



Eight Sentenced for “Professional” Farm Thefts

Eight men involved in “professional and lucrative” crime; stealing high value equipment from farms and contractors’ sites across a wide area of Cheshire were sentenced at Knutsford Crown Court today.

More than £350,000 worth of tractors, trailers and other farming equipment as well quad bikes and a speedboat were stolen by members of the group between June and November last year.

The thefts affected the farming community across Cheshire, as farmers who relied on the equipment for their livelihoods saw work disrupted and insurance premiums rise.

Judge Nicholas Woodcock congratulated the team of Police Officers who had tracked down the offenders and prepared the case against them. He said a detailed and thorough investigation had pieced together a “comprehensive and compelling picture”.

The Judge said the thefts, which were centred on the rural parts of West and East Cheshire around Northwich and Knutsford, including Frodsham, Helsby, Allostock, Kelsall and Chelford, had, in some cases, deprived farmers and contractors of equipment which was vital to their livelihood.

He told Peter Illidge, Christopher Smalley, Liam McGuigan, Shaun Higgins, Paul Edwards, Jamie Meredith, Ben Gee and Andrew Devine “These offences had all the hallmarks of professional and lucrative crime and were executed with planning, foresight and determination.”

Illidge, 27, of Warren Avenue, Lostock Gralam, Northwich, had earlier pleaded guilty to ten counts of theft and two of handling stolen goods. He was

sentenced to three years in prison, with a six months consecutive sentence for attempting to break into a garage at Delamere.

Smalley, 27, of Fernlea Rd, Northwich, pleaded guilty to seven counts of theft and two counts of handling stolen goods. He received a three year prison sentence.

McGuigan, 20, formerly of Hesketh Drive, Lostock Gralam, admitted eight thefts and was sent to prison for two years, with a six months consecutive sentence for being involved in the attempted burglary at Delamere.

Edwards, 27, of David Street, Northwich, admitted six thefts. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Higgins, 39, of Braemar Avenue , Northwich, pleaded guilty to two counts of handling stolen property. He was given a 12 months sentence, suspended for 12 months with 250 hours of unpaid work. He was also ordered to pay £250 costs.

Meredith, 22, of Rookery Rise, Winsford, pleaded guilty to one theft offence and received a 12 months sentence suspended for 18 months with 250 hours of unpaid work and £250 costs. The sentence took into account an unrelated offence of stealing copper wire.

Gee, 21, of Eddisbury Way, Northwich, admitted two thefts and received a 12 months sentence suspended for 18 months with 250 hours unpaid work and £250 costs.

Devine, 24, of Meanee Drive, Nantwich, pleaded guilty to one theft charge. He was made the subject of a Community Order with 12 months supervision and attendance on a “thinking skills” programme.

Two other men admitted involvement in the attempted burglary at Delamere.

Matthew Tyrer, 35, from Lime Avenue, Weaverham, was sentenced to six months in prison. Anthony Brown, 25, from Ashwood Close, Barnton, Northwich was made the subject of a Community Order with 250 hours unpaid work and £250 costs.

Mr. Wyn Lloyd-Jones, prosecuting said some of the thefts had been carried out in an “audacious” manner. Vehicles and equipment had been taken while the owners were nearby.

They had been caught by police work which was “not at the glamorous end of the scale”. The investigation involved a great deal of detailed work, often involving records from mobile phones, and images from CCTV and speed cameras to locate culprits at or near the scene of the crime.

Detective Inspector Liam Furlong headed up the team of officers from Western and Eastern Areas of Cheshire Police who carried out the investigation.

He said: “These thefts affected the local farming community greatly. It had an impact on the livelihoods not only of the victims of the crimes but other farmers who saw a rise in insurance costs and became fearful their farms would be targeted next.

“When the offences came to light, we began a two fold operation to investigate the thefts, help the farming community prevent future thefts and reassure them about the work we were doing to catch these men.

“The investigation was complex due to the number of offences and suspects. There was then the financial side to look into. Today’s sentences reflect the upset, inconvenience and financial burden the farmers experienced during this time.”

During the spate of thefts the farming community were offered free SmartWater kits to permanently mark farming equipment with a forensically coded liquid which is invisible to the naked eye.

For information on Home Watch and Rural Watch in East Cheshire contact Jane Thirsk on 01244 612725