

VOLVO 240 BEST PATROL CAR EVER?

Describing the Volvo 240 as the 'best patrol car ever' is a pretty bold statement. In fact it will probably have any motoring journalist reading this spluttering his coffee all over his computer screen in disbelief! Read any of the aforementioned journalistic reports on a Volvo 240 and you will always, without exception, here it described as 'tank like' or has 'all the style of a tank' etc etc. This 'tank' label was penned by one journalist in the mid 1970s and has been used by a succession of others ever since who were either too lazy to dream up their own description or whose actual knowledge of cars was somewhere close to zero. So there appears to be a huge gulf between what the motoring hacks want you to believe and those of us who lived and worked with these cars for many years.

But first a very brief history lesson on how Hampshire Constabulary came to use the Volvo 240. After cutting its teeth on the Volvo 121 Amazon estates (see Saving the Amazon article) the force moved on in 1969 when Volvo introduced the 144 DL saloon. It now saw the Volvo as being the mainstay of its Traffic car fleet and from 1969 to 1975 it purchased 91 units. The cars were a huge success with reliability and safety being their strongest point. The 144 gave way to the 244 in 1975 and although it was basically the same car there were fundamental differences. New front and rear end, new interiors, new engines of 2.1 litres instead of 2.0 litre, better handling, steering and brakes. The last model 144s and the early 244s came with huge bumpers to help reduce damage during slow impact crashes and to assist with sales to America where such bumpers were a legal requirement on new cars. This is where that tank label became stuck to the brand. The 244 saw gradual change and improvements over the coming years with several exterior styling changes (including the loss of the big bumpers) interior changes, engine capacity upped to 2.3 litres with fuel injection added, five speed gearboxes instead of four-plus-overdrive, until the car eventually went out of production in 1990. During that 15 year period Hampshire Constabulary used every single type of 244/240 model ever produced and purchased an incredible 270 units, making it by far the single biggest model ever used by the force ever. And during that same time other cars came and went, newer, supposedly better products from other manufacturers were all tried and tested but all failed to match up to the Volvo 240. It was only when the car went out of production and Volvo had no natural replacement for the car did the force have to seriously look elsewhere.

So what was it that made the 240 the success it was? It certainly wasn't the fastest thing on the street, nor did it handle as well as some of its contemporaries, but that was about it really. It would depend on which era we were talking about as don't forget this model stayed with us for 15 years. So let us talk about the cars hey day, the mid 1980s when it was called the 240 and came with a 2.3i engine and 5 speed box. One of its most discerning attributes was its incredible turning circle, just 32 feet or twice its body length. For a large car measuring just over 15 feet in length that is remarkable and just the thing a Police driver needs to make that quick turn around. Its interior comfort is legendary, even amongst motoring journalists! But every single Police officer who has had to sit in one for eight hours a day will tell you that the seats are superb and when your car is your office then that is vital. Another Volvo legend is its safety record, which is second to none. Is it justified? Most certainly, yes.

There are many Hampshire Police officers who quite literally owe their lives to that Volvo safety cage. I personally had a serious head-on collision whilst on route to another RTA one wet October night. I came face to face with another car that had travelled the wrong way around a one-way system. The impact was huge, but my crewmate and I merely opened the doors and stepped out, unscathed. The woman in the other car was trapped for nearly an hour whilst the Fire Service cut her out. Reliability again is legendary. This is why the force opted to try the Volvo Amazon in the first place because it was fed up with using unreliable products from the likes of Austin and Wolseley. The rate payers want value for money and would rightly be rather upset if the Chief Constable over spent his budget on buying spares for unreliable cars when more reliable products were readily available. The average mileage for each Volvo 240 was 160,000 miles, which was usually achieved within three years, sometimes less, depending which area the car covered. They were on the road 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The cars would mostly always survive on the original engine and gearbox and had very little known weak points. Performance as previously stated was never going to put it into the super car bracket. But it had plenty on tap for the role that it was required to do, ie that of divisional area car. Top speed was 112 mph from 131 bhp and a 0-60 time of 9.2 seconds. That's comparable to a Ford Escort RS2000 that the journalists all rave about! In practical day to day events there was very little that could escape the Volvo 240. As an area car driver at the time I was involved in many successful pursuits and the only time I can recall having difficulty keeping up with anything was following a stolen BMW 2002 Tii saloon which I could match on top end but just couldn't get any closer than the 500 yard or so start he had on me. He eventually ran out of fuel!

Handling and road holding is another department where the 240 was a bit antiquated. The ride was somewhat harsh and the damping left a bit to be desired on rougher roads but the power steering made easy work of slow speed driving. The brakes were superb, even by today's ABS assisted standards they were good, which gave the Police driver supreme confidence when required to drive at speed. The car came with ample boot space for all the necessary equipment carried and bags of room inside the cabin.

In 1984 Volvo produced the 240 Police Special, a unique car built for the Swedish Polis but also made in right hand drive for the UK Police market, but only ever purchased by Hampshire (although I believe Kent Police had one?). The 240 PS was basically a 240 GLT saloon body but without the standard fit sunroof. It had steel wheels instead of the standard five spoke alloys. The interior had half vinyl and half velour front seats and all vinyl door trim and rear seats to help mop up the blood and vomit. There was no carpet just a heavy duty rubber compound on the floor. The engine was 2.3 litre with fuel injection and mated to a four speed manual gearbox with over drive. Hampshire added twin blue lights to the roof and a Police/Stop box to the boot lid. These area car cars became a regular sight on Hampshire's roads for the next few years. Here endeth the history lesson so let us move onto how and why I ended up buying and restoring a 240 Police Special.

In 1999 I was talking to a friend of mine on the phone. His job is filming and photographing fires and serious RTA's throughout Hampshire and Dorset on behalf of their respective Fire Services. He made mention of a large house fire he had attended

in Bournemouth recently and stated that he had found himself leaning against the side of a white Volvo 240 and said it was obviously an ex-Hampshire patrol car.

“What was the registration then?” I asked.

“I don’t know” he replied

“No good only telling me half a story is it” I moaned and we moved onto other things.

Two days later he phoned me back.

“I’ve found it” he said.

“What?” I enquired.

“The registration number on that Volvo I told you about. It was on the video, I found it when I was doing the editing”

“Go on then what is it?”

“B211 WPX”

I fell off the chair.

“That’s my old area car” I squealed. And I then spent 10 minutes or so reminiscing about old times.

A couple of weeks passed and he phoned again.

“I went and knocked on his door”

“Er, whose door?”

“The chap that owns the Volvo”

“Why?”

“To see if he wanted to sell it”

“Why?”

“In case you wanted to buy it?”

“Why?”

“To restore it back to original”

To cut a long story short he had sewn the seed and a few weeks later I found myself in Bournemouth looking at what was left of a patrol car I really did have fond memories of. For example it was the only car I ever collected brand new from Bar End workshops in Winchester and after serving us for 3 years or so it was me that took it back again. So I always reckoned it was ‘my car’ even though there were plenty of others who also drove it. Anyway the car was a wreck. It had accident damage to the rear offside wing, holes in various parts of the bodywork, the wrong wheels and the seats were worn and completely crushed. They also had several years worth of dog hair spread over them! The floor was wet and I suspected straight away that the well known 240 weak point of water ingress via the front screen was to blame. The elderly owner wanted £600 for it, which was about £550 more than it was worth. He refused my offer and I walked away. That was in November 1999. Christmas Day I opened a box from my wife to see the registration document and the ignition key to B211 WPX staring back at me. She had gone behind my back and worn the man down to a sensible price! What a great girl.

Early in the New Year I drove down to Bournemouth to collect my new asset. It started OK, sounded OK but looked even rougher in the gloomy January afternoon. Coming out of Bournemouth I floored the throttle and piles of black soot came out of the exhaust, but the car was flying once again. I was impressed. Then we reached the A31 and it died. And no end of fiddling under the bonnet would get it started again. So I was rather indignantly towed home! The strip down started the very next day. Everything was bagged and tagged, then stored away in the garage. My good friend

Barry Gard and I then started on the restoration. Six months I reckoned it would take. We eventually finished it in June 2005. I had no idea how time consuming and how physically knackered it was going to be. The restoration included new sills, floor pans and spare wheel wells. One of the most daunting items was cutting out the area of rust at the rear nearside corner of the rear screen where all points of the car seem to meet and grafting on a similar piece taken from a donor car. If we had got that bit wrong then the car would have only been fit for the dustbin! We also replaced the doors, the front wings and some of the trim. The seats were all recovered by a local firm who did a superb job and the respray was to a very high standard, again carried out by a local firm. Proper steel wheels were located and restored and new Pirelli tyres fitted. The engine, which had covered 248,000 miles in total only needed a good service and tuning and hasn't missed a beat since. But was it worth it? Most definitely yes. I have undertaken all sorts of big projects in my time but this has been the most enjoyable (mostly) most rewarding thing I've ever put my mind to. And like the Amazon we restored at the same time, the reaction from those that have seen it has been truly amazing, especially from those that drove them. Everyone has stories to tell about driving a Police Volvo 240 it seems and all hold the car in genuine affection.

Which brings me back to my first point. Best patrol car ever? Without doubt and for more reasons than I could ever list here. So to all you journalists out there, I'm sorry but you got it all wrong when you labelled the 240 a tank. I could find you a couple of hundred Hampshire officers that would gladly line up and give you chapter and verse about the virtues of driving the 240. How many other cars could you name where you would get that kind of response?

Steve Woodward