

So will a £2million legacy lure Ronnie Barker's disgraced son out of hiding?

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To her grown-up children she was affectionately known as 'Mummy'. To friends it was 'Mrs Ronnie B'. But when Joy Barker, widow of one of Britain's best-loved comedians, died suddenly earlier this year, it was several weeks before news of her passing became widely known.

Sadly, that was the way it had to be: it was what her son Larry and daughter Charlotte wanted.

Because the moment their 78-year-old mother collapsed from a fatal stroke, they knew it was only a matter of time before the shadow that has haunted their lives privately for the past seven years would once again be brought into the public gaze.

Their sibling Adam, the third and youngest child of Ronnie Barker — the comic genius who entertained millions in shows such as *The Two Ronnies*, *Porridge* and *Open All Hours* — has not been seen or heard of since 2004.

He jumped bail in that year, shortly before he was due to be charged with possessing child pornography. Police who had raided the 43-year-old bit-part actor's West London home as part of an international criminal investigation are said to have found 1,200 indecent images of children on a computer.

Rather than face the music or argue his case in court, Adam chose to run, leaving a note telling his parents he would not be able to contact them 'for quite some time'.

And since then, nothing. Not a sighting. Not a word.

According to the family, Adam did not even get in touch in the last days of his beloved father's life in 2005. Nor did he attend his funeral or his memorial service — despite assurances by the police that he would be treated sympathetically if he handed himself in.

Some six years on, even the death of his mother has not brought him forth. Adam was nowhere to be seen at her funeral in January.

His absence has prompted some to speculate whether he is in fact still alive. After all, dozens of men caught up in Operation Ore, the international crackdown on those downloading child porn from the internet, have since taken their own lives.

Further, given that the people Adam seemed most desperate to protect — his mother and father — are now dead, the question has to be why he has not now come forward. For, if convicted, he could expect to spend no more than a year to 18 months in prison.

But the truth of the matter is that the police and the family believe he is very much alive, and possibly living in France.

Not only was he a fluent French speaker but his brother, Larry, a successful advertising executive, lived in a £1 million chateau and vineyard with his wife and two children, close to Cognac, near Bordeaux.

His sister Charlotte also subsequently moved to a house nearby, and there were even unconfirmed sightings of Adam in the area. Larry and his family and Charlotte have since returned to Britain.

Last week, details of Joy's will emerged. It shows that she left an estate of £6,520,426. The document stipulates that the money is to be divided equally among Larry, Charlotte and Adam. Drawn up in 1997, since Adam's arrest and disappearance the will has not been amended in any way.

Because, as the Mail can today reveal, not only had Joy vowed to stand by her youngest child, but to the day she died she was convinced that Adam would one day return.

'She never, ever thought he was dead,' Betty Westbroek, her first cousin, told me this week. 'Joy once told me that she strongly believed he was still alive. She said to me: "I would know if he was dead. I don't know why, but I would know."'

It is thought that Adam's disappearance was no midnight flit, rather a carefully planned escape made possible by the lengthy delays during the original police investigation into his alleged crime.

Adam, a chubby-faced Old Harrovian, was first questioned by police in June 2003. They searched his house and seized a number of computer hard drives. But, because of a backlog of work, it was not until April the following year that experts got round to examining his computer equipment.

What they found was said to be damning. Police allegedly managed to recover those 1,200 images of child porn, including a small percentage of 'Grade 5' material — paedophile pornography of the worst kind, showing adults engaged in sex with children.

Until then, Adam had been answering the terms of his bail. But it appears that he had also been using the ten-month hiatus to plan his next move

Shortly before he vanished, he sent a typewritten letter to his parents. 'Dear Mummy and Daddy,' it began. 'I need to tell you that some time ago the police came to my house looking for images of underage children on my computer. I was arrested.

'I must apologise for being foolish and thank you for being great parents. You bear no responsibility for what has happened. I have come to the conclusion that rather than wait and find out what will happen, I will go away.

'You must understand that I won't be able to contact you for quite some time. Rest assured I will not harm myself; I would rather come back.'

Good to his word, Adam, who had appeared in BBC TV shows *Monarch Of The Glen* and *Casualty*, disappeared. But not before he had first tidied up his affairs.

When Charlotte subsequently let police into Adam's two-bedroom property in Ealing (she had a house in the same street), they found it emptied of much of his personal belongings, including his clothes and passport. He left a message asking his family to dispose of his car, a VW Golf, and had taken care to put his financial affairs in order.

His terrace cottage was subsequently rented out, bringing in £1,100 a month. At the time, sources revealed to the *Mail* that Adam's bank accounts contained 'substantial sums' of money. The total figure was put at about £60,000 — half in a savings account, the rest in a current account.

While there were no withdrawals from the savings account, the current account was being used, via standing orders, to pay council tax on the property and other bills.

Such arrangements suggest not only careful planning, but that Adam one day intended to return. (Land Registry records show he still owns the property. When a reporter knocked on its door this week, the occupant, a middle-aged woman, refused to talk about Adam, angrily slamming the door.)

Consistently, the family denied knowing where he was or of having any contact with him — while at the same time having to cope with the terrible impact his shameful flight was having on his ageing father, Ronnie.

Only after he died in 2005, at the age of 76, did his comedy partner, Ronnie Corbett, reveal just how hard hit he had been by Adam's disappearance.

Corbett told the *Mail*: 'Ron did say to me: "It's just so awful. It is like a bereavement. I've lost him, really. I don't know what he's done. What can he possibly have done? How do you hide yourself?"

'The not knowing must be worse than a bereavement. Where is he? How's he managing? How do you successfully disappear? It must be a sadness of such huge dimensions.'

So it was that Adam attended neither his father's funeral nor the star-studded memorial service that followed at Westminster Abbey. After that, the sadness his father endured was passed on for his mother alone to bear.

It is something that Joy's cousin Betty saw first-hand. The women's fathers were brothers and they grew up close to one another in Essex. Then, with their respective husbands, they moved to the Cotswolds, spending the last quarter of a century a stone's throw from each other.

'Joy and I were very close,' says 78-year-old Betty. 'We were the same age and regularly had meals together. I last saw her just before Christmas.'

While describing Joy as a 'strong' individual, she says that Adam's absence was a constant burden.

'She was heartbroken when he disappeared and always hoped he would come home,' says Betty

'She would talk about him a lot with a great deal of affection and never stopped loving him. She said to me: "Whatever he has done, I'll still love him. He's my son." He was her flesh and blood, after all, and no one even knows if he is guilty of the things he is accused of doing.

'Adam is a lovely, adorable man and the family love him. We would love to see him come back, but no one has the faintest idea where he is.'

Betty says she would often discuss with Joy where Adam could have fled to.

'We think he initially went to France because he can speak fluent French,' she said. 'But he might be anywhere, maybe Australia or New Zealand or a French-speaking country, we just don't know.'

Betty did note that Joy always spoke of Adam as if he would return — that even though he was gone, he was not gone for good.

'Joy never, ever thought that he was dead,' she says. 'She never got upset when she spoke about Adam, it was always in affectionate tones.

'She would say things like "that's Adam's room, and Adam said this or that". We'd talk about him playing poker in the garden or how he used to laugh and joke. What else could she do? She had to carry on living and she had grandchildren and two other children to think about.'

And carry on she did. After Ronnie's death, she sold their home, a converted Grade II-listed 17th-century mill in the Cotswold hamlet of Dean near Chipping Norton, for £1.3million. In its stead she bought a slightly smaller house in the nearby village of Great Rollright.

The £1.1million property, while still having five bedrooms, had a much smaller garden and was also near a property to which her daughter Charlotte, 48, had by then moved

Neighbours in the village recall Joy's high spirits as they repeatedly helped her dig out her car last winter, as the cold weather gripped the country.

Despite the snow, at Christmas she insisted on driving herself up to Shropshire where Larry, 51, and his family were living. But days into the New Year, tragedy struck.

'We'd arranged to meet,' says Betty. 'But then I received a phone call telling me she had died a day after returning from Larry's home. I was devastated.'

The funeral passed off with little publicity, although Betty has no doubt that police were watching in case Adam made a surprise return.

Now, five months on, Joy's will has been published, prompting speculation that the seven-figure inheritance left to Adam might persuade him to give himself up.

When Ronnie died, the three siblings were each left £91,000 (the sum is relatively small only because the bulk of the comedian's fortune was tied up in assets jointly held with his wife, and which became part of her estate after his death).

It is not thought Adam has ever claimed or attempted to claim the money from his father. But might he be tempted to do so by the prospect of a much bigger payout — the £1,340,000 that his mother has left him (the sum due to him after inheritance tax and other expenses)?

According to legal experts, Larry and Charlotte, who along with Adam are the executors of the will, would be obliged to hand over the money to Adam should he come forward. Indeed, according to Andrew Kidd, a partner with London law firm Silverman Sherliker, they must take 'all reasonable steps' to trace him.

But at the same time, any attempt to pay the money to Adam without informing the police would leave them at risk of prosecution for aiding and abetting an absconder.

In other words, though Adam has a right to the money, any attempt to claim it while he is still on the run would almost certainly lead to him being traced by police.

There is one final option open to his siblings as executors — to persuade a court that the share owed to Adam be split between themselves on the basis that he is already dead.

It is not an option being considered by the family.