

The perfect bobby was fictional, says documentary-maker **Roger Graef**, whose 1982 cop doc *Police* showed the truth. But why have Thames Valley invited in the cameras again?



"EVENING ALL!" READERS of a certain age will recognise the regular greeting that began every *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955-76). PC, then Sgt, George Dixon was an iconic archetype: firm but fair, avuncular, but capable of swift action and disapproval when dealing with baddies.

He was the perfect bobby, the kind we all wanted local officers to imitate. Of course the reality was often different. Relations between police and public depended on the class of the public concerned – historically, the role of the police was primarily to control the working masses.

Rough handling by police was out of sight and out of mind for most people. In 1960, a poll showed police had the approval of more than 90 per cent of the population. This was the high point of police and public relations. But the 60s marked the exposure of corrupt and violent coppers, and the aggressive tactics of policing strikes and protests led to a growing recognition that Dixon's style was not the default mode for many officers. Small groups of anarchists joined any demo going to encourage violent encounters because of the cameras. Many viewers were often shocked by the clashes.

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE WAS not helped by exposure of more endemic corruption reaching into senior ranks in the 70s. In the early 80s, complaints of police racism burst into riots around Britain. It seemed there was an informal civil war between sections of the public and police – a low point for police public relations.

That was when I was commissioned by the BBC to make a series observing the work of Thames Valley Police up close and over time (nine months), not just on dramatic occasions. *Police* was shown in 1982 and lasted 11 weeks on BBC1 at around 10pm. There was no music, no narration and very little crime. And yet it attracted between ten and 11 million viewers. We were two places behind *Dallas*!

The film on police handling of a rape allegation was simple – just three officers in a small room grilling a woman who did not want to be on camera, so was filmed behind her head. She dropped her complaint because she was so uncomfortable with their sceptical questions. The scandal it generated changed the way police handle rape victims' complaints. It's still used in training to show how not to do it. Thames Valley officers were teased mercilessly by other forces, and it led to a general feeling that cameras might catch people out if they were given unfettered access.

However, the series as a whole showed officers in a generally sympathetic light, dealing with a wide range of problems

Remember on TV we



When police like this?



TOP OF THE COPS
Jack Warner as the hero
of *Dixon of Dock Green*

with good intentions and often good results. Over the few years, some forces and their press officers decided it was a risk worth taking to let cameras see their real work.

Most recently, the success of long-form thrillers like *The Killing* inspired documentary versions like *The Detective*, *Murder Detectives*, and now Brian Woods's new series *Catching a Killer*, which, 35 years after my series – an anniversary of sorts – returns to Thames Valley Police. This episode follows the case of a man believed to have murdered his wife but with no body to prove she's dead. Despite the dramatic crime, the tone is low-key, and a cross section of officers and a specialist staff are shown struggling to find enough evidence to charge before they have to let their suspect walk.

THE GENERAL VIEW inside the police service is that this level of insight helps their image with the public, politicians and the press. But what do viewers get from the deal? Good telly, unquestionably, but does it tell the whole story? Obviously there are legitimate reasons why certain things can't be shown, but in my experience we do not censor ourselves merely to stay in with the force. But I do feel a responsibility to the officers who trust us not to distort their performance simply to make good TV. Were we to witness criminal behaviour, we'd show it.

Some cop docs just focus on action, creating a false impression of excitement with no character or complexity. But the best of these series portray the dilemmas that make policing harder – and more boring – than fictional versions suggest.

That is not to ignore the general reluctance on the part

'Police are ordinary people often asked to do extraordinary things'

police when asked to let a camera follow them. There is an anxiety they will be caught on camera making mistakes, or worried about the mistrust of their superiors' reactions. Those who might agree worry they will be ridiculed by reluctant colleagues. We have often addressed hostile teams of officers, unconvinced it is in their interest to let us see what they do. In some cases, some remain unwilling, so we work around them. Ironically, many then complain they have been left out of finished films.

The great merit of such observational film-making like *Catching a Killer* is that it shows police are ordinary people often asked to do extraordinary things. If it builds understanding about what police can – and cannot – do, this is surely a good thing. Our police can only function with public consent.

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MODERN POLICING
DCs Natalie Golding and Nikki Smith