# Friends caught smuggling cannabis return from shopping trip



Sophie Bannister and Levi-April Whalley, both 30 years old and originally from Blackburn, appeared in Preston Crown Court on April 2, 2024, following their arrest at Birmingham International Airport for attempting to smuggle a substantial amount of cannabis into the UK. The two friends, who had just returned from a purported three-day shopping trip to New York City, were found to be in possession of over 35 kilograms of cannabis, valued at approximately £162,000.

Upon their arrival at Birmingham International Airport on December 9, 2023, after a layover at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, the women drew the attention of Border Force officers. Initially, they claimed that their luggage contained shopping items. However, upon inspection, authorities discovered 34 heat-sealed packages containing 16.5 kg of cannabis in Bannister's suitcase, while Whalley's bag held 39 packages with 19 kg of the drug.

The women later pleaded guilty to charges of fraudulent evasion of a prohibition. During the court proceedings, it was revealed that they had communicated via text messages about their illicit plan to import cannabis, with expectations of substantial financial gain from their actions.

Whalley, who worked as a nurse prior to her suspension after the incident, suggested to officials that she believed the packages contained watches. However, both women admitted that they understood the legality of their actions. The court heard statements indicating that they had been vulnerable to exploitation, exacerbated by personal and financial challenges.

Judge Richard Archer, in his sentencing remarks, elaborated on the gravity of their actions, stating, "You were both aware that having travelled from New York to Birmingham via Paris that you had in your respective suitcases a significant quantity of heat sealed bags, containing 35.5 kg of cannabis." He noted that this was not personal possession but rather cannabis they were transporting on behalf of another party, with the expectation of a financial reward.

Bannister was sentenced to 20 months in prison, suspended for 18 months, which includes a requirement for 30 days of rehabilitation activities and 200 hours of unpaid community service. Whalley received a 16-month suspended sentence, also for 18 months, along with 10 days of rehabilitation and 80 hours of community service.

Following the court ruling, Bannister took to social media to reflect on the experience, expressing gratitude to those who supported them through what she described as "15 months of torture" and discussing the strong bond of friendship that had developed through their difficulties. She stated, "Finally some closure and moving forward with our life. Ready for the biggest fresh start and realising how important freedom really is."

Both women were reported to have no prior criminal history since their arrest and are now looking to rebuild their lives post-sentencing.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-border-force/about> - UK Border Force is responsible for policing the UK's border and stopping illegal goods, which aligns with the role they played in discovering the cannabis at the airport.
* <https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/court-lists/crown-courts/preston-crown-court> - This link refers to the Preston Crown Court where Sophie Bannister and Levi-April Whalley appeared, corroborating the location of their trial.
* <https://www.birminghamairport.co.uk/> - Birmingham Airport is where the women were arrested, making it a key location in their case.
* <https://www.charlesdegaulle-airport.com/en/> - Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris was their layover point, which is relevant to their travel itinerary.
* <https://www.visitnewyorkcity.com/> - New York City was where they had traveled for a purported three-day shopping trip before their arrest.
* <https://www.nhs.uk/careers/working-as-a-nurse/> - This link pertains to nursing careers, which is relevant to Levi-April Whalley's background as a nurse before her suspension.
* <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/said-theyd-been-shopping-new-31338221> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14564939/drug-smugglers-kg-cannabis-luggage-UK-shopping-New-York.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data