

WHY BRITISH IS STILL THE BEST



THERE are some moments which stay with you forever. The time Karen and Roger Humphries walked into the hotel lounge carrying baby Abbie was certainly one of these. Cameras flashed and clicked. The 'brat pack' actually clapped and cheered. Journalists who would normally be happy to tear you (and each other) limb from limb for an 'exclusive', behaved as civilised human beings. One actually cried. It was a moment of common triumph, common celebration.

I stood at the edges of it all, alongside hospital staff who had lived the nightmare 3f the preceding IS days, and simply basked in the sense of relief and excitement. I kept thinking of the phrase 'the best of British'; not as a wish of good luck, but as a simple statement of fact. And it was. There are so many examples of society at its best, which shone

through this nightmare, that it is worth a moment to put them in their proper context.

Initially, there was a moment when it looked as though we might have been deflected down a path which merely scapegoated the Queen's Medical Centre over hospital security. But the truth was quite the opposite. The hospital has invested over £50,000 in additional security measures aver the last year. It is an item under regular scrutiny and evaluation. What is more, within five minutes of baby Abbie being stolen from her father's arms, nursing and hospital staff were out on the main road stopping cars and buses, questioning pedestrians, searching outside for a woman with a baby.

We know now how much planning had gone into the abduction of a baby from the hospital. Despite this, you would be hard pressed to find (anywhere) a hospital response rate which was so fast, comprehensive and professional...the best of British.

Electronic tagging of babies would not have helped. The tag can easily be masked JT cut. In fact tagging, in this instance, would probably have made matters worse. When you rely increasingly on technology, human alertness gets relegated to a secondary role. Yet, it is precisely the human monitoring systems of the QMC which were its greatest strength; its most valuable asset. This was why their response rate was so quick.

By day two of the investigation it was clear that the forensic leads available to the police were very limited. Abbie was always more likely to be found by the Press and the public than by any clue left in the hospital, apart from her image.

There aren't likely to be many occasions in my life when I say this, but the Press were brilliant — no lurches into "Freddie Starr ate my hamster" journalism; no exposes of the life histories of Abbie's parents no "monster woman" stories about the person who had snatched the baby.

In fact, the Press had access to a great deal of highly sensitive, off-the-record information about the

woman which they didn't use for fear of triggering a panic reaction on her part. Journalists went to enormous lengths to deal with this responsibly — striking a fine balance between coverage needed to keep the story alive and in the public mind, without sinking to levels which were tawdry and diversionary.., again, the best of British.

The police themselves worked round the clock in their efforts to find Abbie. But it is here that I want to sound a word of caution to the Press. Within 24 hours of finding Abbie we were in danger of lurching from celebration to recrimination. The police who found her were no longer heroes, but the fools or villains who failed to identify her when they first interviewed Julie Kelley a week earlier. Of course there are important questions to be asked about how this happened. I already lodged some of these myself with the Chief Constable, but no one should any doubt that the elaborate planning Abbie's abduction also went into explanations about her birth.

All of this will come out in court, an important that we do not get drawn down path of trying the case in the Press for of making it impossible to pursue it in courts.

Even more unsavoury is the apparent "trial by tabloids" of other police officer who lived around the area where Abbie found — for failing to be the ones who located her.

Just for the record, it is worth putting number of facts down: Police officers in case worked long and frustrating hours with limited information, to track Abbie down.

MANY worked extended shifts in order to do so. As the days passed, the pressure and a anxiety increased. No one, but one, ever came out with the line "Hell, is fun. Let's spin it out a few more day". At the end of it all there was an indisputable bottom line. Abbie was found, was safe. She was healthy. And she is back with her own parents who must thank for the ordinariness of living their own in their own home.

Finding Abbie was a triumph of human nature. It was brought about by lots of people doing what they hoped others would if this had happened to their child... namely looking round to see if there was a possibility (however remote) that Abbie could be the child in the next pram, in the car which passed, in the house next door.

Over 4,000 people phoned in with leads. Sifting through them must have been a nightmare, but it was out of this that Abbie was found.

Of course there will be lessons to be learned, errors to be avoided, but it was of this welter of calls that the eyes and hearts of the country returned Abbie safely to her parents.

It is an outcome we can all feel proud the best of British.