

Stephen Port's freedom to kill raises difficult questions for the Met

Detectives had Port in their sights but a failure to spot striking similarities in his victims' deaths allowed him to keep killing



A CCTV image showing Stephen Port arriving at a flat in Barking to buy drugs. Photograph: Metropolitan police/PA

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All of Stephen Port's four victims were young, gay men. They all died from an overdose of the date-rape drug "liquid ecstasy" – GHB or G. All four were found near Port's home; three in a churchyard 400 metres away, and one outside the communal entrance to his flat. All were propped against a wall in the same sitting position. All had signs of having been dragged there. All were missing their mobile phones. All but one were found with a little bottle of liquid ecstasy. Three were found over a four-month period.



Stephen Port found guilty of murders of four men

To believe the deaths to be unfortunate coincidence offended common sense, the jury heard. Yet that was initially perceived to have been the case. Port remained at large after police failed to spot striking similarities in the victims' deaths. Missed opportunities by detectives – who had arrested Port for lying after the first body was found – may have led them earlier to the door of his one-bedroomed flat in Barking, east London.

The deaths were originally investigated by Barking and Dagenham borough police, though after the fourth the inquiry was taken over by the Met's homicide and major crime unit. Aware of the "potential vulnerabilities" in its response to the deaths, the Met has referred itself to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). As that IPCC investigation continues, it is likely to be asked to examine whether the force was influenced by institutional homophobia, or blinded by prejudice towards the underground culture of promiscuity and risk-taking the case exposed.



Stephen Port. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

Detectives had Port in their sights, questioning him over the lies he told over the first death, in June 2014. Yet he slipped through their grasp and went on to kill three more times.

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Port's first brush with police was three weeks before his first killing in June 2014. The 41-year-old chef was seen helping to walk a young man to Barking station. The victim, 23, was shouting incoherently, vomiting, and could barely walk before he collapsed at the railway station where staff called an ambulance and police.

British Transport police interviewed both men. Port told them he had found the man in that state outside his flat, and brought him to the station to make sure he got home safely. As no allegation against him was made, Port was allowed to leave.



Anthony Walgate. Composite: Social Media

Three weeks later, on 19 June, Anthony Walgate, 23, a fashion student and occasional male escort, was found outside the communal entrance to Port's flat. Port had made the 999 call without giving his name. Walgate had clearly been dead for some time. His top was pulled up, as though he had been dragged to the spot, his underwear was in disarray and the zip on his jeans was undone. In a black holdall, police found liquid ecstasy, but no phone. The cause of death was GHB intoxication.



[Profiles of Stephen Port's victims](#)

When officers worked out it was Port who made the emergency call they found him asleep in bed. He gave various explanations. The first was he had returned home from his nightshift, found Walgate unconscious, thought he was drunk or suffered a seizure, propped him up, dialled 999 and then gone to bed.

It was exactly the same scenario he had given police three weeks earlier at Barking station. Here was another young man Port had just happened upon outside his flat.

When police discovered he had hired Walgate as a male escort for the night, Port changed his story. Now, he said, Walgate had taken drugs himself and become ill. Port had woken to find him cold and rigid and, not wanting to believe he was dead, had taken him outside and called an ambulance. Asked why he moved him, he said he panicked because “if he’s dead, they’re gonna think I murdered him”.

Port was charged with perverting the course of justice by making a false police statement, and released on bail. He would plead guilty to the charge in court on 23 March 2015 – but by then two more young men were dead.



Gabriel Kovari. Photograph: Metropolitan Police/PA

Ten weeks later, on 28 August, Barbara Denham, a Barking resident walking her dog, found the body of Gabriel Kovari. The 22-year-old, originally from Slovakia, had linked up with Port online and visited his flat five days previously. Port told friends he was his “new Slovakian twink flatmate”. Later, he told the same friends, Kovari had gone off with another man, a “soldier guy”.

Kovari was found in Abbey Green, an area of parkland 400 metres from Port’s flat that contains St Margaret’s church, a graveyard and the ruins of Barking abbey.

His body was propped against the perimeter wall of the graveyard, an area not covered by CCTV. His upper clothes had ridden up as though he had been dragged. There was no mobile phone. Cause of death was given as mixed drugs toxicity, including GHB and mephedrone (known as M or meow meow). The death was treated as “non-suspicious but unexplained”. Despite the similarities, no connection was made to Walgate’s death 10 weeks previously.

Three weeks later on 20 September, Denham was once again out walking her dog by the graveyard when she came across a second body. “I saw him there and thought it

cannot be the same thing again, in exactly the same place, lying in exactly the same position,” she told the court.



Daniel Whitworth. Composite: Social Media

Daniel Whitworth, 21, a chef from Gravesend in Kent, had chatted online with Port before going to his flat on 18 September. Almost in exactly the same location, propped in a seated position, his clothing ridden up as though he had been dragged, Whitworth was found with a small bottle of liquid ecstasy and no phone. High levels of GHB and antihistamine found in Nytol sleeping tablets were found in his blood.

It seems even Port was concerned that two bodies in three weeks might look suspicious. So on this occasion he placed a fake suicide note in Whitworth's left hand. The note claimed Whitworth had killed himself because he felt guilty at killing Kovari by giving him an accidental overdose of GHB during sex.

Two elements of the note were extremely odd. It included the sentence: "BTW, please do not blame the guy I was with last night, we only had sex, then I left. He knows nothing of what I have done." It added: "I dropped my phone on the way here so it should be in the grass somewhere."



Three of Stephen Port's victims were found propped against a graveyard wall at St Margaret's church in Barking. Photograph: Nick Ansell/PA

If Port was concerned his DNA could be found on Whitworth – and his semen was on the bedsheet in which Whitworth was wrapped – he need not have worried. Police took the note at “face value”, the prosecution said, and did not investigate further.

“In particular, Daniel's movements prior to his death were not checked, and no attempt was made to trace the person referred to in the note as ‘the guy I was with last night’,” said Jonathan Rees QC. Had they done so, detectives would have discovered it was Port, a man already known to them.

As for the reference to dropping his phone, police did not appear to consider that an unusual observation in a suicide note. No phone was found.

Shortly after the two men were found, a senior officer reassured the local newspaper that although the deaths were “unusual and slightly confusing”, there was nothing to suggest they were suspicious.

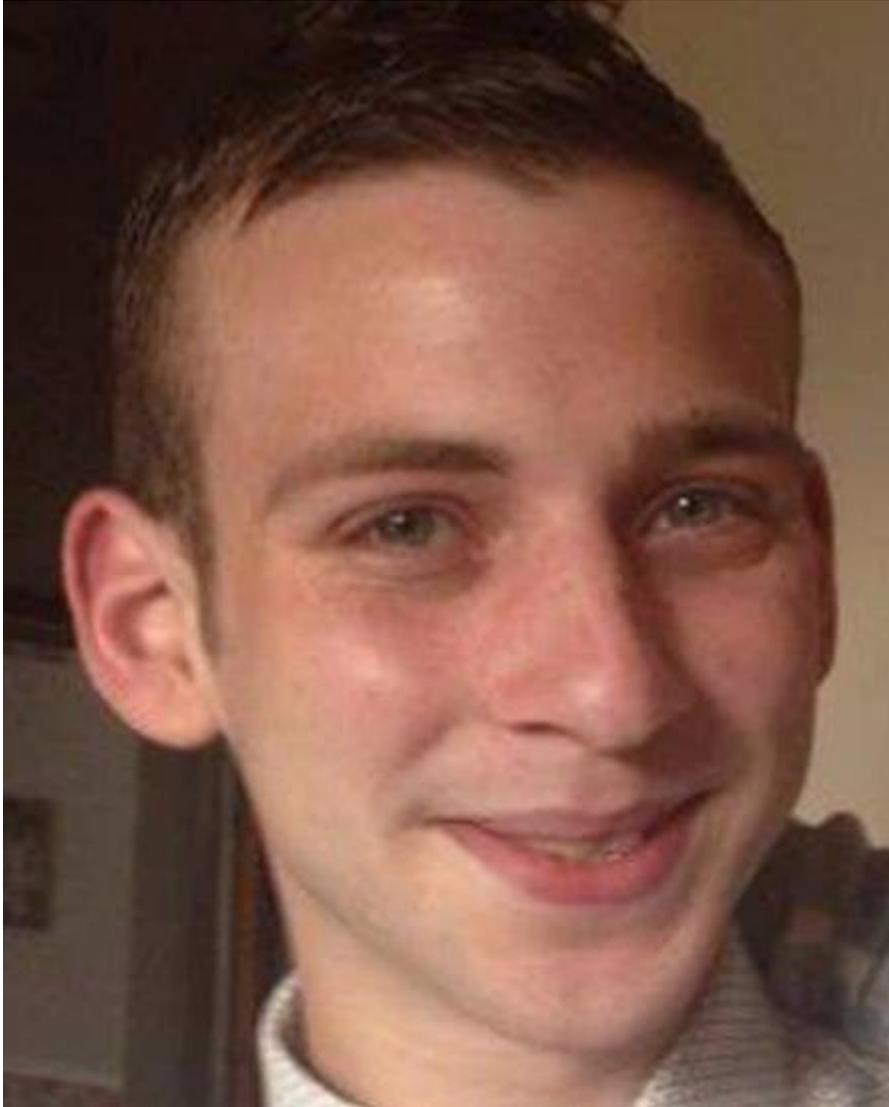
Port must have been hugely relieved when, in June 2015, the note was accepted as fact at an inquest for the two men, headlined in the Barking and Dagenham Post as “Double drug overdose killed Barking lovers found in church grounds”. An open verdict was recorded. Only months later, following the death of a fourth young man, did handwriting experts examining the suicide note conclude it was written by Port and on paper from a pad found at his flat.

On 25 March 2015 Port pleaded guilty at Snaresbrook crown court and was sentenced to eight months for making a false statement in relation to Walgate's death. He was released with an electronic tag less than three months later on 4 June.

As details of the eight young men who survived their encounters with him illustrated to the court, in the time between Port's first known victim to his last he surfed websites, hooked up on gay apps and continued to administer GHB to unsuspecting young men he raped, videoing some of them unconscious as he had sex with them.

Port's apparent freedom to pursue his victims will raise difficult questions for the Met, which has faced criticism in the past over its handling of murders in the LGBT community. In 2007, a review of 10 murders of gay men or transsexuals said in some

cases police inquiries were hampered by lack of knowledge, reliance on unfounded stereotypes and personal prejudices. The report, written by the independent Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender advisory group, did acknowledge the force had substantially improved its dealings with those communities, but warned more radical steps were needed.



Jack Taylor Composite: Social Media

Jack Taylor, 25, a forklift driver who lived with his parents in Dagenham, east London, and who was yet to come out as a gay man, hooked up with Port on the Grindr app in the early hours of 13 September 2015. Less than 36 hours later he was found by a refuse collector, propped up in the same grounds, his shirt riding up above his stomach as though dragged, a small bottle of GHB nearby, and his phone missing. He died from a mixed drug and alcohol overdose.

On this occasion, CCTV at Barking station, where Port met Taylor's taxi, captured the two men walking towards Port's flat. On 15 October 2015, Port was finally arrested. The question police must answer now is why had it taken so long.

Peter Tatchell, LGBT rights campaigner, said of the police investigation: "If four young middle-class women had been murdered in Mayfair, I believe the police would

have made a public appeal much sooner and mounted a far more comprehensive investigation. The killing of low-income gay men in working-class Barking was treated very differently. Police officers stand accused of class, gender and sexuality bias.

“Although police relations with the LGBT community are vastly better than two decades ago, this case is a wakeup call regarding the ongoing slapdash, negative attitudes and behaviour of some officers in some police districts”.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/stephen-ports-freedom-kill-difficult-questions-met-police>