

# Cold case units examine alleged serial killer link in five murder-suicides

Coroner's officer report into striking similarities in deaths of elderly couples prompts fresh inquiries

By Victoria Ward

THE apparent murder-suicides of five elderly couples are expected to be re-examined by cold case units after a report warned that their deaths could have been the work of a serial killer.

Two of the cases in particular bear striking similarities, Stephanie Davies, one of the UK's most senior coroner's officers, said.

Her 179-page report is being reviewed by the three police forces responsible for investigating each of the cases. *The Daily Telegraph* understands that each force has either commissioned, or intends to commission, cold case officers to review its findings and potentially reopen the cases.

One source said the disclosures had

“gone straight to the top” and were being urgently studied by experts.

Relatives of two of the couples have rejected the report's findings while the son of a third told *The Telegraph* he would not “stoke the fire” by commenting on it.

Ms Davies's report raised specific concerns about two cases in which a gentle, loving husband with no history of violence had apparently turned on his wife, brutally killing her with unimaginable violence before taking his own life. The first, involving Howard and Beatrice Ainsworth, aged 79 and 78, occurred in Wilmslow in April 1996. The deaths of Donald and Auriel Ward took place two miles away three years later and bore alarming similarities.

Mrs Ainsworth was found on her bed in her nightie with a knife in her forehead having been hit several times with a hammer, a pillow half obscuring her face. Her husband lay next to her having apparently suffocated himself.

Mrs Ward, 68, was also found bludgeoned and stabbed in her bed, her head

partially covered by a pillow. Mr Ward, 73, lying next to her, had apparently managed to slit his throat and also stab himself in the heart.

In her report, which was produced in her own free time, Ms Davies highlighted several inconsistencies, suggesting that the deaths could have been conducted by an unknown offender.

It identified three further murder-suicides - that of Violet and Michael Higgins, aged 76 and 59, in Manchester in 2000, Eileen and Kenneth Martin, 76 and 77, in Manchester in 2008 and Stanley and Peggie Wilson, 92 and 89, in Kendal, Cumbria in 2011 - which it said should be reviewed.

Det Chief Supt Dean Holden of Cumbria Police said yesterday that the force would review Ms Davies' report.

A Greater Manchester Police spokesman said: “GMP has been in touch with the relevant coroners to discuss the next steps. As with any case that has been closed, where new information comes to light it is reviewed and acted upon if appropriate.”