

The acid house

In the first of a two part look at Britain as a producer of illegal drugs, Peter Simonson revisits the 1970s, when a remote Welsh mansion was home to the world's biggest LSD factory.

If you were to ask the man on the proverbial Clapham omnibus where the majority of the world's illegal drugs were supplied from, he'd probably mention the coca covered mountains of Colombia or the opium poppy fields of Afghanistan. If he were a little more knowledgeable, he might mention the fact the majority of herbal cannabis smoked in Britain is grown within its borders in suburban houses, warehouses and industrial estates – nearly 7,000 of which were closed last year. But our role as a mass producer of illegal drugs is not just a recent trend. During the late Seventies, Britain was the world's largest producer of LSD.

Before LSD was made illegal in 1966, the nascent devotees of its psychedelic properties obtained their supply legally through its originator, Sandoz Chemical in Switzerland. Post-ban, LSD was obtained from illegal labs outside Britain, most famously from clandestine chemist Oswald Augustus Owsley III in California.

However, there were some small LSD labs operating within UK borders. In 1968 an Islington pharmacist, Victor Kapur, was jailed for nine years after producing 19 grams of LSD (enough for 95,000 doses) in two labs. One lab was in his garage and another in the back room of his chemist shop on the New North Road. A year later Peter Simmons and Quentin Theobald were jailed for five and seven years respectively after police busted two clandestine labs, one on a caravan site in the East End and another at Theobald's home in Hythe, Kent. But the urban LSD labs soon disappeared, partly because the LSD scene itself – which centred around squatted hippy communes in the London districts of Notting Hill and Camden – was being constantly targeted by police.

From the late Sixties groups of hippies in Britain and America started setting up alternative communities away from the big cities, in rural idylls, where they could live without being routinely harassed by the 'The Man'. In the US, this counter-culture exodus away from urban centres led to an exodus to far flung states such as New Mexico, where they were relatively free to live alternative lifestyles and consume and

produce drugs – as the police force was scattered over an immense area. In the UK, they left the squatted communes of London for the verdant fields of Wales. Like their New Mexican brethren, hippies and counter cultural types could set up their utopian communities of free love, self sufficiency and, of course, the consumption of psychoactive drugs, without too much fear of being troubled by the local constabulary.

THEY PURCHASED A CRUMBLING MANSION IN THE CAMBRIAN MOUNTAINS NEAR CARNO, CALLED PLAS LLYSN, WITH THE AIM OF MAKING LSD THERE

This was augmented by the burgeoning appeal of the free music festival scene in Wales, including the Elan Valley Free festival in Rhyader, the mushroom festival at Pontrhydygroes and the legendary Meigan Fayres in the Preselli mountains. The remoteness of parts of the Welsh countryside suited these festivals, while the locals were accommodating and happy to rent out their fields to the nomadic hippies. Local Welsh markets, stores and pubs mostly welcomed the increased trade. Of course the main drugs consumed at such festivals were cannabis, magic mushrooms and LSD. In the late Sixties the area was visited by luminaries who felt a certain anonymity there, such as Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix and Keith Richards. According to Lyn Ebenezer, a local reporter at the time, Bob Dylan also visited under the assumed name, Jerry. A farm worker in the area later saw the cover of Nashville Skyline and stated: "Damn, I didn't know Jerry had made a record." This fertile and somewhat remote environment was the ideal place to set up a clandestine lab. Enter chemist Richard Kemp.



Kemp and Bott's cottage near Tregaron in Dyfed, Wales
(The Press Association)

Christine Bott became a keen goat breeder. She gave a talk on BBC Radio Wales and won prizes at agricultural shows (Raymond Daniel)



In the basement of the mansion at Carno, Powys, Kemp set up his laboratory (The Press Association)



Richard Kemp being led into Bristol Crown Court in 1978 during the trials which followed Operation Julie (The Press Association)

BELOW: David Solomon (The Press Association)



Henry Todd caught unawares by a secret police camera during Operation Julie



OVERLEAF: A still photograph from *Return Engagement* released in 1983 starring Leary and Gordon Liddy. Liddy, as a district attorney in New York State, raided Millbrook in 1966. He was later promoted to the Nixon administration and involved in Watergate

In the late Sixties Kemp had been working with David Solomon in Cambridge in an attempt to produce synthetic THC, the active ingredient in cannabis. Solomon had edited a book in 1964, *LSD: The Consciousness Expanding Drug* and had been a regular at Millbrook, where Timothy Leary conducted group therapy with LSD. Kemp travelled initially to France with Solomon with the intention of producing THC, but soon tried his hand producing LSD. With the financial help of an American friend of Solomon's, Paul Arnabaldi, they purchased a crumbling mansion in the Cambrian Mountains near Carno, called Plas Llysn, with the aim of making LSD there.

Although LSD was illegal, the possession of its precursor chemicals, such as ergotamine tartrate, was not against the law. This helped Kemp and his friend, Andy Munro, another chemist with an interest in making LSD. They were able to buy most of the precursor chemicals, through front companies, from

Czechoslovakia. Then the production line began to roll.

Prior to Kemp and Munro's LSD factory, illicit acid had been mainly available in liquid form dropped onto sugar cubes, on blotting paper and as capsules. Kemp's premier skills as a chemist came to the fore in perfecting a smaller, more easily transportable form of LSD, which was to become known as the microdot. Their invention, which became a form of 'brand', would prove a global hit, with the lab producing hundreds of thousands of LSD microdots a year ending up as far afield as Canada and Australia.

LSD had become a drug not just associated with hippies. As Andy Roberts notes in *Albion Dreaming*, in the Sixties certain drugs were associated with certain discrete subcultures. But from the early Seventies onwards, this delineation breaks

AFTER JULIE: UK synthetic drug factories since Kemp and Munro's lab

But what of illicit production of drugs in the UK post Operation Julie? While Julie was a landmark case due to its international scale and its links with the counter culture of the day, the arrests clearly did not stop budding chemists from attempting to produce illicit substances

The rise of Acid House and outdoor raves from 1987, which in many ways mirrored the free festivals of the 70's and probably exceeded them in terms of numbers attending the events, provided the opportunity for budding chemists with a taste for psychoactive substances and an un-taxable income. In the US, two books by Dr Alexander Shulgin and Ann Shulgin, "PiHKAL: A Chemical Love Story" (1991) and TiHKAL: The Continuation" (1997), provided the chemical formulas for a range of psychedelics, empathogens, amphetamines, and tryptamines.

1993

Paul Halfpenny, a research chemist with Parke Davis, the pharmaceutical arm of multinational Warner Lambert, was arrested with 2kg of amphetamine sulphate near Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire. Halfpenny, along with fellow Parke Davis chemist, Dr Reginald Richardson, appeared to have been producing amphetamine and attempting to produce MDMA at Parke Davis' Addenbrooke labs. Dr Richardson was eventually cleared of all charges, while Halfpenny was found guilty of possession, production of controlled drugs and conspiracy to produce MDMA.

1998

Operation Pirate, one of the largest police operations against UK clandestine chemists, saw amphetamine sulphate labs being dismantled in Merseyside, Cheshire, Cumbria and Greater Manchester. An 18-man organisation led by Frederick Cook were arrested and charged. Police discovered a clandestine lab in a remote cottage in Cumbria with enough precursor chemicals to enable the gang to produce £18 million worth of speed at street value. A further raid at a furniture warehouse in Widnes, appropriately named 'Aladdin's Cave', netted a further batch of chemicals which could have produced £4 million worth of amphetamine. Along with the other raids the total value of drugs was estimated by the police to be worth in the region of £36 million.

2004

The first detected case of LSD production post Operation Julie was discovered in a house in Ovingdean, near Brighton. Casey Hardison, an expat American and self-styled medical anthropologist was raided after a tip-off from US Customs, who had seized a package containing £4K worth of MDMA that Hardison had posted to America. During the raid, police in chemical protection gear dismantled the lab and discovered 145,000 blotter tabs of LSD, quantities of the psychedelic disassociatives DMT and 2CB and evidence that Hardison had bought £38K worth of precursor chemicals used to produce psychedelics. He was charged with producing LSD, DMT and 2CB, intent to supply LSD and trafficking. At his trial in 2005, Hardison, much like Kemp back in '78, pleaded that he was motivated not by profit, but by the spiritual "journey" to produce LSD. Prosecutors argued that he had moved to the UK to produce LSD to avoid heat from US police. Hardison was found guilty and sentenced to 20 years and is currently campaigning against the sentence through the Drug Equality Alliance.

2005

Peter Sanders had turned his legitimate chemical company, Sanchem, into an after hours amphetamine lab with the help of his top chemist Ian Kilner. Through Sanchem they were able to procure the chemicals to produce Benzyl Methyl Ketone (BMK) a precursor in the production of amphetamine sulphate. They produced the BMK at a remote farmhouse near Southport and transported it back to a portakabin on the Sanchem site to convert into amphetamine. When the police raided Sanchem they found enough precursors to produce £4.2 million worth of amphetamine paste. Arrested alongside Sanders and Kilner were Steve Dalton (found with £1.5 million of amphetamine paste in his wardrobe), Anthony Bodell, and the alleged ringleader, Leonard Briscoe Stubbs. Bodell and Stubbs were jailed for five and a half years each, Dalton for four years and Kilner and Sanders got three years each. Interestingly, Stubbs had previously received two years after being arrested during Operation Pirate (see 1998).

2006

The first case against UK manufacturers of methamphetamine appeared before the courts. Timothy Morgan, David Walker and Stefan Thomas had attempted to set up a bogus chemical supply company in order to buy ephedrine, used in the production of methamphetamine. When this failed they resorted to the US method of buying up cough medicines from which they extracted the drug. The police investigation estimated that the gang had the potential to produce £1.5 million of methamphetamine per year.

down. Even punks who positioned themselves as opposed to everything hippies stood for, took LSD.

The growth of LSD use inevitably came to the attention of British police, who had worked out that an LSD factory was based in the UK. While Kemp and Munro's lab was in full production mode, under the watchful eye of Detective Inspector Dick Lee, a police task force began to gather intelligence at commercial concerts and free festivals, using a team of undercover officers with outgrown hair and hippy clothing. The evidence coming back to DI Lee was irrefutable: LSD was everywhere. And all roads seemed to lead to a 'Richard Kemp' in Wales.

TO THIS DAY, THERE ARE STILL RECURRING, HOLY GRAIL-LIKE TALES OF 'JULIE' MICRODOTS BEING UNCOVERED, SUCH WAS THE QUALITY OF KEMP'S CHEMISTRY

The international dimension to the case only dawned on DI Lee when he visited the Home Office laboratories in Aldermaston during the early Seventies. He was told that 95 per cent of the LSD being seized in the UK and 50 per cent worldwide was in microdot form – the mark of Kemp and Munro's production line. Lee had further intelligence that the wholesale price of LSD was substantially cheaper within the Welsh borders than elsewhere in the UK. By 1976 Lee had joined up the links between Wales and the global supply of LSD and the organisation encompassing Richard Kemp, Andy Munro, Christine Bott (Kemp's partner), Henry Todd, David Solomon and a cast of others.

On a very small budget, DI Lee set up a surveillance team to gather evidence on the goings on at Plas Llysn. Officers disguised as coal mining surveyors and itinerant fishermen were, within the confines of the Welsh countryside, trying to bring down a worldwide drug production ring which was using pubs in rural Welsh towns and villages such as Tregaron, Cwmann and Ffarmers to exchange massive supplies of LSD.

On March 26 1977, 'Operation Julie', named after a female officer who had been working on the case, sprung into action. Over 800 officers raided 83 locations across England and Wales. Police discovered 600,000 microdots buried in a field near Reading and 120 grams of LSD crystals – enough to produce 1.2 million microdots – beneath a compost heap near Christine Botts' potato patch. A further 50,000 microdots were found under a stone in a field near Plas Llysyn and 100,000 microdots in a Winalot dog biscuit box buried in another local field.

A raid on the organisation's London HQ netted enough LSD crystal to make a further 2.5 million microdots. In a safety deposit box in Christine Bott's name in Zurich police discovered cash, a gold bar and 2kg of ergotamine tartrate. Later, after a police tip-off in October, a further 1.3kg of LSD crystal was discovered, buried beneath Kemp and Botts kitchen.

At the trial in 1978, Mr Justice Parks sentenced 17 defendants to a total of 124 years. Kemp got 13, Todd, 13, Solomon, 11, Munro, 10 and harshest of all, Christine Bott received nine



years.

Bott had not been actively involved in the production or distribution of the LSD and as the secondary chemist, Andy Munro said: "Bott got nine years for making sandwiches. I got 10 for making acid."

Kemp had originally written an 8,000 word defence statement, but was advised by his lawyers against using it. It was released at the time to a journalist at the Cambrian News who précised it under the headline 'Microdoctrine – the tenets behind Kemp's LSD'. The gist of Kemp's defence was that LSD was a catalyst for social change, the motive was the ideal not the money.

Even after the court case, the gang's hoard of LSD was being unearthed. A cache of one million microdots was discovered buried in a wood in Bedfordshire in September 1979. It took the total value of the six million LSD tabs seized during Operation Julie to £100 million. To this day, there are still recurring, Holy Grail-like tales of 'Julie' microdots being uncovered, such was the quality of Kemp's chemistry.

The use of LSD has, since the Seventies, rapidly declined. Its use had a strong following within the anarcho-punk scene and the travelling hippy communities. The mixing of these two scenes saw the emergence of the 'new age traveller' movement, which coincided with the rise of the rave scene.

The last British Crime Survey puts last year LSD use amongst 16-59 year olds at 0.2 per cent of the population. Those seeking spiritual enlightenment or psychedelic pranks still have other avenues to choose. As Mark E Smith of The Fall sang in 1979 a year after the Operation Julie, "I don't need the acid factories, I've got mushrooms in the field," while others buy substances such as San Pedro cactus and Salvia Divinorum, plus an array of 'research chemicals' available online and produced in the Far East.

Many of the outlaw British chemists of the 21st Century seem more motivated by the quest for financial rather than spiritual gain. But although illegal use of LSD is ever declining, after some 50 years in the cupboard, it's now enjoying a psychotherapeutical renaissance. The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) highlights research in Switzerland which uses LSD to reduce anxiety for people with terminal illnesses, while the Beckley Foundation is looking at the use of LSD in brain imaging research. Albert Hoffman's 'problem child' appears to be having a rebirth.

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Next issue: Britain's cannabis factories

Operation Julie: The World's Greatest LSD Bust, by Lyn Ebenezer, is published by Y Lolfa (2010)