

# Answers in blood

**D**efending himself against a vicious knife attack, an English farmer lets fly with both barrels of his twelve-bore shotgun. It seems like the gruesome and tragic climax of a local hate campaign, until investigators take a closer look at the bloodstains on the farmhouse floor, and delve into the case.

Slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, the sheep's head leered from the fence of Widden Hill Farm, in the leafy Cotswolds. Scribbled on a piece of paper fixed to it were two words: "YOU NEXT." To farmer Graham Backhouse it was an unambiguous threat, and he took the grisly emblem straight to the police. He ranted about earlier anonymous letters and phone calls, and a village vendetta against him,

but there was little the police could do.

Besides, they believed it to be just another village spat.

#### ◀ BOMB VICTIM

*Maimed by her husband's bomb, Backhouse's wife divorced him—on the incontestable grounds of unreasonable behavior.*

This one, though, turned out to be different. Ten days later, on April 9, 1984, Margaret Backhouse couldn't start her car, so she grabbed the keys to her husband's Volvo station wagon to drive to a nearby village, Horton. When she turned the ignition key, a bomb under the driver's seat blasted off half her thigh.

#### Pipe bomb

The police investigation revealed that the bomb had been made from a length of pipe packed with nitroglycerine and the pellets from eight shotgun cartridges. It had been positioned to throw the force of the explosion upward, and it was remarkable that Mrs. Backhouse had not been killed in the blast.

Since it seemed clear that the real target was Graham, the police asked him who he thought might have been responsible. At first he denied that he had any enemies, but when pressed, he singled out two local people who might have borne him grudges. One was a quarry worker with whose wife Backhouse had dallied. He had the motive, and was used to handling explosives. The other was a neighbor, carpenter Colyn



#### SCARS THAT COULDN'T HIDE GUILT ▲

*Graham Backhouse had been a successful hairdresser before moving to the countryside, but perms and trims did not prepare him for the rigours of life on a farm.*

Bedale-Taylor, who had argued with Backhouse over a right of way.

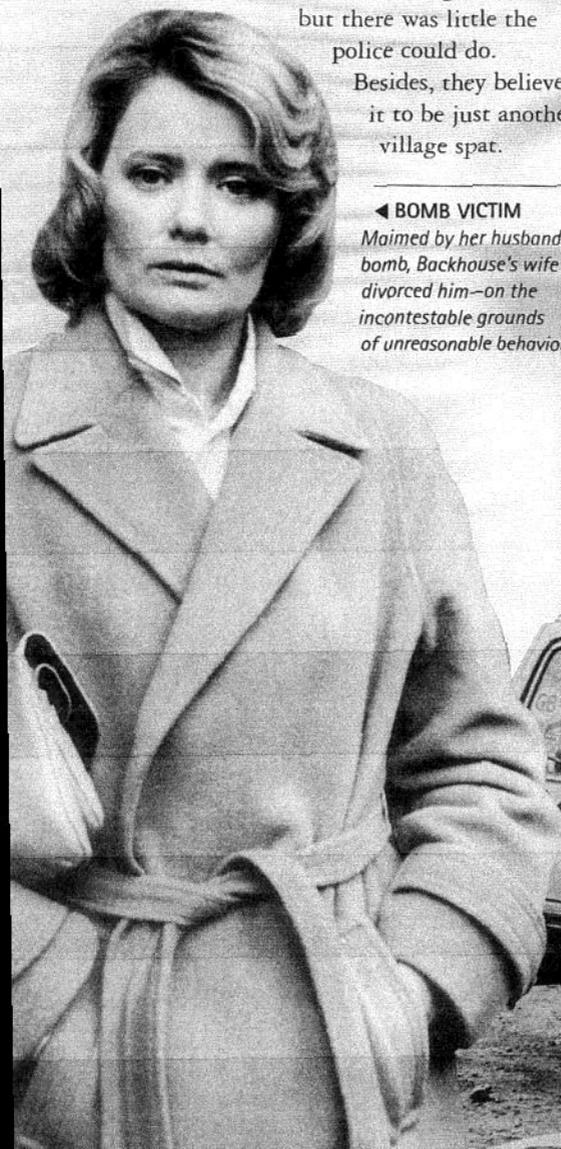
#### Self-defense

The police gave Backhouse 24-hour protection, but hardly more than a week later, the farmer suddenly phoned them and ended the arrangement, claiming he was quite able to look after himself. Still concerned for his safety, the police insisted he have a panic button in the house, linked to an alarm at the station.

On April 30, Backhouse triggered it;

#### CAR BOMB ▼

*Backhouse claimed he did not hear the car bomb, or his wife's screams, because he was in a barn some distance away, and was listening to the radio.*



an officer rushed to Widden Hill Farm. There they found Bedale-Taylor dead from two shotgun wounds, gripping a utility knife. Backhouse was bleeding from gashes across his face and chest.

Between frightened sobs, he poured out his story. Bedale-Taylor, he said, had appeared at his door, saying he had come to mend a chair. When Backhouse told him there was no furniture that needed repairs, the carpenter confessed that he had planted the car bomb, then shouted that he had been sent by God, and lunged forward with the knife.

Backhouse claimed he fled from the kitchen to get his shotgun, and had fired twice in self-defense. A search of Bedale-

from the kitchen—the route that the wounded Backhouse claimed he followed when he went to get his gun.

There were other inconsistencies. The dead man was found gripping the knife, but as the forensic pathologist who carried out the autopsy pointed out, he would have dropped it as he fell. Backhouse's own wounds were curious, too. There were no cuts on his hands, and the continuous slashes from neck to waist suggested he had stood still and offered no opposition as his assailant cut him.

### Insurance scam

Probing further, investigators found out more disturbing facts. Backhouse had huge and growing debts. He was an incompetent farmer, and his crops had failed for two consecutive years. In March 1984, he had doubled the insurance cover on his wife's life. Her death would have cleared his debts.

Police charged Graham Backhouse with the murder of Colyn Bedale-Taylor, and also the attempted murder of his wife. At his trial the prosecution painted a picture of a cynical, scheming killer. Not content with maiming his wife in an attempt to collect the insurance payoff, he was prepared to kill his innocent neighbor in cold blood and mutilate

### SIGN OF A MURDERER ▲

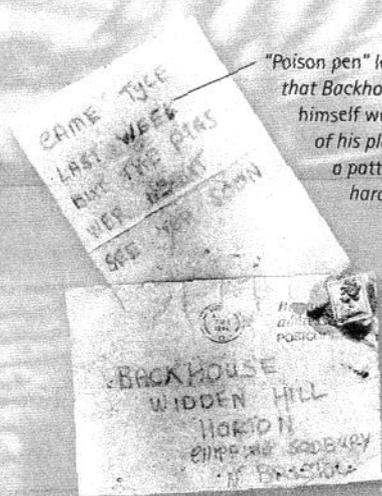
Despite the optimistic sign at the gate, Backhouse had run up a \$100,000 debt supporting the farm, and this was his motive for murder.

himself to ensure that he would not be suspected of the bombing.

Detectives were even able to prove that the sheep's head was part of the plan. The writing on the threatening note was crudely but effectively disguised, so it could not be identified as Backhouse's own hand. But faintly embossed on the sheet was a trace of doodle—that perfectly matched a scribble on a pad found at Widden Hill Farm.

Graham Backhouse denied murder, but the jurors were not taken in. The ruthless, ingenious killer received two life sentences on February 18, 1985; he died of a heart attack nine years later.

"Poison pen" letters that Backhouse wrote himself were all part of his plan to fake a pattern of harassment.



Taylor's workshop corroborated Backhouse's story: investigators found a piece of pipe matching the makeshift bomb in the Volvo.

### Clues in blood

However, when scene of crime officers began to study Widden Hill Farm, they started to suspect that Backhouse was not telling the truth. The pattern of blood in the kitchen was particularly revealing. If there had been a violent struggle there, as Backhouse claimed, blood would have been thrown off with some force, leaving elongated marks with distinct tails. But on the kitchen floor there were only circular drops characteristic of blood that had dripped from a wound. An upset chair covered some of the marks, suggesting that it had been placed there as an afterthought. More revealing still, there was no trail of blood in the hall leading

### SECOND TRY ▶

Undertakers carry away the victim of Backhouse's second, more successful murder attempt.

