

# Rags to riches: ex-wife claims hippy's fortune 23 years later

Frances Gibb Legal Editor

Thousands of divorced wives are expected to revive old legal battles after Britain's highest court said that a woman can claim against her multimillionaire ex-husband 23 years later.

In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court backed the right of Kathleen Wyatt to be able to seek a financial settlement from her husband, a New Age hippy turned green energy tycoon, who amassed his £107 million fortune after the couple divorced.

Ms Wyatt, 55, married Dale Vince, now 53, when they were penniless hippy travellers in 1981. They had a son but separated in 1984 and divorced in 1992. Ms Wyatt already had another son before she met Mr Vince and went on to have two more children after the couple split.

real prospect she will secure a comparatively modest award, perhaps of a size enabling her to purchase a somewhat more comfortable mortgage-free home.

Mr Vince, who faces paying his wife's legal costs, likely to top £1 million, condemned the ruling as "mad". "I am disappointed that the Supreme Court has decided not to bring this case to an end now, over 30 years since the relationship ended," he said. "We both moved on and started families of our own. It has been so long that there are no records, no court has kept anything and it's hard to defend yourself in such circumstances. "I feel we all have a right to move on and not be looking over our shoulders," he said, adding that the ruling signalled "open season" for those who had brief relationships a quarter of a century ago.

Ms Wyatt hailed the decision as "important". However Hannah Budd, of the firm International Family Law Group, said that for many people it would be "truly terrifying". "There is now the prospect of their ex-wives or ex-husbands knocking on the door decades after their separation, seeking financial support."

Mr Vince, a vegan eco-warrior, was described as a "most improbable candidate for affluence". But in his lead ruling Lord Wilson said that he had "achieved brilliant success and is clearly a remarkable man."

Mr Vince, who lives in a £3 million 18th century fort, near Stroud, Gloucestershire, with his new wife and their son, owns Gloucestershire's Forest Green Rovers football club, where he has banned red meat, and installed an organic pitch.

Ms Wyatt says that she is so poor that she has been travelling to the court hearings from her home in Monmouthshire by bus, and has been sleeping in a bus station.

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YOU OWE ME BIG TIME, HENRY

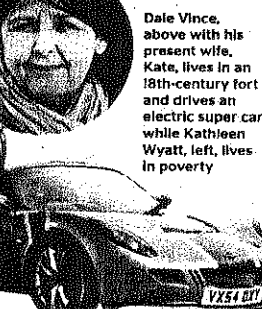


Mr Vince subsequently founded one of the country's biggest green energy companies, Ecotricity, in 1995. Sixteen years later Ms Wyatt lodged her claim.

Five Supreme Court justices ruled yesterday that despite the length of time that has elapsed, she should be free to argue her claim for £1.9 million because the couple never reached a financial settlement. The judges also took into account the contribution made by Ms Wyatt towards "the welfare of the family" by caring for the couple's son after they split.

However they cautioned Ms Wyatt that she would at best secure a "modest award" as the couple were only together for three years and the marriage broke down 31 years ago. Mr Vince, they conceded, did not start to create his wealth until 13 years after they split.

Lord Wilson, who announced the decision, said: "Her claim may even be dismissed but there is, in our opinion, a



Dale Vince, above with his present wife, Kate, lives in an 18th-century fort and drives an electric super car while Kathleen Wyatt, left, lives in poverty

## Judge who stands test of time

### Profile

Lord Justice Wilson, who gave the lead ruling in yesterday's case, is a liberal who puts life's realities before issues of high moral principle (Frances Gibb writes).

A year ago he caused a stir with a speech in Belfast, when he spoke of marriage as an elastic concept, saying that the modern-day "blended family" resulting from divorce and new relationships often replaced the "nuclear family".

Divorce and remarriage had led to many step-families and

relationships of the half-blood", he said. "I am not convinced that it is a bad thing; might it not be healthier for children to learn at a very early age to cope with relationships in a mixed and wider family group?"

As a family barrister and family High Court judge, he is well regarded in professional circles and is popular with his colleagues.

A great raconteur with a booming voice, he loves horseracing and has owned runners. He married his wife, Margaret, in 1974 and they have a son and a daughter.

The 69-year-old judge joined the Supreme Court in

2011. Outside family law he made his mark with a trenchant lead judgment in which the Supreme Court ruled by four to three that former members of the armed forces exposed to nuclear radiation in the 1950s could not proceed with claims for damages against the MoD because the cases were brought out of time.

Yesterday, with the support of his colleagues Baroness Hale of Richmond and Lord Justices Clarke, Wilson, Hughes and Hodge, he decided that the 23 years since Kathleen Wyatt and Dale Vince's marriage had broken up was no bar.