

BROADCAST



Telling the tale of The Bambers for Sky Crime

24 September 2021

Revealing the complex, tragic and compelling family story underpinning the infamous crime case was key to our doc series, says director Lottie Gammon

The Bambers: Murder at the Farm, Sky Crime

Production company Mindhouse Productions

Commissioner Poppy Dixon

Length 4 x 60 minutes

TX 26 September, Sky Crime – also available on Sky Showcase and NOW

Executive producers Arron Fellows; Louis Theroux

Series director Lottie Gammon

Series producer Flo Barrow

Line producer Suzy Burnet

Executive producer James Hunt

Director of development Nancy Strang

Head of production Sophie Ardern

Post-house Molinare

I was immediately curious when executive producers Arron Fellows and Louis Theroux approached me about a series on the White House Farm murders. The case is one of the UK's most notorious mass killings and occupies an unusual place in the UK justice system – a convicted murderer, on a full-term life sentence, who still protests his innocence.

There are already numerous books on the subject, and a successful drama series covering the investigation and trial of Jeremy Bamber, so our first question was whether the series could really bring anything new to the story.

It became clear that this couldn't simply be a retrospective documentary – but one that continued up to the present day. Online forums continue to fervently debate the details of the case, and Bamber, supported by lawyers and a campaign group, has appealed against his conviction on a number of occasions.

I had come into the story cold – I knew very little aside from the sometimes quite outlandish headlines. But as soon as we started digging, I realised that there was a complex, tragic and compelling family story underpinning the case that needed space to breathe.

Sky had originally commissioned 3 x 45 minute programmes, but as our edit progressed and more contributors agreed to be interviewed, it became clear that the best way to really do the story and characters justice was to add a fourth episode. Sky too understood how rich the story was and we were delighted when they agreed.

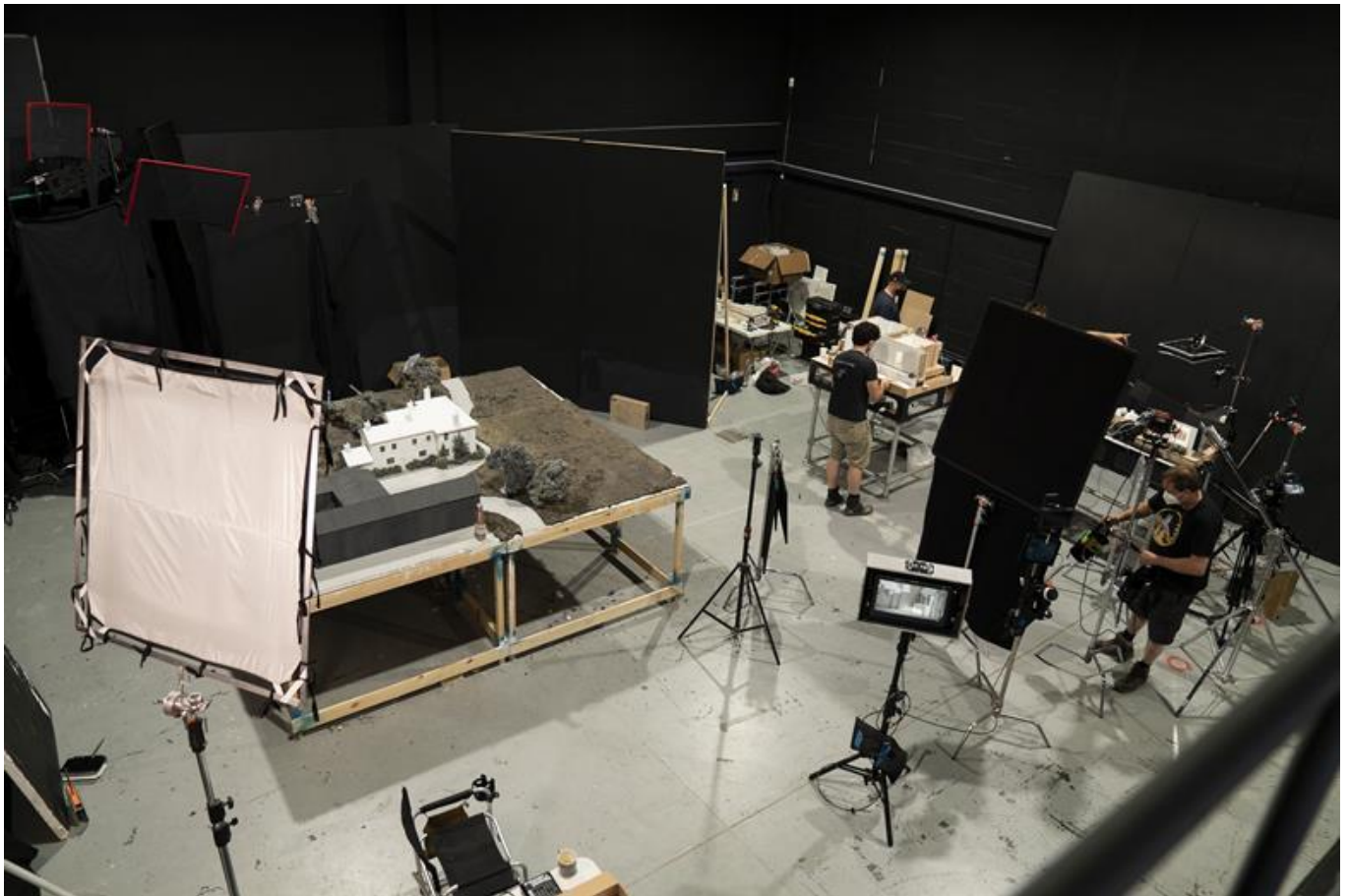
We initially talked about using reconstruction – but it soon became clear that recreating an entire 1980s farm house was not realistic or particularly desirable, both creatively and financially.

There are detailed – and hugely distressing – crime scene photos. We debated whether we should use them as part of the series and felt it was important not to sanitise a crime like this. Equally we wanted to respect the victims and their relatives by not showing anything too graphic.

As a solution, we decided to make a model of the house as a way of allowing the audience to take in the crime scene and its details without compromising the dignity of the victims.

Our art director John Reynolds went to great lengths to make sure that the model was exact – so far as counting the bricks on the front of the house and using the original floor plans by the police. We wanted it to feel hand-made and have texture, but not cartoonish.

We eventually made six models of the interior and exterior of the house which each played specific roles in the series – interior models of the key crime scenes, top-down “birds eye view” models and one enormous 4x4m model of the outside of the farmhouse.



Shooting the models was a new challenge – we shot on a A7S III and used a mini motion control rig called the Syrp Genie which helped create smooth, flowing shots programmed via an iPad.

Unsurprisingly, archive is the backbone of our film. I'll never forget the giddiness in our archive producer James Hunt's voice when he told me he had discovered a box file filled with a press agency's negatives of the Bamber case. Instead of a select group of photos readily available, we suddenly had access to 1500 - and it meant we could string a photographer's rapid-fire shots together in sequences that almost feel like filmed footage.

Rather than shoot expensive and potentially quite cliched courtroom reconstructions, we found the original trial's court sketch-artist Sian Frances who reproduced and added to her work from the time.

My tricks of the trade - Lottie Gammon

rep your interviews as much as you can but let the real thing be a conversation, put

your notes down

- Making a single narrative over several episodes is hard, hang on to your editor
- Opinions are powerful but find your neutral voices to guide you through the story
- Value your production team, a great PM is worth their weight in gold
- Find great creative collaborators (editors, composers, DoPs) and trust their advice.
- Plan your best and worst case scenarios. Strategise for both. You'll end up somewhere in the middle

Aside from the now-familiar problems of Covid on the shoot, we had one other key challenge. When I first spoke to our executive producer Arron Fellows about the project there was one small obstacle in the way – I was 12 weeks pregnant and due to give birth halfway through the production schedule. Incredibly, Mindhouse were very open to the idea of me working until I gave birth, taking a few months off, and then coming back to finish the series.

My then three-month-old daughter was even present at a crucial interview and later at the model shoot. This was the second project of mine in which Louis and Arron had taken a pregnancy in their stride - in 2018 we made a film together in the States (Louis Theroux: The Night In Question) when I was pregnant with my first child and was so unwell that Louis had to rush me around in a wheelchair and I ended up in the ER.

Throughout production, my rocks were my line producer Suzy Burnet, who made sure the schedule didn't break me, and my series producer Flo Barrow who stepped in to do interviews when I wasn't able to and oversaw the edits for episodes three and four. Having a baby mid-production is not something I'd take lightly but - if you are offered a job you really want to do - it shows it can be done.

Flo Barrow **Series producer**

Jeremy Bamber's continual assertions of innocence have kept this case uniquely in the media spotlight for 35 years. From the outset, we knew his name went hand in hand with strong and often passionately opposing opinions - we set out to secure voices from both sides of the divide.

With any "true crime", this is difficult and painful territory for those who have had to live through it – and for a community in a tiny Essex village which still endures ongoing

notoriety. For that reason, several key contributors had previously never agreed to take part in any media and their first-hand testimony was a priority.

We worked hard to prove ourselves; we clearly laid out that our aim was not just to explore the original investigation but some of the hallmarks of the case since his conviction which had never been looked into before. It took months, and many attempts, to set up meetings with apprehensive contributors, not helped by and often delayed by the restrictive nature of the pandemic.

Building local contacts who introduced us to people was vital - as was social media and the electoral roll. Breakthroughs came from unexpected places – we found a prosecution witness in Melbourne, the owner of Bamber’s favourite Essex drinking hole in Brisbane and his best friend and confidante from the time in Auckland.

The pandemic intensified a lot of the challenges but there were some silver linings. The flexibility to interview on Zoom with an international crew meant we could interview these key contributors who had ended up further afield.



Closer to home, we followed some interesting leads. A tip off from a retired modelling agent led us to a photographer, David Thorpe, who took the iconic image of Jeremy Bamber’s sister, a Caffell. The photo was splashed on every tabloid front page the day she died. We didn’t

want to just use the photo but find the story behind it.

We also unearthed unique material, including from journalist David James Smith who offered us exclusive access to his recordings of an interview with Jeremy Bamber from 2010; and author Carol Ann Lee discovered that her Dictaphone surprisingly still had audio on it from meeting Sheila and June Bamber's psychiatrist as part of research for her book, *The Murders at White House Farm*.

Some people declined to be interviewed – many for very understandable reasons. We also worked with Jeremy Bamber's official Innocence Campaign for many months before they decided to withdraw from the series; they became convinced it would be biased against Jeremy, a man they passionately believe is innocent.

Yet the finished series contains friends, family, police, lawyers, journalists and pro-Bamber campaigners telling their story, many for the first time. I would say you cannot underestimate the time and patience needed to secure the trust of the right people. For us, it took a year. But it was worth it.

