

## After Midsomer we're the next of the killer hotspots

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By Mike Pryce

LOCK the doors, shutter the windows, block up the chimney and turn the guard dogs loose, because Worcestershire is about to become as much of a bloodbath as that peaceful rural idyll Midsomer, where some poor soul seems to cop their lot every week.

Whether it's in the shrubbery with a sledgehammer or behind the barn with a pitchfork, there are so many bodies littering Chief Inspector Barnaby's patch that estate agency is a dying trade.

Hopefully that won't happen around here, although the signs are not good, because publishers have gone barmy over the output of new author Julius Falconer, who sets most of his murder mysteries in Worcestershire.

Since the turn of the year, eight have hit the bookshelves and a ninth is on the way.

Little Comberton, Bredon Hill, Birtsmorton, Longdon, Abberley, Evesham and Hartlebury Castle – where the Bishop of Worcester no less is dispatched to meet his maker – are all the scenes of murder most foul with all the cases investigated by the intrepid Detective Inspector Stanley Wickfield.

Perhaps even more surprising than a body count higher than the average undertakers is that Julius Falconer, who writes about the county with a forensic knowledge, doesn't come from Worcestershire at all. He lives in a tiny village in the middle of France (total population 21, so anyone going missing there would soon be noticed) and grows grapes.

His home is a 12th century cottage with an adjoining 14th century barn and this series of stories with titles like *The Longdon Murders*, *Death Twice Avenged* and *The Will of Joan Goode 1793* is his first stab at being an author. By trade he was a teacher specialising in religious education.



Julius was, however, born on the outskirts of Coventry, at the tail end of the Second World War, which at least gives a connection with the English Midlands.

He said: “Much of the city had been devastated by German air raids and to reach some of our relatives, who lived nearer the centre, we had to make our way down streets that were still strewn with rubble.”

At weekends the Falconer family used to clamber into their Humber Super Snipe, head out into the Warwickshire countryside and sometimes travel a little further afield into Worcestershire.

Julius said: “We’d go for walks and just generally enjoy the peace and quiet. I loved it.”

The young Falconer was also a keen reader of detective stories, which obviously sowed the seed for the future. After his teaching career, which literally took him the length of the UK – from Cornwall to Scotland – he retired to France and looked for something else to do while the grapes were growing.

He said: “I’d always read the work of people such as Ruth Rendell and thought I’d have a go myself. It wasn’t an intention to re-create the Midsomer Murders format, it was just a genre I was comfortable with.”

But where to set his murders?

He added: “I was looking for a really peaceful part of the world and the Warwickshire I knew as a child has changed so much. It’s been cut up by the building of motorways and there has been so much growth of industry and housing. It’s not as I remember it at all.

“So I thought why not neighbouring Worcestershire? I didn’t know it as well as Warwickshire, but I can recall we sometimes went on days out to places like the Malvern Hills and Worcester. The cathedral there is such a gracious place It sets the tone for the county.”

With the aid of the internet and a map, Julius sat down to do his research. The south Worcestershire places names were particularly appealing, although his Det Insp Wickfield has ventured as far north as Droitwich. The criteria for a crime location was a village with a church, a pub, a vicarage and a local shop. And those might be in decreasing supply today.

Julius said: “All the stories are set in the 60s and early 70s, because I think that’s what we can look back on as a golden age, before industrialisation set in. Every case involves a murder and as the story develops there is always one significant clue as to who did it. I give the reader the same information the police have as their investigation develops and there is always the chance for the reader to get there first and work out the name of the killer before Insp Wickfield.”

There is no generic title for the series and all the tales are stand alones, their only link being Worcestershire and the investigating officer, who, inevitably, has a sidekick, although his name changes from book to book.

Reviews of Julius Falconer's casebook include comments such as: "Thought provoking entertainment for a night by the fire – but sharpen your wits first" and "The author never fails to write serious and stimulating stories with humour, a wealth of researched detail and subtle plots".

So, all the ingredients are there to turn Worcestershire into Midsomer and Little Comberton into the village of Badger's Drift.

Which means you'd better watch out the next time you're walking on Bredon Hill at midnight.

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