

In the 1960s PC Bryn Phillips became one of Pembrokeshire's first two police dog handlers. In this edited extract from his autobiography he recalls some of the early incidents in his career

# A police dog handler's story

**W**HEN I turned my car into the driveway of Staffordshire Police Headquarters on a Sunday afternoon in September 1963 and saw for the first time the police dog training area, with all the apparatus used for the training of dogs, I glanced at my dog lying in the back of the car and said, 'Well, Abi girl, this is it!'

Abi was an eleven-month-old German Shepherd bitch and we were just arriving to commence a 13 week initial dog handler's course at the Home Office Police Dog Training School, which was based at Stafford.

It was something I'd always wanted to do and I felt that I had found my niche in life.

I was born in the county town of Haverfordwest on July 5, 1931, but only lived there for a short while, as in the same year my parents moved to live in Goodwick where my father had obtained a job as manager of a nursery specialising in the growing of tomatoes and cucumbers.

After the war, when the nursery was put on the market, my father decided he would buy it, so it became the family business. I left school at 14 and went to work in the nursery with my father and elder brother Ivor, helping out there for the next 13 years even though I found a lot of the work boring and repetitive.

As far back as I remember I always had a good rapport with animals, and during my schooldays spent much of my time in the countryside with my dog and ferrets. And after I had been working for 18 months I bought my first horse, straight off the Welsh hills. It cost me a fortune – £16.

*For a number of years Bryn combined working in the nursery with a career as a boxer, initially in the fairground booths and later as a professional, topping the bill at shows all over Britain. He retired from boxing in August 1957.*

**S**YBIL and I were married in August 1953 at Manorowen Church. It wasn't a big wedding, we could not afford it – only members of our immediate families. In 1955 we bought our first house in Park Street, Goodwick.

People often ask me how I came to join the police force and, to be quite honest, I often wonder myself. It was something that happened completely out of the blue.

At the time I was working as a salesman/collector with S & U Stores. It was a job that I was not really interested in, but better than the dole.

I had to go to Haverfordwest one day for a meeting with my area manager and, with time to spare, I called in at the old Police Headquarters in the castle for a chat with some of the policemen who knew me from my fairground boxing days.



*Bryn Phillips with his first police dog Abi.*

After a chatting about boxing for a while, they asked me the reason for my visit. As a joke I said 'I've come to join the police force'; to my embarrassment they took me at my word and I left with a pile of leaflets and application forms.

That evening I showed the forms to my parents and Sybil, and gradually we came around to the notion that, far from being a joke, it wasn't such a bad idea after all.

I sent in the application forms and, as impossible as it might seem today, the following Monday – 12 days after I had first walked into the police station in Haverfordwest – I was on my way to Bridgend to start a 13 week training course. It was November 1959.

After finishing my course at the training centre I did a week's local procedure course at Police Headquarters, Haverfordwest, and on the Saturday travelled to Pembroke Dock to begin my active duties as a policeman.

The police station was in Charlton Place, but a new station was almost completed in Water Street. In fact we moved in there three weeks later.

We all did our tours of duty on foot in those days, which is what I call proper Community Policing. Being constantly on foot patrol gave us the opportunity to get to know members of the public so much more easily, because we were meeting them and speaking to them every day,

Police today are so remote from the general public that it's no wonder there is such a divide between the police and the public.

I've always considered that Pembroke Dock was an excellent place to start a career in the police force; it presented such a wide variety of police work,

At the time it was a garrison town with a large army presence. They were starting to build oil refineries in the south of the county which brought large numbers of labourers into the area, and, of course, I was stationed in Pembroke Dock when the first German Panzer troops came to train at the tank ranges at Castlemartin Camp.

As the Pembrokeshire Police was run in those days, every police officer had a good grounding in every aspect of police work. Whatever you encountered during your tour of duty you dealt with.

Obviously you were given help with the more difficult cases, but it was a way of building one's confidence and competence. We even prosecuted our own cases in court, apart from the more complex ones.

**I**N THE early 1960s, Pembrokeshire Police was one of the very few police forces in the country that didn't have police dogs.

The Chief Constable, Mr George Terry, had for some time been trying to convince the Police Committee to agree that police dogs would be a great asset to the force. It was in 1963 that they agreed with his views and it was decided that the force would have two dogs.

When applications were invited for the posts of dog handlers I immediately applied. As I've said, I've always had a good rapport with animals and I thought this was something that would give me job satisfaction.

Some weeks later I was informed that my application had been successful and I would be one of the two dog handlers. At that time, Glamorgan police dog section had bred a litter of pups from one of the police dogs at their kennels in Bridgend, and our force had been given the offer of buying the last two pups in the litter.

My colleague John Richards, who had been chosen as the other dog handler, and myself were sent to Bridgend to collect the two pups, which were then four months old. We found that one was a bitch pup and the other a dog; it was decided I would have the bitch pup.

The pups had already been named Ace and Asta. Although the official name of my pup was 'Pemcon Asta' I decided to call her Abi, and that's what she was always known as.

At the time I was still stationed and living in Pembroke Dock. My three children were very young at the time, and you can imagine this young boisterous dog growing up with them. I think it did the dog and children a lot of good.

I was subsequently posted to Haverfordwest, to live in one of the two new police houses that had been built with permanent kennels for the police dogs.

Although I'd had plenty of experience with dogs of my own before joining the police force, I knew this was going to



*Bryn with Abi at the Police Dog Trials.*

be something entirely different and I was determined to make a success of being a dog handler.

**W**HEN my colleague John Richards and I came back from the Police Dog Training School at Stafford with our newly-trained police dogs, they created quite a bit of interest in the force and with the general public.

Obviously much was expected of them and they were put to use at every opportunity. As well as being a great asset in the prevention and detection of crime and hooliganism, they also had their public relations role to play.

Although we only had two dogs, we used to put on displays at various events all over the force area which were always well received by the public.

My first success with my dog was when a wholesale fruit store on the outskirts of town was broken into. I was called to the scene with my dog.

I cast the dog to see if she could pick up a track outside the broken window. She immediately picked up a scent which she followed around the back of the premises and into small woods where we found a broken-open orange box.

She continued past the broken box and out of the woods towards the main road. She crossed over the main road and then went up to the doorway of a cottage. A youth living at the cottage was later arrested by the CID for theft of fruit from the store.

I remember well August Bank Holiday 1965. Neither John nor myself was on duty because there was no need for a dog handler on a Bank Holiday in those times, but I was the duty handler on call. About mid-afternoon, my wife and I were playing with the children in the park at the rear of our house when we heard the telephone ringing.

Sybil ran into the house to answer the telephone and then I heard her shout that the Control Room Sergeant wanted me. On going to the phone he told me to go immediately to Tenby because there were dozens of 'Mods' and 'Rockers' fighting on the beach.

Believe me, he took a minute or two to convince me that he was telling the truth, because we had never had that kind of trouble before. On realising that he was genuine, I put the dog in the van and in less than half an hour we were in Tenby.

*Continued*



# A police dog handler's story

I arrived at the end of the Esplanade and, on looking down towards the South Beach, I could see that the forecourt in front of the café was full of people fighting.

All the holidaymakers and their children had retreated onto the sands and were terrified. I took the dog out from the van, put her on the leash and ran down the footpath towards the café.

When I was near the bottom of the footpath, with the dog pulling hard on the leash, I must have inadvertently pressed the quick release clip on the leash, because the dog shot forward towards the fighting crowd.

I am not exaggerating when I say that within a matter of seconds there wasn't a single person in the forecourt of the café, and there was spontaneous applause from the holiday-makers on the beach.

I know that is not the correct way in which police dogs should be used, and I am sure many did not believe me when I said that I had not purposely released the dog, but the fact remains that all trouble was stopped in seconds. We did not receive any complaints from anyone having been bitten by the dog, although I know that many had been.

**I**HAD a call late one evening from the Control Room about a young boy missing from the caravan in which he lived with his parents on a farm. I immediately turned out and went to the farm which was about half an hour's journey away.

The parents were obviously very anxious about their son, who was nine years old. They explained that they had sent the young boy to bed early because he had been naughty.

Before going to bed themselves at about half past ten, they had looked in at the boy's bedroom to see if he was OK and found that his bed was empty and the bedroom window open.

The father, who was the farm manager, and the owner of the farm had searched all the farm buildings and the surrounding area before calling the police to report him missing.

Although it was now nearly midnight, there was a full moon, so visibility was very good. I explained to the boy's parents that I was going to do a free search with the dog, which meant I was going to set the dog loose to search the area to try and pick up the boy's body scent.

Leading from the farmyard, not far from where the caravan was parked, was a gateway into a very large field full of stooks of corn. That was the way in which corn was harvested in those days.

I gave the dog the command to search. She immediately shot off down the field through the stooks of corn and was soon lost from sight. I stood there quietly with the parents and I'm sure they did not think too highly of my method of searching for the missing boy.

We had been standing there for three or four minutes with everyone looking rather anxious, when in the distance we heard the dog barking. We ran down to the bottom of the field.

She barked again and I shone my powerful torch towards the sound. I could see the back end of the dog sticking out of one of the stooks of corn.

On reaching the stook, we saw that the dog had hold of the foot part of a wellington boot and was attempting to pull the young boy from the middle of the stook where he had been sleeping. The group immediately started clapping!

This was another example of a trained dog doing in a



*Bryn and Abi – three times Welsh champions.*

matter of minutes what it would have taken a large number of man hours to do – and maybe without the same result.

**B**Y 1968, when the Pembrokeshire Police amalgamated with the Carmarthen and Cardigan Constabulary and the Mid-Wales Police to become the Dyfed Powys Police, I had been a dog handler for five years and, apart from having a good number of arrests with my police dog Abi, we had won the Welsh Region Police Dog Trials in 1966 and 1967.

In the meantime I had passed my police promotion examination to the rank of Sergeant, while Abi and I went on to win the Welsh Trials for a third time in 1969 (the event didn't take place in 1968 due to foot and mouth).

When I was promoted Sergeant I was posted to Pembroke and placed in charge of the Country Stations. I lived in the new house behind Pembroke Police Station and, even though I was no longer a member of the Dog Section, I was given permission to keep Abi and work her as necessary.

One day I had a call out to where building work was being carried out at the rear of a garage business in Sageston. The workmen, when using a mechanical digger on the site, had unearthed what they believed to be a bomb.

A constable and myself attended the scene and, on looking down into the trench, I could see a very rusty cylindrical object about three feet in length and about the circumference of a football. It had fins at one end.

I must admit that to me, because of its rusty and muddy condition, the object looked quite harmless. But, going by the book, I arranged for the bomb disposal unit at Hereford to be informed, first asking the workmen to stop all work on the site.

A few hours later an officer and sergeant from the bomb disposal unit arrived. One climbed down into the trench to examine the object and climbed out to inform us that it was a WWII German aerial bomb!

All dwellings within a 400 metre radius had to be evacuated immediately. As I was carrying this out, I don't mind admitting that I thought they were being over-cautious. But who was I to argue with experts?

While this was being done, the bomb disposal chaps went down into the trench with a few tools, one of which I noticed was a hand drill. After about half an hour the officer informed me that the bomb had been made safe and people could return to their homes.

The bomb was loaded onto the bomb disposal unit's truck, and my constable and I escorted it to Castlemartin Tank Ranges. Here the bomb was taken well out onto the ranges, far from the camp, and the bomb disposal men did what was necessary for a safe detonation.

We all retreated behind a rocky bluff, about 400 yards from where the bomb was placed. All the time I kept thinking, was there really need for such caution?

Then 'Bang!' there was a terrific explosion and huge boulders could be seen being hurled out to sea. The explosion had left a crater big enough for two double-decker buses. Boy, did my admiration for those two guys change! To think that just a short time before they had been crouched over that thing with a hand drill to make it safe.

I felt no shame in grabbing both of them by the hand and telling them what I thought of their courage.

**I**VERY much enjoyed being Sergeant in charge of the County Stations in south Pembrokeshire, especially as I still had my police dog and could use her when needed.

It was during this time that I had one of my best successes with my dog.

It was about 11.30pm on Christmas Eve 1970. I was off duty at home in the police house behind the police station in Pembroke. My wife and eldest daughter Marianne were in church; our other two children were in bed and probably dreaming about Father Christmas.

The telephone rang and it was one of my constables, Dudley Jones. He was at a house in Manorbier where the householders, a short time before, had been disturbed and found a man in the kitchen. When challenged the intruder had run out of the back door; could I attend with the dog?

Just at that minute my wife returned from church, so I collected the dog and 20 minutes later I was in Manorbier.

Having ascertained that no-one had been outside the back door since the intruder, I put the tracking harness and line on the dog, went out through the back door and gave her the command to 'seek'. She immediately tracked round the house and out onto the roadway.

She turned right for a few yards, then went through a gap in the hedge into a field. She tracked across this large, sloping field and over a stile into the next field. In the moonlight I could see a couple of detached houses in the distance to which we seemed to be heading.

Suddenly the dog stopped. I realised she had heard something and when I listened I could hear a crunching sound. As I was listening I saw someone run across the front of one of the houses.

I immediately took the tracking harness off the dog and said 'Get him'. She was off like a bullet with me after her. I saw the person double back, still running, and the dog took him in full flight, on his right arm, knocking him to the ground. After a bit of a struggle he was arrested and Dudley took him away in the police van.

We later discovered that he had been attempting to break into one of the detached houses, and the crunching sound I had heard was him stepping on broken glass from a window he had smashed.

The prisoner, who was a soldier from Manorbier Camp, was interviewed by the CID and confessed to a number of other burglaries in the area. He said that he had hidden most of the stolen property in rabbit holes and bushes, but as it was dark he couldn't remember exactly where.

I guessed that the property would be hidden somewhere between the village and the Camp, so I decided to make a search for the property with my dog and returned to Manorbier. I was amazed at the amount of property that we recovered – clothing, jewellery and household items. The arrested person was subsequently given a prison sentence.

If it were not for the police dog it might have been quite some time, if ever, before these crimes were detected.

*• Bryn Phillips' career took him from Pembrokeshire to become a Sergeant in the Dogs Section of Bristol City Police, later becoming Inspector in Charge of the Mounted and Dogs Section of the South Yorkshire Police.*

*In 1977 he became Director and Chief Instructor at the Home Office Police Dog Training School in Stafford and he also spent time in Pakistan advising on police dog training. He retired in 1987 and now lives in Bristol.*

*In 1999 he wrote his autobiography 'A Police Dog-Handler's Story' from which this extract is taken with kind permission.*



*Bryn on the police horse Brigadier at the Sheffield Wednesday v Manchester United football match in 1974.*