


# Waking the dead

**In America there is a plot of land, dubbed The Body Farm, where human corpses lay out in the open in different stages of decomposition in the name of forensic science. The facility, visited by a key figure in the investigation of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman's murders, has helped crime scene investigators worldwide. Peter Riley reports.**

 The Body Farm, officially called The Anthropology Research Facility, based at the University of Tennessee, in Knoxville, helps to provide a voice for the dead by supplying information as detailed as the time of death, how a person died, the environment they died in and,

crucially, whether they were murdered.

The facility, which today hosts investigators from many police forces and notable agencies, such as the FBI, has also attracted many overseas scientists, including Patricia Wiltshire, British forensic palynologist, expert on

micro-fossils and pollen grains, who became known as a central player in the jailing of Ian Huntley after he killed schoolgirl friends Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman.

Dr Bill Bass, who started the facility 30 years ago, began his professional career at the Smithsonian Institute in

Washington DC where he catalogued the bones of American Indians, and his job also took him to South Dakota where he spent several summers excavating in Native American burial grounds. It was all this fascination with death through the ages that gave him

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the initial idea for the Body Farm.

He was also employed by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation as a forensic consultant and during his time there he was asked if he could tell how a cow died from examining its skeleton. The answer was a simple 'no' but he was so fascinated that he suggested that a cow be killed and studied in the various forms of decomposition. It was a suggestion that was not taken up but it made a strong impression on him that there was a need to discover how human bodies found in various locations and in certain conditions could serve law-enforcement investigators.

In 1971 he moved east and began working at the University of Tennessee where he was also a consultant to that state's police departments and other law-enforcement agencies. Dr Bass also realised that in the much more densely populated state, and in particular in Knoxville, a major city, he would find more corpses to investigate that had been detected quicker than those in rural Kansas.

### Voice from the grave

'Half of my first dozen cases were simply maggot-covered bodies and I didn't know much about that. I looked through literature and there wasn't much there. Before our work, no one had ever established a time line, and there are a lot of factors that can affect how a body decomposes, but we found that the major two are climate and insects.

'When a person dies, the body begins to decompose immediately and the enzymes in the digestive system begin to eat the tissue. In the first two weeks or so the best way to tell how long a body has been dead is to study the insect activity with blowflies being the first to be attracted to a decaying corpse. They come in and lay their eggs that hatch into maggots which then eat away decaying tissue in a fairly predictable way,' he says.

The facility only became nicknamed The Body Farm after the title of a 1994 novel by author Patricia Cornwell, who introduced readers to what she called a "decay research facility" and went on to describe, through the eyes of

her main character Kay Scarpetta, what it feels like to walk through this kingdom of the dead.

Cornwell writes about the 'language of the dead' and in the book allowed Scarpetta, her fictional medical examiner, to look at 44 bodies in various stages of decomposition, including a skeleton at the wheel of a Cadillac, a skull lying



among fallen leaves and bodies in water pits.

Patricia Wiltshire, the only UK scientist who specialises in locating human remains and then linking suspects to the scene of crime, linked Huntley to the murder scene through investigating the site where the bodies were dumped.

She was able to tell police that they had laid at the site for 13 days after observing the growth of side shoots on nettles and later linking pollen samples found on Huntley's shoes and in his car to the scene.

During her trip to the USA, Wiltshire, who has been described by detectives as a modern Miss Marple, was filmed for a recent TV documentary series called *'The Body Farm'* as she toured the facility in the company of one of their scientists, and was so matter of fact as she strolled around corpses.

She is not callous; it is just her scientific mind that switches in when confronted with scenes that would reduce many fully-grown men to tears. As she said recently: 'The corpses are not real people because the people have gone. A scene of crime is very business-like and we are working against the clock. I sample them and get information from them.'

One British viewer wrote: "The Body Farm does exactly what it says on the tin, it farms bodies in the various stages of decomposition. It was an amazing programme and I was so interested. It got me thinking why can't we have one over here? The one in Tennessee can obviously share its findings with the rest of the world,

could affect the surrounding environment and produce health risks such as in the water table.

'However, it is conceivable that such a facility could exist here, though it would also need to be shown that those burying the body had permission to do so from its relatives and permission from the Department of Health because of possible health risks if the body was left in the open.

'In addition, if a body was buried in such a facility and then needed to be exhumed, it would be necessary to get Home Office permission for such an exhumation.'

Corpses that arrive at the Tennessee facility are not normally buried completely, but are placed in a variety of 'poses' and in various conditions, such as being locked in a car boot, simply left in the open in direct sunlight or rain, placed under plastic sheeting or even hung from a tree. In addition, some are left headless while others are left with open wounds to determine insect activity or normal environmental impact, while others are left in shallow graves and a dozen other situations. All of which are to determine one thing – was a person found in a similar situation in the outside world murdered or had they died a natural death? Had they died where they were found, or had someone moved the body?

By examining not just the corpse but the ground underneath it, scientists can detect through soil samples, because decomposition sends by-products into the ground, just how long a body has laid in a particular location. This, as was the case with Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, often plays a vital part in bringing a killer to justice.

There is no doubt that the Body Farm is unique despite its gruesome quality, but so far there have been no other takers in the USA to set up a similar facility there. Perhaps the day will come when Britain will set up its own, but until that time Knoxville remains a sentinel in the investigation of the corpse.

As Dr Bass, now 75 and officially retired, commented: 'There are so many projects still to be done.'

but the actual conditions relating to their bodies are only really relevant to their flora and fauna and climate, whereas in the UK the stages would likely be slower."

The Tennessee facility is certainly unique and staff are often asked where they get their dead bodies from. The answer is a variety of places: from state morgues where a body has been handed over by the coroner after investigators have failed to find any known relatives, to donations by families.

### Public outcry

In Britain such a facility would undoubtedly be welcomed by scientists who could conduct their own investigations, but there would probably be a public outcry at the thought of corpses lying out in the open.

However, according to the Home Office, there is nothing illegal in British law to prevent a UK Body Farm, though anyone applying to start one might become entangled with red tape.

A Home Office spokesperson commented: 'A private individual could bury someone on private land but would need to seek help and advice from the Environment Agency as such a burial, or burials,

