Serial murders are in the news again with the discovery in London of the bodies of five homosexual men who died in similar ways and in similar circumstances. The press have had something of a field day with the predictable references to Hannibal Lecter from the book “Silence of the Lambs”. Almost every bookshop, and in particular station bookshops, seem to stock large numbers of paperbacks which describe the activities of Serial Killers in some considerable detail. It is little wonder then that the news of such a murderer in London excites so marked a response.

In order to begin to understand these individuals we must first define what we mean by “A Serial Killer”. He, or more rarely she, commits the same type of murder over a period of time. The term “serial” in relation to these crimes is attributed to Mr R. Ressler an FBI agent who has studied many murders and many murderers. The other examples of multiple killers, Mass or Spree, kill a number of people in a single incident and exhibit different patterns and features.

There are a number of ways to classify Serial Killers, one is to divide them into those that kill only in places in which they feel safe and secure, for example at home: and those who kill in the open, away from areas that are confined and secure. The “home” group is typified by Denis Nilsen who killed 15 young men in his two flats between 1978 and 1983 and the “away” group by Peter Sutcliffe who killed 13 women on the streets of towns in Yorkshire between 1975 and 1980.

Another classification depends upon the behaviour of the killer after the murder - are the bodies left where they can be found or are they secreted either with or without dismemberment; the Exposed and Concealed groups. An example of the concealed group are the murders between 1963 and 1964 of 3 young people and their subsequent burial on the Moors by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley (an unusual, but not unique example, of joint Serial Killers). Peter Duffy’s series of rapes and three murders in the mid 1980’s is one of the “exposed” group where the murder victims were not hidden.

These four examples all concern individuals who managed to continue to lead their lives in what was to them, their partners and associates, a “normal” way. No overt psychological defect or psychiatric illness was noted before their arrest.
The third classification divides the murders into “organised” and “disorganised”. The four examples given above lie within the “organised” group in that their murders were all, to a greater or lesser extent, planned and the mode, execution, escape and disposal were considered prior to the actual events and probably refined by experience.

The “disorganised” group of serial killers are almost always typified by overt, psychiatric illness. Their crimes will usually be classified in “Away” and the “Exposed” groups since the attacks are poorly planned and spontaneous events with little chance or desire to secrete the body.

While classifications have their own academic interest they must also be shown to have a predictive role that will allow for the more speedy and accurate investigation of the Serial Murders that do come to the attention of the police. There is little or nothing that can be done about the Home/Concealed/Organised killer who remains anonymous until caught. The arrest of this type of Serial Killer is usually fortuitous and they usually confess fully to their crimes when they are detained. The Away/Exposed/Disorganised killer is likely to be detained reasonably quickly as there is seldom any great attempt to avoid detection or arrest.

It is the Away/Exposed/Organised killer who poses the greatest problems to the Police and it is to this type of killer that Offender Profiling, which relies on the analysis of past crimes and the classification of these crimes and the offenders to make predictions, is being applied. This analysis and prediction gives to the police a new and potentially extremely useful tool. It is not a tool that will replace accurate and painstaking investigations but it is one that will allow the Investigating officers to identify and to focus on the most likely suspects. Offender Profiling is now well established as part of the investigation of Serial crimes in the USA, it is slowly gaining acceptance in Britain, and its use and continued research by The Home Office into its value are to be applauded.

1. *Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris Published by Mandarin Books 1990