Jeremy Bamber has spent 25 years behind bars for murdering his family. He has always denied he did it — and believes shocking new evidence could prove his innocence. For the first time the Ministry of Justice has allowed him to give a face-to-face interview. David James Smith visits him at his high-security prison to unravel the truth behind that fateful night.

Cover Story  The Bamber murders

AND BY DAWN THEY WERE ALL DEAD
The victims, right: Jeremy Bamber’s sister, Sheila, known as Bambi. Left: his parents, Nevill and June. Far left: Sheila’s twin boys, Daniel (left) and Nicholas.
Tuesday was not a normal day for ordinary visitors, so the visiting room at HMP Full Sutton, a high-security prison just outside York, was deserted as the door opened at the far end of the room and a lone prisoner entered. I had been offered any seat in the house, but had already decided we would sit in the private conference room just off the main area, with the low table and the chairs — all bolted to the floor.

Jeremy Bamber is nervous, a faint tremor visible as we shake hands and say hello. Not surprising really. It has taken months to reach this moment, and I have jumped through many hoops to make it happen, layer after layer of permissions have been necessary, up through the highest echelons of government. Now it is finally on, and Bamber has one chance over the next few hours to make his case as an innocent man, as is his right, in the proper circumstances, as a convicted prisoner claiming to be the victim of a miscarriage of justice. Bamber has protested his innocence from the moment of his arrest 25 years ago, but only now has the Ministry of Justice allowed him to give a face-to-face interview in prison, while the Criminal Cases Review Commission considers whether he should be allowed a new appeal.

Many prisoners claim to be innocent, and some are, of course, but not most of them. Bamber is unique. He is one of only 38 convicted killers in the country who have been given a whole-life tariff, which means they will never be released. There are some familiar names on the list: Ian Brady, Donald Neilson, Rosemary West, Levi Bellfield, Peter Tobin... and Jeremy Bamber. So far as I can ascertain, he is the only one of the 38 who claims to be innocent.

He just passed a remarkable milestone. As of last autumn, he has now spent more time in prison than out of it. He was 24 when he first went into custody, in autumn 1985. Now he has spent nearly 25 years locked up, most of them as a Category-A high-risk prisoner, of which more later.

Was that milestone a significant moment for him? "It was not a day I marked," he says drily. I ask what he misses from outside and he says, eyes welling with tears, that he doesn't know because he has forgotten what outside was like. He has served his sentence one day at a time, he says, because that is the only way you can, working in the Braille shop, translating books for the blind (the last book, about a transported convict, made him cry) and teaching literacy to fellow prisoners. The dehumanising effect of prison can be mind-numbing, he says eloquently, in a sudden burst of articulacy that reminds you of his middle-class origins and his days as a boarder at Gresham's public school. Not an ordinary prisoner, not an ordinary man. He was convicted of murdering his entire immediate family, all five of them, including two small boys, the twins. The day I visited him, weirdly, would have been their 31st birthdays.

He will be 50 in January and looks his age, in sharp contrast to the fine-boned, haughty youth in photographs of 25 years ago. He is jowly, porky, his hair tinged with grey. His upper body muscles suggest years of lifting weights in prison gyms, but his general appearance is sagged, middle-aged and tired. He wears baggy blue denim, black trainers and a red Lonsdale T-shirt. He has brought with him three folders from his precious box of 35 folders that contain the key elements of his case for innocence.

That box is culled from two floor-to-ceiling towers of boxes that he keeps in his cell. About 100,000 pieces of A4, he reckons. There are many more thousands with his supporters on the outside. He has a small band of very loyal supporters, some of them women, who have come over to his cause.

Right then. Deep breath. This won’t be pretty. This is what happened, that night, the night of August 6, 1985, a quarter of a century ago.

Bamber called the Essex police in the early hours of August 7. He did not dial 999, but rang through to the local station at Chelmsford, at around half-three.

“You’ve got to help me,” he said. “My father has rung me and said, ‘Please come over. Your sister has gone crazy and has got the gun.’”

Then the line went dead. Jeremy said he tried calling back but could not get a reply.

The Bambers were wealthy arable farmers in the Essex village of Tolleshunt D’Arcy. Jeremy’s parents, Nevill and June, lived at White House Farm, and were being visited that weekend by their daughter, Sheila, from London, with her six-year-old twins, Nicholas and Daniel. Sheila had been treated for depression and recently diagnosed with schizophrenia. Her mother had been treated for depression, too. At different times they had been patients at the same private psychiatric hospital. June had a bit of religious mania and upset the twins’ father, Colin Caffell, by regularly making the boys kneel and pray...
WHILE BAMBER BEGAN LIVING IT LARGE AFTER THE KILLINGS, HIS RELATIVES QUICKLY BECAME SUSPICIOUS. THEY WATCHED HIM CAREFULLY FOR SIGNS OF SUSPECT BEHAVIOUR

with her. Sheila, too, was sometimes intensely religious and could be delusional, her illness sometimes leading to angry or violent outbursts.

Sheila had worked a little as a model and was known as Bambi. She and Jeremy were adopted, from different natural parents. They both had awkward relationships with Nevill and June, Jeremy sometimes seeming lazy and grasping. Sheila and Jeremy did not always get on, but could be close, and Jeremy told me how they had smoked dope together at a party just a few days before the deaths. He had not known then, he said, of the link between cannabis and schizophrenia, or the effect of the former on the latter. He has had plenty of time, since, in prison, he said, to observe schizophrenics at close quarters. He himself has never had any diagnosis of anything untoward. He is not a psychopath, he does not have any notable personality disorders. Either he is exceptionally — impossibly? — clever and manipulative and has fooled every expert for 25 years, or he is, as he claims, just like the rest of us.

Jeremy had been with his family at the farm earlier that evening. He had taken a gun outside the house to shoot some rabbits, but the rabbits had scarpered, so he had returned to the house and left the .22 Anschutz rifle — the murder weapon — propped against a wall inside when he went home to the nearby village of Goldhanger, where he lived in a house owned by his parents.

The police turned out in response to his call and firearms officers were called. The first patrol car overtook Jeremy driving more slowly along the road to the farm. The telephone receiver was off the hook and BT was able to open the line to the house. All they could hear at that stage was a dog barking.

The police finally went in through the kitchen at 7.45am. The first body they found there was Nevill’s, still wearing his pyjamas. He had been shot eight times and his further injuries and the disarray in the room suggested there must have been a life-and-death struggle between him and his killer. He was in a chair, slumped forward, his head at rest in the coal scuttle. Upstairs, the twins had been shot in the room they shared together. Five bullets in the back of the head to Daniel and three to Nicholas.

June was on her bed in the main bedroom, in her nightdress. She had been shot seven times, twice in the head, at least some of the wounds while she was upright. There was a lot of blood. On the floor beside her was Sheila, also in her nightdress. She had two wounds to her throat. There was a Bible on the floor next to her. The rifle lay across her chest, pointing up at her throat.

Nobody was ever able to say in what order the victims had died, but everything about the scene suggested Sheila had shot her family — all except Jeremy — and then herself. That was what the officer in charge of the initial inquiry, DCI Taff Jones, believed from the outset and continued to believe to the exclusion of all else.

Jones conducted a bare minimum of forensic inquiry and returned the house keys to the family after two days so that Jeremy’s cousins David Boutflour and Ann Eaton could go in and have a clean-up. David and Ann’s father, Robert, was there too that day. He was married to June Bamber’s sister Pamela. (Robert is now in his nineties and suffering from Alzheimer’s.) Nowadays, of course, the property would be sealed for weeks and the forensic inquiries would be painstaking, but in the 1980s, senior officers were often a law unto themselves, and once they — some of them — had made their minds up, that was that. It was, Bamber pointed out to me, the days of Life on Mars, the drama that depicted the bad old ways of policing. (He has seen the show on TV in prison, and loves it.)

For many years Bamber has hinted at what he is now overtly claiming. He told me he believes his cousins, motivated by the £400,000 estate, manufactured evidence against him, perjured themselves in court and conspired with the police to have him convicted and do him out of his inheritance. Bamber was disinherited on conviction and the estate passed to the Boutflours. He believes David Boutflour might “admit” his part in this conspiracy and wrote to him not long ago asking him to “play the white man” and be honest about 

BAMBER BEGAN LIVING IT LARGE AFTER THE KILLINGS, HIS RELATIVES QUICKLY BECAME SUSPICIOUS. THEY WATCHED HIM CAREFULLY FOR SIGNS OF SUSPECT BEHAVIOUR
what had happened. Boutflour ignored the letter and insisted to me when we met that there was no conspiracy, no perjuring, no fit-up.

Ann Eaton moved into the farm not long after the murders and still lives there with her family. Bamber told me he thought she was a “sick puppy” for doing that. Eaton would not talk to me for this article — indeed, after I wrote her a polite letter I received a “warning” call from an Essex police detective superintendent asking me to leave her alone, which I did — but David Boutflour was generous and spoke to me at length. It is clear he doesn’t understand his sister’s actions either. How could she? Boutflour told me he knew Ann’s children had suffered nightmares. As well you might. Bamber said she was “as cold as ice”.

At the very least, the killings created lasting schisms across the family, mostly to do with money and inheritance. A third, more distant cousin, Anthony Pargeter, has waged his own long legal struggle against the estate, to claim what he believes is his share. I was told he had suffered his own mental anguish as a result.

Bamber was downgraded some years ago from a Category-A prisoner to Category-B, meaning he was not such a risk of escape and his conditions could be slightly relaxed. He was upgraded again to Cat-A, apparently after his cousins complained, having received guidance from Essex police on how they might make their feelings about his change of status known. It was apparent he feels very resentful about that. Of course the police advice might be seen as perfectly proper, but Bamber insists the cousins were simply being vindictive.

While Bamber began living it large after the killings, spending money on holidays, meals and drinks for him and his girlfriend, 21-year-old Julie Mugford, and other friends, his relatives — Ann, David and their father, Robert — quickly became suspicious. They doubted Sheila was capable of the shootings and watched Bamber carefully for signs of suspect behaviour, imagining all kinds of fancy theories about how he might have got to and from the farm undetected, using a bicycle to get there and a small unlatched window to gain entry.

During the clean-up on August 10, by his own account David Boutflour picked up some ammunition that was lying around and went to return it to the gun cupboard where he found hidden away the sound moderator — we can call it the “silencer” — of the murder weapon. It was sticky as if it had been hurriedly cleaned, and appeared to show spots of blood and flecks of red paint, and a single hair.

Boutflour told me: “I remember some things like it was yesterday. I remember finding the silencer. He’s suggesting that we fraudulently shoved the paint and the blood in to make it appear he had done it. Well, that’s a load of rubbish. What would be the point? There was enough evidence anyway. What an absolute load of piffle.”

The Boutflours did not call the police as soon as the find was made, but took the silencer back to Ann Eaton’s home. The police were eventually notified, and did finally collect it, two days later. The officer recalled seeing the hair, but didn’t know what happened to it. It vanished. Eventually, the silencer was sent for forensic examination.

The blood evidence was inconclusive, but the paint matched the underside of the shelf above the Aga in the kitchen. There were fresh scratches on the shelf, so it seemed likely the silencer had been on the gun during the struggle between Nevill and his killer. If the silencer was on the gun at the time of the shootings, the gun became too long for Sheila to put the nozzle at her throat and still reach the trigger. It was not credible to imagine her killing everyone else before removing the silencer, going downstairs, putting the silencer back in the cupboard, going back up to the bedroom and then shooting herself. If the silencer was genuine evidence, the killer could not have been Sheila, Bamber’s story of the phone call was a lie, and he must have been the killer.

Bamber’s relationship with Mugford came under strain and they split up. A month after the killings, Mugford was having a heart-to-heart with a girlfriend, Lizzie Rimington, who told her what a rogue Jeremy was, as he had slept with her while he was with Mugford. That night, as Mugford admitted in court, she tried to smother Bamber with a pillow, ready to kill him. The next day she went to the police and told them he had hired a hit man to carry out the killings. The hit man was a local character and soon dismissed with an alibi.

Mugford was interviewed about 30 times and later testified in court — and in an article in the News of the World for which she was alleged to have been paid £25,000 — that Bamber had told her before and after of what he intended to do and had done. He had called her that night — "tonight's the night" — around the time he had called the police. He said he had called her to tell her about the distressing call from his father.
There was no evidence to support his claim that the call from his father had ever been made. It was his word against the prosecution’s.

Bamber, of course, argued that Mugford was motivated by revenge, but the jury must have believed her too, in spite of her own history of dishonesty: she had carried out a cheque fraud with a girlfriend, helped Jeremy in the bizarre burglary of the family caravan park he co-owned, and participated in his small-time growing and selling of cannabis — a bit of petty crime that was unknown to the police.

Bamber was convicted on a majority verdict after two days of deliberation by the jury. He has campaigned relentlessly ever since, failed at two appeals and at any number of attempts to succeed in complaints’ inquiries against the police. He is now awaiting a response from the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which could give him one more chance at the court of appeal, if they think his case has merit. The commission is still ploughing through Bamber’s many recent submissions, and cannot say when it will produce its findings, but it could be in the next few weeks.

Julie Mugford moved to Canada and turned her life around. She became a teacher and is now a senior official in a regional education authority. She did not respond when I invited her to talk to me. Jeremy told me he has never written to her and asked her to “play the white woman”.

Tears again welled in his eyes as he said he had not deserved what she had done to him. “She should never have gone to the police, but she didn’t know what she was doing. She didn’t realise the consequences of making those allegations and starting the ball rolling.”

He believes once she had started she couldn’t stop and had to keep the lies going. Of course he calls them lies, but the jury seems to have accepted them as the truth.

“I’ve lived with people for 25 years now who have killed people and attacked people and done awful, awful things for so little. Because people’s emotions when you’re talking about love… Julie had always said to me, if you sleep with Lizzie, I’ll kill you.”

Bamber told me that after his initial arrest the senior officer Taff Jones came to him and said, “that Julie’s full of shit”. Bamber thought he would be able to go and speak to Julie. “I thought I’d say to her, what was all that about? I didn’t realise I’d so upset you that you’d be prepared to lie. But she had gone into protective custody by then, and once I’d come to jail I knew that she would never, ever go back, as everything, all her career, her whole life in Canada would come crashing down for the lies she could never go back on.”

Jones sounds a marvellous character, straight out of central casting. When David Boutflour, Ann Eaton and Anthony Pargeter went to raise their suspicions of Bamber with him, he was having none of it. Eaton was dubbed an interfering Miss Marple. Boutflour recalled the meeting for me and how Pargeter had said they really weren’t pointing the finger at...
anybody, but they didn’t think it was Sheila, and Jones had stood up and said, I’m not listening to this rubbish, out you go! Eaton had persisted and he had again stood up, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. He wasn’t going to listen to a lot of old nonsense.

Some junior detectives doubted it was Sheila, but they couldn’t speak to Jones either. Eventually he was effectively overruled and other senior officers took charge. Jones went home and was up a ladder doing house repairs when he fell and suffered injuries that eventually led to his death, on May 11, 1986. It’s more than a little coincidental that the only officer who always believed Bamber’s account of events should have died in a freak accident, but there is nothing obviously untoward in the incident, which I investigated thoroughly. It was without doubt a genuine accident, as the inquest into Jones’s death confirmed.

About 10 months ago, Bamber was poring over a particular crime-scene photograph in his cell. He suddenly wondered why he had never seen flecks of red paint on the floor around the Aga, beneath the scratches supposedly made on the shelf above the cooker during the struggle that led to his father’s death. He and a fellow prisoner — “he would love me to name him, but I’m not going to” — carried out some tests of their own on a red-painted footrest in the workshop, using a sharp edge to make a scratch and of course sending a shower of paint flecks to the floor. “I said, ‘Look, you can’t miss them, even if it is just one … but there’s not a single one in these photographs.’”

If there were no paint flecks beneath the Aga, what did that mean? It could mean that no scratch had been made at the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely what that meant? It could mean that no scratch had been made at the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?

He needed the photographs examined by an expert, so his solicitor, Barry Woods, called Kodak, and they said he wanted Peter Sutherst, who had written the police manual on crime-scene photography. Sutherst had calculated precisely the time the photograph was taken, immediately after the killings. But there were definitely scratches later, so who had made them and when, if not the killer, during the struggle?