions](#))<sup>[14]</sup> successfully argued that the "exceptional" delay of more than eight years since the first complaint was made would mean his client would not be given a fair hearing.<sup>[15][16]</sup> Stagg was invited to attend the proceedings but was not permitted to participate, address the committee or answer Britton's claims. Stagg's detailed account of the case against Paul Britton can be found in *Who Really Killed Rachel?*.<sup>[17]</sup>

André Hanscombe later wrote a book, *The Last Thursday in July*, about his life with Nickell, coping with the murder and life with Alex afterwards. In 1996 Hanscombe moved with Alex to France, driven abroad – according to notes in his book – by media intrusion. "Callous, mercenary, unfeeling ... cowardly, snivelling scum" is how he described some of the reporters who tracked him and his son down to his "sanctuary" in the French countryside. Hanscombe has since embarked on a new career writing and illustrating children's books.<sup>[12]</sup>

In 2006, [Nick Cohen](#), at the time of the murder a junior reporter on *[The Independent on Sunday](#)*, commented in his column in *[The Observer](#)* that the inaccurate reporting of the case – and, in particular, frequent suggestions by the press that Stagg was guilty – stemmed from too close a relationship between the police and the media.<sup>[18]</sup>

In January 2007, the [Home Office](#) confirmed that Stagg would receive compensation for wrongful prosecution, with the amount to be set by an independent assessor. On 13 August 2008, Stagg's solicitor announced that the compensation, set by Lord Brennan QC and accepted by Stagg, was £706,000.<sup>[19]</sup>

In 2012 Stagg received a "substantial" out of court settlement relating to the [News International phone hacking scandal](#), specifically as a result of a *[News of the World](#)* honeytrap involving an attractive woman befriending and starting a relationship with him in 2004, a decade after he was acquitted of the Nickell murder. He later discovered the woman was a prostitute employed by the newspaper.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Cold case review[[edit](#)]

Scotland Yard annually came under pressure for progress on the anniversary of the murder. Under new management, they began to collate evidence and files related to the case from 2000.<sup>[21]</sup>

In 2002, 10 years after the murder, Scotland Yard used a cold case review team, which used refined [DNA](#) techniques only recently made available. A small team of officers and retired veteran investigators working from secret offices in South London analysed statements from witnesses, reassessed files on a number of potential suspects, and examined the possibility that the case was linked to other crimes. Officers compared the injuries suffered by Nickell with other attacks and consulted forensic scientists about improvements in DNA matching.<sup>[22]</sup>

In July 2003, reports surfaced that, after 18 months of tests on Nickell's clothes, police had found a male DNA sample which did not match her boyfriend or son.<sup>[23]</sup> The sample at the time was insufficient to confirm an identity, but was large enough to rule out suspects.

## Robert Napper[[edit](#)]

*Main article:* [Robert Napper](#)

In July 2006, the Scotland Yard team interviewed convicted sex killer Robert Napper for two days at [Broadmoor Hospital](#) in [Berkshire](#).<sup>[24]</sup> Napper, 40, was diagnosed as having [paranoid schizophrenia](#) (and also as having [Asperger syndrome](#))<sup>[25]</sup> and had been held at the secure institution for more than 10 years.<sup>[26]</sup>

Napper had been convicted of killing Samantha Bisset and her four-year-old daughter Jazmine in November 1993, 16 months after Nickell's murder.<sup>[27]</sup> On 28 November 2007, Napper was charged with Nickell's murder. He appeared at City of Westminster Magistrates' Court on 4

December 2007,<sup>[28]</sup> where he was remanded until another hearing on 20 December 2007.<sup>[29]</sup> On 24 January 2008, Napper pleaded not guilty to Nickell's murder. He faced trial in November 2008.<sup>[30]</sup>

On 18 December 2008, at the [Old Bailey](#), Napper pleaded guilty to the manslaughter of Rachel Nickell on the grounds of [diminished responsibility](#). Mr Justice Griffith Williams said that Napper would be held indefinitely at [Broadmoor Hospital](#) because he was "a very dangerous man". At the same time, Colin Stagg received a public apology from the police.<sup>[31][32]</sup>

## IPCC findings<sup>[edit]</sup>

Following an investigation, the [Independent Police Complaints Commission](#) (IPCC) released a report, dated 3 June 2010, into the actions of the Metropolitan Police Force and their handling of the murder investigation. It described a "catalogue of bad decisions and errors" by the Metropolitan Police which had resulted in Napper being free to kill Nickell. It said that officers missed a series of opportunities to take the violent psychopath off the streets and suggested the lives of Samantha Bisset and her four-year-old daughter Jazmine would also have been saved if police had acted on tip-offs, including one by Napper's mother.

Rachel Cerfontyne, of the IPCC, said that police failed to investigate the 1989 report that he attacked a woman on Plumstead Common, in London, and no record of the telephone call can be found. She said: "It is clear that throughout the investigations into the 'Green Chain' rapes and Rachel Nickell's death there was a catalogue of bad decisions and errors made by the Metropolitan Police. The police failed to sufficiently investigate after Napper's mother called police to report that he had confessed to her that he had raped a woman and, inconceivably, they eliminated Napper from inquiries into the Green Chain rapes because he was over 6ft tall. Without these errors, Robert Napper could have been off the streets before he killed Rachel Nickell and the Bissets, and before numerous women suffered violent sexual attacks at his hands."

The IPCC said no police officer would face disciplinary action because they have all retired, and one key senior detective has died. Criminal prosecutions were not considered.<sup>[33]</sup>

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