

IT TAKES ONE TO CATCH ONE THE HISTORY BEHIND BMW POLICE CARS

Steve Woodward has just retired after 30 years Police service, the vast majority of it on Traffic Patrol, driving a large number of BMWs. This article was originally written for the BMW Car Club magazine in 2007.

For years the British Police would only use British built cars. It was as traditional as the black paint they were delivered in, as honest as the bell on the front bumper and about as British as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The likes of Wolseley, Riley, Jaguar, Austin and Morris would pound the highways and byways of the country, proudly keeping the Queens peace. That's what the romantics would have us believe anyway, but it wasn't all Simoniz wax and chrome polish. The truth is that in the late 1950s and early 1960s our cars weren't exactly cutting edge and the reliability of some of them was particularly poor. Police officers and their mechanics spent a lot of their duty time on servicing and repairs and quite often had to make modifications where the manufacturers either couldn't or wouldn't. As our road network grew and motorways spread across the land so the need arose for cars that were not only reliable but had the performance to match a society that was becoming a lot more mobile.

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary started it all in 1965 when they dared to go foreign. They purchased Volvo 121 Amazon estates, painted them in white and fitted the new fangled two-tone horns to them. It was quite literally headline news and questions were even raised in the House! Letters of disdain were written to Autocar magazine accusing Hampshire Police of 'lapping it up in luxury'. The politics involved clearly put off most other forces for several years and they continued to buy cars from the likes of Rover, Triumph, Ford and Vauxhall.

But in 1972 Thames Valley Police did the unthinkable. They bought German. They bought BMW. It was bad enough that Hampshire looked toward Sweden for some of its cars but the politicians and the media were having palpitations over this latest act of treason. But worse was to follow. Not only did Thames Valley buy BMW but they openly flaunted it by agreeing to take part in an advertising campaign, where the latest patrol car, an E3 3.0Si and a BMW R75/5 Police bike are about to set off in pursuit of a speeding 2002Tii with the slogan 'It Takes One to Catch One'. The Home Office were furious. As a side note it is quite amusing to read the blurb that accompanies the advert where it states that the 3.0Si has 'Apollo like acceleration' and that it will 'earn its keep in the nuclear power age'. Stirring stuff.

Once one force takes the plunge you tend to find that others follow suit and sure enough a couple of others, albeit with just a couple of vehicles "strictly on a trial basis you understand" did just that. Derbyshire Police appear to have followed Thames Valley in 1972 with a 3.0Si and in 1974 West Mercia Police did the same. You can understand why when you look at the performance figures. With 220 bhp on tap and a top end of 132 mph it was way above the figures for the Rover 3500 V8 and the Triumph 2500 which were the mainstay vehicles of most Police fleets. But it wasn't just about performance. The whole reason Hampshire took on Volvos was because of the serious reliability issues they were experiencing with home-grown products and this was also the main reason behind Thames Valley and others looking at BMWs. As

the cars continued to prove their worth so other forces started to sit up and ignore the politics involved.

When BMW announced the E12 5 series in 1977, it was seemingly custom made for Police use but it wasn't until 1979 that we saw the first ones being used and historically speaking it was at this point that the final nail was probably driven into the coffin of the all British Police car fleets. Horror of horrors, the City of London Police took the E12 525 on as a traffic patrol car, right in the heart of London and right under the noses of all those politicians who had voiced their opposition. Other forces like Hampshire, West Mercia and Thames Valley also fell for the E12 but then they had already dabbled in the foreign market and it didn't seem to bother them anymore. Most other forces still weren't sure and stuck with the likes of the Rover SD1 and the MK2 Ford Granada. Nonetheless the E12 was an important milestone because it was such an impressive car. Police Fleet Managers talk to each other about various products and those that were still experiencing reliability issues became a lot more interested when the 'down time' of the BMW product was proved to be so much less than most of its rivals.

When the E12 was replaced by the E28 and in particular the 528i model then things really started to take off. Here was a car with four doors, a decent boot, excellent reliability, good handling and blistering performance all in one affordable package. What more could Britain's Traffic cops want? Those forces that were already hooked bought even more with Hampshire and the City of London in particular buying dozens of them. North of the border this car suddenly became very popular with the likes of Fife, Dumfries and Galloway and Central Scotland Police all falling for the cars superior performance credentials. The early 528s were fitted out with all black perforated vinyl seats, which on a hot day were unbearable. The last of the line cars from 1987/8 at least had the luxury of cloth seats! The 528i was my first patrol car when I transferred from ten years of inner city policing onto the Traffic Division. I loved it. What fantastic cars to live and work in on a daily basis, except for the seats, which were truly awful. Every single one of us bought those cushioned log-rolls to ease the back pain! I have just finished restoring my E28 Police car and this will be the subject of another article in the near future.

Contrary to popular belief Police cars aren't 'souped up' in any way to make them go faster. Most are taken from the production line to get Police package fitments, which include an additional battery and wiring to facilitate the extra electric's, a beefier alternator, heavy duty springs and dampers, bottom of the line interior options and sometimes different wheels, although nowadays that is rarely the case.

In the late 1980s the ever popular E30 was the car of choice for the new generation of young and upwardly mobile but suprisingly it didn't cut it as a Police car, except in Guernsey where the Island Police had several of them.

In 1989 BMW gave us the E34. This new 5 series car spread the word even further. Early Police spec cars came as a 530i again in a very basic package. It was longer, wider, faster and generally a better car than its predecessor, although there were mutterings from a few officers that they found the interior to be a bit claustrophobic because the dash appeared to envelope its occupants. Although I liked the 530i I personally found it to be a bit heavy and its engine rather lazy. That all changed when

we got the 525i multi-valved units that transformed the E34 into what I still rate as *the* best traffic patrol car of all time. It had everything; fantastic performance, sure-footed and predictable handling, plenty of interior space, decent seats and first rate reliability. My last K plate car did 201,116 miles in less than three years and it didn't let us down once. It didn't have a rattle or a squeak in it and still pulled like a train. In comparison to the MK2 Vauxhall Senators, which most other forces (including us) were running at the same time, there was nothing to compare. I still have heated arguments with people today who rate the Senator as one of the all-time great patrol cars. It wasn't if you were lucky enough to drive an E34 from the same era! One of the other big users of the E34 was Cheshire Police. They used the 525i saloon and were the only force to utilise the Touring in both 525 TDS and 530i on their motorway sections.

In 1992/3 Hampshire Police began to experiment with diesel powered vehicles, primarily for its non-response vehicles like panda cars, vans and CID vehicles. Diesel cars from this era still resembled a passing tractor of course so you can imagine the uproar when it was learned that the force were also looking at the diesel option for area cars (emergency response units). But the protests soon died down when officers got behind the wheel of the E36 325 TDS. It didn't sound like a diesel and it certainly didn't perform like one! And it wasn't long before other forces took them on, all desperate to reduce their fuel costs. As a response car it was perfect. Here was a medium sized four-door saloon or estate with decent performance and excellent economy. Forces from South Wales, North Wales, Lincolnshire, Fife and Cheshire all followed Hampshire's lead and went diesel.

But the E36 also spawned another winner with the Police, the 328i. As an urban traffic patrol car there were few if any that could match its overall package. Other new converts included forces like Sussex and Hertfordshire who both used the 328i Touring on their fleets.

And believe it or not but the Metropolitan Police got to use an M3. It came at a time when the Met were experimenting with semi marked traffic enforcement units and they utilised a number of performance cars including a Porsche 968 Club Sport and a couple of yellow M3s. Legend has it that BMW refused to produce the M3 in white, hence the colour choice! Apparently those that got stopped were a lot more interested in talking about the M3 than the points they were about to receive!

When BMW launched the E39 it was quickly hailed as one of the best cars in the world. And it would seem that Britain's Police forces agreed because the car was hugely popular as a traffic patrol car in a number of variants, from 528i saloon to 530 TDS Touring. And this was during the reign of the Volvo T5, the late 1990s king of traffic patrol cars! Whilst just about every force in the UK had Volvos there were a growing number also taking on the E39 because they had no wish to put all their eggs in one basket. New converts included Durham, Dorset, South Yorkshire, Strathclyde, Wiltshire and the Metropolitan Police. For the first time ever the Met bit the bullet and purchased BMW for use as a traffic patrol car, as an armed response vehicle (ARV) and on the Diplomatic Protection Group (DPG) whose distinctive red cars are seen patrolling the foreign embassies in the capital.

Conversely the next generation of 3 series cars didn't take off anywhere near as much as its predecessor. The E46 continued in Hampshire as a 330d Tourer as an emergency response area car and that force used nothing else to fulfil this role. The

Durham Constabulary took on the 328i saloon as an urban traffic car complete with American style V bars on the roof which I have to say make the car look really good. One of the reasons behind this could be that the Home Office were starting to tie down forces on the type of vehicles they were allowed to use for certain roles. For the emergency response role, where traditionally the 3 series found its niche, the Government's choice was restricted to the Vauxhall Vectra and the Ford Mondeo, although this was to change by 2005.

In 2002 Hampshire Police's strong links with BMW paid off when the force became the first in the world to use the BMW X5 3.0d as a patrol car. Not even the Germans or the Americans got them before we did! And I was lucky enough to drive it everyday of its three year life on the motorways of Hampshire and in my opinion this car is the perfect patrol car. The 3.0d engine is a gem, the handling is light years ahead of its rivals and there is nothing that seems to faze it. Its pulling power is immense and I've dragged everything from a broken down petrol tanker to a dead horse from the carriageway. It has plenty of room, is incredibly reliable and a lot more frugal than the 4.0 V8 Range Rover it replaced! It seemed to be an age before other forces cottoned on but now the likes of Dorset, Tayside, Wiltshire, Avon and Somerset, Leicestershire and Northern Constabulary in Scotland have at last woken up to the fact that there is life after a Range Rover. Hampshire remains the largest fleet user of the X5 with four on its books currently and Cheshire Police have just replaced their Range Rovers with three of the all new X5.

The current E60/E61 5 series cars have raised the bar again and this car has replaced the Volvo T5 as the number one choice for the UK's Police. In both saloon and Touring versions but almost exclusively in 530d configuration, this car is now a common sight on our roads (although not as common as many would like given the demise of real Traffic Officers). The Met Police won't use anything else and the number of forces currently operating them includes the City of London, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, Durham, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Lincolnshire, Sussex, Wiltshire, Strathclyde, Central Scotland, Tayside and Lothian and Borders Police. And BMW isn't resting on its laurels either. One of the biggest concerns for Fleet Managers at present is the issue of weight. The Police now load their cars with so much high tech equipment that many of them are right on the weight limit. There is also a growing call to standardise the equipment forces use and to this end BMW has come up with its 530d Authorities Enabled Concept range, which includes a host of standard plug-in sections actually fitted at the factory. With additional wiring and other electrical components fitted by BMW the cars now weigh considerably less and this will no doubt attract a few more Police buyers.

The latest 3 series car is just starting to make in-roads onto the Police market. Who else but Hampshire now uses the 320d Tourer automatic as its next generation area car. The lower powered car was preferred over the last 330 model purely because advances made by BMW in diesel technology now meant that the 330 was far too quick and the accident rate amongst Police drivers was getting too high. Therefore the 320d was chosen instead. Meanwhile the Metropolitan Police are slowly introducing the 325d Tourer to replace a number of its Vauxhall Vectras as area cars. There is also an X3 2.5d doing the rounds on trial at present but I doubt this will be taken on, as it doesn't really fit the criteria.

Overall BMWs climb up the Police ladder has been a long and slow process, but without doubt they are now here to stay. Their products suit the Police perfectly with a combination of strength and reliability, versatility and outstanding performance, no matter what sector they are being aimed at. And current Home Office thinking is leaning towards having a standardised Police car being built on a national basis, so the Police will no longer get a say in what they buy, instead they will get what the Government has built and at present it looks like being BMW. It will be interesting to see how that develops.

And finally at the 2007 Police Fleet Managers Conference and Exhibition, BMW unveiled another new Police car; the Z4M. If only! Unfortunately for the boys in blue it was only a mock-up and was done at the very last minute to wind up the staff on the Audi stand because they were displaying an unmarked white R8. Shame!