

Refugee gangs target village Post Offices

FAMILY gangs of East European asylum seekers – often including mothers carrying babies as decoys – are terrorising Middle England's village stores and sub-post offices in a wave of robbery and shoplifting.

The gangs – whom police say are mostly Romanian refugees – have carried out at least 14 attacks in five counties during the past fortnight, *The Mail on Sunday* can reveal.

They have stolen thousands of pounds in takings as well as personal items from shop-owners.

Police and Post Office chiefs have warned the public and shopkeepers in isolated communities not to challenge the raiders in case they are dangerous.

The robberies – in Hampshire, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Surrey and Hertfordshire – follow a similar pattern. Gang members distract the shopkeeper while others force open the till before making their way to the living quarters. They escape in a waiting car.

At Braughing, Hertfordshire, a farmer and a pub landlord went to the rescue as two shopkeepers were attacked at their village post office by a gang of eight adults, including a woman with a baby.

One of the gang tried to distract post office staff by feigning a nose-bleed. Scuffling broke out when Ian and Peter Jones refused to hand over any cash.

Farmer David How said: 'I was driving past on my way home and saw oddly dressed people – women in long skirts and headscarves on a warm, sunny morning – barging into the shop.

'I went in and found the postmasters trying to arrest the two men while the women were pushing and shoving them away. I joined in, and was pushed to the ground. I was only slightly cut, but like everyone else here I see this as an outrageous invasion of our peaceful village life.'

Pauline Dye, clerk to the parish council, said: 'Our one local bobby can't cope with this. It is sinister

By **Barbara Jones**
and **Christopher Leake**

and terrifying to think our safe haven in the countryside is being threatened like this. We feel we are under siege.'

In the tiny village of Alton Barnes, Wiltshire, Audrey Andrews lost £3,000 of sub-post office takings plus a gold necklace and bracelet of her own.

She said: 'There were three men and three women with a baby of about one year. They were milling around the shop talking in a language I couldn't recognise, asking me questions at the counter while others went round to the back of the shop and stole my things.'

In the corner shop at nearby Upavon, eight people turned up one quiet morning. Some bought small items while others got into the kitchen and took £60 from a purse belonging to a mem-

ber of staff. At Hawkesbury Upton, South Gloucestershire, a gang of six stole from the sub-post office.

Days later, Hiltingbury post office in Hampshire was raided by a gang of eight adults and two children.

Postmistress Rachel Hunt said: 'Anyone would be taken in by these people. They look so innocent with their babies.'

Similar raids have been reported at Newdigate, Mickleham, Fetcham, Bookham and Leatherhead in Surrey.

Four Romanian asylum seekers, living in Slough, Berkshire, appeared on shoplifting charges before Southampton magistrates last week after raids on shops in Hampshire.

A 17-year-old girl was given a six-month conditional discharge by the same court after admitting she stole a quantity of pain-killing tablets from a Spar shop at Eastleigh, Hampshire.