

Wikipedia – The Kidnapping of Shannon Matthews

On 19 February 2008, **Shannon Louise Matthews** (born 9 September 1998), a nine-year-old girl, was reported missing in [Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, England](#).^[1] The search for her became a major [missing person](#) police operation which was compared to the [disappearance of Madeleine McCann](#).^[2] She was found on 14 March 2008 at a house in [Batley Carr](#), near Dewsbury. The house was the home of 39-year-old Michael Donovan, uncle of Craig Meehan – the boyfriend of the kidnapped girl's mother, Karen Matthews.

The kidnapping was subsequently discovered to have been planned by Karen and Donovan to generate money from the publicity. Donovan was to have eventually "found" Shannon, taken her to a police station and claimed the reward money, which would be split between Donovan and the child's mother.

Donovan – also known as Paul Drake – was arrested at the scene, and charged with [kidnapping](#) and [false imprisonment](#).^{[3][4]} Karen Matthews was charged with [child neglect](#) and [perverting the course of justice](#) on 8 April 2008. The joint trial of Donovan and Matthews at [Leeds Crown Court](#) commenced on 11 November 2008^[5] and concluded on 4 December with both defendants found guilty of kidnapping, false imprisonment, and perverting the course of justice.^[6] They were both given eight-year prison sentences.^[7]

Craig Meehan was convicted of possessing [child pornography](#) which was discovered on his computer during the investigation,^[8] but had nothing to do with the kidnapping.^[9]

[Disappearance](#)^[edit]

Investigation^[edit]

Nine-year-old Shannon Matthews was seen at 15:10 on 19 February 2008, outside her school, Westmoor Junior School, [Dewsbury Moor](#), after a visit to the Dewsbury Sports Centre swimming pool.^[10] The school was about half a mile from her home.^[11] At 18:48 Karen Matthews rang the police to report her daughter missing after she had not returned home from school. The [West Yorkshire Police](#) started the search which eventually involved more than 200 officers.^[12]

The investigation into her disappearance was led by [Detective Superintendent Andy Brennan](#).^[13] The West Yorkshire Police questioned 1,500 motorists^[14] and searched 3,000 houses.^[15] By 5 March, more than 250 officers and 60 detectives were involved in the investigation, about 10% of the West Yorkshire force's operational strength.^[15] It became the largest police investigation since the [Yorkshire Ripper](#) investigation 30 years earlier.^{[2][16]} Of 27 specialist [victim recovery dogs](#) in the United Kingdom, 16 were involved in the search.^[17]

Publicity^[edit]

The Sun newspaper offered a reward of £20,000 for information leading to Shannon's safe return.^[18] It was increased to £50,000 on 10 March, by which time she had been missing for 20 days.^[19] A business in *Huddersfield* – nine miles from Dewsbury – offered £5,000.^[20]

West Yorkshire Police created a web page, 'Missing Shannon Matthews Appeal', and on 7 March, released a photograph of Shannon on the website.^[21] The police released the recording of the 999 call made by Karen Matthews reporting the child's disappearance.^[22] An official website, 'Help Us Find Shannon', including the Shannon Matthews Appeal, was launched on 11 March.^[23] Both websites were removed after Shannon was found.

Media reaction[\[edit\]](#)

A comparison was drawn between publicity given to the *disappearance of Madeleine McCann* and the much lower level of publicity for Shannon. Roy Greenslade, in *The Guardian* blog, explained it as "Overarching everything is social class" but added that Shannon's being taken hostage in the UK made a difference. *The Independent* took the same line saying "Kate and Gerry McCann had a lot: they were a couple of nice middle-class doctors on holiday in an upmarket resort... Karen Matthews is not as elegant, nor as eloquent".^{[24][25]}

The Times noted that the local community had pulled together but that the hunt appeared less newsworthy than the most minor developments in the search for Madeleine McCann.^[26] *The Brisbane Times* said that Karen Matthews and Kate McCann represented two sides of the social class coin in Britain.^[27] *The Daily Telegraph* speculated that had Shannon been part of a middle-class family, in which articulate parents were conversant with the mechanics of mobilising a slick public awareness campaign, then more public attention would have been focused on the effort to find her.^[28]

On 7 March, Karen Matthews said on *GMTV* that her boyfriend Craig Meehan was not involved in the kidnapping and he "would not hurt anybody".^[10] Meehan was defended by Shannon's father, Leon Rose.^[29] Karen Matthews and Meehan, in an interview on Radio 4's *Today programme* on 12 March, were questioned about suggestions by her parents that Meehan had been violent towards Matthews and on Karen having seven children by at least five fathers (two of the children were registered as having unknown fathers). Commenting on the interview, *The Independent* said that the case had developed a cruel overtone and that such questions went far beyond necessity and lifted the lid on an uncomfortable hypocrisy in British society.^[30]

Discovery[\[edit\]](#)

West Yorkshire Police found Shannon alive at 12:30 on 14 March 2008, 24 days after she went missing. She was concealed in the base of a divan bed in a flat in Lidgate Gardens, Batley Carr. Michael Donovan, the 39-year-old tenant of the flat, was arrested at the scene.^[3]

Shannon was placed under police protection and cared for by the local *social services* department.^[31] The police exercised powers under section 46 of the *Children Act 1989* which allows a child to remain subject to police protection for 72 hours.^[32] Shannon ceased to be subject to police protection on 17 March 2008.^[33] Since then she has remained in the care of Kirklees Family Services on a voluntary basis.^[34]

On 15 March, the police reported that Shannon had begun to recover after her ordeal. Specially-trained officers questioned her to establish what had happened.^[35] The questioning, which lasted for several weeks, took place in ten-minute sessions at a special children's suite resembling a classroom.^[34]

Post-kidnap pre-trial events[[edit](#)]

Meehan's uncle, Michael Donovan, was charged with kidnapping, false imprisonment and committing acts intended to pervert the course of justice on 17 March 2008.^[4] He appeared before Dewsbury magistrates on 18 March, and was remanded in custody.^[36] He appeared at Leeds Crown Court, via a video link from his prison cell, on 26 March.^[37] The provisional trial date was fixed for 11 November.^[37] He made an unsuccessful suicide attempt on 6 April.^[38]

Meehan was arrested on 2 April, on suspicion of possessing *indecent images of children*, after police had examined computers in the home.^[39] He was remanded in custody by Dewsbury Magistrates, at a hearing on 3 April charged with 11 offences of possessing indecent images of children.^[40] On 18 April 2008 Meehan pleaded not guilty, and elected to be tried by magistrate rather than by jury. On 16 September 2008, Meehan was convicted by Dewsbury Magistrates of 11 counts of possessing child pornography, relating to 49 images of *level one, two, three and four* found on his computer after it was seized from the house he lived in with Karen Matthews, on Moorside Road. On the same day, he was sentenced to 20 weeks imprisonment but was released as he had spent longer on remand than the length of the sentence.^[41]

Karen Matthews was arrested on 6 April on suspicion of attempting to pervert the course of justice.^[42] She was charged with child neglect and perverting the course of justice, on 8 April.^{[43][44]} At a hearing on 5 September 2008, she was also charged with *kidnapping and false imprisonment*.^[45]

Amanda Hyett, Meehan's sister, was arrested on suspicion of assisting an offender on 4 April 2008.^{[46][47]} Meehan's mother Alice Meehan, sister of Michael Donovan, was arrested on suspicion of attempting to *pervert the course of justice*, on 4 April.^{[46][47]} Hyett and Alice Meehan were released on police bail on 4 April but were rearrested with Meehan's sister Caroline on 10 April and held on suspicion of perverting the course of justice before being released on bail.^[48] Hyett and Alice Meehan were later released without charge, although Hyett was jailed the following year in an unrelated conviction for benefit fraud.^[49]

On 8 April, the police announced they were investigating approaches to the *Madeleine's Fund* for money to assist the search for Shannon.^[50]

Karen Matthews was remanded to face trial alongside Donovan in November 2008.^[51]

Trial and convictions[[edit](#)]

In November 2008, the trial heard evidence that Shannon had been drugged to subdue her whilst held.^[51] Newspapers reported that "The jury was told Shannon was drugged and restrained with a strap tied to a roof beam after her mother hatched a plan to make £50,000 from her faked kidnap."^[52] The jury was told Shannon was kept locked in a flat for 24 days by Donovan, who police believe used an elasticated strap with a noose on the end to tether her when he went out.^[53]

On 13 November, Detective Constable Mark Cruddace and Detective Superintendent Andy Brennan gave evidence at *Leeds Crown Court*. A forensic toxicologist told the court that tests on Shannon's hair indicated she had been given *temazepam* for up to 20 months before her disappearance.^[54]

Donovan claimed that Karen Matthews had asked him to look after her daughter for several days and that they would make money from newspaper rewards. He told the court that she had threatened him with violence.

On 27 November Karen Matthews gave evidence. Sobbing throughout, she denied having anything to do with her daughter's disappearance, claiming that Meehan told her to 'take the blame' for what had happened. She said she did so because she was scared of him. In cross-examination, Julian Goose QC said that she had told police a total of five versions of the story and accused her of "telling lie after lie, after lie".

On 4 December 2008 Karen Matthews and Michael Donovan were found guilty of kidnapping, false imprisonment and perverting the course of justice.^[6] The plan had been for Donovan to release Shannon at Dewsbury Market, drive around the corner to 'discover her' then take her to a police station and claim the £50,000 reward. This would be split between Donovan and Karen Matthews.^[55] On 23 January 2009, both were sentenced to eight years in prison by *Mr Justice McCombe*.^[7]

Karen Matthews was released in April 2012 after serving half her sentence.^[56] Donovan had already been released.^[38] Karen Matthews was given a new name for use in public, although authorities did not consider her mentally capable of maintaining a completely new identity and she will retain her real name for engagement with officials.^[57]

Post-trial media reaction[[edit](#)]

In the aftermath of the trial, revelations about the life that Shannon Matthews and her siblings had endured with their mother were widely highlighted and politicised by the media. The "welfare state" was heavily scrutinised. [The Daily Telegraph](#), described a "dysfunctional family where children equalled benefits", a claim that was supported by Shannon's aunt, Julie Poskitt.^[58] [Daily Mail](#) columnist [Melanie Phillips](#) claimed the case of Shannon Matthews and several other high-profile cases of child abuse were the result of the "culture of greed" that had developed after the introduction of [child benefit](#) and other forms of financial support for single mothers since the 1970s, and she blamed the welfare system for creating a generation of "feral youths". Phillips also criticized the actions of social workers, although they were under pressure from local government to reduce the number of children on the child protection register and Shannon Matthews had been removed from the register at the end of 2005, as social workers thought that the family was "settling down".^[59]

[Serious case review](#)^[edit]

On 16 June 2010 a Kirklees [Safeguarding Children](#) Board report found that social services could not have anticipated the abduction. It stated: "The [Serious Case Review](#) concluded that the historical and current knowledge available to professionals involved with this family could not have led them to anticipate the third child's abduction from her home or her mother's involvement in this. The only way to have avoided her abduction was through her prior removal from home under a Care Order and there is no evidence to suggest that this was warranted on the basis of professional knowledge about this case."^[60]

[In the media](#)^[edit]

A film of the search for Shannon, and her homecoming, was shown in an episode of the [Channel 4](#) documentary series [Cutting Edge](#) on 20 March 2008.^[61]

A [BBC One Panorama](#) special: [Shannon: The Mother of All Lies](#) was broadcast on the night of the trial verdict, (4 December 2008), about the disappearance and investigation, featuring the testimony of friends of the family and the police. The special was watched by 5.6 million viewers.^{[62][63]}

On 18 May 2009, an [ITV](#) programme, [Tears, Lies and Videotape](#), documented cases of people who manipulated the media for personal attention. The Shannon Matthews case was the main focus of the show.

A two-part dramatisation of the case [The Moorside](#), aired on 7 February 2017 and 14 February 2017 on [BBC One](#). The drama focuses on the publicity campaign preceding Shannon's discovery and her mother's involvement in the scheme.^{[64][65]} Episode one was watched by 9.93 million viewers with the second watched by 10.23 million viewers.

On 28 February 2017, Channel 5 broadcast a documentary entitled Shannon Matthews: What Happened Next which followed the key people in the investigation nine years later.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kidnapping_of_Shannon_Matthews