



Body in the snow

Killer Vincent Tabak strangled Jo Yeates and went to great lengths to hide his crime. But forensic scientists followed the invisible trail he had left behind to ensure he was brought to justice. Tina Orr Munro reports

He was described by the Crown Prosecution Service as a “cunning, dishonest and manipulative man who knew exactly what he was doing”. And, for a time, Vincent Tabak must have thought he had got clean away with the murder of Jo Yeates in December 2010.

The 33-year-old Dutch engineer went to considerable lengths to cover his

tracks, disposing of her body together with any evidence linking him to her flat. Shortly after the murder he even texted his girlfriend to tell her he was ‘bored’. According to the CPS, Tabak managed to manipulate the police, and tried to stay one step ahead of the investigation by using the internet to research extradition and details of body decomposition. He even tried to

point the finger of blame at someone else, Chris Jeffries, Jo’s landlord, who lived in the same building, telling police he moved his car on the night of her disappearance. But for all his cunning, Tabak underestimated the role forensic science would play in detecting the murder.

Twenty-five-year-old Jo Yeates appeared to simply vanish on the

night of December 17 while walking home from a night out at the pub with her friends. Initially, it was treated as a missing person's case after her boyfriend Greg Reardon returned home from a weekend and reported her missing on December 22.

But as her disappearance was so out of character, the police were already concerned for her safety and several items, including the bedding from the couples' first floor flat were sent to a forensic laboratory for analysis, although nothing of significance was discovered. Then, on the morning of December 25, Jo's body was discovered, covered in snow on a verge by a roadside, several miles outside of Bristol. She had been strangled. The investigation became a murder inquiry and within hours the world's media were camped outside Jo's flat in the Clifton area of Bristol. Under the full glare of the media, the race was on to catch the killer.

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On Boxing Day, Avon and Somerset police requested a scene-going scientist, Tania Nickson, from a forensic company to attend the place where Jo's body had been dumped. While forensic scientists do not attend crime scenes as a matter of course, in this instance the police had very little to go on. Also, the fact the body had been left in freezing temperatures posed its own set of problems for the investigation. At first investigators thought she may have frozen to death, and although Tabak could not have



An officer stands beside floral tributes outside the flat of Jo Yeates, the 25-year-old landscape architect who went missing a week before Christmas in 2010. Forensic evidence was key in securing the murder conviction of Vincent Tabak

planned it, the appalling weather worked very much in his favour. “It was a difficult scene. It was very cold and there was a lot of snow on the ground,” says Lindsay Lennen, who is a case leader for homicides. “The first issue was whether or not to disturb the snow. There were discussions on whether to remove the snow which could interfere with

any evidence or examine it in situ. In the end, the snow was removed and blood was recovered from the wall behind the body.”

An ecologist was also asked to attend the scene. By examining the layering of leaves over the body, it was hoped they would be able to give some indication as to how long the body had lain there. Once the body had been removed to

the mortuary, swabs were taken in the hope scientists could extract enough of the all-important DNA to get a profile of the suspect. Clothing was also recovered and analysed. But extracting the DNA from the swabs was to prove a painstaking and complicated process.

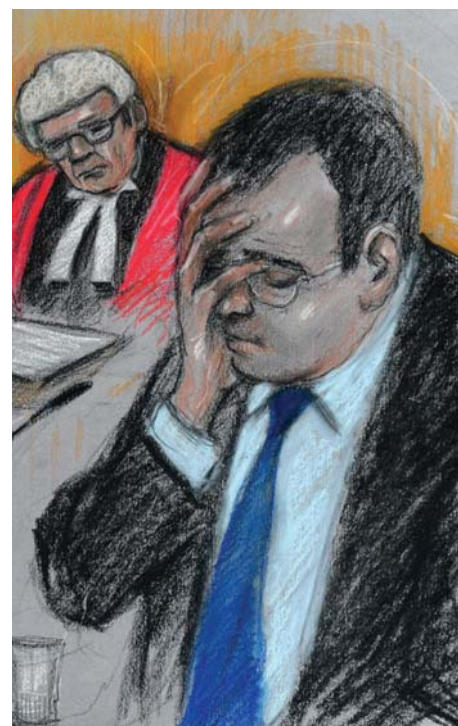
“The DNA appeared to have either degraded or to have been inhibited. One theory put forward by the DNA unit was that there may have been high levels of salt in the snow, which might have inhibited the DNA. A high salt level might have resulted from the gritters, but this was not known. We cannot say for definite, but it could have accounted for the issues we had surrounding the profile,” says Lindsay.

The DNA obtained from Jo’s body and clothing was ‘weak’, says Lindsay. This meant the lab had to use a more sophisticated process that allowed them to enhance what DNA they had. The method enables scientists to enhance the smallest amount of DNA to bring it up to a level where they can interpret a profile.

While scientists worked to get a result, the pressure to find Jo’s killer mounted. The forensic company set up an internal focus group of five scientists to ensure ‘a cohesive and rapid, customer-focused response’. The group comprised the most appropriately experienced and qualified forensic scientists, who carried out the DNA examinations as well as interpretation, peer review and quality review.

“The focus group was quite specific to this case and it worked very well as it meant the different scientists could come together and share their findings. Everyone was aware of what was happening in the case even in areas outside their own specialism,” says Lindsay.

Then, 25 days after the discovery of Jo Yeates’ body, scientists made a breakthrough. They found DNA matching Vincent Tabak on one of the samples recovered from her body. After two days of questioning, Tabak was charged on 22 January 2011 with



DCI Phil Jones (top) led the investigation into the murder of Jo Yeates (above left), and said that DNA analysis was “crucial” in securing the conviction of 33-year-old Tabak (above right)

Jo’s murder. In May 2011, Tabak admitted to her manslaughter, but his plea was rejected by the CPS and in October he was convicted of murder following a four-week trial. He was sentenced to serve a minimum 20 years in jail.

Following Tabak’s conviction, DCI Phil Jones, senior investigating officer, said the DNA analysis was “crucial in building a strong evidential case against Vincent Tabak and ultimately securing his conviction”.

Lindsay also points to the close working relationship between Avon and Somerset police, their scenes of crime officers and the forensic company’s scientists which she says was vital to the case’s success. “We were lucky to work with a very patient and respectful team from Avon and Somerset police. Sometimes it is a tough job to get results and it takes time, but despite the pressures the police were under, they let us get on with our work.”