

PC David Inglis has a bigger beat than the Metropolitan Police - and he pounds it all b

I'm the REAL Hamish Macbeth

By Mike MacEacheran

THROUGH his station window, mile after mile of breathtaking Highland landscape disappears into the distance - a wilderness of hills, glens and lochs so vast it would take a lifetime to get to know it in proper detail.

Yet every inch of this rugged terrain is policed by PC David Inglis, the officer with the largest beat in the UK.

At 900 square miles, his area is 50 per cent larger than that patrolled by the entire Metropolitan Police Force in London - which employs 30,235 officers to do the job.

But then, there is rather more elbow room in the Highland bobby's beat in Sutherland, in the far north of Scotland.

While 7.2 million Londoners fall within the Met's catchment area, Mr Inglis is responsible for maintaining law and order among just 1,100 souls. Just like Hamish Macbeth in the popular TV drama, he knows almost every one of them.

Mr Inglis, who also pounds his enormous beat with a faithful West Highland terrier (his is called Bruce), said: 'There are lots of similarities between me and Hamish Macbeth because this is a very remote area.'

The Stornoway-born policeman, whose tiny station is in Rhiconich, near the fishing port of Kinlochbervie, has spent seven years getting to know his patch as best he can in the circumstances.

Drugs offences and violent crime are almost unknown - he makes an arrest only once in a blue moon. Peppered among the missing farmyard animals are occasional incidents of minor vandalism or theft.

However, Mr Inglis, a policeman for 30 years, would never swap his solitary post for a busy inner city beat. He said: 'I have the luxury of being able to spend time with people in the local community. But even though there are no real rogues or scoundrels in the area, it does get quite frenetic at times.'

'If there's a pub brawl in the street then I wouldn't have any worries about someone having a wee kick at me because they all know who I am. In a city centre it would be a different story.'

'There's rarely any pettiness or bickering because next week you'll need a favour done, so everyone

'It's good to know I have the support of the community'

here needs to stay close. Even though it's a large area, it only has a small population - so no one wants to fall out.'

Last year, Mr Inglis, 49, made four arrests - two for drink-driving, a minor assault and a theft - and investigated 20 cases.

Although serious crime is largely absent from his patch, variety is not. A current case involves the theft of a dog's wind-up toy.

Mr Inglis said: 'The blades have a diameter of about four to five metres, so I'd imagine it'll be quite easy to track down.'

'Someone has clearly just unbolted the entire structure and thought they could employ it for their own use; a propeller for a boat, or maybe in the garden.'

Then there was the gruesome mystery of the severed hand, stripped of skin, that washed up on a local beach. For a moment, the solo bobby thought it might be the case of a lifetime - until a marine biologist confirmed it was only the skeletal flipper from a seal.

In another case, a resident reported that their car had been broken into on a remote road late at night. On closer examination, Mr Inglis noticed animal hair stuck to the broken glass on the road.

It was the clue that wrapped up the investigation. He said: 'A roaming deer had seen its own reflection in the back window and probably taken a dislike to what it saw. It had smashed the whole back window in.'

The deer up here have really big antlers and they can cause some serious damage.'

With the nearest fellow police officer 65 miles away in Dornoch, back-up is not exactly close at hand - but any potential criminals should disabuse themselves of any notion that Mr Inglis' patch is a pushover.

He said: 'Before you commit a crime in this area, you need to make sure you can get away. There are only three roads in and three roads out. Within a short space of time I can have all the roads blocked, so there is no escape.'

The local villages, which have four primary schools and several country pubs, are spread out over a 120-mile radius, which means Mr Inglis can visit each



One policeman and his dog: PC David Inglis and Bruce are responsible for 900 square miles - but only 1,100 people

area only once a week. But even routine patrols can be time-consuming, as some crofts are only accessible by foot. Several require a four-mile round trip.

The nature of Mr Inglis' beat also allows him to employ his own unique methods when it comes to cracking down on drink-driving - when the village pub closes, he often gives customers a lift home.

He said: 'I'm certainly not averse to giving people a lift home if they live in a remote area. It's not a taxi service but if somebody needs one I'd rather prevent them from driving.'

There is another side to the coin. If Mr Inglis does see a car being driven late at night, he will always investigate.

He said: 'There are so few vehicles on the roads at night that if I see one in the early hours then I will check it out regardless.'

'It's not one vehicle in a hundred that

I check for drink-driving; it's one vehicle in one.'

But there is also a degree of understanding from the community that a single bobby cannot do everything at once. Locals are often happy to muck in.

Mr Inglis said: 'I have had people who have stopped to help me direct traffic when they have seen that I have my hands full. They'll get out of their cars and give me a hand for half-an-hour.'

'I recently needed help apprehending a rather aggressive man - so I got two of the local boys to assist me.'

'There are no other officers here, so it's good to know I have the support of the community when I need it.'

But the days of the remote village bobby could be numbered. Last year, one rural police station a month was closed in Scotland.

Despite First Minister Jack McConnell's promise to put more

officers on the beat, more than 60 community stations have been shut over the past seven years to save cash.

In five years, 11 stations have closed in the Grampian area, seven in Highland, four in Tayside and one each in Dumfries and Galloway and Fife.

But Mr Inglis - who has a son Craig, 23, and lives with his 41-year-old partner Isobel - is not gravely concerned for his own future. With 30 years service, he is looking forward to early retirement.

He plans to spend more time with Isobel, who works part-time in the local school, and their two dogs, Bruce and black Labrador Jade.

But Mr Inglis will not be moving far from the quaint little station with the unforgettable views when he hangs up his barely used truncheon.

He said: 'I'm actually building a house next to the police station. I love it here and have no intentions of leaving.'



On-screen image: Hamish Macbeth