

Case worker

From Madeleine McCann to Jonathan King, criminologist, TV presenter and Hindhead man Mark Williams-Thomas has worked on some of the UK's top cases. Catherine Whyte meets him as his new show airs on ITV

It was an open-and-shut case. I began this interview by saying how utterly uninteresting I find crime thrillers. I rarely watch them, or horror movies. Just don't see the point of all that gore. But by the end – 90 minutes and two cups of coffee later – I am sitting, jaw open, enthralled by tales of suicides, post-mortems, shootings and accidental deaths.

Guilty as charged. I confess to enjoying every minute of this chat with Mark Williams-Thomas, ex-police detective-turned-TV presenter, who is one of the principal advisors on the sort of TV drama I never watch, like *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* and *Waking The Dead*.

His CV is as full as a police station on a rowdy Saturday night. Following a long and distinguished career as a detective with Surrey Police, Mark is one of the country's leading experts on child abuse and missing children.

As well as presenting programmes (you may recall ITV's *To Catch A Paedophile* in 2009), Mark can frequently be seen

commenting on high-profile cases on the BBC, Sky

News and ITV. And if that isn't enough, he also runs a consultancy service on child protection and risk management: the GB Beijing Olympics squad have Mark to thank for their safety.

"I have had a fascinating police career, and to go from that to making primetime television is truly amazing," he says.

Now, Mark is about to present an hour-long episode of ITV's *Exposure* series (the successor to *World in Action*) called *On The Run*.

"What we are basically tackling is the issue of offenders on the run," he explains. "Some have escaped; some have been given bail and have taken flight; some have disappeared while on leave. The numbers are truly shocking. The programme is going to attract a lot of attention."

Whether or not he succeeds in tracking down any of the prisoners remains a secret for now. Yet his excitement is palpable.

"It's all about bringing subjects which need airing to a national audience. It has to be delectable to the public but considered," he says.

Delectable to the public but considered. A curious phrase, I reflect, but one which describes Mark himself to a tee. So much so that he is 'helicoptered in' by TV networks at the first sign of breaking stories, such as those of Raoul Moat, Jean Charles de Menezes and, most famously, Madeleine McCann.

"I was there within 48 hrs. I broadcast live every day. I know the case in depth," he reveals.

Mark has his own theory about what happened to Madeleine that night at Praia da Luz in 2007: that she wandered out of the apartment and was picked up by a passing stranger. A case of the wrong place at the wrong time. Mark is not a man afraid to speak his mind – a trait much in evidence throughout our conversation.

"I don't sit on the fence. Be it against a British or a foreign police force, I'll say what I think – but with the confidence that I know what I'm talking about."

Which indeed he does. Having joined the police after a spell as a rugby league player for *Harlequins*, he quickly became involved in working with ways to divert youths from reoffending.

"We began to identify that a lot of these kids were coming from child protection type environments, often with domestic violence involved. I thought: 'Hang on, I really need to know why these children are suffering this abuse. Can we do more?'"

Eventually, however, the trail began to lead outside the family.

"We hadn't really tackled the organized paedophiles. Not organised in rings, exactly, but in the sense of targeting children in large numbers outside the family," he explains. "I started to look at it. And soon realized that we had a major problem – not unique to Surrey, but throughout the UK."

Mark goes on to explain, in some depth, the background to two of Surrey's most infamous cases: those of Adrian Stark, the music teacher at



St John's School Leatherhead who was charged with possessing child pornography, committing suicide just before it hit the headlines in 1997; and Jonathan King, the songwriter and record producer sentenced to seven years in prison in 2001 for the assault of five teenage boys.

"I had intelligence from a woman in the media that King was picking up young kids and abusing them; taking them to music events, things like that.

I wasn't sure what to do. He was a huge name at the time and there was no evidence or other intelligence to corroborate the story. Then, five years later, a young man approached Max Clifford with stories that King had sexually abused him, along with many other children, when he was a child at the *Walton Hop* disco."

The trial attracted a lot of media attention. Celebrities, including Simon Cowell, publicly supported King. Mark, though, is unfazed.

"It wasn't just King. I had a list of people in the music industry that were abusing kids. Some were prosecuted, some were not."

"If you see these images and don't get upset, you're in the wrong job"

Child abuse is a difficult world to talk about, let alone to work in. One wonders how Mark can sustain such an intense involvement.

"You have to be a certain type of person. Yes, it upsets me – the gravity of it. But it also drives me on. Ultimately, my satisfaction comes from catching them and stopping their offending behaviour.

"If you work in the field, see these images and say that you don't get upset, you're in the wrong job. You should never get used to it.

"When I look back on my service, and all the people I saved from abuse and helped to get their life back on track, it's a fantastic reward."

Even so, paedophilia stubbornly refuses to stay out of the news. Is it a modern disease?

"No. It's been around since Roman times. But the way that people offend has changed. About 80-90% of abuse still occurs within the family, but there is also this terrible add-on – the stranger element of it. The internet affords greater opportunity.

"The NSPCC has declared that it wants to eradicate child abuse," he continues. "It's a ridiculous strapline. You will never eradicate it. You can only reduce it.

"We have gone from a situation in which paedophilia is acceptable, but not discussed, to one in which it is discussed everywhere. That was a direct result of Esther Rantzen's *Childline*. So, in 2000, we had a lot of disclosures – historic disclosures. There is a greater acceptance that child abuse takes place."

Mark had left the force by the time Jonathan King was arrested. But he would soon find himself in the company of other detectives, in the shape of DIs Lynley and Boyd, as he began to advise scriptwriters on the accuracy of their storylines. *Waking The Dead*, in particular, is a series close to Mark's heart.

"It's my favourite because it was the hardest to do. It was all-consuming. Many of the characters and storylines that I delivered were drawn from my own experience."

So, is it realistic?

"Some characters are exaggerated, but others are very real. Take Boyd, for example. Yes, sure, he does go over the top sometimes, and perhaps he delivers above what a police officer would, but actually I think he's very real. You know, he is that police officer of the 1990s. Not a modern one. He's the sort of police officer we need more of."

A bit like an investigative journalist?

"Yes. Exactly. People who stand up and are prepared to take calculated



Mark Williams-Thomas on the *This Morning* sofa. Photograph courtesy of Rex Features

risks, but within the law. Now we have too many politician-driven officers who reach senior rank but have scarcely done the job, or who have never been proper investigators, and who aren't prepared to stand apart from the official police agenda, or the government agenda, and say: 'Let's do this.'"

Now independent, Mark can be particularly vocal about current issues, such as the riots and the phone hacking affair.

"The context in which the riots began was appalling. You don't have people outside a police station for hours without a police officer coming out to talk to them. That was terrible.

"Thereafter I think they handled the situation very well. But I was very disappointed with the Government's response. There was no leader, when what we need so badly are role

models. That is a massive breakdown. I would like to have seen Cameron getting on a plane sooner, or even just doing an interview.

"Similarly with the News International case. Andy Hayman, who was in charge of the official enquiry, seemed to treat it as a bit of a joke. I respect John Yates, but he didn't come across well either. Sue Akers, though, was very good.

"The police have got to realise that the media play a massive, massive role, not only in setting the public agenda, but in actually assisting them. I would like to see the police identify one spokesperson who is media-friendly, very savvy, but also highly respected."

Case closed.

■ **On The Run**, part of ITV's *Exposure* strand, airs on October 24, available on ITV Player until Oct 31