

VERA

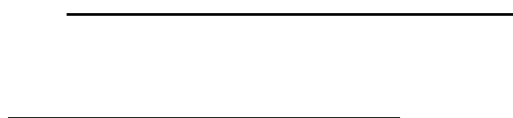


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VERA

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Introduction



ITV and Silverprint Pictures welcomes the return of Brenda Blethyn in the role of DCI Vera Stanhope for two emotionally compelling feature length episodes set against the backdrop of the North East.

The eleventh series opens when the body of well-respected local builder, Jim Tullman, is found beaten to death on the steps of the Collingwood Monument. DCI Vera Stanhope (Brenda Blethyn) questions how such a seemingly beloved and imposing figure could be attacked so viciously. The mystery deepens when she discovers that Tullman was due to testify in court as the key witness in a violent assault. Could these two crimes be connected?

As Vera delves deeper into Jim Tullman's life she discovers unresolved bitterness between his estranged wife Barbara and doting son John Paul, while tensions with old family friends Gary and Lesley Clayton threaten to spill over. Vera must see through the web of family grievances, jealousies and lies to ensure justice is done.

Introduction continued:

The strong ensemble cast reunited with Blethyn include Kenny Doughty who returns as Detective Sergeant Aiden Healy, Jon Morrison who plays DC Kenny Lockhart, Riley Jones who plays DC Mark Edwards and Ibinabo Jack who plays DC Jacqueline Williams.

Produced by Silverprint Pictures, part of ITV Studios, for ITV, the new series is produced by Will Nicholson whilst Executive Producer Phil Hunter returns for his fifth consecutive series. Director Paul Gay and writer Paul Logue also return to the production on the first feature length episode.

Two of the six feature length episodes for series eleven went into production during the autumn/winter of 2020. The four remaining new feature length episodes are currently in production and are expected to broadcast in 2022.

Vera is commissioned by ITV's Head of Drama Polly Hill and Drama Commissioner Huw Kennair Jones.

The six self-contained crime stories will be inspired by the best-selling novels and characters created by acclaimed crime writer Ann Cleeves, who received the Diamond Dagger Award at the Crime Writer's Association in 2017 for a lifetime achievement for sustained excellence.

In the UK *Vera* performs consistently for ITV. Earlier this year series ten averaged 7.5 million viewers. Internationally *Vera* is one of the most successful imported drama titles in Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands and Norway, and has been sold to more than 150 territories worldwide.

At the 2019 Royal Television Society Awards: North East and The Border, *Vera* won the Judges Award for outstanding contribution to the region and Production Designer Patrick Bill won the award for Professional Excellence for Production Design.

ITV Studios distributes *Vera* internationally.

Character biographies

DCI Vera Stanhope played by Brenda Blethyn

Heading up a team at Northumberland and City Police, Vera is obsessive about her work and dogged in her desire to uncover the truth at the heart of each case she leads. Unconventional and unglamorous maybe, but Vera has a wry sense of humour and faces the world with caustic wit, guile and courage.

For Vera, work is her life and her team is her family. Having been brought up by a neglectful father, she's constantly trying to find a sense of self-worth, feeling she has to prove herself in everything she does - although she would never admit this to her colleagues. Vera demands fierce loyalty and respect from her team, which she returns with the smallest glimmer of affection. Vera really cares for her team and for the victims of the crimes she investigates.

DS Aiden Healy played by Kenny Doughty

Detective Sergeant Aiden Healy has proved himself a strong and reliable partner to DCI Stanhope, who relishes his insight, commitment and diligence. Aiden, in turn, feels protective of his boss, knowing her obsessive nature and commitment to the job can sometimes be at the cost of her own wellbeing. Aiden has settled into family life and has a renewed focus on the demands of the job, as well as his dedication to ensuring that the perpetrators of crimes are sought out and held responsible.

DC Kenny Lockhart played by Jon Morrison

Kenny is a very loyal and trusted member of the team. Though Kenny works at his own pace, Vera knows that he brings with him years of experience and instinct, and she can rely on him when it counts. Plain-spoken if a occasionally tactless, Kenny possesses a keen memory for cases long past and is often surprisingly savvy with contemporary technology and social media.

DC Jacqueline 'Jac' Williams played by Ibinabo Jack

Jac is a valued member of DCI Vera Stanhope's team. With her dry wit and no-nonsense attitude, she often uses her sharp abilities of detection and unique perspective to bring new evidence to the case at hand. Jac first joined Vera's team from the fraud squad after her former boss was found guilty of corruption. Jac looks up to Vera and greatly admires her commitment to the truth. Jac is tough, courageous and determined.

Character biographies

DC Mark Edwards played by Riley Jones

Since joining Vera's team from uniform, Mark has become a skilled and reliable detective. As one of the younger members of the squad, Mark is less outspoken and more introspective, preferring to channel his energy into meticulous analysis and research. His enthusiasm, keen eye for detail and self-drive means that Vera now counts on the invaluable information he uncovers to push an investigation forward.

Pathologist Dr. Malcolm Donahue played by Paul Kaye

Dr. Malcolm Donahue is thorough and observant. His dour demeanour might be mistaken for misanthropy, but in truth his grim scientific approach comes from a deeply rooted commitment to justice. He worked with Vera several years ago and their professional relationship has always been challenging. Pedantic and officious to the point of rudeness, Malcolm often treads heavily on Vera's toes. Though he appears to be critical of Vera's impatience and sometimes bullish approach, he retains an underlying admiration for the DCI's capacity for empathy and compassion.

Brenda Blethyn – DCI Vera Stanhope



Q&A with Brenda Blethyn – DCI Vera Stanhope



Q: You were due to begin work on four new *Vera* films in March 2020 when the pandemic halted all filming. What was your experience of the first lockdown?

“Apart from living in London I also have a home in Ramsgate on the south east coast. I happened to be there gathering my last bits and pieces to take up to Newcastle with me for filming when the lockdown happened. So, I couldn’t go home. My husband was in London and he couldn’t come down. So we were apart for however long that was. 12 weeks was it? Fortunately for me I had Jack the dog with me for company.

“I’m someone who likes to be busy. So when my dog jumped on the sofa with his big muddy paws, it wasn’t too much of a chore to remove the covers and wash them. Except they shrunk pretty badly. A friend told me to wash them again and stretch them whilst wet but that didn’t work. So the only thing for it was to make new covers. It’s a big sofa with quite complicated cushions but I was up for the challenge.

Cast Interview

Q&A with Brenda Blethyn continued:

“Fortunately I had a bale of fabric I could practice with. I ordered a sewing machine online along with all the accoutrements and set to it. All those sewing lessons I had at school many moons ago all leapt into focus. I was amazed at the result. The covers turned out brilliantly, prompting me to send photos to my friends. A mistake, because I then got several requests to make covers for their sofas too. Not likely! But one of my friends was fixing an emergency leak for me, and instead of payment he also asked me to make some sofa covers. He already had the fabric which cost £100 a metre. I was petrified. In trepidation I measured, double measured, triple measured and gingerly cut into his fabric. Even if I say so myself, I did a really good job and he and his wife were delighted.”

Q: The announcement in August 2020 that six new episodes were to be filmed was a real morale booster for *Vera* fans. Did you get a lot of reaction to that?

“It was hugely gratifying to hear that the people in the North East were excited to know that *Vera* was returning to film more episodes. Something to look forward to in a dismal time.

“I was glad to be starting work again for lots of reasons. But at the same time I was nervous of it. We were in the middle of a global pandemic and nobody was safe really. But when it was explained to me about all the precautions to be set in place - and my word they were very very thorough, I became a little less nervous. I was quizzed on the phone by a Covid detective, and medicals were carried out to make sure I wasn't too vulnerable. Medicals are necessary anyway for any filming for insurance purposes. They really just want to know you're going to make it to the end of the shoot!

“Covid did make it more difficult to film. It lengthened the filming time of each episode by about a week. To start with the Covid protocol made it a little bit inhibiting but we soon got used to it. It became a sort of dance. If somebody approached you, you naturally stepped backwards. And if anyone did forget, the Covid marshals were over to you with a long stick. Not to hit you with but to make sure you were the appropriate distance apart.

“On the first day back filming I think everyone felt a huge sense of pride. That we had all come together, we were all putting our best foot forward to try and get this done. We all knew it would be difficult with all the restrictions.

Q&A with Brenda Blethyn continued:

“The other thing of course is that it was difficult to recognise anyone with all the masks and visors on. Covid also forced technicians to be a little bit more creative in how a scene was shot, so that it didn’t *look* like we were all separating and keeping our distance. We all tried our best in very difficult circumstances.

“There were plenty of people sitting at home who would have given their eye teeth to go to work and they couldn’t. So, nobody in the cast or crew were moaning, even though we were nervous and didn’t want to catch Covid. We knew we were in a fortunate position in being able to work. If you looked on the catering list for lunch each day there would be something like 75 to 80 people involved.”

Q: What else did the new restrictions involve?

“Because Kenny Doughty, who plays DS Aiden Healy, and I have a lot of scenes together and especially in the Land Rover, it was decided we should be in a bubble. Very nice for me - not so for him! Our apartments are next door to one another. We weren’t allowed visitors. Even my husband wasn’t allowed to visit unless he’d been Covid tested or quarantined beforehand.

“Even Vera’s hat and coat couldn’t be handed to me. They are put in a special bag. So when I turn up on set Vera’s clothes will have been delivered to my trailer having been sprayed or whatever it is they put inside a hanging bag. The trailer will then also have been fogged again after somebody else had been inside it, so that I will be safe to go back in. And as I arrive on set as with the rest of the cast and crew, we had our temperature checked. And Kenny and I were also Covid tested several times a week.

“When we shot the first scene in the Land Rover, I was horrified to notice that all the rubbish that Vera has accumulated had been removed and the whole vehicle sanitised. Valeted. ‘I want all Vera’s rubbish back please!’ I cried. So they sanitised all the rubbish and put it back in. Haaa! All the empty crisp bags and apple cores. They all came back.”

Cast Interview

Q&A with Brenda Blethyn continued:

Q: What about the practicalities of filming both in the studio and on location?

“In the first episode we employed different techniques when filming the police interview room scenes. Because the space is limited, and especially because of Covid, only a limited number of people were allowed in the room. Usually five. We needed to be two metres apart. So a green screen would be put to use. Which means that when Vera is interrogating a suspect, the suspect isn’t actually there! I just had to make you believe that they were. The other actor is behind the green screen and all Kenny and I could see were their feet. It was hysterically funny. And when the suspect is explaining themselves, Vera and Aiden weren’t there. We were tucked behind the green screen delivering our lines. I defy anyone to notice in the final edit. Director Paul Gay is a wizard.

“There’s also a scene in the first episode at a tower block of flats. We shot the exterior actually outside the flats, but because of Covid we weren’t allowed inside. So the interior was recreated at the studio. But, you would never know when you see it on screen.

“The only thing our audience might notice is the population of the incident room. There are normally more officers in there. But we were only allowed a limited number of people in any given space because of the Covid protocol. If an extra person wanted to enter the room, someone had to leave meanwhile. It’s also a good thing that Vera has never been one for handshakes. She’s got a natural two metre antenna when it comes to other people.”

Q: You made these two new films in the autumn of 2020 when filming would normally have finished. Did working on location at that time of year feel any different?

“We finished filming the first two new episodes just before Christmas 2020. It was a lot colder filming at that time of year. I had more layers on. In the second film I had my big winter coat on because it was just too cold to wear Vera’s Mac. Plus jumpers under that. Also a heated waistcoat! I looked like a Yeti.”

Cast Interview

Q&A with Brenda Blethyn continued:

Q: People love to watch *Vera* being filmed on location. Does that ever cause a problem?

“We did have lots of people turning up at locations to watch filming. We always have somebody to help marshal the crowds, and the onlookers are always so co-operative. And quiet. Such nice people.

“I find the people of the North East generally very friendly anyway. What does surprise me is the age span of the people who come. You get older people but also younger - junior school age who like *Vera*. Their mums or dads have brought them along. One lad told me that young people like *Vera* because she’s in charge of all these men, she keeps them all in their place and she is funny. I’m glad they get that *Vera* does have a sense of humour. Apart from doing her job well.”

Q: Can you give us a taste of what’s ahead in the first new film, *Witness*, by Paul Logue?

“The opening of our first episode includes a lovely view of the Holy Island causeway. I love it when they are able to include that as part of the story. We also have a very impressive location - the Collingwood Monument at Tynemouth. A body is found on the steps of the memorial. A builder who appears to be an upstanding member of the community and who was due to be giving evidence in a trial that very morning. We also see him earlier on board the Shields Ferry. Sadly, *Vera* doesn’t get to go on the ferry but I have been on it myself as a passenger.

“The guest cast includes the wonderful Lorraine Ashbourne, who plays the victim’s estranged wife Barbara. Almost everyone could be a suspect. There are also some great new actors in the first two films. There is one young actress called Ayten Manyera who came in to the second episode as a replacement at the very last minute. Ayten was terrific. Made me laugh. We have some wonderfully talented new young actors.

“*Vera* also notices that Aiden, played by Kenny Doughty, has been a ‘bit off’ recently and wonders what’s going on with him. She soon discovers what it’s all about and tells him to sort it out. Kenny is terrific. He really should have his own show. He’s the most wonderful mimic. If you shut your eyes when he’s impersonating someone his voice is pitch perfect. A very funny fella. He can probably imitate me too but it would be at his PERIL! We have such a laugh.”

Cast Interview

Q&A with Brenda Blethyn continued:

Q: One of the characters in the first story is a young footballer on the verge of possible stardom and we see Vera at his training ground. Are you a football fan?

“How could I not be after the wonderful performance of our England team in the Euros. I thought they were marvellous. What a team. The only actual match I’ve been to is Newcastle United at St. James Park a couple of years ago. I loved it. I’d be there every week if I didn’t have so much work to do on *Vera*.”

Q: September 2020 saw the publication of *The Darkest Evening*, the latest *Vera* novel by Ann Cleeves. Would you like to film that one day?

“*The Darkest Evening* is a great read. A terrific story. Telling a little more of Vera’s background. I would love to film it one day. There is a lot of snow in it so it would be a great Christmas special. And I mean a LOT of snow. Scotland maybe. Or Iceland? Or what about Norway? That’d be nice.”

Q: You have been working this year on four further *Vera* films to be screened in 2022. Can you tell us a little about them?

“One of the four new films is *As The Crow Flies* by Sally Abbott which includes some lovely seaside locations. A teacher is found on a very remote part of the coastline. She had made what is thought to be an exaggerated claim to social services about child protection. So we have all sorts of suspects rearing their heads. She’s a farmer’s wife so there are farmland settings as well. Vera’s got her Mac back on for that one!”

Q: Viewers were treated to lots of *Vera* repeats during lockdowns. Do you ever watch them again?

“People would tell me how glad they were that the repeats were on, which is very nice. I think people like Vera because she lives on the same planet as them.

“Sometimes I watch a repeat but I’m generally doing something like making cushions or trying out a new recipe. If I’ve not seen an episode for a long time I always forget who did what. You’d think I’d know, wouldn’t you?!”

Cast Interview

Q&A with Brenda Blethyn continued:

Q: You also now have an off-screen co-star. Can you tell us about him?

“My dog Jack has become a bit of a celebrity and also a bit of an embarrassment after his appearance with me on *This Morning*. He so delighted them when he was on there, disgracing me. They later called up and said ‘Can you bring him on again?’ I said, ‘I don’t think I’ll be doing that. Not after last time. Anyway, I’m working. I’m afraid I can’t come’. And they said, ‘Well we can send somebody to pick him up and bring him in? He’ll get a fee!’ I said ‘So you only want him, you don’t actually want me?’ Cheek! Haaa!”

Q: Are there plans to film more of *Kate and Koji* with Jimmy Akingbola?

“We were all geared up to do another series. I finished *Vera* just before Christmas 2020 and they had already started some of the outside broadcast filming. I was due to start *Kate and Koji* in the studio in January 2021. But there were too many challenges. You couldn’t have a studio audience. I’m playing a character who is serving tea and sandwiches all day long, and because of Covid protocol, I wouldn’t have been able to pass anything to anyone else. And of course, we had to stay two metres apart. So, the producer has delayed it until after I’ve finished work on *Vera* later this year.

“*Kate and Koji* was designed as one of those old-fashioned comedies with a studio audience. And they did so enjoy it. We were accused by one newspaper of having canned laughter but we didn’t. It was real people laughing in the studio. In fact they actually had to take some of the laughter out because it made the episodes too long!!”

Q: So, no thoughts of retirement and hanging up Vera’s hat?

“At the end of filming every season I think, ‘Oh, thank the Lord I’m going home. Never again.’ But it’s like having a lovely slap-up meal. You’ve eaten too much. You couldn’t eat another morsel. And you’re shown the menu again. ‘Take it away, take it away!’ But then a week later you get hungry again. So by the time I go back to Newcastle again I’m always very much looking forward to it. It rather depends on the Covid situation and putting my priorities in order.”



Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter

Q: How long have you worked on *Vera*?

“This is the fifth consecutive series of *Vera* I have worked on as executive producer. I joined for series seven. Originally coming from the North East, it is a dream job for me. Also, being crime show obsessed I was a fan of the show already. Loving the North East as I do it reached out to me in a way that no other crime show could because it is based in the region I grew up in and tells stories about the people I grew up with. I know the locations like the back of my hand. And what is great is that there is so much more out there still to discover given the vast and varied landscape the region offers. I was passionate about the show and what could still be achieved. Also, most importantly it’s been amazing to inherit such an incredible format, to be able to immerse myself in the world of the wonderful character Ann Cleeves created, and work with somebody as brilliant as Brenda. There is no better job, it’s such a great show to work on.”

Q: You were about to start filming in March 2020 when the pandemic brought everything to a halt. How did events unfold from your point of view?

“By early March 2020 people were starting to pay close attention to what impact the pandemic might have on the industry. It was a good couple of weeks before we went into the first lockdown that I was in daily discussions about how we might go into some sort of hiatus to give ourselves time to weather the impact of the virus. We very quickly realised we were going to have to make a decision to postpone the shoot altogether. Like everyone we followed government guidance to keep everybody safe.

“As for many others it was a very difficult time for the industry because our crews are predominantly made up of freelancers. We actioned the furlough scheme where possible and provided some retention of crew as best we could. Giving people reasonable notice on their contracts with a promise that as soon as we could get back up and running we would be inviting people back. From the outset we were trying to look after people in terms of their well-being and health but also being acutely aware of what this was doing to their livelihoods. I took that responsibility really personally.

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

“Everyone was remote working and planning until the point where the government and the industry could respond in terms of insurance cover and protocols that would allow us to be signed off to go back safely. Because every production has different contributors and requires different facilities, the plan had to be tailored to the show. This meant we had to write our own Covid protocols and procedures that were specific to our show as well as sitting within the industry and government guidance.

“My outlook throughout this period was always, ‘We have to remain optimistic that the show is going to come back’. So, we continued prepping and developing scripts and getting the series ready for that moment. Working closely with everyone concerned to put a plan in motion and make that possible. First and foremost it was about making sure everyone’s well-being and safety was protected. But also, really importantly, that the show could come back and be shot in a meaningful way that has merit and it looks as good as any episode of *Vera* shot during normal times. To make sure we weren’t going to compromise creativity or make it feel like the production process had been stunted in any way. The love for the show is great and nobody wanted to come back and operate in a way that would see production values drop or the show’s creative value diminished.

“One of the most amazing things about this industry and all of the people who work in it is the level of creativity and ingenuity they bring on a daily basis to make these shows. The dexterity and resourcefulness that people were demonstrating was just phenomenal, constantly adapting our plan in the face of the pandemic. We decided we would not depict the pandemic on screen, the challenge was that we had to maintain social distancing but make it look like there wasn’t any. The reason for pushing this? I think we all recognise that TV has become part of people’s escape during lockdown and we have had so much coverage of the pandemic and people wearing masks on TV. We thought the last thing any *Vera* viewer wants to see is more of that on their favourite show.”

Production Interview

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

Q: The news last August that *Vera* would return with two new episodes filmed before Christmas and four more to be made in 2021 was a real morale boost for fans. Did it feel like that to you?

“Absolutely, a huge boost. It was something we had been working on for months. The day we were signed off to say we could start filming two new episodes with four more this spring was overwhelming. You are in a situation where this matters so much to the 70-strong crew, all of the talent involved in that process and alongside that I was surrounded by the desire to deliver the show to the fans. *Vera* has such a loyal following. We wanted to bring new content to the screen and also put people back into work after a really long industry shutdown. It’s a lot about content creation but, it’s also about people’s jobs.

“There was overwhelming relief and joy when I could ring my producer and Brenda and say, ‘If you’re still up for it, we’re on.’ It was amazing. We were going ahead with the confidence that we had everything in place to keep everybody safe. And the hope is we’ve been able to shoot shows that everyone will appreciate when they hit the screens. Restarting the show has meant so much to so many people.

“Regionally, there was a great response from the fans in the North East. It was a real good news announcement and a positive message that we could come back and film safely and within the government guidelines. It’s not just about protecting the cast and crew but also the general public in the North East and the location owners we work with. This was a success story but it had to come with the reassurance we were doing it in a safe way.”

Q: What were the practicalities of filming under new restrictions?

“One of the things we’ve had to do is allow more time. We shoot an episode over 28 days during Covid versus the usual 25 days in normal times. We’ve allowed more time for people to put the show together. We’ve also got a dedicated Covid team who oversee all of the decisions we make. The protocols we put in place are far reaching. All in line with government and industry guidance and also ITV’s health and safety department. But specifically, at a production level, we set these guidelines in motion for every single contributor to take responsibility for their own well-being. We ask people to protect themselves then look after their colleagues and ultimately look after the viability of the show continuing.

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

“That involved daily self-declarations in terms of any symptoms. You need to have a digital green pass and you don’t turn up to set unless you have got one. A lot of measures were put in place on the shoot and within the production office itself including daily temperature checks with two different kinds of measures. A contactless and a contact measurement. All departments of the crew were put in cohorts. So, you reduce the numbers on set. And you don’t have inter-departments working on set any more, you have them in different shifts to get everything organised. We were choosing bigger locations so the population within a set at any one time is within the guidelines and within safe parameters. And then we have really strong messaging on hygiene and distancing, the use of PPE, including face coverings, which in most cases involved both masks and visors.

“In terms of monitoring it all, we had a very specific track and trace system if anyone presented any symptoms and a risk based approach to testing. Everyone played their part diligently sticking to these protocols but, obviously we were lucky as well, whilst we could control the risk in the workplace you could go out one day and catch it in a supermarket. There’s no guarantee. Importantly, we were able to keep the show running and also reassure everyone they were coming to work in a safe environment. We don’t get the best from anybody if they turn up to work and feel compromised in any way. And there’s nothing more compromising than feeling like your health is at risk. That goes right through from the crew to the cast.

“The way we worked with the cast was looked at in great detail. We had a specific plan which made sure we kept our cast two metres apart in as many scenarios as possible; except that is with Brenda and Kenny Doughty, who plays DS Aiden Healy. They worked in a close contact cohort because they are in so many scenes together and ultimately have to sit in the Land Rover together. The scenes couldn’t function without the two of them being in a close contact cohort.

“But everywhere else we were making sure that Brenda was kept at a distance from all of the technicians and the guest cast who formed their own close contact cohorts. There was use of very careful blocking but also, we adopted some green screen shooting. For example, we shoot interview room scenes in two halves so the artists were never breaching that two-metre distancing. Again, it’s just to make sure that when everyone is on set they can feel confident they are as safe as they can be.

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

“Vera’s Land Rover is regularly sanitised. And from a costume and make up perspective, actors are dressing themselves and doing their own hair and make-up where ever possible. The department heads, supervisors and make-up artists were then allowed limited time for checks and adjustments where masks and visors are used by the crew.

“Credit goes to everybody who has supported this new way of working. We wouldn’t have been able to continue if people hadn’t adopted that.”

Q: Did you have to make many script changes?

“One of the benefits of the way the show is constructed is that a lot of it is shot outdoors. Vera is a character who is almost carved from the rock of Northumberland and likes to be outside. A lot of the script didn’t need a great deal of alteration. It was about how the director blocks the scenes and how Brenda interacts with the rest of the cast that was important.

“Where it becomes a bit more problematic is within the domestic settings. I know a lot of shows have been struggling with this because you need the team to keep their distance. We choose bigger locations, bigger houses than we would normally choose, so you have enough space for technicians and the artists to work in the room safely. Then if there is a smaller space required, like a flat, we’ve been building sets for those smaller locations. Whilst it appears to be small on camera we’ve actually got removable walls so you can operate safely. There were also times when I would encourage writers to re-stage scenes outside where we could.

“In terms of some of the action where maybe Vera would make physical contact with a guest artist, you would take that away. Something like putting a hand on a shoulder. That would be removed. But generally speaking, if you watch any episode of *Vera* the character will normally give a respectful distance when she is questioning somebody. It actually wasn’t too difficult to make that happen. It was more of an operational challenge than an editorial one.”

Production Interview

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

Q: The North East public loves to try and spot *Vera* during filming and sometimes gathers to watch. Does that cause you any problems?

“Pre-pandemic there were times when we’d be spotted on location and we would get an enormous number of people turning up, including families with their kids, to stand on the sidelines and watch. Brenda and the rest of the cast really value this support. The love the region’s fans have for *Vera* is wonderful. It doesn’t really cause a problem in terms of the attention it gives us, as long as the crowd stays out of shot and of course quiet during each take. Seeing people’s enthusiasm for the show is a lovely thing.

“We have had to be a little more cautious during the pandemic. When running a Covid compliant shoot and filming during lockdown we couldn’t be responsible for encouraging gatherings that shouldn’t be happening. Again, that’s about wanting to keep people safe. It doesn’t really cause too many problems, but we do need people to keep their distance from each other and from the unit.”

Q: What is it like working with Brenda Blethyn?

“It’s a huge privilege to be working with such an incredibly talented actress. Look at her career. It’s phenomenal.

“When you start working with Brenda you soon appreciate not only how complex and brilliant her performance is but also the amount of preparation and care that goes into that. Brenda will finish a 12-hour day of filming and go back that night to learn her script for the next couple of days, it’s nonstop for her. It’s wonderful to work with an actress with such a strong work ethic, always looking to bring refinement and deeper understanding to the script.

“Brenda immerses herself in every episode and wants to know the story and the investigation forensically. For me, it’s such a joy to have a lead actor who challenges the script and has a constant dialogue with the director, with the editorial team and at times with the writers. This means there is no part of that script or investigation Brenda’s not fully immersed in. You can see that in the way that translates on screen. Every day when I watch the rushes - having watched thousands and thousands of hours of Brenda being Vera - there is still something that takes me by surprise in terms of the nuance and how she renders her character. And she makes me laugh, her warmth and humour between takes is wonderful and brings a smile to everyone’s faces”

Production Interview

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

“Brenda knows and loves that character better than anyone else and she grapples with the material which means there are no questions unanswered before she steps on set and can deliver that performance.”

Q: It must be a huge responsibility for her to lead such a major production?

“Brenda takes that responsibility very graciously. Filming involves very long days over a long period of time. It is hard work, But what comes shining through alongside that hard work is a wonderful sense of humour and her love for the show and the crew. Everyone who works on the show ends up loving it just as much and that’s why you get the camaraderie we have. We enjoy the commitment of a lot of people coming back year on year because they love Brenda and the show.

“That’s quite intoxicating as well. When you work on something that has so much enjoyment at the heart of it. I always hope that when people see the show go out they can be proud of what they have achieved and have enjoyed it along the way, as well as putting in the hours.”

Q: How long does it take to develop a script until it is ready to film?

“From an original idea it’s about six to eight months until a script is ready to film. The quickest you can do it from an idea to screen is four months, but you are slightly flying by the seat of your pants there, because they are quite weighty scripts, 100 to 110 pages. We spend about three months just working on the idea and the storyline and the writers don’t go to script until we have literally hammered out every detail of that plot and the storyline. The hope is that this unlocks an enjoyable writing experience and avoids having to solve any major problems once the script is written.

“The key element is to make sure we do early development with all of these ideas because they take time to craft and get right. To make sure the scripts are polished up and they are the best version of the story that the writer wants to tell before we hand it over to production and of course to Brenda.

“Paul Logue and Colette Kane have written the first two new episodes of series 11. Sally Abbott and Paul Matthew Thompson have also returned along with a new writer to the show, Michael Bhim to write the next batch of episodes filming through summer 2021.”

Production Interview

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

Q: The relationship between Vera and DS Aiden Healy is central to the drama. What does Kenny Doughty, who plays Aiden, bring to that?

"Kenny plays a crucial role. To be second in command with such a formidable DCI. Kenny is wonderful. DS Aiden Healy has to be that constant for Vera, no matter what mood she is in. She is completely wedded to the job whereas he's got a more complex domestic life with his wife and his child. But Vera expects the same discipline and support from him, day in, day out. Vera has plenty of heart, she will of course look out for him and all of her team. But she expects Aiden to be there and on the ball. Kenny pulls that off from an actor's point of view brilliantly.

"It's great to see how their relationship has developed on screen. We pulled together a promo reel for the 10-year celebration screening in January last year and we picked out one of Kenny's early episodes when there was a really bumpy start to this relationship with his new DCI.

"We've watched their relationship flourish to where it is now, both professionally and emotionally, you can see Aiden really cares about Vera. There are times he has to call her judgement into question all in the name of protecting her. And as a result of their bond there are moments when Vera lets that in. Vera is formidable and will take on anything and anyone. But there are times when she has moments of vulnerability. When you see that and how Aiden very humbly supports her, it's great. Compared to the young DS who felt like he was just getting short shrift all of the time to earn his stripes. It's been a really lovely character journey to witness."

Q: Vera is renowned for giving young actors their first screen break. Can you tell us about that?

"As a show we are keen to bring in a range of acting talent both established and younger emerging talent. There are plenty of actors that have come through the show and gone on to lead their own series, it's lovely to have been part of that journey.

Production Interview

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

“Brenda is very keen to support and develop young talent too. The support Brenda shows doesn’t stop at helping provide the opportunity. Once the actors arrive on set she is incredibly generous in terms of supporting and nurturing young talent, actors who may be a bit nervous because they’re on their first shoot or because they are working with an actor with so much experience. The level of support and encouragement Brenda gives actors on set is a wonderful thing.”

Q: *Vera* has an ‘Albert’ sustainable production certification. What does that mean?

“Albert is an environmental organisation which aims to encourage the TV and film industry to reduce waste and its carbon footprint. Like many shows *Vera* has been working with this system for a number of years. It’s all about environmental measures. Anything we can do to minimise our environmental impact. To ensure as much efficiency as we can and minimise waste.

“It always used to horrify me how much paper productions used to get through, from call sheets to scripts. Multiple copies. You were producing 40 scripts at 100 pages a time. For a number of years now, scripts and all production memos have been paperless. Today iPads and PDFs are the way to go and most people are reading all the documents we distribute on their phones or their devices. Anything where we can be sustainable and less wasteful. That goes right through from the types of cups we use for our coffee to the vehicles we use. We try to use more economical vehicles, and hybrids where possible. To get that accreditation you have to submit a report and there are specific things you have to have achieved on the show. Every series is vetted.”

Q: *Vera*’s studio base in Wallsend is another success story. Can you tell us about that?

“*Vera* is based in one of the buildings near the old Swan Hunter shipyard in Wallsend on the banks of the Tyne. In terms of the standing sets, we have the police station interior there, the mortuary and the interior of *Vera*’s cottage. The police station is the whole width of the building. We take the props out, but it’s standing all the time. The mortuary is up on the first floor. CID is on the ground floor. And then the interior of *Vera*’s cottage has moved about a bit. We put it up and then take it back down again. It’s whichever space we can fit it into.

Production Interview

Q&A with Executive Producer Phil Hunter continued:

“The history and importance of that site is incredible, famous not only for the 19th and 20th century shipbuilding industry that thrived there, it also sits near the site of the Segedunum Roman fort that lay at the end of Hadrian’s Wall. One coincidence for me is that some 30 years ago my mum started a job with North Tyneside Council in the building our sets occupy. She was based on the floor where our mortuary set is. My mother-in-law’s partner trained as a draughtsman in that building as well. So, I have a couple of links to it.

“We don’t show it on screen because it’s not part of the set but as you go in through the door of that building it’s got a beautiful curved elevation at each end. And when you step inside it has wonderful aluminum bannisters designed by the draughtsman on each side with a fish curled up at the bottom. It’s obvious that even down to the building they worked in they took pride in its design. It’s lovely to be surrounded by that history. We rent that space and retain it series to series because we need to leave things in place. I love the fact the building has found a new use providing work today, albeit in a different way.

“Our locations in the first new episode of series eleven include the Shields Ferry from South Shields to North Shields and the Collingwood Monument in Tynemouth. We also got back up to Holy Island where we shoot the exterior of Vera’s cottage. There are some shots across the causeway in episode one which are just mesmerising. It looks so beautiful.”

Q: How do you reflect on the return of *Vera*?

“At this point we all need a bit of optimism and some new content. It’s great to be at the point we have the first two new episodes completed, I’m really looking forward to seeing them hit our screens and hope that everyone enjoys them. It’s also really exciting to be back in production on the next four episodes.

“The viewers have plenty to look forward to. As always, the episodes are about normal people in exceptional circumstances. They are about the emotional response you have when there is loss of life. And of course we are shoulder to shoulder with Vera as she solves the case.”

Synopsis

Episode one | *Witness* written by Paul Logue



When the body of well-respected local builder, Jim Tullman, is found beaten to death on the steps of the Collingwood Monument, DCI Vera Stanhope (Brenda Blethyn) questions how such a seemingly beloved and imposing figure could be attacked so viciously. The mystery deepens when she discovers that Tullman was to testify against Marcus Hynde, a promising cadet footballer facing charges of GBH. Are the two crimes connected? The traumatised victim, Victor, and his sister Monica demand their day in court, while Hynde's delinquent brother Patrick and fiercely protective mother Andrea insist that Tullman was wrong; Marcus is innocent!

As Vera delves deeper into Jim Tullman's life she discovers unresolved bitterness between his estranged wife Barbara and doting son John Paul, while tensions with old family friends Gary and Lesley Clayton threaten to spill over. Vera must see through the web of family grievances, jealousies and lies to ensure justice is done.

Synopsis

Episode two | *Recovery* written by Colette Kane



DCI Vera Stanhope (Brenda Blethyn) is called to the scene of a murdered support worker, Angela Konan, found hidden among the bleak woodlands of Northumberland National Park. The location is so remote; was this an attack of opportunity or a carefully planned ambush? Noel Henderson and Stanley Booth, the two park rangers who reported the body appear oddly evasive when questioned if they knew the victim. Vera soon discovers Angela worked tirelessly for a women's addiction recovery centre, yet her manager Darlene Houghton, and colleagues had no relationship with her outside the refuge.

Vera and her team must peel back the layers of their introverted victim to uncover her closely guarded secrets and surprising depths.

It appears an increasingly erratic Angela clashed with two clients in the week before she died, rashly evicting Aysiha Nassar, while becoming ever-more personally involved in the life of Beth Draper, a recovering addict desperate to reunite with her daughter, Maya. Vera trains her keen, insightful mind on what was driving Angela to learn the truth about her tragic death.



Ann Cleeves is the author of over thirty critically acclaimed novels and is translated into as many languages. She is the creator of popular detectives Vera Stanhope and Jimmy Perez who can be found on television in ITV's *Vera* and BBC One's *Shetland*. The TV series and the books they are based on have become international sensations, capturing the minds of millions worldwide.

The Heron's Cry, publishing in September 2021, is the second book in her bestselling Two Rivers series featuring Detective Matthew Venn.

Ann moved to North Devon when she was 11 years old. Before then the family lived in a tiny village, and as the headmaster's daughter she always felt like the outsider at school. But in Barnstaple, Ann found a real home. She made life-long friends and fell in love with the beautiful North Devon coast, which still has a very special place in her heart. She dropped out of university and quite by chance, was taken on as assistant cook in the Fair Isle bird observatory in Shetland. She met her ornithologist husband there. Soon after, the couple moved to Hilbre, a tidal island nature reserve and Ann took up writing to occupy her time. Thus began Ann Cleeves' career in crime fiction.

It took a long time to achieve commercial success, however, and Ann had a number of day jobs, which fed into the novels. She worked as a probation officer, a playgroup leader, a youth worker and even sold flights for British Airways! Eventually, she found her perfect role as reader development officer in a public library, and continued working there until 2006, when *Raven Black* won the CWA Gold Dagger.

In 2017 Ann was awarded the highest accolade in crime writing, the CWA Diamond Dagger. The award recognises authors whose crime writing careers have been marked by sustained excellence, and who have made a significant contribution to the genre. She is a member of 'Murder Squad', working with other British northern writers to promote crime fiction.

Ann is also a passionate champion for libraries and was a National Libraries Day Ambassador in 2016. Her new 'Reading Coaches' project, providing support for health and wellbeing in communities, launches in the North East this summer.

Cast and Production Credits

Cast credits | Episode one

DCI Vera Stanhope.....	BRENDA BLETHYN
DS Aiden Healy.....	KENNY DOUGHTY
DC Kenny Lockhart.....	JON MORRISON
DC Mark Edwards.....	RILEY JONES
Pathologist Dr. Malcolm Donahue.....	PAUL KAYE
Lesley Clayton.....	ELIZABETH MARSH
Gary Clayton.....	GED SIMMONS
Jim Tullman.....	GAVIN KITCHEN
Karaoke MC.....	RAY SPENCER
Amber Fenn.....	OLIVIA NAKINTU
John Paul Tullman.....	MICKY MCGREGOR
Aliah Kapoor.....	RINA MAHONEY
Ewan Webster.....	IAN BONAR
Monica Samassi.....	AMBER JAMES
Victor Samassi.....	NOAH BAILEY
Marcus Hynde.....	LEWIS COPE
Andrea Hynde.....	SOPHIE STANTON
Patrick Hynde.....	CONOR LOWSON
Doug Rooney.....	JOE CAFFREY
Barbara Tullman.....	LORRAINE ASHBOURNE
Anita Sinha.....	RAMANIQUE AHLUWALIA
Helena Rossi.....	PAULINE MORIARTY

Cast and Production Credits

Production Credits | Episode one

Executive Producer.....PHIL HUNTER
Producer.....WILL NICHOLSON
Writer.....PAUL LOGUE
Director.....PAUL GAY
Director of Photography.....RYAN KERNAGHAN
Head of Production.....MATT CLEARY
Production Executive.....JULIE BURNELL
Line Producer.....FAHIMA CHOWDHURY
Script Editors.....LIAM J STRATTON
.....MATT DENSION
Casting Directors.....MAUREEN DUFF
.....GERTIE PYE
Costume Designer.....ANDREW COX
Make up Designer.....LESLEY FAULKNER
Editor.....SIMON STARLING
Composer.....BEN BARTLETT
Production Designer.....JACQUELINE SMITH
Art Director.....PHILIP BROWN
Props Master.....NIGEL PLACE
Locations ManagerANDREW BAINBRIDGE
Production Co-ordinator.....LYNDSEY PALMER

Cast and Production Credits

Cast credits | Episode two

DCI Vera Stanhope.....	BRENDA BLETHYN
DS Aiden Healy.....	KENNY DOUGHTY
DC Kenny Lockhart.....	JON MORRISON
DC Mark Edwards.....	RILEY JONES
Pathologist Dr. Malcolm Donahue.....	PAUL KAYE
Angela Konan	KARLINA GRACE-PASEDA
Noel Henderson	CAYYVAN COATES
Stanley Booth	MARK BENTON
Darlene Houghton	CAROLINE LEE JOHNSON
Ayisha Nassar	AYTEN MANYERA
Kirsty Smith	NATASHA ATKINSON
Maya Draper	MIA MCKENNA-BRUCE
Duncan Maxwell	JAMIE BALLARD
Lou Maxwell	NATASHA ALDERSLADE
Jack Kassin	LOUIS EMERICK
Lara Kassin	SHVORNE MARKS
Reuben Kassin	EDEM-ITA DUKE
Beth Draper	SIAN REESE-WILLIAMS
Shaun Barrow	JOHN BULWICH

Cast and Production Credits

Production Credits | Episode two

Executive Producer.....PHIL HUNTER
Producer.....WILL NICHOLSON
Writer.....COLETTE KANE
Director.....CHRISTIANA EBOHON-GREEN
Director of Photography.....CINDERS FORSHAW
Head of Production.....MATT CLEARY
Production Executive.....JULIE BURNELL
Line Producer.....FAHIMA CHOWDHURY
Script Editors.....LIAM J STRATTON
.....MATT DENSION
Casting Directors.....MAUREEN DUFF
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