



# Inside story

A new book about the Babes in the Woods murders is giving readers a glimpse behind the curtain of one of the highest profile investigations in Sussex's history. Simone Hellyer speaks to former senior detective Graham Bartlett, who wrote the book with best-selling author Peter James

It is said that the truth is stranger than fiction, which might go some way to explaining why true crime dramas and documentaries continue to be so popular. And now the investigation into one of the most high-profile crimes to happen in Sussex, the Babes in the Wood murders, is being explored in a new book by former senior detective Graham Bartlett and crime writer Peter James.

On 9 October 1986, nine-year-old girls Nicola Fellows and Karen Hadaway went out to play on their Brighton estate. They would never return home; their bodies were discovered the next day concealed in a small clearing in a local park. Shockingly, Russell Bishop, the local man charged with their murders, was found not guilty and went on to attack another girl three years later. Thanks to a change in the law and advances in forensic science, Bishop was finally found guilty for the murders of Nicola and Karen in 2018, 32 years after he had committed the crimes.

Graham Bartlett came to work in Brighton as a young police officer shortly after the original "not guilty" verdict and saw for himself the effect that this devastating crime had on the local community and its trust in the police. He says: "We were seen as a bit of a joke. People were laughing at us, but were scared as well, because there was still a child-killer out there."

When Bishop's second victim, seven-year-old Claire Perkins, was kidnapped and found wandering naked on the freezing South Downs, Graham was at the heart of the investigation as a junior detective. "My feeling was absolute devastation for that poor girl and it was probably the biggest learning experience of my early career. I was plunged from being a reasonably experienced uniformed response

officer to investigating one of the most dangerous criminals in the country at the time. I was hugely privileged to watch how some very skilled senior detectives approach these kinds of crimes and learn the principles they applied. And these were principles that I then taught to junior officers as I rose through the ranks," he says.

Graham was a Sussex Police officer for more than 30 years and served Brighton and Hove through every rank, rising to become a homicide senior investigating officer and the city's police commander, a job he held for four years. In 2016 he joined forces with best-selling crime author Peter James to write *Death Comes Knocking*, a real-life account of some of Brighton's most challenging cases. The book was due to include a chapter on the Claire Perkins investigation, but when the news broke that Bishop had been re-arrested for the Babes in the Wood murders it had to be shelved.

## "It's the oldest double jeopardy case that there's been"

"It was such a momentous occasion because we had been waiting for this news for 30 years. Finally, it looked like justice was going to be delivered," Graham recalls, adding: "Peter James and I decided to follow the investigation and tell the whole story from the moment the girls went missing to the latest trial. We did it because it's such a horrendous story, but one that's so important, not only for the people of Brighton but for UK criminal history too. It's the oldest double jeopardy case that there's been. And from a professional perspective, because there have been so many myths about the police handling of the case, I wanted to tell the inside story too."

The book follows the investigation moment by moment and draws on exclusive interviews with the officers charged with catching the killer. "I read everything that was out there, but most of the research actually came at the end of the trial because I assured Sussex Police that I wouldn't speak to anyone who could be called as a witness. Come the verdict, I spent a huge amount of time interviewing just about everyone I could find who had been involved in the case," Graham explains.

Graham also attended Bishop's second trial and saw for himself how changes in policing, the law and science helped secure justice for the girls' families. "I did a lot of research around the original trial and the two were completely different events – the law and science were different, but even the news coverage had changed. Back in the Nineties there was no 24-hour news or social media," he adds.

By his own admission, Graham bought into the idea that there had been a "cock-up" by Sussex Police that led to the original verdict and hopes that this book goes some way to debunk the myths that surrounded the investigation. He says: "I hope that by reading the book people learn the full truth about how the crime was investigated and get that peek behind the curtain of what it's like to investigate these crimes and how it feels to be the first officer on the scene. The officer that was first to find the girls has had nightmares ever since and he's one of the biggest, roughest, toughest police officers I have ever met." ♦

## GOOD TO KNOW:

*Babes in the Wood* is published by Pan Macmillan, £8.99 paperback.