

'A victim of his own fame'

The acquittal of William Roache raises the question: should events that took place decades ago be judged by the standards we uphold today?

Tim Rayment and Sharon Feinstein

He's 81 but he's still got it, it's incredible," said James Roache of his father, who was acquitted last week of sex crimes dating back nearly half a century.

"My dad's like a pin-up and his secret is his amazing attitude to life where he keeps working, keeps himself busy, always learning and going to events. There's a supergene in there as well. And women, of course, especially back in the day."

The father is William Roache, the Coronation Street actor who was found not guilty of two rapes and four indecent assaults in one of many "historic" sex abuse cases that are in, or on their way to, the courts.

In the informal setting of a television studio Roache — the world's longest surviving soap actor in his role as Ken Barlow — once confessed to a tally of up to 1,000 sexual partners and admitted that as a younger man he had no control over his sex drive. But a jury at Preston crown court, which was not told about the "1,000 women", reached unanimous verdicts.

It is not the last jury that has had to decide the truth of cases that end up as one person's

memory against another's after a delay of decades. The trials are a roll call of the famous. This week a jury in south London will consider Dave Lee Travis, 68, the former BBC Radio 1 DJ, who has been charged with 13 indecent assaults and one sexual assault over a 30-year period.

The Australian entertainer Rolf Harris, 83, was flanked by his family as he arrived at the same court last month to plead not guilty to 12 counts of indecent assault on girls as young as seven. The charges relate to an 18-year period starting in 1968. The PR

consultant Max Clifford has pleaded not guilty to 11 counts of indecent assault relating to seven alleged victims, aged 14 to 19, between 1966 and 1984.

As the judge in the Travis trial said last week, the hearings are the result of the Jimmy Savile scandal in which a 2012 television investigation led to 200 people coming forward, in some cases after 50 years, to allege abuse on an unprecedented scale.

They told police of 214 acts by Savile, including 34 of rape or penetration. Accusations against other celebrities, unrelated to Savile, followed.

For James Roache, an actor who has played Ken Barlow's gay grandson, the acquittal means he has his family back. Since the sudden death of his mother in 2009, aged 58, his father has been "our rock", who secretly loved James's pet frogs when he was a child.

"As a boy I wasn't interested in Corrie, it was frogs," said Roache, 28, who accidentally bred hundreds. "My dad just went along with my mum when they were exasperated about them [being] everywhere but secretly he loved them. They were pretty loud at night, I can tell you."

Outside the family the trial raises other questions. Two apparent suicides last week showed how high the stakes can be for all parties.

A former teacher who was due to be sentenced for multiple crimes against boys threw himself in front of a London Underground train the day after a woman fell from the roof of a car park in Rochdale when the man she had accused of rape was found not guilty.

Our ideas of what constitutes a sex crime have changed. Should we judge by the standards of today things that happened 40 or 50 years ago? As the pendulum swings from the gossip and indifference of a generation ago to the post-Savile crop of prosecutions, have we yet found the right balance?

"THINGS were different back in the 1970s," said William Roache in an interview before his trial. "People were more tactile; you did things that today are regarded as wrong."

For today's young women, the idea of being groped in the workplace as a test of availability is too strange for words. But it happened.

"We were talking about this in the office," said Wendy Brown, a social media editor who now works for a company in Liverpool. "If someone groped you that was all part of the norm."

Normal or not, campaigners say it is right to act. "If it was a crime to touch someone sexually without their consent in the 1970s then it's absolutely legitimate to prosecute that crime today, whether there was a culture of silence and collaboration or not," said Katie Russell of Rape Crisis.

Roache ended up in court after implying that abuse victims had "brought it on themselves", appearing to say they were being punished for their actions in earlier lives.

Asked whether he really thought this, he replied in an interview with New Zealand broadcaster: "No, not quite... but yet I am. Everything that happens to us has been the result of what has been in previous lives or whatever."

The remarks caused a furore and a woman, who is now 62, contacted police two months later to allege that he had raped her twice as a 15-year-old at his homes in Lancashire. She believed that she would be taken seriously after sex scandals involving Savile and Sir Cyril Smith, the former MP for Rochdale who died in 2010.

Experts say there is no reason why cases should not be brought after a delay of 47 years. Last summer Stuart Hall, another veteran broadcaster who is now 84, admitted 14 indecent assaults between 1967 and 1985 against girls aged from nine to 17.

His 15-month sentence was doubled by the Court of Appeal in July.

Last week Peter White, 83, the former headmaster of the Buckinghamshire prep school attended by Nick Clegg, was jailed for eight years for abusing five pupils aged

eight to 13. The assaults went back to 1959.

"I think it sends a very strong message to those people who are abusers of children that you can get to the age of 83 and get eight years," Tom Perry, a former pupil, said. For him, however, this is not the end. Children often felt complicit in abuse and did not speak out, he said. That broke the bond between child and parent. His abuse was a "seeping wound" that would never close.

Unlike the Buckinghamshire case, the Roache trial has raised questions about the decision to prosecute after seemingly large flaws emerged when the evidence was tested in court.

One woman said she had been warned against Roache by the actor Johnny Briggs several years before his character, Mike Baldwin, even joined Coronation Street. Another told police she had had a lift home from Roache, only to say later it was another actor, Neville Buswell, who had dropped her off. A witness claimed she had been assaulted by Roache in a gold Rolls-Royce, but he could prove that he had not owned one until 1986, more than a decade after the alleged attack.

Do such weaknesses point to a celebrity witch-hunt? Keir Starmer, the director of public prosecutions until three months ago, denied that celebrities were treated differently in the decision to prosecute. He added that the



IT'S ABSOLUTELY LEGITIMATE TO PROSECUTE THAT CRIME TODAY

acquittal of Roache showed a system working well.

Peter Neyroud, a former chief constable of Thames Valley police who is now an academic, was more nuanced. "A well investigated case is likely to produce the type of substantive evidence which prosecutors can successfully [use]," he said.

"It becomes more difficult where you've got someone who is quite so high-profile as William Roache. The pressure to test that evidence, and the public interest in doing so, is considerable. He's probably a victim in some sense of his own fame."

ONE person who knows exactly why a victim would wait decades before coming forward is Michelle Noble. She says she was raped by a Nottinghamshire policeman when she was 14. He drove her home from the police station after she had been arrested in a case of mistaken identity.

After she shut but did not lock the front door, he fol-

lowed her in and raped her: "I didn't fight him, I just did as I was told. I just lay down and let him do what he wanted."

At the time Noble and her father were told there was insufficient evidence to prosecute. Her alleged rapist was forced to resign after being found guilty of "dis-creditable conduct".

Then she got caught up in the national wave of anger and hope that ran through abuse survivors in 2012. "When I saw Jimmy Savile, there was a shot on television and he walked down some stairs with a hat in his hand, very arrogant. That was a trigger," she said this weekend. "The arrogance of it: look at me and I'm getting away with it."

The effect on Noble, who is now 47 and has waived her anonymity, was "massive". She was already contemplating a request to have her case reopened. Seeing Savile's alleged victims come forward, she felt a surge of optimism.

"I thought maybe the world has changed. I got hope from it because I thought things have changed and you can get justice. I spent a couple of months in fight mode. I rang every agency I could think of," she said.

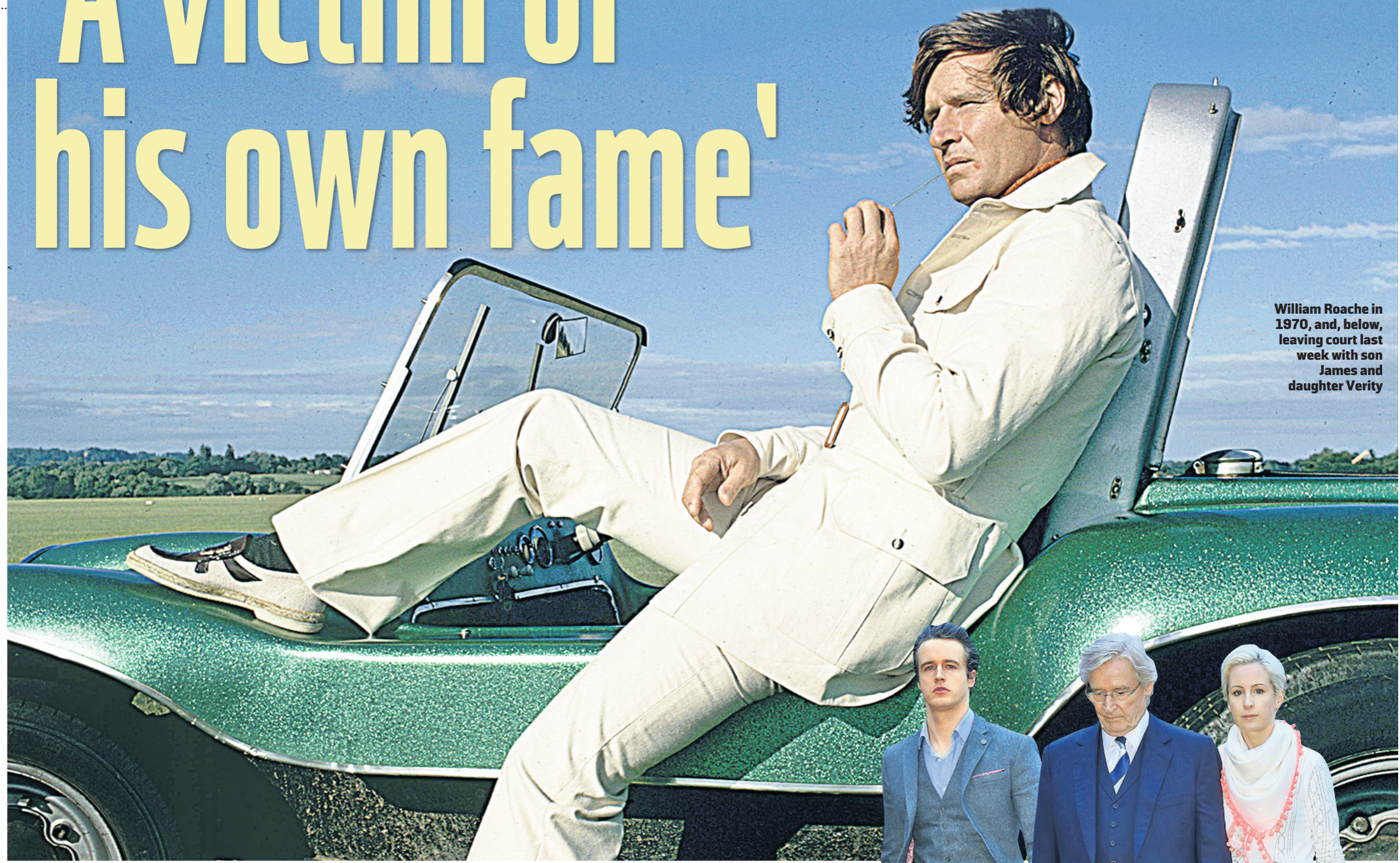
In Noble's case it turned out to be ill-founded: the Independent Police Complaints Commission said all records relating to her had been destroyed. There are apparently no grounds for a new investigation and she has been left feeling frustrated.

For the rest of the country there is no doubt that we are in a new era. Even William Roache, who was written out of Coronation Street but is now expected to return, recognises that it was right for public policy to move in the direction of those who want tough action.

Yesterday he was facing new uncertainty after three more women contacted the police during his trial, although no formal investigation has started.

"It's probably better the way things are [now]," he said in the interview before his trial. "It will level out. Whatever's going on I think the pendulum has swung a little and it will settle back and everything will be OK again soon."

Others hope the world has changed for ever.



William Roache in 1970, and, below, leaving court last week with son James and daughter Verity



The Self Assessment deadline has passed. Do yours online now and avoid further penalties.

The sooner you do it the better. If you don't you could get penalties of up to £1,600, even if you owe nothing.

Self Assessment | hmrc.gov.uk



HM Revenue & Customs



Rolf Harris with his wife Alwen. He is accused of indecent assault