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## Meet the new home guard.

by Lucy Bannerman

### With burglaries on the increase, Neighbourhood Watch schemes are rising to the challenge - this time with new technology

The modern, semi-detached homes are immediately familiar to anyone who has seen an episode of Brookside. Recycling bins stand in orderly rows. Ford Focuses and Volkswagen Passats are parked dutifully in the driveways. Plasma television screens flicker through the windows and children's bikes lie across lawns or by back doors and garages. One imagines that, for your average thief, this could be a lucrative slice of suburbia. But that would be to reckon without Graham Roe and the 17 other co-ordinators of the local homewatch association. There have been no burglaries on these streets in recent weeks - and Roe, the neighbourhood watch leader, is determined to keep it that way, recession or no recession.

"We tell people, if you get up in the night to go to the toilet, always have a look out of the window," he says. "If I see any guy trying the handles of cars or eyeing up properties, I can phone any of the numbers on this list" - he brandishes it aloft - "and tell them to keep watch."

On one fortuitous toilet break, at quarter to three in the morning, 63-year-old Roe spotted three youths "who were patently up to no good". He dialled for help. "The police were here within six minutes," he says. "Now that could have been a crime averted."

A bleak economy is invariably accompanied by a rise in burglaries. Last year the number of domestic burglaries recorded by police in England and Wales rose by 4 per cent to 69,700, signalling an end to the slow decline of break-ins over the past decade. In response, Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, held an emergency "burglary summit" yesterday to discuss possible ways to counter the rise. But Roe and his fellow residents on the Nurseries Estate are clearly ahead of the crime curve.

"The lady at No 8 is an absolute sleuth," he tells me as we patrol the quiet cul-de-sacs of Sale, looking out for anything suspicious. "She doesn't miss a thing."

The estate has an enviable record in burglary prevention and has so far resisted the wider trend in Greater Manchester, where the number of break-ins has risen four times faster than in the rest of England and Wales. As the spectre of crime looms, residents have been securing their ramparts - testing alarms and checking patio doors.

"No question about it," says Roe, a retired teacher, after inspecting damaged fencing behind some shrubs in Miller's Close. "That was a weakness. Thieves could be gone into the darkness within minutes."

In an era when new homeowners may be on closer terms with Facebook friends overseas than with the people living in their streets, the idea of Neighbourhood Watch might seem rather quaint. Yet the scheme has also found a new lease of life on the Gascoigne Estate in Barking, East London, where residents - some of whom had been burgled as many as five times in the previous 12 months - are convinced that it has helped to cut crime. And in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, a former ambulanceman has helped to re-launch a similarly successful scheme on the Platts Common estate. "It used to be chaos here," says Barry McGowan, "and with the recession there's every chance that crime will rise again."

McGowan's message to other schemes is, don't let your guard down now.

If all this seems a bit Dad's Army, maybe that is no bad thing. For the residents of one street in southwest London, at least, months of being targeted by burglars finally awoke a self-protective instinct.

"It was the brazenness of it all," says Thomas, a local father who joined forces with his neighbours to barricade an alleyway linking their homes that had made access easy for housebreakers, who even targeted elderly residents during the daytime.

When police had to wake one resident to tell him that the family 4x4 had been stolen and used in a ram-raid in the other side of London, enough was enough. "It was a case of men defending their castles," says Thomas, "but it has been a neighbourly bonding exercise, too."

Back on the Nurseries Estate, gone are the old orange Neighbourhood Watch signs on lampposts which featured the shape of a bobby on the beat. In their place are red triangular warning signs with the silhouettes of suspicious characters inside.

"They have been a great weapon," says Graham Roe. "They send a clear message to the criminal fraternity: come to the Nurseries Estate and you will be spotted. You will be reported and you will be caught." He chuckles, as if surprised by the force of his own threat. "I'm nothing if not enthusiastic," he admits. "We are quite zealous."

The arsenal with which Roe confronts would-be villains includes badges, leaflets and stickers, not to mention a stack of minutes from the last group meeting. And there are code words, too. "When you call the central station, two words guarantee the quickest police response," he says, conspiratorially. "Thieves on."

"Now this lady walking past with her dog, she's very vigilant," Roe says proudly. "If they were all as keen as her, crime round here would be non-existent."

His wife, Pat, nods sagely.

Britain's first official Neighbourhood Watch was set up in 1982 in Mollington, Cheshire, about 35 miles from the Nurseries Estate. It hoped to follow the success of similar schemes in the United States, which were themselves based on the concept of the "town watch" during the colonial era.

The idea of community crime prevention was reignited in America by public outrage at the murder, in 1964, of a young woman who was repeatedly stabbed and sexually assaulted in front of an apartment block in New York. Although 38 people saw or heard the prolonged attack that killed Kitty Genovese, 28, not one called the police until the attacker had fled, 35 minutes later. Her death led to a new phrase being coined - "the bystander effect" - and her name became a shameful reminder of what happens when neighbours do nothing.

Today the Neighbourhood Watch movement covers six million households in the UK. It consists of more than 170,000 groups, ranging from schemes covering a single street to those with thousands of members monitoring whole districts.

In previous recessions, Neighbourhood Watch groups may have relied on little besides the protective curiosity of their members and a few extra Chubb locks. Now, though, homeowners have technology on their side.

Graham Roe holds up what looks like a mascara stick. "On this brush," he says, "is a unique, revolutionary liquid."

SmartWater is a permanent invisible ink that can be dabbed on valuables such as laptops and television sets. Any recovered stolen goods can thus be traced to their original owners. According to Roe, almost a third of the 261 properties on the Nurseries Estate are "SmartWatered" - "not as many as I'd like, though," he adds.

Not all crooks have been outsmarted, though. One tried to steal car keys from the house of one of Roe's neighbours by using a 17ft fishing rod with magnets on the end. With more security measures being installed as standard by vehicle manufacturers, car criminals have become more ingenious.

Not that Tony Hannah is worried. Anyone misguided enough to try to steal his car would probably find himself temporarily blinded by "disco smoke" that fills the garage within minutes. "He wouldn't be able to see anything to steal it," says Hannah.

An alarm specialist and manager of a security company, Hannah lives round the corner from Roe. He has installed a dizzying array of devices to keep the family home secure. There is "a combination of overt and covert CCTV cameras" with 30ft night vision, which are wired to the central police station. Then there are the "infra-red, acoustic and vibration" technologies, including an alarm that is triggered by the sound of breaking glass.

Even the doorbell has a label warning callers that every conversation through the voice security system is recorded. An "enunciating system" allows anyone at home at the time of a burglary to follow the high-pitched beeps that track an intruder's movements from room to room.

"And if all that technology fails," he adds with a smile, "there's always the dog."

As if on cue, Sabre emerges from his cage in the kitchen - 7st of snarling German Shepherd, baring his teeth and growling at the Times photographer. I have no intention of robbing Hannah's house but I keep my distance anyway. "He's not very friendly," explains his owner, rather needlessly.

Hannah says that home security is cheaper than most people think. Buying and installing a few CCTV cameras used to cost many thousands of pounds, but now you can buy a whole kit for less than £1,000. He also pays £15 a month for a direct alarm connection to the police station, there being no guarantee of any response to a bells-only alarm.

Hannah was the victim of an attempted break-in at a previous address, it transpires. I ask how it felt to have his privacy invaded and his home threatened. "We had a lot of blood to clean off the front step that morning," he sighs. They had two German Shepherds at the time.

"The technology will only do so much, though," he continues. "I'm not so worried about the house. It's the ones who knock on your door and say 'give me the car keys or I'll stab you' - they're the ones that worry me."

Like Hannah, Roe identifies "stranger danger" as the biggest threat to the community, and believes that the first rule of beating home crime is simple: exclusion. "The more strangers you exclude from the estate, the less chance there is of a crime. It's statistically proven," he says.

The estate is a strict "no cold callers" zone. Some might say it is only a few fences short of being a gated community.

Paul McKeever, chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales, welcomes "as many eyes and ears as possible" in the collective fight against crime - as long as homeowners don't try to take the law into their own hands. "Neighbourhood watches are one thing but vigilantism is another," he says. "I can understand the frustration in cases where people have gone out on the streets themselves, but that is a job for the police."

Jane Holdship, a 27-year-old drama teacher who lives on the Nurseries Estate, has some reservations about people being "almost scaremongered" into protecting their properties. But she admits that a communal concern with security does create a feeling of togetherness.

"You feel protected. We all keep an eye out for each other," she says. "It sounds rather cheesy but it makes us feel like a community."