

MOBILE AND FREE-WHEELING IN ENGLAND

by

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An old writer's adage is 'Write what you know.' In writing detective fiction, that's fine — *if* you're a detective. But what about us plain folk? The closest we've been to a crime scene is pressing our hands against the television screen during an airing of *CSI*. And about the only detective we've seen in the flesh — or fur — is McGruff, the crime-fighting dog. And even there we'd be barking up the wrong tree.

So how do we get the facts, ma'am, just the facts for our novels?

In my case I went straight to the source: I zoomed over to Derbyshire, England, where my novels are set, and talked to some police officers.

I was winding up general research for my sixth novel, *The Coffin Watchers*, and had a few ideas already bubbling for my seventh book, *A Terrible Enemy*. Both books' questions could be answered with a dash over to the other side of The Pond. So I arranged to meet my English police detective friends, booked my b-&-bs, bought my airline ticket, and subsequently spent a leisurely fortnight meandering around the countryside, soaking up local color, gathering information, and listening to murders.

Well, *stories* of murders. That was the easy bit of the research stint.

One bit of info garnering, however, wasn't particularly easy to come by: see a real mobile police station in the flesh — or steel — and talk to the officer.

You'd think it would be easy to track down a van. Not exactly inconspicuous, they are about the size of three jail cells (but shaped more like an ambulance). Plus, their rota is listed on the Constabulary's website. But the village/visitation days must have changed since I printed out the schedule, for when I showed up at Stanton on the

second Friday morning (outside the post office) as my official printout suggested, there was no police van.

The postal clerk didn't seem to know when it was there, either. Presumably he was always too busy selling sweets, newspapers, ice cream, batteries, sunglasses, cassette tapes, bottled water, maps, canned goods, magazines, paperbacks, cigarettes, lighters, packaged sandwiches, combs, and shoelaces to notice the large white and orange-striped van parked occasionally outside his shop.

I swallowed my disappointment and drove over to see my police friends, spending four entire days with them, absorbing case stories, and spending an afternoon with my detective-sergeant friend and his team at the station.

On leaving them, I wandered up to Buxton, the sectional headquarters of the Derbyshire Constabulary and where a police inspector friend was stationed. Tony gave me a tour of the communications center and the jail block — redesigned since my last visit — and the police morgue (I didn't go beyond the main room, though. That row of stainless steel drawers was enough for me!)

Somewhere between the prisoners' property lockers and the drunk tank (Oops! Sorry! The 'drunk-and-incapable-in-a-public-place offenders' safety cubicle'...), I happened to mention that I had evidently missed the mobile police van in Stanton and couldn't quite figure out where it was stationed. (Casually popping-up in unsuspecting villages had produced no mobile van, either.) Tony checked and told me I could catch it up tomorrow morning in Wirksworth. I don't think I've ever squeezed anyone's hand so warmly before.

That next morning... Sure enough. Right where the new rota said it would be: outside Memorial Hall. Except it wasn't the first or fourth Tuesday as my schedule had

foretold. No matter. I was there; it was there. I parked and hurried over to the officer, who was standing outside the van — it being an odd sort of day: sunny, warm and dry.

I introduced myself, told him I was a writer and that I hoped to see the interior of the van. After producing one of my books from my purse, I pointed out the names of my police detective friends in the acknowledgment page (gives me ‘legitimacy’). That seemed to break the ice, and we chatted about the reason for the mobile van and some things he’s been involved in while working it. When we were all talked out I gave him the book as a ‘thanks,’ and left with an assurance that he’d answer any further questions if I emailed him.

I finished up my trip with bird watching (my protagonist Detective-Sergeant Brenna Taylor is a bird watcher when she’s not solving murders) and getting the added treat of seeing a stoat, talking to a wildlife officer and to the curator of a ruined castle (who invited me to spend the night there alone to “soak up atmosphere.” If I get up my nerve, I’ll let you know about that — provided I’m allowed a computer in my padded cell....)

The trip turned out better than I could have imagined, giving me answers and plot ideas, and renewing friendships. I have a great team behind me, helping me with every aspect of my research. Sure, I know I’m lucky — who else do you know who has four English police officers helping her commit murder?

- The End -

Jo Hiestand’s seventh novel is *A Terrible Enemy*, published by Hilliard & Harris, September 2009, \$18.95 TP.