

'I'm terrified of him finding me when he gets out'

Rural domestic-abuse victims are half as likely to report offences than those who live in towns.

But, as Jane Wheatley reports, charities such as SafeLives and the Wiltshire Bobby Van Trust are working hard to change that

Photographs by Philip Sowels

ON a warm spring day in the West Country, I am taken to meet a woman we'll call Amy, a startlingly pretty blonde mother of four children and a survivor of an abusive marriage.

One of the bedrooms in Amy's house has a solid fireproof door fitted with triple locks, hinge bolts and a spy hole. The internal wall has been reinforced to prevent someone kicking their way in. The police and fire brigade know the location of the safe room and will respond immediately to a call for aid.

There are alarms on the windows of the house and the external doors have bars to resist a well-aimed boot, all fitted by Doug Batchelor, a police officer employed by the Wiltshire Bobby Van Trust (WBVT), which offers free security protection to vulnerable people across the county. He says he will wait in the van outside as I talk with Amy.

She tells me that she was with her partner for 12 years and finally managed to escape from him with the help of Women's Aid and Rail to Refuge, a scheme that provides free travel to people fleeing abusive relationships. The family stayed in a women's refuge before a home was found for them.

A man she met since moving here has stalked her and broken into the house twice, prompting the WBVT to provide increased protection. That was frightening, she admits, and she is glad to have the safe room, but she is much more afraid of her husband, currently in prison for a knife crime committed after she left him and her home town, 150 miles away. 'I'm terrified of him finding me when he gets out,' she says, urging me to leave out any details of her story that could identify her.

Meanwhile, she has made friends, got her children settled in local schools and enrolled

in a college course, making up for years of lost education. 'All I want is to provide a stable life for my family,' she says.

I wish her all possible luck and go to find Mr Batchelor in the Bobby Van. What a lovely woman, I say, and he nods: 'After everything these ladies have been through, it's amazing they can hold it all together. I absolutely adore this job.'

'These are trauma teddies, knitted for us by a group of ladies. I gave six to one family at Christmas'

He gives me a tour of the van's interior, full of intriguing kit: there are smoke alarms, baked-bean cans hollowed out to contain a secret bunch of keys, dummy CCTV cameras, locks, bolts, padlocks and a mobile key-cutting machine. There is a lip balm concealing the number of an abuse hotline and a small pack of tampons containing a leaflet on reporting abuse.

'We also carry food parcels,' confides Mr Batchelor. 'Sometimes, we go to a house and find that there is nothing at all in the fridge.' He shows me a brightly coloured toy bear: 'These are trauma teddies, knitted for us by a group of ladies. I gave six of them to one family at Christmas: there wasn't a single present in the house.' →

'I adore this job': police officer Doug Batchelor in a well-stocked Bobby Van







Above: WBVT director Jennie Shaw. Right: The Duchess with presenter Emma Barnett (left) and campaigner Diana Parkes (right) after their discussion on *Woman's Hour*

Mr Batchelor is one of three officers manning the Bobby Vans, covering the vast county of Wiltshire with its many outlying villages and farms. Domestic abuse in the countryside has its own particular characteristics. According to the National Rural Crime Network, victims are half as likely as those in town to report abuse, being twice as likely to fear shame and disbelief or disapproval from members of the local community, some of whom will be relatives of the abuser. Services are few and distant, there is often no police station to run to in extremis and public transport is limited or non-existent. A rural victim without access to a car is captive and physical isolation is the abuser's best weapon.

Once police are alerted, the abuser may be issued with a restraining order and the

WBVT asked to provide security. 'We can change locks, but there are occasions when I've gone to the house and the perpetrator is sitting inside drinking tea,' explains Mr Batchelor. 'She's let him in and given him a key because she's too frightened to refuse.'

Jennie Shaw, director of the WBVT, is faced with the formidable task of raising £270,000 annually to run the service. In this, she is aided by the trust's long-term patron The Duchess of Cornwall. 'The Duchess is so much more than a name over the door,' confirms Mrs Shaw. 'Her Royal Highness is a great conduit for ideas and information.'

For example, she tells me, the WBVT can now supply a mobile-phone app called Hollie Guard, designed by Nick Gazzard, whose 20-year-old daughter Hollie was murdered



by her boyfriend. 'If a victim feels unsafe or threatened, she can shake the phone and the GPS will tell a trusted person her location. We got the funding for that through a contact of The Duchess.'

The WBVT was set up to provide free physical and online security to the over-sixties, but was later expanded to tackle domestic abuse among all ages. In 2016, The Duchess was alerted to the largely hidden underbelly of familial and sexual violence through the charity SafeLives, where she met Diana Parkes, whose daughter was murdered by her partner. She was, she admitted later, 'shocked and horrified' to learn how many thousands of people live with domestic abuse. The Duchess added SafeLives to her list of patronages and, in an interview with Mrs Parkes and Emma Barnett on *Woman's Hour*



Feel safe: the four Bobby Vans that patrol Wiltshire are a tangible reminder that help is available



A helping hand

- At the suggestion of The Duchess of Cornwall, a victim undergoing an examination at a sexual-assault referral centre (SARC) is given a washbag of toiletries donated by Boots, to soften what can be a sensitive and dehumanising process
- Train operators have provided free tickets to more than 3,000 people under the Rail to Refuge scheme, which The Duchess describes as a 'brilliant initiative'
- *The Willows* is a powerful short film commissioned by Rural Action Derbyshire highlighting the particular difficulties for abuse victims in the countryside (www.ruralmedia.co.uk/TheWillows)
- Anyone looking for help and information online can take steps to prevent their abuser tracking their internet activity by following this link: www.womensaid.org.uk/cover-your-tracks-online

earlier this year, vowed to continue her campaign on behalf of victims 'for a lifetime'.

One SafeLives initiative is to encourage anyone that suspects a friend or colleague is being abused to 'reach in' to offer help. One survivor of abuse, who received support from a colleague, has this advice: 'They [the victim] may be angry and deny the abuse, say they don't need help, but your offer will make them stronger in many ways. They will know inside they have an option, that they will be believed—and when they do escape it will be in part because you reached in.'

Domestic abuse can happen at any age, Mrs Shaw assures me: 'It might be a wife with a disabled husband who is exerting revenge on him for years of abuse. Or a younger member of a family bullying a parent. The important thing is to let people know there

is help available, so 70% of our work is proactive, giving talks in the community, advertising our services widely and liaising with other agencies such as Neighbourhood Watch.' Formerly a manager of Harvey Nichols in London, Mrs Shaw has worked for the WBVT for 20 years: 'This is truly one of the most rewarding things I've ever done in my life.'

Nor far from where we are talking in Mrs Shaw's dining room is Bowood House, home of Fiona, Marchioness of Lansdowne, a vice patron of the WBVT. In her role as High Sheriff, Lady Lansdowne tells me that she recently visited Splitsz Support Service, a Wiltshire organisation helping victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. 'The support they receive instantly and quietly from the WBVT to protect a family is literally life-saving in some cases,' she points out. →



Hands on: practical help offered by the WBVT officers includes changing locks and providing gadgets in which to hide spare keys

For several weeks this spring, Amanda Burton (not her real name) was being stalked by a former boyfriend. Until he made contact, she had not heard from him or thought about him for 27 years. Back then, aged 14, when she ended their brief relationship, he had punched her, breaking her nose and a front tooth, and subsequently set fire to a barn on her parents' farm.

Now, decades later, he was sending increasingly threatening text messages from different accounts to her husband and, when the couple reported him to the police, they were told he had convictions for assault, harassment and abduction. He was out on licence for life.

The police took the couple's complaints seriously: patrol cars regularly cruised by their house and a Bobby Van was despatched to advise on security. Mrs Burton became

'The support they receive instantly and quietly to protect a family is literally life-saving'

a prisoner in her own home. 'I didn't go out alone, stopped running or cycling or taking my daughters roller-skating around the lake. I couldn't sleep when my husband was on a late shift,' she discloses.

Then, the day before we met, she heard that the man had been detained in Northern Ireland, where he had fled to avoid arrest. She had cancelled plans to do the 1,500km

London-Edinburgh-London 2022 bike ride in August. 'It is a solo ride, so too risky,' she explains. 'But now I can do it and can train on roads instead of on my static bike in the back garden.' She plans to donate her sponsorship money to the WBVT.

For further details, contact the Wiltshire Bobby Van Trust (01225 256867; www.wiltshirebobbyvan.org.uk), SafeLives (0117-403 3220; www.safelives.org.uk) and Hollie Guard (www.hollieguard.com)



The Duchess says
'I have been the proud Patron of SafeLives for just over two years, but I have been a great supporter of their vital work ("to end domestic abuse, for good") for much longer. The charity was established in 2005, when Diana Barran (now Baroness Barran) asked what was the biggest human problem for which it was the hardest to raise money. The answer, she learnt, was domestic abuse.

'SafeLives began at Diana's kitchen table with a very simple governing principle: if your best friend were experiencing

domestic abuse, what would you want for her? Diana and her tiny team, in those early days, concluded that it would be a single person to talk to, who could be an advocate with all the different statutory agencies. Now, 17 years on, SafeLives has grown beyond all recognition, helping more than 65,000 adults and 85,000 children each year—but the "best friend" rule still applies.

'SafeLives, quite simply, gives us all hope that survivors can become the victors, not the victims, of heinous crimes and that we will, one day, see the end of domestic abuse forever.

'The WBVT was one of the first charities of which I became Patron and it has a very special place in my heart.

'The WBVT has a wonderfully straightforward approach that makes an enormous difference every single day: to work in partnership with the local police to help the over-sixties, the disabled and victims of domestic abuse to feel safer at home. There are three Bobby Vans (that all residents of Wiltshire will recognise), providing mobile workshops for Bobby operators to secure houses and a team of volunteers undertakes one-to-one visits and gives community talks online.

'These brilliant operators and volunteers check up on people at home, offering services to prevent burglary, hate crime and domestic abuse; promote awareness of fire safety; and provide guidance on combating online fraud. They fit key safes, install door chains and carbon-monoxide monitors and advise on how not to be scammed online—and, in so doing, ensure that people who might otherwise be vulnerable can truly relax in their own homes. Wiltshire is so lucky to have the Bobby Van and I often wonder why other counties in the UK have not followed its lead.'