

Man arrested in connection with prison van escape of John Anslow

Written by Daily Mail Reporter
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He is the first category A prisoner to escape from custody in more than 17 years. Now police face a race against time to stop Anslow fleeing the country after he was "sprung" from a prison van by an armed gang, a retired detective superintendent said.

John Plimmer, former head of West Midlands CID, says officers need to stop fugitive John Anslow, 31, from flying or sailing abroad after his dramatic escape yesterday.

However, police last night said Anslow may already have left the country - despite them issuing an alert to all ports and airports.

Anslow was freed after three masked men, armed with knives and sledgehammers, ambushed the prison van outside Hewell Grange prison, near Redditch, at 8.20am.

They smashed the vehicle's windscreen before attacking the driver and escaping in a getaway car with the murder suspect.

Anslow, from Tipton, was one of five men charged this month with the murder of Black Country businessman Richard Deakin.

The father-of-two was shot dead as he slept in the bedroom of his Chasetown home, in Staffordshire, in July 2010.

The victim's family were alerted to the dramatic developments by police yesterday, but were too traumatised to comment last night.

Mr Plimmer, CID chief from 1994 to 1998, said MI5 and Scotland Yard could now be called in to help capture the fugitive, who may look at fleeing abroad.

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"In cases like this, you use everybody - every agency you can get your hands on," he said.

"He has got to try to get out of the country. And they have to cut off his lines of escape through airports, private airfields and shipping lines..."

Anslow, dubbed "dangerous" by police, was being taken to Stafford Crown Court when the breakout happened.

West Mercia Police said the GEO Amey prison escort van had collected three people from Hewell Grange and was a short distance away in Hewell Lane, Tardebigge, near Bromsgrove, when the gang struck.

Three balaclava-clad men, two of them carrying sledgehammers, leapt out of a silver Volkswagen Scirocco and smashed the windscreen and driver's window.

The driver was punched in the face before Anslow was freed.

The gang jumped into the Scirocco and sped off from the scene. The group are believed to have switched to a silver Mercedes car in Stoney Lane, Bromsgrove, soon after.

There were two other prisoners in the van at the time, but neither was released, police said.

Hewell Grange houses more than 1,400 inmates across three blocks holding category B, C and D prisoners.

Ports and airports were last night put on alert and the public warned not to approach the fugitive, as officers from three forces launched a nationwide manhunt.

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Det Insp Jon Marsden, from West Mercia Police, said: "Anslow has recently been charged with murder and is considered dangerous.

"We are working closely with our colleagues from West Midlands and Staffordshire Police forces and a large number of officers from all three forces are involved in the search for him.

"However, we would urge any members of the public who sees him not to approach him directly, but to contact police immediately on 999."

A spokesman for Staffordshire Police said Anslow had to appear in person at Stafford Crown Court for yesterday's preliminary hearing, as there are no video-link facilities.

He stressed the family of Richard Deakin have been kept informed of developments.

Mr Plimmer believes Anslow's greatest risk of capture comes from those very individuals involved in his break-out.

"His biggest problem is information," he said. "His biggest problem is someone is going to put him in.

"He will be looking over his shoulder for ever and a day."

The murder of skip hire boss Mr Deakin sent shockwaves through the former mining community.

His partner, Megan, had taken their two daughters to school when the masked killer struck on July 5, 2010.

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CCTV images of the gunman calmly walking through their garden gate were later screened on TV's Crimewatch.

Darryl Dickens, 33, and 62-year-old David Harrison, from the Bilston area, were charged with the murder on January 5 after an 18-month investigation by Staffordshire Police.

Last week Mr Deakin's brother-in-law, Leigh Astbury, aged 31 and from Wolverhampton, was charged with murder alongside Andrew Hill, 49, and 31-year-old Anslow.

The family did not wish to comment on the latest development, but a close friend told the Birmingham Mail: "They are just blown out of the water by today's news. They just can't believe it has happened.

"In a million years they didn't think something like this would happen. It is way above our heads.

"If you had put something like this in a book, I would've put it down because it was too far-fetched."

The latest twist in the high-profile case will come as a fresh body blow for Mr Deakin's mother, Carol.

Earlier this month she told the Mail: "I've aged 10 years in the last 12 months. The happy-go-lucky person has gone - I'm just miserable now.

"I was always game for a laugh, but now I feel guilty for enjoying myself. I feel guilty for being here when Richard is not. It should have been me that went, not Richard. He had more to live for."

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Anslow is described as white, 5ft 10ins tall, of medium build, with short straight dark brown hair.