

## Ronald Biggs (1929-2013)

Ronald Biggs (or 'Ronnie') was born on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1929, in London, England. In 1947, he joined the Royal Air Force. Two years later, he got into trouble with the police and the military authorities. He was dishonourably discharged for theft and other crimes. He later received a short prison sentence for stealing a car. More criminal activity followed, and he ended up in prison for three years. For much of the 1950s, Biggs spent a lot of time in the British criminal-justice system. During this time, he made friends with Bruce Reynolds, the mastermind behind the "Great Train Robbery". In 1960, Biggs promised to go straight after marrying his girlfriend Charmian Powell. He started a construction business with a friend, but he couldn't make ends meet. He then turned to Reynolds for a loan, but instead, Reynolds invited him to join the robbery.

### Heist of the Century

On August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1963, a gang of 15 men, including Reynolds and Biggs, committed what has been called "the heist of the century." The gang, taking inspiration from the rail robberies of the Wild West, raided the Glasgow to London mail train and stole £2.6m in used bank notes. Biggs played only a small part in the robbery, but his escape from justice made him a legendary criminal.



The mastermind behind the crime was Bruce Reynolds, a known criminal. Using inside information about the transportation of money, he assembled a gang to intercept a night train. On August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1963, fifteen men wearing ski masks and helmets entered the train and took 120 bags of money. The scale and style of the crime captivated Britain and a huge police operation was launched. They found the gang's abandoned hideout in a nearby farm. The train driver, Jack Mills, was hit on the head with an iron bar during the robbery.

Like most of the gang members, Biggs was later arrested. The members of the gang were sentenced to a total of 300 years in prison. Reynolds (photo right), eventually found after five years on the run, was given 10 years for masterminding the crime. But it was Ronnie Biggs who became the most famous gang member, and Britain's most notorious fugitive.



### Escape

Sentenced to 30 years in prison in 1964, Biggs spent only 15 months behind bars. He escaped from Wandsworth Prison by scaling a 30-foot wall. A ladder was thrown over the wall from the outside during the prisoners' afternoon exercise session. The prisoners climbed the ladder and lowered themselves onto a waiting van. They were driven away in three cars.

Soon after, Ronnie Biggs fled the country. He went to France where he had plastic surgery to change his appearance and then moved to Spain, Australia, and later Brazil (Rio), using a false name. During his time in Australia, he reunited with his wife and two sons. They also had a third son during this time. Repeated attempts to extradite him to Britain failed. Fellow robber Buster Edwards gave himself up after living in Mexico for three years. His adventures were portrayed by Phil Collins in the hit film "Buster".

In 1974, Scotland Yard detective Jack Slipper travelled to Rio to arrest Biggs. Brazilian authorities refused to extradite Biggs because his girlfriend was pregnant (photo below). They didn't want to expel the father of a future Brazilian.

## Capitalizing on his Notoriety



Apparently free, Biggs started to capitalize on his notoriety. He gave interviews and appeared in advertising campaigns. In 1978, he even recorded a song, "No One Is Innocent" with the punk rock band "The Sex Pistols". He also gave barbecues for tourists so that they could eat with him and take photos. Biggs also sold T-shirts that said: "I went to Rio and met Ronnie Biggs ... honest." In 1994, he released his autobiography, "Odd Man Out".

Due to poor health, in 2001, Ronnie flew back to England, where he was immediately put in prison. He had previously suffered from a number of strokes and his health was in decline. Biggs told the press that he came back because his last wish was "to walk into a London pub as an Englishman and buy a pint of bitter." Others speculated that he had come home for free health care.



Imprisonment & Death In all, Biggs had spent nearly 36 years on the run. The authorities made sure that he wasn't going to escape again. He went to a high-security prison until 2009. He was then given compassionate release because his health was so bad, unable to walk or talk. Biggs gave a press conference two years later to promote his new book, "Odd Man Out: The Last Straw". He communicated by writing on a chalkboard, telling the press that he wanted to be remembered as a "lovable rogue." He died on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at the age of 84 in a nursing home in London. The train driver, Jack Mills, never returned to work and died seven years after the robbery in 1970, without making a full recovery (photo).



**Ronnie Biggs and one of his sons (2009)**



**Shortly before his death (2013)**

Recommended video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v98zJfFY7\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v98zJfFY7_8)