

The Neighbourhood Watch Podcast

Episode 1 with Penny Smith

Hello, come on in, make yourself at home. This is a Neighbourhood Watch podcast and I'm Alfie Moore, ex-copper and current stand-up comedian. Admittedly, it's not the traditional career path, but it's one that's hopefully useful for the purposes of this podcast, where we want to provide you with key advice about crime prevention and put a smile on your face in the process.

Here at the Neighbourhood Watch, we believe that a connected community is one where crime cannot thrive. We're the largest volunteer-led crime prevention charity in England and Wales, working across local communities and regions to empower and educate people. I'm delighted to say that my guest today is the presenter, newsreader, podcaster, opera fanatic and author, Penny Smith.

You might know Penny from the GMTV years or from her current podcast, Pains, Stains and Automobiles. Perhaps you remember her hosting crime-related TV programmes back in the day, like Crime Net, Crime File and Britain's Most Wanted, and today she's going to tell us all about her experiences of crime. Everybody knew who these wretched people were who were doing the burglaries, the banging in of the car windows.

It was just a matter of time before somebody could find something to attach. They were so quick as well at getting rid of everything. Part of the problem with being on television, live television, is that they can tell when you're out.

Please welcome to the podcast, Penny Smith. Hello, Penny. Well, hello.

I don't know why I said it in that way, as though it was... and finally, here I am. It was perfect. It was perfect.

I understand you were born in Eastwood in Nottinghamshire and grew up in Rutland. That's right. What was your neighbourhood like? Oh, well, Eastwood was very, very neighbourly and Rutland possibly not quite so much.

We weren't the rich lot and we weren't the other lot, so we were in the middle and sort of slightly marooned, plus slightly unconventional, perhaps mum very left wing in a place that very much was not left wing. And so, I mean, I never felt it. I ran around with everybody.

What was dad? Dad, well, it's quite funny because I grew up in a household where dad was a Margaret Thatcher supporter, mum was not. Interesting conversation. Do you know what it was? It was very much so.

We had... it was a very good grounding in how one could have a discussion with completely opposing views and how you could listen to other views and disagree really quite vehemently and yet still at the end of it say, anybody want any pudding? Or actually, that was never really a question. Don't be ridiculous. The question was, how much more pudding is there going to be and how many helpings can we have? I guess I was the total opposite because I started off in the steelworks and I was a shop steward in the steelworks in a big

union manor, used to have collections for the striking miners and then I left that and joined the police, so I've flipped.

Happy memories from your childhood? Do you know? Oh, my goodness. So happy. I loved growing up in the countryside.

I love living in towns, I love living in cities. Do you know what? I think I'd be happy wherever I was as long as the people were nice and as long as there was a... I do like a community though. I don't think I could ever go to one of those rural retreats and think I'm going to stay here forever.

That would not suit me. But I loved growing up in a village. I also had very happy memories growing up in Eastwood as well and skidding down the slagheap.

Is that a euphemism or were you skidding down the slagheap? Thank you, Alfie. No, generally, the slagheap. And so I think I'm a big fan of a community and of being able to say go next door or go to somebody and say, can you help me? I would feel... I think I'd probably move if I didn't have some sort of community around me.

I like to have... And I also like to have a centre. I like, wherever I am, I like to have a place where I can go. Yeah.

Any sort of quirky character, neighbours that you remember? I mean, I live next door to... We live next door to a farmer in... It was like probably pretty much everybody lived next door to some kind of farmer when I was growing up in the little... It was a little village. I mean, Rutland, let's face it, is small. Two towns, ten villages and four hamlets, I think somebody once said to me, whether that's true or not.

And we lived in a village near a hamlet. It was a dead end village, really. You came in and then you couldn't really get out unless you went out across the fields.

And I suppose there probably were quirky people, but I think we were probably considered quirky as well. You know, I think it was one of those things where there were all sorts of odd people all over the place. There was a bloke called... I don't know why it was called Tom Tom Turnaround, but he virtually lived in the pub and he was always in there.

And if you wanted to know anything that had gone on in the last 1700 years, you just asked Tom Tom Turnaround. You know, we had a guy called Richard Tullock, who was a... And he lived at Wing, which was quite good. And also I enjoyed turkey plucking because it was ten bob a turkey and that was jolly good money when I was growing up.

If you've got quick hands, yeah, it's all right. Do you know what? You've got very soft hands doing that. So there was... And of course Tom Tom made his fortune with the old sat-nav business, didn't he, after that? So Tom Tom Turnaround.

Yes. I see what you're doing there. And there was a very... There was a slightly odd... I mean, I did bell ringing as well.

And the bloke who led the bell ringing, I don't know, some people would say he was quite quirky as well. So there we would go, going and ringing the bells and in various... Great. It sounds great.

You know, for a kid growing up in that environment. Oh, I loved it. And I was kept very fit because whichever way you cycled, and it was two miles to the nearest town, and so that kept you very fit because if you wanted to go and eat something like sweets or whatever, it was two miles up and down hills.

Lovely. And if you missed the school bus, that was six miles up and down hills. You never did it more than twice.

You have to mean it for that sweet run, don't you? You have to be craving. Six miles. The CEO at Neighbourhood Watch Network, John Hayward-Cripps, is going to be joining us soon.

But first, Penny, take us to North London. Tell us about your neighbourhood there. Well, North London is where I ended up for 10 years when I first started living in London.

I didn't move to London until I was in my thirties. And I bought a flat in North London. It was two steps down.

And I liked it because it was near a little place where I could get my newspaper, which is important, and I could get provisions. So I liked the fact that it was walkable. I could walk to a really good market.

There were lots of things to do. There was a cinema. It was very, very easy and very walkable.

And the community was great. Perhaps my main problem with it, though, looking back, was that, well, I mean, you know, it's like everything. If you have lived a long time elsewhere, then it's quite difficult.

When you come to London, you know, it's difficult to know what it's going to be like when you decide to put down a route somewhere or other. So what I should have done perhaps is look a bit closer at my neighbours, because my neighbour on one side was moderately pesky and it was down a couple of steps. It was described as basement, but definitely wasn't.

It was a very sunny flat and it was just two steps down to the front door. And my next door neighbour, when I did ask him to turn his television down, which because we shared a wall, had actually turned it up. So perhaps I should have checked whether that was going to be an issue.

Yeah, there's a lot of luck involved, isn't there? I mean, this is a Neighbourhood Watch podcast, so we like neighbours. I love a neighbour. But there is some potluck involved.

There's the odd not so good one, isn't there? And also, you know, neighbours leave. So you can start with a great neighbour and then you end up with a different neighbour. And some neighbours are, I mean, I could have been described as moderately pesky because I was getting up at three o'clock in the morning.

I was working on Sky News and that was quite a schlep for me. So I was having to get up at three and probably waking up people by having a shower. I don't know whether I was a particularly noisy shower.

I tended not to sing in the shower. But then I wanted to be quiet during the day. So it probably was a bit annoying asking people to stop doing things when it's the middle of the day.

Who knows whether I was an annoying neighbour. I tried to be nice. I bet you weren't.

We should be respectful. Penny, you've been burgled on two occasions. I have.

Tell us about the first time it happened to you. The first time it happened, it was a sunny day and I came back and I thought, that front window looks a bit weird. It was a big sash window with beautiful wooden shutters on the inside.

You know, typical Victorian. Oh, lovely. Exactly.

Yeah, really, really lovely. And funny enough, the front door, had they but known, was quite easy to stove in. And I had been meaning to do a bit more on the front door.

But anyway, they chose to just break through the front window, which therefore ruined pretty much everything that was there. And they took all the, well, the usual stuff. They took my television, which they must have been extraordinarily disappointed on because it was virtually a wind-up television.

It was incredibly old. It was black and white. And it was just there until I managed to get around to getting a new one.

They took my hi-fi system, which in those days, I spent a lot of time choosing hi-fi because I love my music. I'm a big classical music and opera fan. And other things.

I'm just saying that there was a particular way that I wanted my hi-fi. And they took all my jewellery, which was the upsetting bit, of course, because so many of those were pieces given to me by people who are no longer with us. So that was my first burglary.

Then I... So just, they went in through the window. In through the window. They were very quick.

And my next door neighbour... Same way out? Same way out. Yeah, same way in and out. Yeah.

The window was very big and you could have possibly, I mean, I suppose that's why they stoved it in, because once you'd managed to get the sash window up, it's quite a nice, big entrance. Yeah. Awful though.

So you contacted the police? Contacted the police. They came round. They did fingerprinting.

Oh God. I don't know. They were very fast.

And yes, you can tell this was quite a long time ago. And they came round. They were very speedy.

They did fingerprints and everything else. Have you ever been called CSI then? They'd have been called SOCO, Seeds of Crime Officers. We only adopted the term CSI when they started... when the programme on Netflix started CSI Miami.

That's when we started to call ours. Oh, that's good. We'll call ours CSI.

I think I quite like the SOCO though. I don't know why. I think because it sounds like socket to them, which I think it sounds a bit more muscly myself.

Anyway, they came round. They were lovely. And then I tied it up.

But we didn't get anybody. Well, I think everybody knew who they were because they were... I lived near a little estate which was generally 99% lovely people and then 1% hideous people who, I don't know whether they burgled for fun or whatever, but it was... I mean, it's a real... I mean, the Americans call it home invasion, don't they? And you can understand why. As you're explaining, jewellery of sentimental value that you can never replace.

And people beating you. I've never experienced... I've had my shed broken into. And that was... They took a few tools.

And even that was like, oh, really, really? The thought that somebody had been in. Oh, you see, I didn't... I wasn't so much that, to be honest. I mean, there was... I'm quite a tidy person and I don't have a huge amount of stuff.

So it wasn't as though there was... I mean, maybe... I don't know why. I didn't particularly feel invaded. I just felt really angry.

I just felt so annoyed about these tow rags coming and taking stuff and probably flogging it for next to nothing when I'd spent so long doing it. And I've worked hard in my life. I've worked really hard getting up really early and all the rest of it and putting in the hours.

And it just seemed so mean. I mean, so the police suggested I go and sleep elsewhere. And I went, no, I am not sleeping elsewhere.

I'm going to sleep here. And I might even have something heavy by the side of me just in case they come in. And so I got somebody to come and put two planks over the front window so that somebody would really have to be quite a contortionist to get in or maybe a rabbit.

And I slept remarkably well because, of course, it was so incredibly breezy that there was all that fresh air. And I think the stress of the day meant that I slept extraordinarily well. If I'd have been up at three o'clock, I'd have slept well in any conditions.

You see, I think that's the thing, yeah. So did that change your, did you make changes sort of security wise after that? Well, they tried to, there was a suggestion that I should get Bannum grills at the front on the outside of the house. And there would have been issues

with that, though, because it was, I think it might have been, there was a conservation area sort of slightly, you know, not looking too brilliant on the outside.

There would have been hoops to go through. And you've had a beautiful window, haven't you? A beautiful Victorian window. It's a beautiful window.

And also, I didn't want to live in a prison. So I did, I made sure that at that point, I did, obviously, I put another lock, a big mortise lock on the front door and I did get an alarm. But the thing is that then I got burgled again.

And the alarm went off. But by the time anybody had actually responded to the alarm, they were so quick. They only took this time because I hadn't replaced any jewellery.

They did it pretty much a year afterwards. But what they did take was my car. My car keys were there.

And part of the problem with being on television, live television, is that they can tell when you're out. Of course, yes. Oh, of course.

Because it was live, of course, your TV. Yes, exactly. So nothing really much you can do about that.

So was it predominantly the car they took? It was the car. They took the new television that I'd bought. Right, OK.

The term in place is a Hanoi burglary. I think it's only called that because that was the operation name when we tried to do a number on the Hanoi burglars. And sometimes they're only after the car and the burgle to get the car keys.

In Scunthorpe, where I worked, we had a series of Hanoi burglaries. And we had a campaign. And I'll bring John, our expert, in a minute to ask him if this was a good idea.

But we had a campaign where we're giving out free... I was a police officer at the time. We were giving out key rings, key fobs. And the message on the key fobs, the tagline was, take me to bed.

For the car keys, take me to bed. And we were encouraging people to take the car keys upstairs to bed with them. Because when burglars break in, they've very often... Sometimes they'll come in in the evening when people are in bed, occupants to sleep in bed.

But exceptionally rare that they'll actually go upstairs. And so that was out. Well, that's a good time to bring, take me to bed.

John Hayward-Cripps, CEO of the Neighbourhood Watch and former boss at Victim Support. So you've dealt with a lot of victims in your careers, John. Is Penny's story quite typical of some of the burglary stories? There are definitely some similarities between something that happens quite often.

I mean, I think breaking through a front window is slightly unusual just because it's quite visible. But if it was relatively straightforward, it sounds like the first time it might have been. But I think what Penny described is people know you're out.

I mean, burglars don't want to get caught. They don't want to get seen. So knowing you're out, that is very common within burglaries.

But also, I think a lot of people aren't aware that if you've been burgled, you're actually more likely to get burgled again because the person that's done it knows the exit. They know they can get in and out quickly. And equally, the houses next door to a house that's been burgled are more likely as well.

For again, they know they can get away. They know the exit. They can do those things.

So I mean, I think what Penny describes is it being really, we're describing about people being in and out really quickly is common. So I think those things are, yeah, that is not unusual. Thank you.

So let me ask you, we're going back some years, Penny, with your burglars. And MO-wise, although you said it was unusual to be that visible, what sort of methods by the burglars, have they changed and evolved over the years? I mean, I think I'm tying in with what Penny was saying earlier, that one of the key bits is making sure people are out. So I mean, I think now one of the things we advise people is not to post when they're on holiday in Majorca for a month over Christmas.

You know, not putting those sort of things on social media. I think one of the other things that there are, we have quite a lot of now quite mobile high value items, like mobile phones, those sort of things, tablets, that sort of stuff. If you put out with your rubbish a load of, you know, packaging of brand new mobile phones, that's not a good thing to be doing, because it just signifies that there are new mobile phones in the house, or laptops or computers, those kind of things that are easily transportable, easy to sell.

So that's kind of what would be different. I mean, apart from that, it's quite similar. You know, people want to make sure people are out.

They'll want to have easy access. I mean, we know something like a third of all burglaries happen through an either unlocked window or an unlocked door. And so it's just, you know, that it's, there is certainly an opportunistic element to burglaries as well.

I would also say, John, sorry if I can just butt in. But both days that I was burgled were sunny. And I do wonder if sunny days are also the day that they choose because of the fact that from their point of view, nice and bright, see what they're doing, not going to be slipping over in the rain, not going to get wet themselves, et cetera, et cetera.

Because is there any truth in that? I think foul weather is a massively fantastic crime prevention technique. PC rain is the most effective, obviously. Yeah, the burglars don't like to get wet.

They're also quite lazy. Otherwise they'd be going up at three o'clock to go to work. Quite, quite lazy people.

So they want it as easy as possible, really. They want, as John was saying, they want cover. People with exposed back gardens are particularly vulnerable, I think, that aren't overlooked or got big bushes around the front of their house.

I guess they want to do minimum work for maximum reward, don't they? And I guess it's a question of making it as difficult as we can for them. And I know that John's going to cover some crime prevention methods shortly. What can local communities and police forces, what part can they play in helping to prevent burglaries, John? I think there's a massive bit where Neighbourhood Watch was kind of built on people looking out, not just looking, but looking out for each other.

I think that's a really important thing. If you see something that looks suspicious, letting neighbours know, letting the police know if it's really important, but also just looking out for each other, letting people know when you're going to be out. I think what Penny described as people being able to knock next door and have a word next door, that's a really, really important bit.

I mean, where communities are connected and together and people feel pride in their community and those sort of things, crime is just much, much less likely to happen. I mean, we know that, the police know that. It's not rocket science, it makes sense.

I think those are really important things. And the police have a massive part of that as well. You can't police and protect a community if you don't know the community and the people in it.

So I think the more of that that happens, I know there's a real resurgence in community policing at the moment where the police are trying to make contact and be part of communities. And I think those are the things that can be really important. And for a while, the police, just because of resources, I understand their issues, often didn't visit burglary victims.

But that sends out a whole set of messages that has a load of unforeseen consequences. People think, oh, the police don't care. They obviously do, but they're busy.

They don't care. I don't know who my local copper is. I don't feel as though they're bothered about.

Whereas now, I think almost all police forces visit burglary victims and they might not be any more likely to catch the perpetrator, but people feel reassured, comfortable. It has loads of really big benefits. The other thing is that I've got a friend who, and they had a front door, communal flats, not communal flats, but multiple flats in a building.

And people, delivery drivers, as we know nowadays, it used to be once in a blue moon. Now it's every 20 seconds. And their front door had to be pulled shut to make sure that it was shut properly.

And eventually they got a really good self-closing door so that you couldn't actually, unless somebody was determined and decided to prop it open. And they all made a decision to

listen on the door phone, as it were, to make sure that they could hear it closing. All right, that's great.

So I suppose, but particularly the self-closing door, because obviously, as you know, there will always be opportune burglars, et cetera, et cetera. But if you can try and do as much as possible to dissuade them. So if somebody goes past and there's an open front door and you know that there's 10 flats in there, you might be tempted to go and have a go at one of them.

Whereas if the door is closing behind somebody who's delivering, it's just much better. And that's a good example of the communication, of talking to your neighbours and having that little community where you can throw the problem in and come out with a solution. Like you, John, I'm a massive fan of neighbourhood policing.

So my background as a cop, the noughties when we had the high visibility phase and the crime and disorder reduction partnerships were a big thing. I was on various committees of community problem solving rather than the sort of the fire brigade policing and just drive around putting out fires. In fact, I was a member of a team, a community team.

They called us the ACORN, the ACORN Project. We had a little van, one sergeant, six police constables, great times when the focus was the community and problem solving. I ought to say, John, there's loads of information on your website, ourwatch.org.uk, about securing your home to prevent break-ins.

What key advice would you like to share with our listeners? Is there anything you've not covered so far? Yeah, I mean, I think the key bit that we always advocate is an acronym WIDEN, so W-I-D-E-N. So W for windows, just making sure they're locked. The I for if you're out and it's dark, having internal lights on a timer.

D for door, just making it double locked or deadlocked. E for external lights that come along with movement. And the N part for neighbours, just being linked in with your neighbours.

I mean, those are the things that are relatively or pretty inexpensive and will probably make one of the biggest differences to whether you're likely to be burgled. Obviously, now there are loads of really modern ways of doing things as well. So video doorbells and alarms are great.

I mean, I know it's relatively inexpensive now, if you can afford them to kind of have pressure pads on or window alarms all attached as well, which are all great. But there are some really sort of old school things as well. If you're lucky enough to have a garden or window boxes, planting spiky plants rather than soft ones will definitely dissuade people from going in through those sort of routes.

But I think I said right at the beginning, the key bit is making sure, the simplest thing, just please make sure your windows and doors are locked when you're not there, is the most important thing. John, you see, that's a solution I could have done rather than having these great big Bannam grills. I could have actually grown an enormous, great big bramble right up the front of the house.

Or a holly tree or something, something pretty. I wouldn't have been able to see unless I put the light on. A Venus burglar trap, that's what we need.

Oh, that would be nice, wouldn't it? Wouldn't that be great? So Wyden, thank you for that. Can I ask you, Penny, because you're clearly a strong, forthright, confident woman, did you feel safe after your burglaries? Did it take a while before you... The burglaries, no, the burglaries wasn't. As I said, I was kind of more angry.

The thing is that worse, terrible things happen at sea, as it were. And I'm not, you know, I know some people for whom a burglary is a terrible thing, which means that they can't go back in and they feel desecrated. And I can totally understand that.

But I think, I don't know, maybe it's because when I was backpacking, I did a lot of backpacking, two and a half years in Central and South America and Southeast Asia. And I was held up at submachine gun point in Northern Thailand almost. Almost, I was in a knife fight.

Did that worry you, did that worry you, Penny? That was mildly worrisome. I didn't think I was going to survive. When they made us turn around, I was actually standing there thinking, did I tell my parents I loved them in my last letter home? There was a knife fight in Brazil, almost fell off a mountain.

I'm glad I stopped in Scunthorpe now, I really am. There you go, you see. There were hurricanes, there was all sorts of things.

I got, you know, Swiss army knives taken off us by, robbed by police in various countries. On it goes. So I suppose the thing is that my sense of danger is more about personal danger, I think.

And because everybody knew who these wretched people were, who were doing the burglaries, the banging in of the car windows, the general unpleasantness. Everybody knew who they were. It was just a matter of time before somebody could find something to attach.

They were so quick as well at getting rid of everything. And so I suppose that's why I didn't feel particularly invaded, as it were. I always tell myself, you know, karma is at play and they will come unstuck.

Oh, I do hope so. I do hope that terrible things happen to them. Yeah, I still do, actually.

I still look back and think that I do. It would be nice to think that maybe a couple of them maybe saw the error of their ways and turned into the massively marvellous citizens of the world and did good. You never know.

You never know. And we remain hopeful. We remain hopeful at all times.

If you are unlucky and have been a victim of burglary, you can report it in several ways. If it's an emergency and the burglary is still taking place, call 999 and ask for the police. You will not be criticised for doing that.

If it's not an emergency, don't call 999. This doesn't mean the crime is not important. It just helps the police make the best use of their resources.

Many police forces use the 101 non-emergency number so you can ring that number instead. You can also go to your local police station, report the crime there. You can find the address and telephone number in the local telephone directory.

Check what time your local police station is open. Of course, not all police stations are open all the time. The other option is to report it online.

Remember to note down your police crime reference number for insurance purposes. That's very important. Thanks so much to Penny Smith and John Hayward-Cripps.