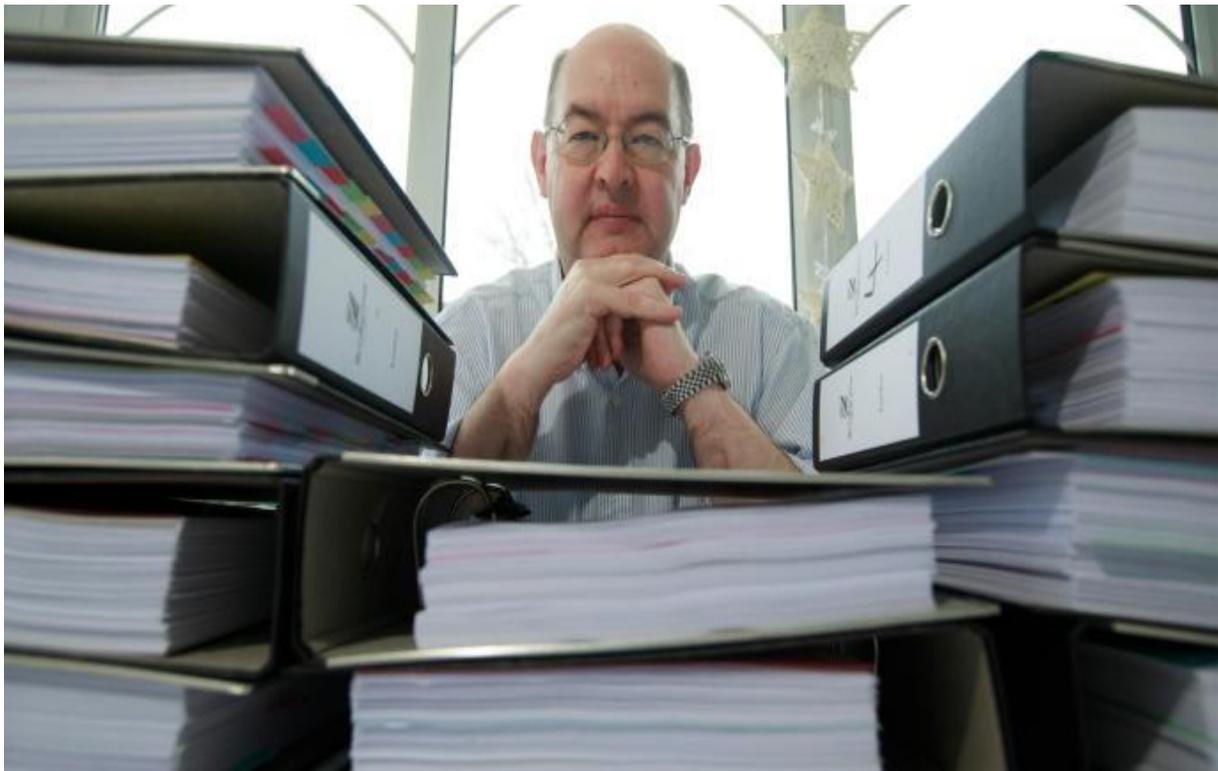


# Banks ‘forging signatures on industrial scale’

[James Hurley](#), Enterprise Editor

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Julian Watts claims forged signatures appear on documents used in court proceedings for disputes and repossessions

If Julian Watts is a conspiracy theorist, as his detractors would have you believe, he doesn't exactly look the part. The former consultant, once an adviser to bosses of international companies, has the considered air of a regional accountant rather than someone who has taken leave of his senses.

Yet the otherwise mild-mannered Mr Watts, 56, has some extraordinary allegations to make. "The inconvenient truth," he says, "is that several UK banks are engaged in persistent, serious organised crime against the public."

From a bedroom in his modest family home in Guildford, Surrey, Mr Watts has been working around the clock for the past year or so to compile evidence that he claims suggests that banks and other financial firms are falsifying documents.



Joanne Harris  
Complaints Site Manager



Lynne Bulmer  
Mortgage Solutions Manager

The same signature appeared on documents in the names of Yorkshire Building Society employees Joanne Harris and Lynne Bulmer

He alleges that his documents show they are forging signatures, including on papers used in court proceedings for cases such as small business disputes and mortgage repossessions.

So far his “bank signature forgery campaign” has produced 11 files of evidence. From these carefully indexed dossiers, he has compiled 136 separate “crime reports”, each relating to a distinct case of alleged signature forgery or document manipulation.

His claims are denied by the banks, yet he isn’t entirely out on a limb. Anthony Stansfeld, police and crime commissioner for Thames Valley, called the evidence “overwhelming”. Steve Baker, a Conservative MP and former member of the Treasury committee, said the files suggested that, at some banks, “anyone is signing” key documents, prompting concerns that home repossessions may have amounted to “fraudulent transactions”.

Mr Watts believes what he has collated is the “snowflake on the tip of the iceberg”. In a similar scandal in the United States five banks, including JP Morgan Chase, Citigroup and Bank of America, were fined \$25 billion after defective or forged documents were used as the basis for home foreclosures.

About four million court cases against customers were reviewed after a [“Linda Green”](#) apparently signed hundreds of thousands of court papers. Her name had been forged by employees of a company called DocX. The fines, the largest consumer protection settlement in American history, were the result of an investigation by all 50 state attorneys-general.

At the request of the Treasury committee, Mr Watts’ files were passed to the National Crime Agency last year, which in turn gave them to the Financial Conduct Authority and the Serious Fraud Office. No formal investigation has been launched. “This is a serious issue in the UK banking system which the Americans have fixed. The UK has to go and fix it,” Mr Watts said.

Mr Watts stumbled across the emerging scandal while going through court documents relating to a repossession of his wife's home by Lloyds in 2010. He discussed the issue with a friend who had been through a similar experience and when they went through his files he discovered examples of allegedly suspicious signatures.

A former editor of a business journal published by John Wiley on process management, Mr Watts began to wonder if banks had hit on a way to reduce the costs of document processing.

“Debt recovery is a cost to them. It's a high-volume business process that they want to run at the lowest possible cost. They are pumping as much through in the shortest possible time.”

What's the problem with that? “No one is checking anything.”

Mr Watts began to invite anyone who suspected that something was amiss with their bank documents to send them to him. Since most customers see only one signature, they generally have nothing to compare it with.

“This only gets discovered when someone aggregates it. And who would do that apart from a process management guy? And here I am.”

Mr Watts has come up with some surprising evidence. For example, one signature he has discovered has been used under the name of at least three different Lloyds Banking Group workers, as well as at least two staff in a different institution, Yorkshire Building Society. Another signature has been found under the names of up to ten Lloyds employees, including on legal documents, Mr Watts claims.

There are also examples of the opposite issue; markedly different signatures, sometimes handwritten, being recorded against the same name, including on legal documents and those used in court proceedings, he alleges.



Anthony Stansfeld, police and crime commissioner for Thames Valley, called the evidence “overwhelming”

Even customers' signatures may have been manipulated, Mr Watts claims. In one case, a witness signature has been produced by Lloyds for a customer's personal guarantee dated when the purported witness insists they had stopped working for the company concerned. Flight tickets suggest that the individual was overseas at the time.

Along with Lloyds, Royal Bank of Scotland regularly features in the files, Mr Watts says. However, the issue appears to be close to industry-wide, he claims. "You might be taken to court on the basis of a contract with a false signature on it."

The work is exhausting and emotionally draining and comes at a personal cost, he says. He and his wife Helen, 56, a part-time teaching assistant, are on modest means. "It's a massive strain." So why put himself through it? "If we don't do something, other people are going to be stuffed. It's a moral obligation."

Mr Watts insists he won't rest until his claims are thoroughly investigated. "If someone did this to a bank, they would go to prison for a very long time. This is about people in [banks] doing this to customers and equally they should go to prison. The only thing we are focused on is getting there."

#### **'Evidence of fraud is clear'**

Allegations that some of Britain's big banks may have been involved in the forging of signatures and documents are shocking (Anthony Stansfeld writes).

Executive boards and chairmen have been well aware of this from the many who have written to them laying out the detail. Their non-executive boards also should have been aware, yet have been supine and taken no action.

I am concerned that there appears to be overwhelming evidence of large-scale document manipulation and signature fraud and yet no one has been held to account, no one has resigned and no one has been sacked.

Authorities, such as the Serious Fraud Office, the Financial Conduct Authority and the National Crime Agency, have been aware of the situation for several months, if not years, and again no action has been taken.

This cannot go on. A royal commission should be set up to investigate not only the banks involved but also those third parties who may have colluded.

The UK needs a profitable and honest banking system. The two are not incompatible.  
*Anthony Stansfeld is the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner*