

## SAVING THE AMAZON

I am a self confessed Volvo fanatic. Why? Because I've come to admire, through my using them at work everyday, their robust build quality, incredible reliability, eight-hours-a-day-in-the-saddle comfort and their admirable reputation for safety, which yes, I have experienced at first hand!

I became interested in the historical side of Police vehicles during the 1984/5 national miners' strike when many of us were sent north to the coalfields of Nottingham, Wales and Yorkshire. Whilst there I became fascinated at the number of different types of Police cars and vans used by each force. And I became acutely aware that Hampshire was looked upon with envious eyes as we were using Volvos and BMWs as a matter of routine, when others were still using clapped out Austins, Vauxhalls and Fords. I began photographing the cars and then started to seek out photos from various sources of older cars, long since retired from active service. One of those photos was of CHO 621C, a 1965 Volvo 121 Amazon estate. I was hooked and had to learn more about this unusual looking car. I became even more enchanted when I discovered that it was the first foreign car ever to be used by a British Police force and slowly began to understand why the Hampshire Constabulary had purchased it in the first place and why we, as a force had continued with what was then, a hugely controversial project. The more I learned the more I wanted to know and by the mid 1990s I had spoken to various people who had either driven these cars (there were 5 in total) or who had worked on them.

In 1997 I discovered that one of the Amazon estates had survived. By now I was determined that the car should be saved for the nation. I know that sounds like a rather grand statement but in historical terms it is without doubt, one of the most important Police cars ever made. Now my mechanical knowledge wasn't what it should be and although I was forever reading classic car magazines I simply didn't have the know how or the bottle to undertake any kind of a restoration project. I therefore contacted the Milestones Museum in Basingstoke. They were on the verge of opening the museum and after discussing my ideas with them, I found myself in a car with Alistair Penfold and Gary Wragg from the museum bombing down the M4 towards Wales to look over the Amazon. I had spoken to the current owner several times on the phone and he stated he wanted to sell the car. It had just failed its MOT but only "required a little welding to the floor pan and it would sail through". We arrived at this barn, half way up a Welsh mountainside. He rolled it out and I nearly cried. There was no floor pan, in fact there was very little left of it all. Not a decent panel in sight, seats eaten by mice, roof lining hanging by a thread. I went to open one of the rear doors and all I had was the handle, the door stayed shut! I looked at Alistair and Gary and they just shook their heads. En route home a few minutes later they reckoned it was going to cost about £8000 to restore properly and they couldn't justify spending that much money on one project.

Undeterred in 1998 I contacted Volvo UK who made all the right noises and came up with a plan to ship the car back to Sweden for the factory apprentices to rebuild. Everything was fine until the money men stepped in and estimated the total cost to be around £20,000. Needless to say they withdrew. I was now beginning to think that it would be left to rot when a PVEC member by the name of Terry Wells got to hear

about the car. "I'll buy it" he said "but you've not even seen it" I said "well nothings beyond salvage" he replied confidently. And sure enough a couple of weeks later FOR 298D was delivered by trailer to Enfield and Terry set about the task of rebuilding the car. That was in 1999 and I didn't really hear anything more until 2004 when I heard through the grapevine that the restoration was complete and that Terry was considering selling the car on. Photographs were sent by e-mail and FOR 298D certainly looked a whole lot better than it did the last time I saw it.

I had been a member of the Hampshire Constabulary History Society for several years and decided that I should make an approach to them to sound out the feasibility of the Society buying the car back and using it as a mobile museum piece. I prepared a written business type plan and at the next meeting went armed ready to do battle, convinced that I was going to have to fight one or two of them, twist some arms and generally cajole them into purchasing this unique car. After reading the plan a vote was called for and a unanimous decision to buy the car was reached within seconds. You could have knocked me down with a feather!

During the interim period from 1999 to 2004 I had actually taken the mechanical plunge and bought another car to restore myself. It was of course another Volvo and it was of course another Hampshire Police Volvo, a 240 Police Special area car that also needed a complete restoration job doing on it (but that's another story!). I had recently met ex Sgt Barry Gard who is nothing short of a welding genius and he taught me many restoration bodywork techniques during this time. He also owns a Volvo Amazon saloon of his own and so we travelled up to Enfield armed with a set budget from the History Society and a large dose of eager anticipation. The Amazon looked glorious as it was wheeled out of the garage but our smiles quickly turned into frowns as we looked closer. Terry openly admitted that he had no love for the car and had become bored with the project. He won't mind me saying but it showed. Take nothing away from the man, he saved the cars life and without his efforts the car would have been scrapped years ago (remember Milestones and Volvo both withdrew). But I'm a fussy bugger and I have to have everything perfect in a restoration job and this wasn't. The interior was still in a terrible state, with ripped upholstery, battered door panels, holes in the metal dash, the same old headlining and lots of detail parts just missing or not properly fixed. We couldn't agree on a price and I left even more disappointed than when I saw the car in Wales. However over the coming weeks some sense prevailed on both sides and I travelled back to Enfield and proudly returned with FOR 298D on the back of a Hampshire Constabulary recovery truck.

Barry and I set about dismantling the car again, ripping out the interior completely, including the dash and logging everything that either needed replacing, repairing or finishing off. The list was huge and we were going to need some financial help. I therefore went back to Volvo UK and spoke to Peter Cody at Volvos Special Vehicle Operations. He is the man responsible for selling Volvos to the Police and 2005 just happens to be the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first one to be sold, ie CHO 621C to the Hampshire Constabulary. Volvo could see the worth in assisting us finance the project and sponsored the deal to the tune of £2500. This enabled me to purchase a large amount of new stock for the Amazon. Yes, I did say new. You can still buy just about anything for the Amazon from door cards, headlining, chrome trim, carpets, window and door rubbers, to just about all the engine parts. Most of it came from a UK supplier and the rest was imported from Canada. It was now February 2005 and the

goal was to have the car ready by June 4<sup>th</sup> for Families Day at Netley. Where better to debut the car than at the forces own open day?

Barry and I logged more than 1000 man hours of work leading up to June 4<sup>th</sup> and I was still polishing the car at half midnight the night before that first show. One of my neighbours who had been monitoring our progress came out, shook his head and said “now I know you’re mad”. Maybe I am. But I knew it had been worth the effort the following day when I saw the look on some of those faces. People who had once driven it in anger or who had serviced it stood there in disbelief. But they were so proud that they had a connection with a piece of history and so chuffed that their car had survived after all these years that it made all that effort and all that aggravation so worthwhile.

FOR 298D still needs more work. Phase 1 consisted of returning the car back to a condition that allowed it to be used as a static exhibit at shows and I think we have achieved that. Phase 2 will concentrate on the engine and the cars performance potential. In 1966 the Hampshire Police Volvos were fitted with Ruddspeed conversions to up the performance. Ruddspeed has just been resurrected by a company in Gloucestershire and negotiations are in progress to build a 1966 spec engine for the car. Other projects include obtaining all the period Police equipment for the interior. So far the car is fitted with the old Winkworth chrome bell plus a set of two-tone horns (which in 1966 were an experiment) a Lucas Acorn blue light, a flexi map light, Smiths calibrated speedometer, Pye Westminster VHF radio set and all the various Lucas switches to operate it all. A large wooden box now needs to be built to house a petrol generator in. This powered the Mitralux flood lights that stood on tripods to help illuminate a darkened accident scene. We also need four blankets (I think they were light blue?) a reel of electric cable and two more Police/Accident signs and the finger breaking metal stands they sat on. If you know where I can obtain the generator from (it doesn’t need to be in working order) or any of the other items I would be delighted to hear from you.

FOR 298D is an ongoing project which I hope brings joy to all that see it.

Steve Woodward  
June 2005