

CRIME SQUAD

LIFE AND DEATH ON LONDON'S FRONT LINE

MIKE PANNETT AND KRIS HOLLINGTON



PART ONE

Friday evening and I'm crouched on a stinking tenth-floor stairwell, deep inside Battersea's vast and notorious Winstanley Estate, home to gangs, guns and drugs.

It's November 1989 and I'm a keen, newly-arrived 23-year-old probationer constable, desperate to prove myself and this is my chance, my first ever drugs raid.

Even though it's supposed to be an easy job, my heart's pounding like a pair of trainers in a tumble dryer.

Having grown up in rural North Yorkshire, I've only ever been in a tower block once before in my life (the police training college at Hendon), and never so high up.

This area's not only top of London's crime tables; the local criminals are smashing records for car thefts and street robberies for the whole of Europe.

From my vantage point in the stairwell I peer across the landing and examine the target door. Behind it is suspected cannabis dealer Clinton Smith. The most remarkable thing about him is that he is 70-years-old.

A week or so earlier, I'd just left the nick on my solo foot patrol when I glanced up to see a white lad in his early 20s looking at

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me nervously from across the street. He broke eye contact in the way only the guilty can and so I stopped him.

“Excuse me sir,” I said, blocking his way, and taking hold of his wrists so he couldn’t do a runner. “Why are you so nervous?”

“Nervous, me? I’m not nervous, I-”

His eyes were glazed and puffy.

“I’m going to search you, ok? Don’t move.”

I went through his pockets and amongst keys, bits of paper and some loose change, was a tiny piece of cannabis, wrapped in cling film.

“Oh god, please don’t arrest me,” he said. “I’ve had a caution before. I’m a postman with two kids, I can’t lose my job.”

“Tell me where you got it from, I’ll dispose of this and we’ll say no more about it.”

He considered this for a few seconds. “Ok. It’s an old guy on the top floor of a block in the Winstanley.”

I took the man’s details and dropped the little piece of cannabis down the drain.

“In future, if I search you again and find so much as a crumb of cannabis, I will arrest you.”

The postie sloped off gratefully and I returned the short distance to base, our grand Victorian redbrick building, which was but a truncheon’s toss from the Thames and Battersea Park.

I found Pete, red faced (the result of a hangover) his clip-on tie missing and his shirt un-tucked, enveloped by pipe smoke at his desk in a small, dark office behind the canteen on the second floor. Pete had served 28 years as a PC, the last six of which had been as the LIO (Local Intelligence Officer).

Pete, whose white beard, glasses, pipe and unkempt appearance made him look like a wise but absent-minded old wizard, was surrounded by library drawers which were packed full of thousands of index cards for suspects that went back forty years.

“Alright Pete?”

“What is it Constable Pannett?”

As the new boy and a probationer PC, I was at the bottom of the rung in Battersea and still had a lot to do to win the trust and respect of my fellow officers.

“Do we have anything on a possible septuagenarian cannabis dealer in the Winstanley estate?”

I explained my encounter with the postie as Pete’s fingers skipped skilfully through the mass of yellowing index cards. He stopped and pulled out a card.

“Yes, we have something, not much though. Some similar reports. But if you want a warrant you’re going to need more evidence than a street-side confession from a stoned postie who would say anything to avoid losing his job.”

He passed me the card.

“Thanks Pete, I’ll check it out.”

“Fill your boots, Constable Pannett.”

The Winstanley: a huge council estate built in fits and starts between 1956 and 1972, overlooked by three monstrous 20-storey towers surrounded by 25 low-rise blocks, which, for a lad recently arrived from North Yorkshire, added up to a confusing concrete warren full of dark and dead-end alleys. Along with the adjacent council blocks on nearby streets, it was home to 10,000 people, and sat to the immediate north of Clapham Junction, the busiest railway station in Europe, with more than 2,000 trains rattling below residents’ windows every day.

This station attracted street robbers who stole from commuters and tourists at knifepoint before blowing their booty on drugs, readily available from flats across the estate, or from the Wellington Pub, a squat sixties building of dark bricks and

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concrete where no police officer dared show his face, unless accompanied by a battalion from the riot squad.

The estate was also a short sprint from the busy high street, full of gastropubs and boutiques thronging with the borough's wealthier residents who lived in luxury apartments and renovated Victorian town houses, and who drove the expensive cars so beloved by the thieves of Winstanley.

As a lad who'd grown up in the Yorkshire countryside where everyone knew and looked out for each other, I was still in shock from the lack of community. Law-abiding residents felt helpless, as though criminals were holding them hostage. Every day we dealt with two or three robberies and/or burglaries. Sometimes, especially in the case of the elderly, burglars struck in broad daylight, often kicking the doors in while residents were still in their homes. Treasured personal possessions were sold for peanuts or swapped for small amounts of drugs.

I'd been to one flat that had been completely emptied of every last piece of furniture, along with its new doors and windows, when the owner, a young woman with two children had gone to spend a couple of days with her sick mother. She'd just finishing furnishing the flat after the council gave her a grant.

"I had sod-all as it was," she said, "And they've even taken that."

Taking down a 70-year-old cannabis dealer didn't sound like it was going to make much of an impression on our terrible crime figures but I had to start somewhere. Besides, it was unpleasant for residents to walk past kids smoking cannabis in the communal areas.

I went in plain clothes first thing in the morning, a time when any self-respecting drug dealer would still be in bed. At night the atmosphere changed and lookouts announced the arrival of any stranger (i.e., cops or possible prey).

After getting the keys to the emergency stairwell from the caretaker who'd just done his rounds and picked up the detritus

of the night's drug taking (syringes scattered around the swings in the children's play area), I went up with my best mate and fellow eager-beaver probationer Mark, a 28-year-old, black-haired Cornish lad who'd won the 'Baton of Honour' at police training college.

We spent the day watching the long corridor from behind the fire door and counted fifteen people who were prepared to climb the ten flights of stairs (the broken lifts had been awaiting repair for more than a week) to score their cannabis.

I then found out the name of the person paying the bills at the address and spoke to Brian aka 'Bry', a senior PC with fifteen years of service who was about to join the CID, and who knew the Winstanley better than anyone else at the station.

"Good work Pannett, let's talk to Phil about putting together a job."

Sergeant Phil was an old sweat with 28 years' service. Phil was of the 'been there, done that and worn the T-shirt' type. He was unflappable, no matter what mess was dumped in his lap.

"Well, it's not worth much, really, is it?" he muttered, keeping his cigarette clamped between his lips.

"It'd be good experience for Pannett, sarge," Bry said, "And a drug dealer is a drug dealer, no matter how small-time he might be."

Phil squinted at me through his cigarette smoke.

"Alright Pannett. Put the job together. But don't fuck it up, alright?"

Even though it's 7pm on a Friday night I'm not expecting a lot of people to be inside, or much in the way of resistance. I'm more worried about Winston; that he'll drop dead of a heart attack when I kick in his door, which, as far as we can tell, is only

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secured with a simple latch lock. As it's supposed to be an easy one, I've been given the honour of leading the charge; I can't wait to get it over with.

I look around. We're all in plainclothes, doing our best not to be rumbled, although in true amateur undercover cop fashion, we're all clean shaven and dressed in freshly-pressed jeans, so we're not going to fool anyone.

Along with Bry and Mark, two other officers are behind me on the stairwell. Timbo, a 6"4' ex-Royal Marine and Johnny, a hyperactive officer whose ambition is to one day drive the Area Car (Area Car drivers are trained in advanced driving and tactical pursuit and are the Met's fast responders, i.e., experienced cops able to deal with any job; they were gods to us probies). Another two officers are waiting down below, in case Clinton decides to chuck the evidence out of his window, and to keep an eye on our unmarked van, and in case the local gangs decide to nick it, petrol bomb it or give it a new paint job.

The others look suitably bored and I try to play along, as if this is no big deal.

I'm shaking from the adrenaline so force myself to take slow, deep breaths. My mouth is dry and my hands are sweaty. I can't wait until this job is over, so that I have one raid under my belt.

"You alright Pannett?" Bry asks.

"I'm fine."

"Only you look like you've eaten a rotten egg."

I look at the landing. All quiet. And then across the estate. It's dark but the glow from the lights of Winstanley is turning the night clouds orange. I'm an outdoors country lad, used to the dales and moors of Yorkshire. This concrete jungle is something else.

I look back down the line. Mark, white-faced, looks exactly like how I feel.

Even Bry, perhaps picking up on our nerves looks uncertain when I say: “Ready?”

Four heads nod.

“Ok, follow me!”

I charge out of the fire escape, along the landing and turn to face the plain black door. I take a step back, heart pounding at the thought that I’m about to crash headfirst into the unknown, but with no time left to dwell, I raise my size ten boot and, with as much weight as I can, leap towards the door, aiming for the Yale lock. To my relief, it implodes, flying back into the wall with an almighty crash, and comes off its hinges as I push past it and into the dark hallway that stretches before me. I see the door to my left and burst through it and into a bedroom, yelling: “Police!”

The light is on and the room is full of acrid smoke.

A young black man is standing in front of me. He’s tall, thin, sinewy and wild-eyed, and he’s pointing a double-barrelled sawn-off shotgun at my head.

CHAPTER ONE

YORKIE COMES TO TOWN

One year earlier, Sunday 28 November 1988.

I looked through the glass at Mum and Dad, waving me off from the small platform of our hometown station and then glanced down at the seat next to me. Someone had left behind a copy of *The Sun* newspaper. I pressed it against the window so Mum and Dad could see the front page. The headline read: *Police Cadets in Sex Drugs and Rock and Roll Scandal* and there was a photo of some young lady officers laughing as they showed their stocking-stops. Mum and Dad's expressions froze in shock. I grinned and gave them the thumbs-up as the train pulled away.

Dad was a scientist who worked with fibre optics and my brother and two sisters were all academics. My brother went on to become quartermaster of the Thames, responsible for all shipping on the river. I was the black sheep. Academia held no interest for me; I was the outdoors type (we lived deep in the Yorkshire countryside) and loved to talk to anyone and everyone about girls, motorbikes and York City FC.

After school I'd joined the Territorial Army (First Battalion, Yorkshire Volunteers, the barracks backed onto York City's home pitch and you could watch the Tuesday night

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footy for free). I specialised in Signals, which I loved, and was the runner up out of 180 men when we were tested for overall performance (I was pipped by the Sergeant Major's son, funny that). I then went from job to job (vacuum cleaner salesman to farm labourer) and worked selling car parts from a Ford garage (I can still remember some of the seven-figure serial numbers for different parts) before I decided I was going to join the police.

I applied to join North Yorkshire and sat the multi-choice exam. I was a bit worried about my performance until I noticed there was an intelligent university boy sitting to my immediate left and, well, I passed everything. Then I learned they wouldn't take me because I was short-sighted and wore glasses. I told them I could shoot a gnat's nut off at fifty paces but they weren't having it.

The only force that didn't mind (apart from Devon and Cornwall, way too far away from home) was London's Metropolitan Police, aka the Met. Apparently, after two years, you could transfer and any force would then take you, glasses or no.

When the Met accepted my application, I was 24-years-old, driving a van, delivering engine parts all over Yorkshire. I loved the scenery but it wasn't well paid and it certainly wasn't a challenge. If I wanted to move on, I had to leave all this behind for the big city.

I'd never been to London and so was quite nervous when I stepped out of the train at Kings Cross; I'd never seen so many people in one place. They were rushing around, like some emergency was taking place; I seemed to travel at half their speed. The first person to talk to me was a tall lady who was standing with a friend on the station concourse. She stopped me by placing a

hand on my chest. She was attractive, in her 20s and was holding an unlit cigarette, which she waved at me hopefully.

“Got a light, luv?” she said.

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, fishing out my lighter.

The young lady and her friend then propositioned me, for a price, an offer which, blushing, I politely declined. My next encounter was with an illegal minicab driver who offered to take me to Hendon for a fiver.

I opted instead for the tube, which was in its own way no less daunting. The Met had warned all us young recruits that pick-pockets and street robbers were targeting naive students heading for the college, so I was on high alert as I descended into the bowels of London.

I’d only seen one black person before in my life, a friend of mine who was in the TA with me and whom everyone referred to as ‘Black Ronnie.’ We’d become quite matey after working together at a terrible job cleaning bricks (Ronnie went on to become an RAF navigator). Now there were loads of black people everywhere I looked and I couldn’t help but stare, fascinated at everyone and everything.

There was standing room only on the crowded tube train. I smiled at the other people around me, like any Yorkshire lad would, and said: “Busy isn’t it?” to a man I found myself a touch too close to. He gave me a tight-lipped smile in response and turned away. No one was making eye contact and no one was talking, which left me totally flummoxed. Why weren’t people talking to one another? I stood in uncomfortable silence as the train rattled its way north and the crowds gradually thinned out until I stepped off, above ground, in Hendon.

I found my way to the college and then had no trouble locating the Peel Bar, marvelling at the dozens of people that were already there (the Met was on a recruitment drive and 170 people were in my group). Blokes outnumbered the ladies by at least

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five-to-one. I'd been expecting the place to be overwhelmed by Cockneys, but there were people from all over, even all the way from Wales and Scotland. I eventually made myself known to the administration and was presented with a key.

"Ninth floor," the woman told me, handing me an A4 paper with a long list of do's and don'ts. The ninth floor! I'd never been in a tower block before in my life.

The room was cell-like, with a sink, which doubled as a urinal. There was an old fashioned chest of drawers. I opened the top draw. A bible was inside. I looked out through the thin, drafty window and saw the underground trains rattling by, the city lights and heard the unceasing ocean-like roar of traffic. The wind rattled the window; it felt as though the building was swaying with the weather. I lit a fag and sat down at the desk. Someone had carved a message into the surface: 'Good luck you're going to need it!' and I wondered what the hell I'd done.

We had twenty weeks of intensive training. I was fit thanks to the TA and had no fear of the physical tests. We needed to be in top physical condition and had to be able to run one-and-a-half-miles in under twelve minutes; a piece of cake, as were the trials involving sit-ups, push-ups, press-ups and standing jumps. But when it came to studying, I was terrified. I'd left school with no qualifications and succeeding at exams was to me, as likely as getting hit by a snowball in the Sahara. Fail two exams at Hendon and you were done.

But I was lucky. Two academics – Graham, a muscular rugby player from Durham, who came from a family of miners, and Mark, a good-looking, dark-haired posh boy from Surrey – were in my class and bunked on the same floor as me. They took me under their wing

“The trick is to avoid the bar at all costs,” Mark said, “Until we’ve studied for at least three hours and had a run.”

“Then we can have a quick pint,” Graham said.

“Or three,” I added hopefully.

“And then to bed.”

Mark and Graham taught me how to study, and the use of cue cards as memory aids. We spent hours working each night and even questioned each other first thing in the morning (after Graham, an expert trumpet player, had woken us at the crack of dawn by playing First Call) when we were in our floor’s three baths, all in a row, separated by thin partitions.

Our first exam was on a Monday morning with the result handed out that night in the classrooms (classes were eight hours a day, Monday to Friday). I was terrified and my hands were shaking by the time the results were delivered but was totally delighted when I realised I’d passed. I may not have been near the top like Graham and Mark (who once managed to score 100%) but this was enough to make me realise that I could learn just as well as the university types; it was all down to application and enthusiasm. I learned everything verbatim and can still recall every word of the Theft Act as it was when I learned it then. And because I was actually interested in the law, I started to do well, sometimes coming third, behind Graham and Mark.

Although they were academically gifted, Graham and Mark were a couple of years younger than me and didn’t have much in the way of real-world experience, and were lacking in the common sense department, so I was able to teach them a bit about this. Together we formed a bond and stuck together, and took everything to do with our studies seriously – although we cut loose at weekends. We were being paid a salary and had no expenses, so we could afford to party and once even ended up in Stringfellows.

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My ‘common sense’ sometimes got me into trouble, however. Our first ever role-play was on a London bus. The trainer asked for volunteers.

“Go on Yorkie,” Mark said so, unable to resist a challenge, I stepped up. We were on the top deck. The instructor asked me to get him off the bus.

“Begin,” he commanded.

“Excuse me sir,” I said, “Would you mind stepping off the bus?”

He grabbed hold of the pole and refused to budge, despite my pleas.

“Come on sir, get yourself off the bus.”

He still refused, and turned his back to me. I found myself uncharacteristically flustered. How should a copper go about this? Inspiration hit. I withdrew my truncheon and raised it above my head.

“IF YOU DON’T FU-!”

“STOP!” the trainer screamed. “Stop the role play! Good god man, if someone doesn’t do what you want you can’t whack them!”

I was still so naïve about how a police officer should act. We were of course expected to behave responsibly even when off duty. It slowly dawned that, as I would have the power to take away someone’s liberty, I had to be professional at all times.

The instructors were enthusiastic and really cared about their work. The majority were still serving cops but a few had been injured on duty and had been forced to retreat to the classroom, a reminder of the dangers we would be facing once out in the ‘real world’ trying to arrest ‘real criminals’.

There was lot of horseplay among us, some pushing and shoving, finding out the pecking order but people who were overly aggressive tended to disappear. Seven students were sacked after they got into a drunken brawl in a KFC (they became known as

the Kentucky Seven) and I was surprised at how many people dropped out as time progressed. It was tough, however, you could be “back-classed” a month for failing an exam and if you failed again then you were out, no ifs or buts.

We were given many physical tests, from jumping off the high board in the Olympic-sized pool, to boxing tournaments with rival classes. I enjoyed all the physical stuff and was quite loud, bolshy and earned a reputation as the toughest trainee in the college. I found out I wasn't *quite* the toughest during a boxing tournament held towards the end of the academic year when, after donning gloves along with head and mouthguards I turned around to see the biggest, nastiest bloke I'd ever encountered in my short life. He gave me a murderous look as he pounded his gloves together. He was a former bouncer (and turned out to be one of those aggressive students who were weeded out before graduation). He smacked me in the head for two minutes and fifty seconds while Graham and Mark yelled at me to run for my life. I tried, and ran around and around the ring, forcing him to chase me, pounding my head, for so long that he grew really tired and finally, seeing a moment where he let his guard down, I snuck in a punch, causing him to slip in his own sweat and he hit the canvas like a lead weight. I leapt in the air claiming victory to the triumphant roar of my colleagues.

Our graduation celebrations were held at the Heathrow Park Hotel, with Commissioner Paul Condon and his wife in attendance. Lots of newly-graduated coppers were doing spots on stage – Graham played his trumpet, for example. As ‘Yorkie’ I was known for being a bit of a clown, so, after a bit of chanting from friends (and a lot of alcohol), in a hired white tuxedo, I climbed onstage and did an impression of a mating pig – and was quickly pulled off. Commissioner Condon's wife was not enjoying my act and this impression almost cost me my career. Mark, on the other hand, was presented with the Baton of Honour, the

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prize awarded to the most outstanding student. We were so hung over that along with Mark and Graham, I missed the bus booked to take us all back to Hendon for the passing out parade. We spent a fortune on a taxi and arrived with a minute to spare, luckily our colleagues saved us by polishing our shoes so we ran out, heads still spinning, to salute Sir Paul in the nick of time.

I was 24 and couldn't be prouder that I'd been accepted into the Met. When I put the uniform on it felt like a protective shield (this belief would be corrected in due course). Then it was to the noticeboard to see where we'd been posted. We'd all heard horror stories about policing central London, as well as rough areas like Tottenham, Brixton and Kilburn. As the crowds of cops craned over one other to get a look at the noticeboard, I noticed some blokes laughing at one of their mates who'd been posted to Brixton. I was hoping for something leafy in north London, Enfield or Barnet, easier to get home to Yorkshire on the weekends. But no.

I was heading south of the river.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM HENDON TO HELL

Battersea (the area from Nine Elms to Wandsworth west to east and from the Thames to Clapham Common north to south) was top of the crime table for all the wrong reasons. Street robberies, drug dealing and car thefts were off the scale. Apart from this, all anyone would tell me was it was a really bad patch to end up.

I had a week off after Hendon and spent it in a state of mixed emotion – between wanting to get stuck in and high anxiety about what I'd got myself into. I still had very little practical experience of life in London, let alone working as a police officer in one of its most challenging boroughs.

My home was a police section house, essentially a boarding house for police officers. The ladies who ran it were like surrogate mothers and took good care of us by preparing slap-up dinners.

When I arrived at the station for my first day – a huge Victorian brick building just over Battersea Bridge, overlooking the park – I spotted a photo-shoot taking place in the multi-storey carpark just opposite. Nothing wrong with that I suppose, except that the woman being photographed was naked. Not entirely sure whether any decency laws were being broken, I

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decided better not be late on my first day and, after a brief gander, carried on to the station.

I was joining with four other probationers including – to my delight – Mark. After we picked up our uniform, handcuffs and truncheon, we went to the canteen. We had to watch where we sat. There was an Old Sweats table that was strictly off-limits. Woe-betide any probationer foolish enough to even think of sitting there. You didn't speak to the Old Sweats until spoken to.

Area Car Drivers, the guys who drove the fast cars, responding to crimes-in-progress, were Gods to us. Even constables who'd finished their probation wouldn't get anywhere near their table, let alone be able to strike up a conversation with them or be trusted enough to listen in on their conversations.

It was busy and everybody stared at us through untrusting eyes. Nobody wanted to talk to us in case one of us was a mole put in by Complaints. This was a tough area and things hadn't always been done by the book, so to speak.

Plus, Battersea nick had just been through the horror of the Clapham Rail disaster. A packed passenger train had crashed into the rear of another train stopped at a signal, and then an empty train, travelling in the other direction, smashed into the debris lying across the tracks. Thirty-five people died and nearly five hundred were injured, so the mood was sombre.

We'd only just sat down with our teas when someone yelled: "Dave's called for urgent assistance, Winstanley!" and everyone charged out of the station.

It was scary to see it for real. Paul, a PC with 25 years' service, and our guide, along with Chris, a sergeant with 20 years' service, stopped us from following.

"Training school's all very well," Paul, a gruff, tough, dark-haired man, said, "But reality is a bit bloody different. Come on, we'll give you the guided tour."

As we left I glanced across the now empty canteen, hazy with cigarette smoke, half-eaten meals on the tables and wondered whether I would ever make it to the senior officers' table. It was then that I also noticed a huge fridge standing against the far wall. It was away from the serving area and looked totally out of place. I meant to ask Paul and Chris about it but quickly forgot as we boarded an old riot bus for the grand tour and they began a running commentary on where so-and-so got murdered, stabbed or shot; where drugs were dealt (I didn't even know what drugs looked like); which pubs were dangerous; stories about car thefts, fights and chases. I soon felt like we were driving through a warzone. Groups of lads hanging out on corners just went quiet and stared as we passed by.

"Stay switched on at all times," Paul said. "You get in a fight, don't go down, stay on your feet otherwise they'll kick you to pieces."

"Right Pannett, tell me what street are we on?" Chris asked me.

I shook my head. "No idea, sorry."

Chris leaned over and looked me straight in the eye. "If I ever have to fucking ask you again... If you don't know where you are, how are you going to ask for urgent assistance?"

I always paid attention to where I was after that.

Paul and Chris knew what we were thinking and how to handle us. I felt like I was in good hands but terrified about messing up at the same time.

"You feel like outsiders now," Paul told us, "And you are. Also, you don't have a clue. Trust me on that one. You might have your laws memorised and done your little role-plays but you have to give it time out here. Don't rush into anything. My advice, and you should really pay attention to this, is to listen to everybody who is more experienced than you, but stay independently-minded. Make your own way in life and you'll do alright."

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After that, Mark and I, along with some other probationers, were taken on a day-trip down the Thames in the Commissioner's Launch. The Commissioner's Launch was essentially a Thames Police Boat that transported Metropolitan Police commissioners and Thames Division superintendents as well as members of the Royal Family, visiting MPs and probationer PCs like me. I felt like royalty as we cruised through the middle of the greatest city in the world.

The boat was named after magistrate Patrick Colquhoun, one of the founders of the Thames River Police in 1798, formed to tackle theft and looting from ships anchored in the Pool of London. The Patrick Colquhoun is no longer part of the police service but the John Harriott (named after the Thames Police's other founder) was recommissioned to carry commuters from Chelsea Harbour into Central London, and is still operational at the time of writing.

Our destination was the Black Museum (now known as the Crime Museum after some black police officers complained) in Room 101 at New Scotland Yard. Created in 1874 by Inspector Neame after an 1869 law permitted the police to retain prisoners' property for 'instructional purposes', it's not open to the general public and nor should it ever be (although plans are rumoured to be afoot). It's inaccessible with good reason. The exhibits are grim beyond belief and are designed to give bright young police officers a reality-check. In other words, the Black Museum is a warning not to trust anyone not wearing a police uniform; to never let your guard down.

"Some people faint when they come in here," the museum's curator told us with a friendly smile as we stepped behind the door and entered a room that looked like it belonged to the Victorian age. "Even experienced constables sometimes find it a bit too much."

After an exhibit of disguised weapons and fake and real guns we passed by serial killer Dennis Nilsen's cooker (he boiled the

flesh of his victims), John 'Acid Bath' Haig's apron, various weapons with real bloodstains and the ricin pellet that killed Georgi Markov after a secret agent had stabbed his leg with a modified umbrella in 1978. We saw the so-called "From Hell" letter supposedly written by Jack the Ripper and the noose that hanged Ruth Ellis in 1955, the last woman to be executed in the UK.

We finally stopped at a recent display. It was of some riot shields from the Broadwater Farm Riots of 1985. They'd been melted by petrol bombs and pierced by bullets. Finally, there was a section about Met officers killed in the line of duty, and on display was the clothing of PC Keith Blakelock, stabbed to death by youths during the Broadwater Farm riots; the stab marks had been highlighted so you could see just how many there were.

By the time we'd seen all the Black Museum had to offer, we returned to the Commissioner's Launch in a somewhat subdued mood, fully aware that doing your job could cost you your life.

We spent several weeks with PC Paul and Sergeant Chris and they did their best to drum in every practical part of policing they don't tell you about in training school. They were the first people to mention the Yardies, gangs of crazed drug dealers from Jamaica, and to point out a young man who was South London born and bred called Gary Nelson who was into protection rackets and heading fast up the criminal ranks.

"He's one to watch," Paul said ominously. "Dangerous but he's got a brain in him, that one."

Finally, it was time for me to step out on my own. I was Whisky Alpha 150 and walking out that first day was extremely surreal. I felt like anything could happen and I wondered whether I would be up to the challenge. And then it came. My first arrest. A young lad had had a bit too much to drink and was kicking

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off, picking fights outside a pub just off the high street. I spotted the “Oh shit!” expression on his face when he saw me and I knew then he was going to be as good as gold. My uniform did all the work for me. I put on the handcuffs and called in the Sherpa van to come and collect him.

As a probie (probationer), I got sent to deal with all the crap jobs, shoplifters and sudden deaths. It was all about learning the job of course but, being a naive Yorkshire lad, I found some aspects of my job really difficult. My first dead body was in a tower block. It had been there for a good few days and the smell filled the landing. Where were his friends and family, his neighbours? Did no one care? It was so different from Yorkshire where it seemed everyone kept an eye on the older neighbours.

Mark and I were called to backup other officers when pub fights got out of hand, especially on Friday and Saturday nights in Chelsea and Fulham which, if nothing else, was a bonding experience. When Mark and I arrived at our first pub riot, it looked as if a bomb had gone off. The cops were outnumbered four-to-one by football hooligans in full riot mode and PC Timbo, an ex royal marine, 6’4” of pure muscle, waved cheerfully at us as we arrived and beckoned us to get stuck in, before picking up a rioter (who stupidly, blinded by beer, had decided to pick a fight with the normally gentle giant) and sending him swiftly and firmly to the ground. Timbo was recently married and always policed with a smile. He had loads of compassion for victims and was, therefore, ruthless when it came to street robbers. He did us the occasional honour of joining us on the probies’ table in the canteen. I spent most of this particular fight running from one side of the pub to other to help various colleagues cuff their prisoners, dodging punches and kicks as I went.

I was looking for where I should go next when I heard: “Could you possibly give me a hand old chap?” come from somewhere behind me. This was Triston Fairweather aka ‘Trist’, and

he looked just like his name sounded, like an RAF pilot from the Biggles era. A university toff in his late 20's from the Home Counties, his family owned a National-Trust-sized country mansion and saw Trist's love of policing as a phase he was going through (Trist already had seven years in when I joined). He played on his public school boy image to impress the ladies, but he was a tough cop who adored his job. When he asked for my help he was throwing a huge skinheaded man with homemade tattoos up against a wall, and was struggling to hold his hands to get the cuffs on.

That done, I was amazed to see a petite WPC in the thick of the action. This was Mandy Fox aka 'Foxy', one of only two girl PCs at Battersea. Foxy had eight years' service and was a no-nonsense biker girl. She was proof that women could handle themselves just as well as any man when it came to policing a pub riot and had wiped the smiles off more than one hooligan's face with a well-placed truncheon (not to forget her judo skills).

Eventually, the riot, which had started, as these things always tended to do, for no good reason other than someone had taken offence at the expression on someone else's face, was brought under control, the prisoners were in the Sherpa vans bound for the sobering reality-check of being booked in by the duty sergeant Phil, a totally unflappable old sweat with almost thirty years' service, followed by a night in a police cell, which in turn would be followed by a court date.

Being in the police was like having a huge extended family. Although us probies were kept at arm's length by the more experienced coppers, it was very much a case of all for one and one for all, and this was brought home to me when, as part of a random check, I stopped a car close to Clapham Common and I wasn't sure about a legal technicality and so called it in. The driver was a man in his 20s and had been understanding about the delay and my checking, so not wanting to keep him waiting

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any longer than necessary, I said: “Control could I have some quick assistance?”

The radio went quiet and I told the driver: “Won’t keep you long now.”

About thirty seconds later I heard several police sirens heading our way. I was curious as I hadn’t heard anything urgent come over the radio. And then I saw the Area Car, followed by a patrol van and then one of the local pandas. And then I saw Darren aka ‘Doctor Death’, sprinting towards me from a side street where he’d been on foot patrol. Tall, pale, thin and sly as a fox, Darren looked like the Grim Reaper. He had eight years’ service and fancied himself as a bit of a ladies’ man. He loved to surf, owned a camper van and sometimes slept in the thing after a night out on the town. He was also, to my amazement, into fly-fishing. He was always used for plain clothes observation as he didn’t look anything like a copper.

His truncheon was already drawn as he approached and he yelled “What is it Pannett!? You alright mate? Is it this wanker? What’s he done?”

And then I had a sudden sinking feeling that I was about to make myself extremely unpopular. In essence I’d asked the police operator for “urgent assistance” an expression that meant a police officer’s life was in imminent danger and this had meant she had scrambled the entire nick to come to my rescue.

A minute later my worst fears were confirmed as I was surrounded by every vehicle from the police nick, sirens on, road-blocks up, coppers with mouths still chewing the remains of bacon and egg rolls they’d left cooling on the canteen tables. Soon Clapham was gridlocked, and the poor driver at the centre of it all, who newly-arriving police officers kept insulting and trying to arrest, was practically in tears.

And then I felt a very solid finger poking me in my back. It was Patters, the senior beat cop, an old, roll-up-smoking,

cockney sweat in his mid-40s, divorced and with over twenty years' service.

"You fucking useless twat," he spat, getting right into my face, "Fucking sort your life out," he added, before turning his back and bad-mouthing me to anyone in the vicinity.

"He has a point," another voice said. I turned to see Timbo leaning out of the window of a van he'd commandeered to rush to my aid. "People sometimes hurt themselves running to help," he said, starting the engine, "Better learn from this Mike, OK?"

A few minutes later, I was on my own again and sent the dazed driver on his way. I was gutted. I had a lot to do if I was going to redeem myself for this gaffe.

A few days later, I thought I'd cracked it. Pete stayed seating, looking at me as I breathlessly explained.

"Just from a stop and search, thought they were looking dodgy and sure enough." I gestured triumphantly at the object between us on the desk – a kilo of hash – the heavy, oily brown derivative of marijuana.

Pete unwrapped the clingfilm and had a close look. He then looked at me curiously.

"Is this a wind-up Pannett?"

"No, of course not."

"Where are the prisoners?"

"In the custody suite."

Pete put down his pipe and went to have a look for himself. Sure enough, there were two young West Indian men looking extremely pissed off as they awaited booking in. Pete strolled back to the desk and looked at the large lump of dope in front of him. I was practically levitating with excitement.

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“Better test it then, hadn’t we then Pannett?” Pete said, scratching his beard.

“Eh?”

I watched, incredulous as Pete broke off a chunk, put it in his mouth and chewed. “Mmm. S’good stuff.”

It was molasses cake.

Despite having a mountain to climb in terms of experience, I wasn’t lacking in enthusiasm. I teamed up with Mark and we stalked the streets, targeting the street robbers who liked to hang out at Macdonald’s, and patrolled the estates at night, looking for gang members up to no good. Local people were happy to talk to us and impressed upon us the urgency with which we needed to tackle gangs, weapons and drugs. They wanted to like the police, they said, but we simply weren’t doing enough to make a difference on a day-to-day level. We’d missed and then ignored the rise in drug use and now all the associated crime, especially street robbery, was out of control.

We were both passionate about what we thought were the best solutions – I wanted to go after the drug dealers and Mark argued that we needed to tackle the street robbers. If we made it impossible for robbers to operate in Battersea then the hard drug dealers would lose money and would dissipate. I argued that we should go after the drug dealers first and make it impossible for them to sell their wares in Battersea and then all the associated crime would fall.

“It’s too late for that,” Mark argued, “They’re too secure, too hidden, we’ll never catch them. At least we can go after street robbers, by definition they’re visible to us.”

It was late at night and the station was quiet, so we’d taken our argument into the luxury of the senior officer’s canteen. We were both extremely competitive and at some point our discussion grew overheated and one of us shoved the other and moments later we were fighting and rolling around on the floor when Inspector Barry walked in on us.

Barry was in his mid-30s and married with two kids. He had taken a shine to Mark and me, encouraging our enthusiasm. Once Barry had pulled us apart made us shake hands, Mark and I never argued again, we were the best of friends from that day.

And then came my first real cannabis discovery via the postie. This, I thought, was a chance to target a drug dealer in their den. Ok, Clinton was in his 70s, and only sold cannabis but everyone has to start somewhere. The last thing I was expecting was to be confronted by a young man aiming a shotgun at my head.

Everything went blurry for a moment. I was so full of adrenaline I thought I was going to pass out. I heard screams behind me, someone shouted “GUN!”

“I bloody know!” I thought, not realising someone had found more guns at the other end of the flat.

The man was stick-thin and despite the cold, and despite the fact he was dressed in nothing but vest and shorts, was glistening with sweat. I had to fight to tear my eyes away from the double barrels and look him in the eye, which were partly concealed by long dreadlocks. They were like saucers, almost entirely overtaken by huge pupils. It had just been a few seconds but right then, it felt like time slowed, I’d never been more alert to the need to stay alive and I felt like this could go either way. No doubt, this young man was going through his own thought process, weighing up the pros and cons of several courses of action, the key one of which had to be to shoot or not to shoot. Normally not short of words, I knew I had to find something to say to try and help him come to the right decision. After all, shooting a copper meant spending the rest of your life in prison with no hope of getting

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out – or at least that’s what I thought and I hoped he would think so too.

“Look, I’m police mate, don’t shoot,” I pleaded, “Put down the gun, ok?”

His eyes flashed for a moment with realisation, and he turned, tossing the gun out of the open window. The moment it left his hands, I charged, knocking him to the ground. He fought back but I held him as he writhed, wriggled and kicked.

Outside, the PCs’ eyes popped when they saw the shotgun hit the ground and they – with incredible bravery – ran straight in to help just as the young gunman was about to wriggle free of my grip. Between the three of us we got this lad under control and cuffed.

“I’ve never seen someone fight like that before,” one of the PC’s said.

“Me neither,” I replied with emphatic breathlessness. I was a mess. My jumper was ripped, my glasses were broken, my nose was bleeding and I felt as though I’d been kicked in the ribs by a horse.

I spotted a small metal pipe, along with some pale-brown crumbs loosely contained in a cellophane wrap, sitting on a coffee table covered in burn marks, scratches and stains. We had a closer look.

“What is this stuff?” I asked. What I knew about drugs could be written on the back of a postage stamp but even the clued-up officers weren’t sure.

Meanwhile, the rest of the team had been through the flat. Seventy-year-old Clinton was in the kitchen, fag on, calm as anything, as the team proudly showed me a loaded crossbow and another shotgun, also loaded, propped against the wall. On the table was an ounce of cannabis.

The young man turned out to be a drug dealer on the run from some rivals. Clinton had decided to let him hideout the

night before our raid, so us catching him along with the weapons stash was just dumb luck (although I felt that perhaps Clinton didn't feel as though he could say no to a man who walked the streets of Battersea with a shotgun hidden under his coat).

It took us some time to sort everything out and get Clinton and the shotgun kid booked into the nick but eventually, in the small hours, the raiding party was ready for a debrief in the canteen.

Patters was waiting for us on the old sweats' table. My heart sank at the sight, as he hadn't yet forgiven for my mistaken call for urgent assistance and I was convinced he never would. I braced myself, expecting him to give me hell about sending officers into danger and not conducting proper surveillance of the flat we were about to raid.

Patters got up, looked at me for a moment and, not saying a word, he walked over to the mysterious fridge and opened the door. Every shelf was filled to the brim with cans of beer. He removed two, and came up to me, fag on, squinting through the smoke. He put the can on the table in front of me.

"Good job that, Pannett. Bet you're feeling a bit lucky tonight."

This was the second time Patters had ever spoken to me. Although neither he nor I made a big deal of it, he'd made it clear: I could be trusted.