

Britain's marijuana mafia: Two million users, £6bn worth of trade and 30,000 deaths. A leading author meets the men (and women) feeding the UK's terrifying addiction

- **A total of 750,000 cannabis plants were recovered by the police in 2009-10**
- **Independent Drug Monitoring Unit says UK consumes 1,000 tons each YEAR**
- **Three joints a day causes similar damage to 20 cigarettes in the same period**

By Wensley Clarkson

Cyril lives in a five-bedroom detached home hidden along an 800-yard drive in the middle of the Kent countryside. A grandfather and a businessman, he revels in the life of a country squire. But Cyril is one of the single most dangerous criminals I came across in my journey through the secret underworld of cannabis or hash. An outwardly respectable, middle-class businessman, he is clearly more than capable of having someone killed. Cyril is a hash 'financier', called upon to help fund major gangland deals. 'My role is to cough up £50k on a Monday and by Friday get £120k back, no questions asked,' he says. 'That's a sweet deal.' Cyril takes me in his gleaming black Bentley Turbo to a nearby lock-up garage, which he opens with an electronic remote control. The door slides up slowly to reveal three chairs, a table and a line of tools. He takes a hacksaw and runs his fingertip slowly along it.



Dangerous delivery: A shipment of hash awaits transportation in a warehouse in southern Spain, bound for destinations around the world

'See that?' he says, picking something from between the tiny teeth. 'That's blood.' He laughs. 'Violence, or the threat of violence, is part of my business. If the other team isn't scared of me, then I'm going to have a problem on my hands.'

He picks up a claw hammer and smashes it down on a wooden worktop, leaving a dent the size of a 50p piece. 'That's what it does to people's faces. Leaves them with a lasting reminder of who you are.' Without a trace of irony, Cyril adds: 'I don't want you making out I am some sort of psycho who gets people topped if they upset me. This is the trade I work in. I am a businessman and hash is a lucrative way for me to earn a living. End of story.'

The illicit trade in cannabis stretches from some of the poorest countries on Earth to middle-class homes in the UK. It is now believed to be the biggest source of income for organised crime around the world. Attracted by staggering profits, an underworld network of gangsters, drug barons, crooked police and even terrorists have made cannabis their contraband of choice. And they have no qualms about using sex, intimidation, bribery and murder to achieve their aims. Cocaine, heroin, LSD and amphetamines all bring devastating consequences but it is no exaggeration to say that cannabis, and in particular hash, its concentrated resin, is the most deadly of them all. It brings a level of violence, illness and addiction that to most people would seem barely credible.

The cannabis industry dwarfs the trade in heroin and cocaine. According to the Serious Organised Crime Agency, around 270 tons of cannabis are consumed every year in Britain, of which 80 per cent is grown here. In comparison, Soca calculates that 23 tons of heroin and 30 tons of cocaine are imported annually, with street values of £2 billion and £3 billion respectively.



Goings on: Inside a Hash farm in the Rif mountains of Morroco where much of the world's hash is produced

Some estimates are higher still. According to the Independent Drug Monitoring Unit, there are up to 2.7 million cannabis users consuming 1,000 tons worth £5.9 billion. This compares with a million users of cocaine and 300,000 of heroin.

The global cannabis trade is reckoned by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to be worth a staggering £200 billion a year.

I have spent a quarter of a century talking to and investigating figures in the underworld here and abroad and my contacts are unrivalled. The more I have come to know about the hash business the more I have come to realise that the risks are just as deadly as for any Class A drugs. I've been told of hitmen paid to kill rival criminals who dared to encroach into another gang's territory. I've travelled from the lawless Rif mountains in Morocco to darkened warehouses in Spain protected by heavily armed gangsters, feeling just as queasy as if I had been in the company of Colombian cocaine dealers or Turkish heroin smugglers. Cannabis is far from 'safe' despite its reputation. Users are six times more likely to suffer from serious mental illness than non-users.

It is also carcinogenic. The British Lung Foundation says smoking three joints a day causes similar damage to smoking 20 cigarettes a day. That would suggest that up to 30,000 people a year contract cannabis-related cancer.



Finished: This typical ready-to-smoke spliff is the type used by many of the 2.7 million cannabis smokers in the UK

Yet such is the demand for the drug that an entirely new industry has cropped up to meet it. Between 2004 and 2007, police detected around 800 illegal cannabis 'farms' each year. This rose to 7,000 by 2009-10. Most produce high-strength herbal 'skunk', but now laboratories have sprung up to make premium-grade hashish. With average prices of £21 per quarter ounce, there is an ever-growing commercial and personal market for cannabis grown here in Britain. That's where The Consultant comes in. He specialises in organising every aspect of a 'home-grow operation' – from the renting of a suitable house to organising the heating, lighting and the right crop to grow.

His clients include people wanting to smoke their own to those who see it as a way to make a living. And his services do not come cheap: for setting up a growing room, there is a flat fee of £3,000. The Consultant takes me to a large semi-detached house in Lewisham, South-East London. In the loft, ultraviolet lights buzz gently. Dozens of seeding cannabis plants, each at least 3ft tall, make the space feel more like a jungle, and the smell is all-consuming.

The Consultant tells me that he grew up surrounded by 'duckers and divers'. For some years in the early 1980s, he was a 'grass' dealer in Chelsea, selling the leaf, rather than the hash resin form of cannabis. Through his dealing, he claims he got to know pop stars and even members of the Royal Family. He fell into growing when his supply dried up. 'I couldn't see anything wrong with it,' he says. 'Surely it's better to do it this way than line the pockets of cold-blooded gangsters who charge a fortune to smuggle the stuff.' He's part of a burgeoning phenomenon. A total of 750,000 cannabis plants were recovered by the police in 2009-10, with the largest concentrations being found in West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. Energy companies calculate that up to £100 million worth of electricity is being stolen to fuel the sophisticated lighting systems needed to encourage the drug to grow. British Gas – now a major supplier of electricity – has formed a special team to tackle the problem.



The Consultant: Inside a 'home grown' hash factory in the suburbs of London where cannabis plants are tended to

At the retail end of the supply trade, Micky cuts up a '9 bar' – the slang term for a nine-ounce block of hash – in an East End lock-up. He smokes a large joint as he works, carefully cutting down the large block into smaller chunks which he weighs on a set of digital scales and then wraps in cellophane. Micky always sticks to the speed limit as he drives his respectable Audi estate through the London streets. He doesn't want to get pulled over by police.

'Stay put,' he says, opening the lid of the armrest between us and removing a tightly wrapped ounce brick of hash. 'Won't be long.'

I watch as he climbs the steps to a large, period terrace house. Through the property's big bay window, I notice a group of people sitting at a table – obviously the host is holding a dinner party. I see a man leading Micky in. He places the hash on the table before leaving.

'I hate it when a customer tries to show me off like that,' he says back in the car. 'When you drop cocaine off with a punter, they try to keep it hush-hush. Hash users think it's as normal as having a cup of tea.' Micky, a 29-year-old East Londoner, comes from a long line of villains – his father was a chauffeur for the Kray twins. He operates out of a swish apartment close to Canary Wharf, and his customers range from lawyers to film stars to builders. 'That's the thing about hash – it crosses the class divide,' he says. Indeed, many people I know shrug their shoulders at the mere mention of hash as if it is barely worth anyone's attention. Their attitude sums up perfectly the way this illicit industry has been allowed to balloon into a multi-billion-dollar network. But even at the civilised end of the market, where well-heeled British clients buy their hash from amiable dealers, you are never more than a step away from vicious gangs. Tom is a former public schoolboy from Berkshire who nurtures a loyal set of customers who only ever buy hash from him. 'I'm a professional hash dealer,' he says. 'I have made a decent living for more than 30 years because I am trusted. I also believe my hash is healthy. There is nothing chemical in the hash I sell.'

Tom claims to have numerous celebrity clients and says he is often flown across continents with hash for tycoons. 'My business relies solely on word of mouth,' he says. 'The rich and sometimes famous people I supply put a good word in

to their chums. I've got at least ten customers I've supplied throughout the 30 years I've been in this business. I reckon that's unique.'

Two weeks before we met, Tom flew to Tibet to inspect a £10,000 shipment of finest Himalayan hash before it was smuggled into Europe, paid for by a client who belongs to one of the world's most famous banking families. 'My customers don't want to know about the other side of this business,' Tom says. 'I think they imagine I only ever deal with nice, smiley- smiley farmers who give me a hug and slab of hash and then we're on our way. 'Of course that is utter b*****s. I have to deal with some really horrible characters, the ones who shift the hash to the UK.



The Consultant: Londoner Micky (pictured) whose father was a driver for the Krays and who sells to film stars and builders alike

'The only problem with supplying a range of hash is that I have to deal with a different set of gangsters for each brand: North London Turks who smuggle the best hash from Afghanistan; West London Sikhs bringing it in from Nepal; and a gang of French mafia importing from Morocco.'

Tom predicts an uncertain future for the UK underworld. 'Soon it's going to be crawling with so many bloody foreigners that the police are going to lose control and it will be like living back in Victorian times with crooks and pimps on every street corner trying to make a quid. A lot of these people from abroad are much more desperate for cash than the Brits.

'The cities will soon be overflowing with them and that's when the real problems will begin.' It's not just those users and gangsters who die at gunpoint or whose lives are ruined by cannabis. Besides the barons, dealers and smugglers, there is an army of 'part-timers' who often pay the ultimate price for their involvement. These are the mules – characters who often risk their own lives and liberty in a desperate bid to make a few thousand pounds. Every year dozens of people are either arrested or die after swallowing balls of hash tightly packed in plastic. These so-called 'eggs' usually hold about five grams of hash apiece. And most mules are expected to swallow around 50 of them at a time.



Preparations: Hash just about to be rolled into a joint - part of an industry which is now worth £5.9 billion

Many are forced into it by human traffickers and other criminals. Others are students hoping to make some extra money by re-selling the hash once they get home. The first time Jane worked as a mule was when she was a penniless 18-year-old student in Tangier needing money to get home to Birmingham. She swallowed 30 pellets of hash in exchange for £1,000 and made it back to the UK to deliver it, even though one of the pellets burst in her stomach.

Now a nurse in her mid-30s, Jane has revived her career as a mule to support her family. Since 2010, she has returned three times to her Moroccan lover in Tangier. Each time she swallows hash pellets before the journey home. She says: 'My husband lost his job and my salary doesn't cover the costs of bringing up my family. And, if I'm honest, I liked escaping the drudgery of my life and meeting my lover. 'If a bag bursts inside me it might kill me. If I get arrested I'll end up in prison. Either way, I will lose my family and destroy them.'

Away from the chaotic, low-reward world of amateur mules such as Jane, there are a number of 'professionals'. I was introduced to Perry and Dev by one of Essex's most notorious criminals. Perry and Dev are what are known in the trade as 'do-it-yourself-merchants'. They buy hash in Spain from one specific supplier, then Perry 'mules' it to the UK and they distribute it.



Going underground: Perry and Dev run a small time hash smuggling operation from Spain to Essex

Perry explains that he takes a budget airline flight from southern Spain with the tightly packed bricks of hash taped round his waist. The hash itself is triple-packed in cellophane so that it does not smell and then smothered in hair conditioner to put sniffer dogs off the scent.

Perry lays out 15 bricks of hash on the table in front of him and I casually ask him the street value of what he has just smuggled through. 'They're worth two grand a brick so that makes £30,000 once we've sold it all to our customers.' So how much did Perry pay for it in Spain? 'Hundred and fifty quid a block,' he says. 'Not a bad little earner, eh?' Foreigners – mainly eastern Europeans – are accused of more than a quarter of all crimes committed in the UK. Astonishingly, they also make up nine out of ten drug suspects and are responsible for more than a third of sex offences.

The figures back up fears of an immigrant crime-wave and officials believe that it's not helped by the ease with which so many eastern Europeans are able to get into Britain with false identities which hide their criminal past. Nowhere illustrates this problem more than Albania. The collapse of law and order in that country has created a criminal element feared even by the Italian mafia.

I meet Albanian hash baron, Ivan, through a British gangster called Jerry. He warns me in advance that Ivan is 'a right nutter' before adding: 'They are the maddest, baddest people I've ever met. Step out of line and they murder you.'



Head honcho: Moroccan hash kingpin Leff, who owns and runs a hash farm in the Rif Mountains

'The Albanians are the ones we all fear. They've got a stranglehold on virtually all the hash that comes in from the countries east of Albania. You cross them at your peril.'

At a meeting in a pub near Braintree, Essex, Ivan tells me: 'I come from a long line of smugglers. My family controlled everything that went in and out of the area. That's how we make our living. We charge people to bring their drugs through our territory. Why not?'

'I live in the UK half the year, using a different identity because I spent some time in prison in Albania. I like the life in England but I also like to be back in Albania to make sure my friends do their jobs properly.' He smiles. 'I have two wives in the UK and two in Albania. It's perfect. Most men would like to have my life, I am sure.' But why hash? 'Because more people use hash than anything else, my friend. It's just another commodity to us. Hash, coke, people – we will bring anything in if there is a demand for it. But hash is the biggest business, so we make sure we control it. It's not easy but I have many friends in high places so I can always get my shipments through without any problems.'

The easy availability of high-quality home-grown cannabis is fuelling the problem in Britain and matters are only going to get worse. Some estimates predict that the number of cannabis smokers in this country will double within 20 years. Britain is, in the words of one law enforcement official, 'a very lively marketplace for hash'. But that is an understatement. We are in the grip of an epidemic and it will take more than an increase in domestic production to stem the tide of ruthless gangsters drawn to our shores by this lucrative trade. Robert, my contact in UK customs, says: 'Countries such as the UK are being swamped with four times the amount of hash that used to come in as gangs of foreign criminals try to create huge markets out of substandard, dangerously cut drugs, and that includes hash.'

In a chilling postscript, he says the authorities have little or no chance of cracking these operations. 'The police and other authorities rely on informants, but it's getting harder and harder to infiltrate these criminal gangs. Informers are few and far between and gangs from eastern Europe are so ruthless, other criminals dare not cross them.'

Names have been changed to protect identities.

- Hash by Wensley Clarkson is published by Quercus, priced £10. To order your copy at the special price of £9 with free p&p, call the Mail Book Shop on 0844 472 4157 or visit mailbookshop.co.uk.