

# THE RADICAL

Researcher by day and activist by night, Joseph Harris was leading an untenable double life that eventually landed him in prison.

BY SHANTA BARLEY

Most British PhD students head straight to the pub after graduating. Joseph Harris had something else planned. On a freezing Friday night in December 2005, he packed a rucksack with a pair of bolt cutters, a hammer, a flashlight, latex gloves and a can of black spray paint. He drove to a deserted industrial estate just outside Nottingham, UK, and broke into a compound owned by a company that hires out refrigeration units. He slashed the tyres of a van and glued down its windscreen wipers. He smashed his way into an outhouse, tipped cans of lubricant and coolant onto the floor and cut through the electrical cables that powered the office's air-conditioning unit. On his way out he sprayed, "Now you pay 4 your crimes" on a wall.

The following Monday, Harris returned to work in Sue Watson's oncology lab at Queen's Medical Centre in Nottingham, where he was already committed to an irreconcilable double life. By day, he studied potential treatments for gastrointestinal cancer — work that invariably required the use of animal models. By night, he crusaded against such animal research, sabotaging companies with links to it. Within a month, Harris would be caught vandalizing another company. Ultimately, he would become the first person in the United Kingdom to be convicted under a law intended to crack down on activist extremism.

The judge overseeing the case lamented a career destroyed and a scientist lost. "It may well be that your future inability to continue your research into gastrointestinal cancer will be a great loss to those who suffer that disease," said Judge Ian Alexander when he sentenced Harris to three years in prison. Harris was released within a year, and has now agreed to speak to *Nature* about what drove him to commit his crimes.

## RUMMAGING FOR ROLY-POLIES

Most of Harris's childhood in southern England's New Forest was spent outdoors. He and his younger brother, Thomas, passed the hours rummaging under rocks for roly-polies — woodlice that roll into a ball when threatened. Joseph Harris showed an early affinity for science. At the age of ten he started compiling a list of every animal in the world. "I didn't get very far," he says. His convictions were already firm, however. In the same year, his teacher asked him to write about what he wanted to be when he grew up. Instead, he wrote about what he didn't want to be: a scientist who did tests on animals.

He excelled in biology and chemistry at school, and in 1998 began a degree in molecular biology at the University of Nottingham. While there, Harris joined the local Hunt Saboteurs Association group in fox-hunt sabotage, or 'sabbing'. Shadowing hunts from Land Rovers, he and his friends sprayed citronella to mask the scent of foxes and break pursuit. His actions were legal as long as he didn't injure anyone or trespass on private property.

In 2001, Harris was interviewed for a PhD on oesophageal cancer at Queen's Medical Centre. "I made it clear that I wouldn't do animal testing during the interview, even though I thought it would scupper my chances," says Harris. Instead, he got the job, with a grant from the UK Medical Research Council. He soon found himself in Watson's lab studying a class of drugs known as proton pump inhibitors. These drugs are commonly prescribed for gastro-oesophageal reflux disease, but tests on rats in the

1980s suggested that they might also boost the risk of developing a type of cancer known as oesophageal adenocarcinoma (N. Havu *Digestion* 35, 42–45; 1986). According to one hypothesis, they do this by raising the amount of the growth hormone gastrin in the bloodstream. Harris and his colleagues suggested how, by showing that gastrin can suppress a cell-death pathway in oesophageal cells, allowing them to survive and possibly become cancerous (J. C. Harris *et al. Cancer Res.* 64, 1915–1919; 2004).

"I wasn't doing any animal testing," says Harris, "but I still felt that I was making important contributions towards the field."

## PETTY INSOLENCE

As his involvement in research gained momentum, Harris says that his participation in activism waned, save for a single act of petty insolence. One day in a nearby lab, he spied a pair of axolotls — amphibians studied for their ability to regrow entire limbs. With no one looking, he decanted them into a jar and took them home. "I just felt so sorry for them," he says. But as his doctoral studies neared an end, he was forced to confront the conflict between his career and his convictions. Watson urged Harris to take on the project of a postdoc who had quit the lab. This meant an early promotion for Harris — still technically a student — but the project involved working with mice. "When I took over, she asked me, gently and then increasingly insistently, to continue the animal testing, even though she knew that I was utterly against it," he says. The pressure was real, says colleague Jacqueline Dickson, who also did her PhD under Watson's supervision. "Sue is very used to getting her own way," says Dickson. Watson declined to comment for this story.

Eventually, Harris acquiesced. He was studying whether a drug designed to prevent gastrin from binding to cell receptors would slow tumour growth in mice. Harris says that he reluctantly agreed to analyse biopsies. "I didn't inject a single drug, or see a single animal die, but I still felt complicit in what was happening," he says. Worst of all, Harris was concerned that the animals were dying for nothing. Phase III clinical trials had shown that the drug, known as Insegia or G17DT, did not improve survival rates in patients with pancreatic cancer, and Harris reasoned that it probably wouldn't work for gastrointestinal tumours either. He was appalled, he says, that his own research into gastrin had been used to justify the drug's continued development.

Tortured by his conscience, Harris felt the need to do something. Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), the largest animal-testing company in Europe, located in Cambridgeshire, UK, seemed like an appropriate target. He never forgot the highly publicized release of video footage secretly shot at HLS in 1997, showing several severe breaches of animal-research protocols, including beagles being beaten. The films had already riled the broader British activist community into a state of organized fury. Activists firebombed three cars owned by HLS staff and sent the managing director mouse traps allegedly tainted with HIV — he was later attacked by three men armed with pickaxe handles. The organization Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC), which formed in 1999 and is based in London, targeted HLS investors relentlessly with forms of intimidation such as hoax bombs and abusive e-mails. One by one, financial backers of the company

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pulled out, fearful that their staff would be hurt. In early 2001, the Royal Bank of Scotland cancelled a £22-million (US\$47 million in 2001) loan, forcing HLS to near bankruptcy.

But HLS and the BioIndustry Association — an organization based in London that promotes UK biotechnology — fought back, lobbying the government for tougher laws against activists. The London-based Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry delivered an ultimatum: if the government did not do something to curtail activist attacks, Britain's drug industry would boycott those banks and investment companies that had caved under the pressure of SHAC. "All of a sudden, the government was confronted with the real threat of pharmaceutical companies pulling out of future research-and-development investment in Britain," says Andrew Upton, who studied the animal-rights movement for his PhD at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. The UK government passed the Serious and Organised Crime and Police Act in 2005. Section 145 of the law explicitly prohibits "interference with contractual relationships so as to harm animal research organisation", and imposes tough sentences of up to five years for perpetrators of these crimes.

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The threat of punishment wasn't enough to dissuade Harris — but the armed patrols and barbed-wire perimeter now installed at HLS did convince him to go after a softer target. Like several activists before him, Harris went after companies that had contracts with HLS (and much less security). The SHAC website had identified several such companies, and for his first foray, Harris chose the Nottingham branch of York Refrigeration, which provided fridge units to HLS. The fact that he had graduated with a PhD that very day was "just a coincidence", says Harris.

Sensing no repercussions from his acts of anarchy, he resumed his crusade one month later. On 15 January 2006, Harris targeted Atlas Material Testing Solutions, a company based in Bicester, UK, that provided HLS with equipment. He sliced through power cables, squirted superglue into locks and flooded the office. "The sight of a hosepipe propped up against the front door proved too much to resist," says Harris. He pushed the nozzle through the letter box, twisted the tap and destroyed a shipment of computers still in their Royal Mail boxes. Lastly, he spray-painted, "This company kills puppies" onto a wall.

Later that evening, he broke into Bullimore Plant Hire in Northampton, UK, which was helping HLS to build an extension. He was snipping air valves off the tyres of bulldozers when he heard a distant shout. Soon after, ten police cars arrived on the scene, responding to what officers thought was an attempted burglary at an adjacent electronics warehouse. Harris ran and the police gave chase. "I knew it was all over, but I didn't want to just give myself up," says Harris. Defiant to the last, he buried his hands beneath him when he was slammed to the ground to avoid being cuffed.

It took several months of police work to reveal that Harris was not, in fact, a burglar. DNA and minute droplets of copper on the blades of his bolt cutters eventually tied him to the crimes at the three companies, which had caused damages in excess of £28,000 (US\$49,000 at the time). Harris insists that these are the only serious crimes he has committed. After his arrest, the police raided his lab and took away his computer. He was subsequently fired. His actions shocked many of the staff at Queen's Medical Centre, but not Dickson. "Joe's a 'straight-edged vegan' who makes no secret of his opposition to animal testing, doesn't drink alcohol or coffee, and donates most of his money to animal-welfare charities, so although I was surprised it kind of all made sense," she says.

Harris was sentenced in September 2006 and spent his first month in prison in a maximum-security facility near Milton Keynes, alongside,

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For a podcast discussion with Joseph Harris, see: [go.nature.com/9ajhgc](http://go.nature.com/9ajhgc)

he says, murderers, rapists and drug dealers. Harris dead-pans that he learnt two valuable lessons in prison: how to stick a poster to a wall using toothpaste, and how to take a compliment. "A guy came up to me in the shower and told me I had J-Lo's bottom," says Harris. "I thanked him and walked away." He shaved off his curly chestnut hair to look tougher in front of the other inmates, but his concerns about being bullied were unfounded. If anything, he was, it seems, universally liked by his companions. When his image appeared on the news one evening his fellow inmates cheered, he says. They also expressed bafflement over his three-year sentence. "Meeting a member of the National Front who got the same sentence as me for stabbing a black man in the throat, killing him, made me wonder too," says Harris. He later appealed his sentence on the grounds that Judge Alexander was a fox hunter and Harris was a first-time offender. He was released in August 2007 after 11 months in prison.

## PALPABLE FEAR

David Jentsch, a neurobiologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, who uses vervet monkeys to study the effect of drug addiction on the brain, doesn't think that the punishments imposed on activists are too severe. In March 2009 his car was firebombed, and in November last year he received a parcel containing HIV-tainted razors — with an accompanying threat that his throat would be slashed. Whether psychological or physical in nature, the violence is terrifying, he says. "You feel fear. Real, palpable fear." Harris describes the threats that Jentsch has received as horrendous, but justified. "Vervet monkeys are very intelligent creatures that, like humans, feel psychological fear, so each time David goes into the room they're probably terrified too," he says.

Harris represents a unique brand of animal-rights activist, according to Upton. "He is the only example on record of an animal-rights activist actively contributing to the very thing he was trying to wipe out," says Upton. Harris also operated alone and had a 9-to-5 job. Most animal-rights activists who have broken the law since 2005, says Upton, have been full-time protesters embedded in campaigns. "They were 'career' activists, for whom convictions were an occupational hazard," he says. Harris's brother Thomas fits this profile better. He dropped out of university after a year, and in 2007 took over running SHAC after several of its leaders were imprisoned. He is currently serving a five-year sentence for intimidating companies linked to HLS. Joseph maintains that he never spoke to his brother about his own escapades and that he acted independently of SHAC. He says that he found the members of the organization 'cliquey'.

In some ways, however, Joseph Harris does fit the activist profile: white, middle class and well educated. James Jasper, a sociologist at the City University of New York, studies animal-rights protesters and says that people in this category are more likely to become animal-rights activists because they do not need to fight for their own basic rights, and are therefore at liberty to extend rights to less privileged groups.

"I didn't really think of myself as an animal-rights activist," Harris says now. "I was just doing what I thought was right." Harris has tried to resume a normal life since being released on parole. Initially, he could only find a job driving forklift trucks in Newbury, UK. After eighteen months, however, he persuaded a well-known conservation organization to take him on as an unpaid intern. He asked that they not be named for fear that he might be forced out.

Today, Harris speaks about his past double-life as though it happened a long time ago. He knows he can never return to biomedical research and regrets that he may never be able to do a PhD in conservation. "It's hard to imagine that any professor would take on someone with my past," he says. But he is also unrepentant. Although he was caught, he views his crimes as a success. All three of the companies that he sabotaged pulled out of their contracts with HLS to prevent further attacks. "You can't get much more effective than that," he says. ■ [SEE EDITORIAL P.435](#)

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