



In 2012 Leslie Thomas was named Legal Aid Barrister of the Year, and on Monday he takes silk

# 'My advocacy is more of the Mike Tyson school of boxing'

Black QCs are still rare: next week Leslie Thomas becomes one of them. Interview by **Fiona Bawdon**

Black barristers who make the upper ranks of the legal profession as Queen's Counsel are a rarity. Next week Leslie Thomas joins the 80-odd who have received the accolade. His success comes after a string of prominent cases: this week he is acting for families in the Hillsborough inquest. Before that, he was on the team for the family of Mark Duggan, whose death sparked the riots across London in 2012.

Thomas was five when he had his first encounter with violent and unexplained death. He was playing with his older sister on Clapham Common when he came across a freezer bag. "I kicked it, and it felt soft. So I opened it." Inside was a pair of severed female hands. He saw them only fleetingly before being dragged away by his sister, but remembers them in detail, "delicate, with traces of red nail varnish".

The pair ran off, and it would be years before he told anyone (he still doesn't know the story behind the hands). "I think it was that whole thing about we'd get in trouble. Our parents were always of the view, 'Keep your head down. Don't make a fuss'."

Far from doing that, he has taken on a series of difficult cases where black men have died in strongly contested circumstances. As well as Mark Duggan, he represented the family of Wayne Douglas, whose death in custody sparked riots in Brixton in 1995; Ibrahima Sey, who died after being sprayed

with CS gas; Christopher Alder, the former paratrooper who died after being restrained by police; and Azelle Rodney, shot dead by police in 2005, in circumstances which a judicial inquiry ruled amounted to unlawful killing.

Thomas's parents met in London in 1960, after arriving from the Caribbean. His father, who died in 2000, worked as a telecoms engineer; his mother was a nurse. The family started out in Notting Hill, West London, in a one-room flat, owned by Peter Rachman. Thomas remembers the smell of the lone paraffin heater. From there they moved to South London. Thomas remains close

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to his mother, Sheila. She was there when he won Legal Aid Barrister of the Year 2012, and will accompany him on Monday when he takes silk.

His reputation is as a dogged, even ruthless, advocate. Accepting his 2012 award, Thomas says of his technique for cross-examining police officers: "Kick, kick and kick again." Not everyone likes his style of advocacy, he admits. "If there are the Queensbury rules of boxing, and the Mike Tyson rules, I suppose I am more of the latter. I'm not saying some of my questions are below the belt, but I'm very direct; I don't allow witnesses not to answer questions."

Confronting the police within the confines of the courtroom is one thing, doing so on the street is another. He was first stopped and searched aged 12 and the officer's aggression came as a shock after being brought up to respect the police. In 1984, while studying at Kingston Polytechnic, he was arrested on the A3 after stopping at a petrol station. He

was with a friend who drove a tow truck when they were surrounded by four police cars and taken to a police station. After a night in a cell he was released. "I remember speaking to my criminal law professor about it afterwards. He was quite outraged, but I just wanted to get on with my law degree."

Given both personal and professional experience of disputed police accounts, Thomas favours officers wearing body cameras, and cameras in police vans. The latter would have been invaluable in the case of Sean Rigg, a mentally ill man, who died after being restrained by police. "One of the issues was whether his condition deteriorated in the van. We wouldn't have had a debate about it, we would just download the CCTV and have seen it."

The former, he notes, would have solved the mystery of how Mark Duggan's gun ended up metres away, the other side of a fence. Without CCTV evidence, juries remain reluctant to think badly of police: "It really takes a paradigm shift in somebody's thinking to have them believe the police are capable of serious wrongdoing."

Despite the controversy over the Duggan verdict, Thomas is "a fan" of juries. "We ask a lot of jurors. Normally, if there's a problem, it's because something hasn't been properly explained. That's not to say you can't at times have a rogue jury decision, but generally speaking it's because issues haven't been explained."

Thomas, who practises from Garden Court Chambers, may be a fearless advocate but would have been put off a Bar career by the costs of a degree and "extortionate" fees for vocational training. "I would not make it today. For someone from a working class background, that kind of debt would scare me."

He fears he is not alone. "The profession is becoming increasingly homogenised. I've been an advocacy trainer for 10 years and I see entrants becoming more and more middle class, and more and more white."

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