



Sam Stringer, left, and Colin Butcher run The Pet Detectives in Cranleigh. Picture: Chris Whiteoak (Ref: SA110199)

Pet finders' Ace agency

by Melanie Hall

AN Ace Ventura-style pet detective agency has launched in Cranleigh, aiming to reunite owners with their stolen animals, hundreds of which go missing in Surrey every year.

The Pet Detectives is headed by former Surrey Police investigator Colin Butcher and ex-RSPCA coordinator Sam Stringer, and specifically aims to find animals targeted by criminals.

The agency is the brainchild of Mr Butcher, who worked at Surrey Police for 14 years and was part of their criminal investigation department.

Among the cases Mr Butcher dealt with were

those involving stolen animals, and it was one particular incident in 1994, when he managed to recover two German Shepherd puppies that had been taken from their breeder, that inspired him to found the agency.

After leaving to start his own detective agency eight years ago, which looks into cases ranging from recovering debts to investigating cheating partners, Mr Butcher received calls about missing pets and decided to set up another agency dedicated to stolen animals.

He explained that in the past missing pets were dealt with more by the police, but these days cases were forwarded on to private investigation agencies or dog wardens to avoid increasing crime figures.

"The police don't do anything with missing animals unless there's a clear suspect," said Mr Butcher.

The former police detective said people have to overcome a significant hurdle in order to contact a private detective agency.

"They think we hang around in the shadows, smoking and wearing long coats," he said.

"We are trying to break away from that image.

"This is very much along the lines of Ace Ventura, and we deal with anything, such as specialist breeds, wild animals, all sorts.

"300,000 pets go missing every year in the UK, but I would say a third of those are stolen. It's a much bigger problem than is actually recorded."

According to Mr Butcher, one issue was with people stealing pets in the hope that a reward would be announced, and then returning them to claim the money.

Asked if he recommended that people do not offer rewards, Mr Butcher replied: "That's a difficult question.

"In some cases, people are very wealthy, really want their dog back and are prepared to spend a bit of money, so it's hard for us to say don't do that.

"However, we can send one of our team to do the money exchange and film them covertly."

He explained that Surrey's affluence meant there tended to be more pedigree dogs, which thieves can sell on quickly.

He added: "Many dogs are

stolen because the person wants to keep it.

"It's the same reason someone wants a bike - they want what they can't have."

Ms Stringer said the agency used a range of tools, from visiting the owners and looking at the site, to raising the pet's profile as quickly as possible by extensive leafletting and spreading the word through their network of volunteers and relevant agencies.

She said: "The problem we have is that owners were coming to us too late, after several months had passed.

"Dogs are often moved around the country quickly."

She added: "We are always looking for more and more volunteers. They act as a pair of extra eyes and ears on the ground."