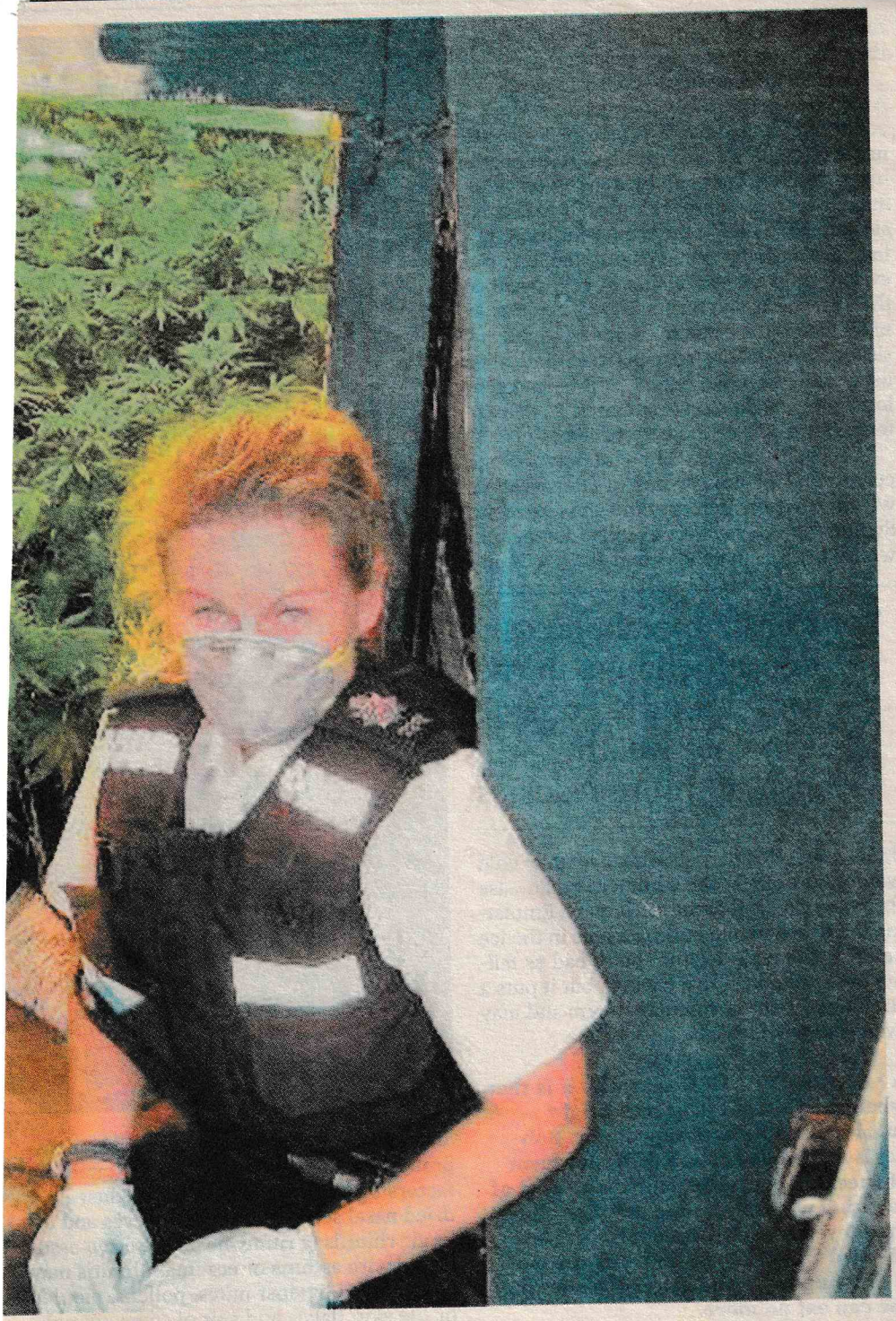


Heath spearheaded the initiative to contact the police.

Meanwhile my unsuspecting uncle was delighted with his tenants, who kept the bank tills ringing, with no complaints or requests; everything had been going smoothly until he received the call that early September morning summoning him to the local police station with all documentation pertaining to the house.

Midway Avenue had been cordoned off, three vans were parked outside his property and an officer placed on 24-hour guard. The entire area was now a site of forensic evidence. All of the occupants had disappeared. The four bedrooms, spacious living room, second reception room and hallways in which my uncle had envisioned a future of silver serenity had been desecrated: his little Surrey nest egg housed not five Heathrow catering workers but up to 500 skunk plants — higher maintenance than any reasonable tenant ordinarily would be.

Irrigation systems had been fitted throughout the house. The carpets oozed water. The walls were no longer eau de nil but black-and-mildew grey. Row upon row of lamps hung from huge bolts in the walls creating subtropical conditions. A ceiling had collapsed and my uncle "nearly fainted" when he saw the hole made in the roof. The electricity meter had been bypassed — a common procedure for cannabis farmers not wanting to arouse attention from the electricity board — and thick black cables ran throughout the house.

The Andrew Martin three-piece suite had been chopped up and discarded; the oak four-poster reconditioned to form a bench in the kitchen upon which the two farmers slept, every other piece of furniture dismantled and each door removed. It took three skips to clear the debris. It was in the kitchen that my uncle discovered the sole personal effects of his tenants: a rucksack filled with dirty clothes and two dozen flatfish that had rotted when the electricity was switched off, replacing the evergreen scent of sinsemilla that had so mystified the neighbours with the pungent odour of decay.

In their six months of occupation the skunk farmers had earned an estimated £100,000 from two crops, caused a further £10,000 in damage, left a £6,000 electricity bill and wiped £20,000 from the value of the house. What provided a point of timeless amusement for the rest of my family wasn't such a laughing matter for my uncle. His tenants were not Chinese catering workers as they had pretended but a Vietnamese druglord, two illegal immigrants and their accomplices, in all probability part of a sophisticated network, a money-making machine involving violence, people trafficking, money laundering, firearms, Class A drugs and millions of pounds in turnover a year.

> 'I think that it surprised everyone, something like that happening in Thorpe'

Detective Inspector Neil Hutchison, from the Metropolitan Police's serious and organised crime unit, which played a significant role in the near 200 arrests made during Operation Keymer, the cannabis farm clampdown last month, explained that "Vietnam, much like China, is a poor country with a rapidly growing economy. The quickest way to earn money is through working in the West."

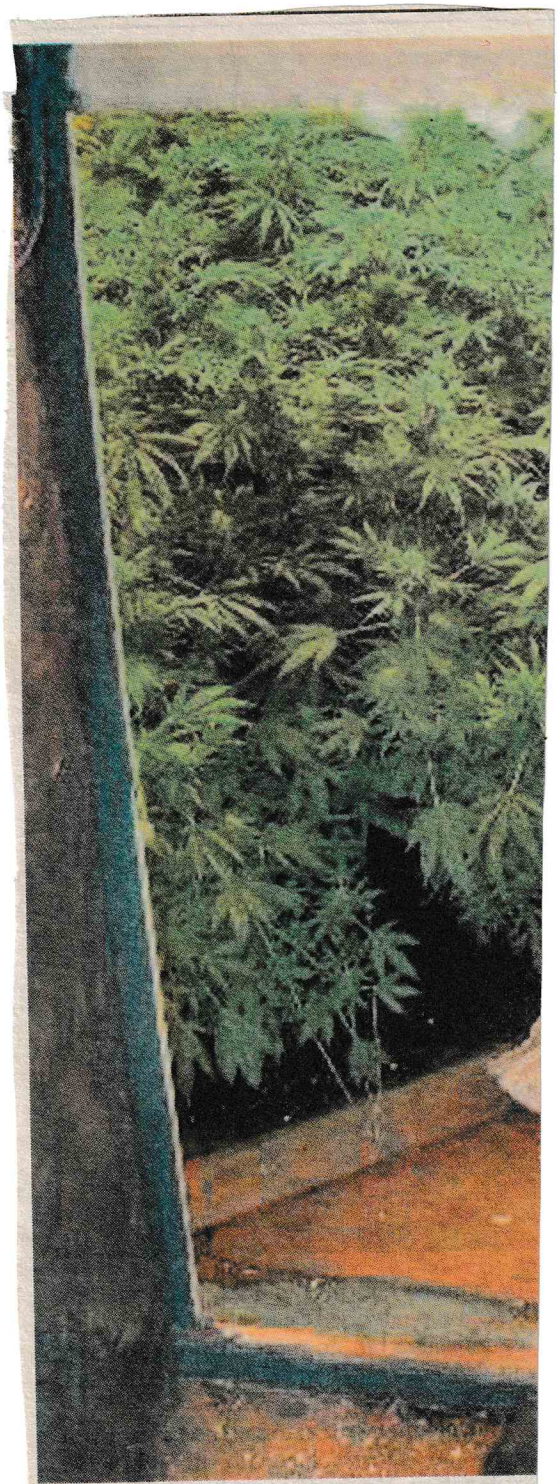
Illegal immigrants, those at the bottom of the pile who are the ones most commonly caught, pay around £10,000 to be smuggled into the UK, usually in a lorry or truck, "to discover that they owe serious amounts of money to some very horrible people. They are promised work in hotels or restaurants, but when they arrive they're forced to work in cannabis factories to settle their significant debts — and take all the risk for the career criminals."

Before selling the house my uncle attempted to let it again, receiving between 20 and 30 calls from people speaking broken English about his advert for a "large house for rent from private landlord in a secluded village". They all, unfailingly, put down the phone when asked for references, utility bills, bank details and the like.

"I think it surprised everyone more than anything else. Something like that happening in a little quiet village like Thorpe. 'Nothing ever happens in Thorpe', that's what they say," Mrs Heath says. "We all kept a very wary eye out when the house was up for sale. 'Mum, dad and two-point-four children will do us just fine', we said."

The green, green grass of home...

The 'catering workers' who rented a house from the uncle of **VICTORIA GILL** seemed a rum lot to the villagers of Thorpe. But they were stunned to discover that the home had been converted into a dope farm run by a Vietnamese drug lord



much racialism that you hold back, we certainly didn't want authority with a capital A knocking on our doors. We joked that they could be making bombs or anything, we didn't know what was going on."

It was at the neighbours' Second World War-themed fancy dress party that the residents decided to take matters in hand. Gossip had reached fever pitch: every cross-lawn glance acknowledged that the neighbours didn't quite behave as renters should.

"Cannabis houses raided in Stanwell and Ashford!", the local papers screamed. As the pensioners and aspiring yuppies congregated in their military uniforms and Forties best, the small talk turned to the resounding similarities between the crimes across the green belt and the neighbours whose absence was all too pronounced. Speculation was at crisis point: as the elected Neighbourhood Watch representative, Mrs

It was the build-up of a sequence of events over time that made us realise that something was distinctly wrong, says the lady telling me the tale of my uncle's house, local sensibilities and the curious tenants who came and went in the middle of the night. "You just don't expect it in a village like Thorpe."

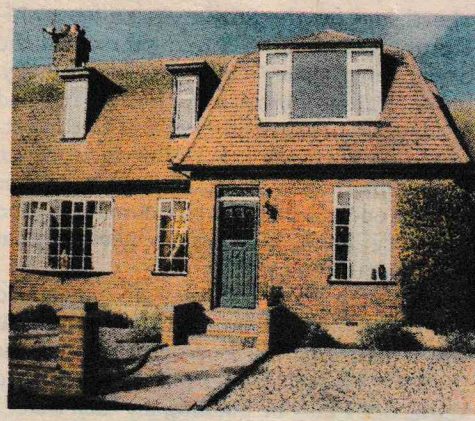
Mrs Heath, which is not her real name, speaks in tones that rise in pitch with every phrase; her biscuit-coloured cardigan offsets the taupe Draylon of her armchair (she tells me it's her best chair, and we've to be quick because she cooks her husband's tea every evening at 6 sharp). Mrs Heath, 72, is the eyes and ears of Midway Avenue, a microcosm of pre-Thatcher Britain, where clipping the lawn and polishing the Volvo are a daily ritual, stone hedgehogs compete with clay cats on the porches of neighbouring bungalows and curtains twitch with every passing car.

"Most people here, for want of a better word, not wanting to be classist or anything, are sort of middle class. They're quiet, pleasant, well-behaved, law-abiding citizens," she explains, as we sip tea in her front room. "If something was amiss, if something wasn't quite right in someone's front garden, you'd knock on their door and tell them."

My uncle bought into this slice of sleepy Surrey hinterland in January last year; seduced by the private lake to the rear of the house, an oasis of tranquillity for a picture-perfect retirement spent listening to Brahms and fishing. As business matters kept him in London, in the meantime he planned to let it. The students from the nearby American school had settled in to the spring term, the Irish family for whom my uncle had high hopes postponed; thus he was pleased to receive the call from the five Chinese catering workers at Heathrow, who arrived punctually for their viewing that grey day in March.

"They said they were enamoured, absolutely enamoured, with the property," said my uncle. "They told me it was perfect for them; exactly the kind of place they were looking for." The women in particular adored it.

If my uncle considered it a sound investment, the property's neighbours harboured deep concerns. Thorpe is as culturally homogenous as it gets: a community that takes pride in British values and holds store by the monarchy, so the new tenants' bizarre conduct played true to the



'extreme casualwear'. They could have been shiftworkers or students, except they didn't ever seem to leave the house, nor behave quite as a student house should," Mrs Heath explains. "When people don't fit in they are bound to be talked about – whenever people got together they'd comment on the orientals over the road.

"We all wondered why on earth they always kept the lights on and the curtains drawn, even in the height of summer!"

In hope of gaining further insight into the mysterious characters in their midst they posted invitations to social gatherings; the new neighbours never RSVPed. So they knocked on their door; but nobody ever answered. The house's inhabitants seemed to reside on a "roll on, roll off basis", with

> The lady next door didn't know what the 'funny smell' was

faces changing every few weeks. The only lights ever turned off were those in the kitchen and bathroom. "We all wondered why on earth they'd put a bed in the kitchen when they had all those lovely rooms!" Asked how they knew, Mrs Heath explains: "When people are trimming their hedges they just tend to see in."

The lady next door didn't know what the "funny smell" was coming through her daughter's wardrobe. "She couldn't understand it – she had to ask her kids." Every so often a van was spied backed up against the garage in the dead of night and big taped boxes loaded in. The large-scale concertina ducts, compost and fertiliser had, however, slipped through undetected. Asked why the

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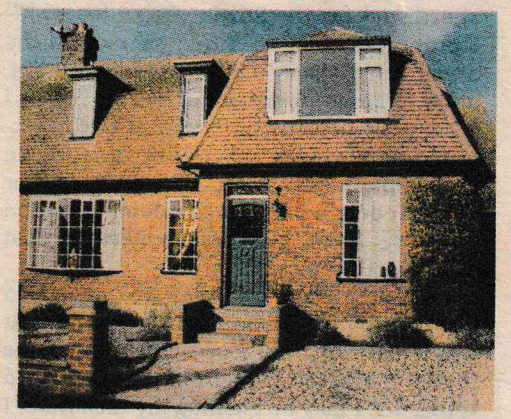

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