

JAMES HANRATTY'S BARRISTER TAKES THE STAND

Michael Sherrard QC, the barrister who defended James Hanratty in one of the most controversial trials of the 20th century, came to City to talk to members of the Law Society about his experiences during the famous Hanratty trial.

The case was tried 40 years ago, and Hanratty was hanged for murder. In 1999 the Criminal Cases Review Commission referred the case to the Court of Appeal as DNA taken from members of Hanratty's family was analysed to test its compatibility with DNA samples collected from the crime scene. The results were inconclusive, and Hanratty was exhumed so that samples could be taken directly from his body.

Mr Sherrard's talk was fascinating, and touched on some of the most fundamental precepts of the law. He discussed the circumstances surrounding the original trial, and remarked, "If police officers choose what they'll disclose and what they won't, it becomes trial by police".

The recent DNA tests would seem to prove conclusively that Hanratty did in fact commit the crime for which he was executed. Mr Sherrard said, "The wrong man was not hanged. That was an immense relief to me." However, his opinion of the original prosecution remains unchanged. "The evidence was too weak to justify conviction. I still hold that view."

So, have things changed for the better since that infamous trial 40 years ago? Mr Sherrard believes that the legal system has been substantially improved: "I've got more faith in the police today than I did then."

<http://www.clsq.org.uk/hanratty.htm>