

# **OPERATION PLOVER**

**A multi agency problem solving approach to tackling vehicle crime along one of England's oldest roads, the ancient Ridgeway in Oxfordshire.**

The Ridgeway is an ancient, unmetalled road, with a public right of access, which runs across southern England from Wiltshire to Buckinghamshire. As the Ridgeway passes through the Wantage and Faringdon Police Sector, it is an area of outstanding natural beauty with several sites of historical and scientific interest, attracting many visitors from across the UK and abroad. The Ridgeway is administered by The National Trust.

Operation PLOVER sought to address the problem of vehicle crime along the Ridgeway. Predominantly, this type of crime involved the forcible entry into secure and unattended vehicles and the theft of property from them whilst the user of the vehicle was visiting the Ridgeway.

It was apparent that the area was suffering from disproportionate levels of crime. In order to identify the problem of 'beauty spot crime' which Operation PLOVER was going to tackle, a Crime Survey of Ridgeway crime between July 1994 and March 1997, was conducted, in which details of offences held on crime recording databases was obtained, researched and analysed. This led to the identification of 'hot spots'. The survey included visits to those locations by Crime Reduction Experts in an attempt ascertain reasons why they were attracting crime.

There were several phases to Operation PLOVER, which when viewed collectively, were aimed at reducing, preventing and detecting offences on the Ridgeway. A traditional police operation ran alongside a multi-agency forum, The Ridgeway Action Group, consisting of representatives of organisations, all with a vested interest in making the Ridgeway a safe place to visit. The overall strategy for the operation was to address the short term priorities of reducing and detecting offences and, the overarching strategy of the Ridgeway Action Group was to provide a long term sustainable solution to the problem.

The success of the operation was measured by analysing the reported crime before, during and after Operation PLOVER. Between July 1994 and March 1997, there were 203 offences reported. Between January and December 1997, 14 offences were reported, which represented a 74% *drop on* the same period the previous year. The downward trend continues with only 5 offences being reported throughout 1998, and 9 offences so far in 1999.

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In many respects, the National problem of vehicle crime, particularly theft from motor vehicles, is mostly associated with urban areas, where most motor vehicles are to be found. The tackling of a vehicle crime problem in a very rural, at times remote location, such as the Ridgeway, with offences being committed over a wide area, presents a real challenge. Although Police operations had been launched on the Ridgeway in the past they focused only on detection's and only had a very limited degree of success. The number of offences reported to Police rose steadily throughout the 1990's. With Ridgeway vehicle crime accounting for approximately 10% of the Police Sector's annual crime, there were compelling arguments for looking at fresh ways of tackling the problem again, not only from the point of view of reducing and detecting offences on the Ridgeway but also to seek sustainable long term problem solving alternatives which would ultimately have a significant impact on the Sector's crime overall. Operation PLOVER was aimed at achieving this.

The first stage in the planning process for Operation PLOVER was to identify what exactly the problem was and to this end, a Crime Survey was conducted of all 'beauty spot' vehicle crime along the Ridgeway for the period July 1994 to March 1997. The survey was conducted by a Home Office accredited Crime Reduction Officer (C.R.O.), who obtained, evaluated and analysed all reported vehicle crime, which was recorded on 'CEDAR', the Thames Valley Police central crime recording database. In addition to identifying the 'problem' in its widest sense, further aims of the survey were to identify where and when the 'problems' were occurring and also to make recommendations and suggest measures which could be employed, to reduce the number of offences (complimenting and running alongside the proposed Police pro-active operation).

The survey resulted in the analysis of two hundred and three (203) offences which had been reported and recorded on CEDAR and three (3) main 'hotspots' of crime were identified. These were the main car park at White Horse Hill, the site of the oldest of twelve chalk horses in the Country (81 offences), the parking area for Wayland Smithy, an ancient burial site (46 offences) and the car park at Ashdown House, a stately home owned by The National Trust, (24 offences).

In turn, these 'hotspots' were subject to further in depth analysis, as it was here that there was the greatest opportunity for reducing and detecting offences. This further analysis included the identification of various factors, which in themselves, could be relevant in determining how any Problem Solving approach could be tailored and refined to address this problem. The following factors came to light:

## **1. Months, Days and Times of day, when offences were committed.**

Most offences were committed between April and October, with a slight rise in offences each December (the summer months bring most visitors to the Ridgeway).

21% of all offences were committed on Sundays. 15% were committed on both Fridays and Saturdays. Offences on other weekdays were generally evenly spread. Weekends tended to attract the highest volumes of visitors.

When the 'hotspots' were looked at individually in more depth, most offences on White Horse Hill were committed on Wednesdays. At Wayland Smithy, the most active day was Sunday. For Ashdown House, Saturday was the most active day (when the stately home was open to the public).

79% of all offences along the Ridgeway were committed between 12 noon and 7pm. There were no offences reported between lam and loam and only one offence during the night.

## **2. Types of Offences committed.**

The two main types of offences committed against visitors to the Ridgeway were:

- (i) the theft of personal property from unattended parked vehicles (property which is either in or on the vehicle (i.e. roof racks), and
- (ii) acts of criminal damage to such vehicles (which could include attempts to gain into the vehicle, but where no property has been stolen).

## **3. Methods of entry into the vehicle.**

- (i) The breaking of vehicle window (by far the most common).
- (ii) The puncturing of the door and boot locks or surrounding door skin (in the case of vehicles where only the boot was attacked and property removed, this begs the question 'did the offender see the property being placed in the boot by the victim?').
- (iii) The tampering and cutting of window rubbers and seal (once done, the window can then be pushed into the vehicle, allowing access).

(iv) Duplicate keys (where a vehicle was entered and property removed but where is no evidence of a forced entry and the user of the vehicle, is certain of security when the vehicle, when it was left parked and unattended).

#### **4. Property stolen.**

Handbags, rucksacks and briefcases were the favourite type of property stolen during the commission of offences. In many cases, these items had been left on clear display within the vehicle. The types of property stolen were frequently cash, credits cards, cheque books, cameras, mobile phones, personal and identification documents, audio tapes and CDs. Car stereos were very rarely taken. It appeared that the contents of the vehicle made it attractive, not the vehicle's value or make/status.

#### **5. The Victims.**

20% of all victims were non UK residents. 95% of victims lived 10 miles or more from the Ridgeway. Some conclusions which could be drawn are that people living near the Ridgeway either did not visit or were aware of the problem which existed on the Ridgeway and consequently took precautions when visiting, thus decreasing their likelihood of becoming a victim. Many victims did not expect this type of offence when visiting rural locations. Victims visiting the Ridgeway as part of a day out, were more likely to have more property in the vehicle, which if not put out of sight, increased their chances of becoming a victim.

#### **6. Detection rates.**

With a 0% detection rate, previous attempts to tackle the problem had obviously failed. The possible reasons for this were explored and the following were thought to be of relevance and offered additional avenues of possible work, in relation to the operation:

- (i) No witnesses (the only potential witnesses to offences, were the victims or other visitors to the Ridgeway). Did this indicate that the offenders were able to commit offences in such a manner so as not to raise any concerns among other visitors present?
- (ii) No natural surveillance (no neighbours overlooking the sites and no tradesman/passing traffic, due to the remoteness of the Ridgeway).

- (iii) Offender Identification (positive identification of offender unlikely as visitors are in the main from out of the local area: if offender using vehicle, the obtaining of a registration number would be a valuable lead, but without apparent witnesses, this will not be taken = hence a viscous circle!).**
- (iv) Forensic Evidence (very few vehicles examined by Scenes of Crime, either due to more pressing commitments elsewhere or the fact that attacked vehicle is driven home by victim, prior to offence being reported, hence examination then *not* practical or Scenes of Crime are not immediately available, even if the attacked vehicle is).**

**As a result of the survey, a multi agency, problem solving approach was adopted to tackle the vehicle crime problem along the Ridgeway, with the Crime Reduction *Officer* making the following recommendations:**

- (i) Make. the public more aware of the problem and enlist their help in providing a solution.**
- (ii) Make better use of Police resources by focusing patrols to the Ridgeway, at the times/days and locations.**
- (iii) Asking local businesses for their help and support.**
- (iv) Enlisting the aid of the National Trust who administer the Ridgeway and it's sites of historic and scientific interest.**
- (v) Use hi-tech equipment to apprehend offenders.**
- (vi) Putting up good warning signs for the information of visitors.**
- (vii) Good: use of the press in highlighting the problem and reporting any successes in detecting offences or arresting offenders.**

**With the problem researched and identified and having decided to adopt a problem solving approach to tackling the problem, the various strands to Operation PLOVER were drawn together and implemented.**

### **The Ridgeway Action Group**

**In line with the Crime Reduction Officer's recommendations, the Ridgeway Action group was formed. The group consisted of representatives from the Community Safety Department of the Vale of White Horse District Council, the District Administrator of the National Trust, members of both Neighbourhood Watch and Countrywatch schemes (representing the communities through which**

**the National Trust held joint public presentations in the car park at White Horse Hill, with use of the exhibition trailers, from which crime prevention advice was available to visitors (in the form of displays, videos and leaflets). The National Trust also contributed financially (in the form of sponsorship) towards the pro-active Police operation (discussed later in this document).**

**There were a number of other actions spawned from the Ridgeway Action Group, which were realised and played their part in assisting in tackling 'the problem'.**

**Within the Police Sector, there were weekly Crime Management Meetings, in which the Ridgeway in general (but especially the 3 'hotspots' previously spoken about) were identified as locations that required extra Police attention, both from a prevention of crime and a re-assurance to the public point of view. As a result, the Ridgeway was made subject of Directive Patrols, with officers on day shifts being specifically tasked with visiting the sites on the Ridgeway, during their tours of duty, and to report back any information.**

**In past years, vehicles crimes along the Ridgeway have been reported in a number of ways. The victim has either attended the Police Station and a crime report completed or they have travelled home and then phoned the Police to report the incident, with details then being taken over the phone, either by an officer at the Police Station or at the centralised Crime Desk. In order to enhance the quality of service to all victims, all vehicle crime reported along the Ridgeway was allocated to one officer, who undertook initial enquiries with the victim. This officer had an in-depth knowledge of the layout of the affected locations on the Ridgeway, and a knowledge of other reported crime and/or intelligence information coming in. All reported offences were investigated as one large enquiry, not a myriad of individual ones. This also ensured relevant information was passed to our partners, the various Watch schemes and the National Trust, and ensured continuity of contact with the victims.**

### **The Police Pro-Active Operation**

**The Police Operation, which ran from January until October 1997, was co-ordinated from Wantage Police Station was led by Police Sergeant Simon Moms and involved a small team of officers, who collectively have a responsibility for the identifying, tackling and managing crime on the Uffington Area Beat (an Area Beat on the Police Sector, through which the Ridgeway runs).**

**The operation was divided in several phases and each phase was undertaken, using the information provided by the Crime Survey.**

## **Phase One**

**The first phase was a public awareness campaign. This involved uniformed officers visiting the various 'hotspots', at those times identified in the crime survey, to speak with visitors, to highlight the problem of car crime, to distribute crime prevention literature and to identify vulnerable vehicles at the locations (i.e. vehicles with property inside, left on display). Crime prevention packs, which included letters from Police and the National Trust and car crime leaflets, were prepared in advance and left on unattended vehicles, to ensure those visitors who were not personally spoken too, would be made aware of the problem, in case of any return visits in the future. This phase also provided a high visibility presence, at the 'hotspots', to act as a deterrent to offenders who may have been present and public re-assurance by the Police presence.**

## **Phase Two**

The second phase of the operation was an intelligence gathering exercise. This involved Police officers, both in uniform and in plain clothes, mingling with visitors to the Ridgeway, in an attempt to identify any suspicious persons or vehicles, on which further background work could be initiated. This phase also involved members of staff from the National Trust (and the associated Ridgeway Rangers), who, having been provided with details of 'hotspots' and any intelligence on specific vehicles to look out for, would be on the Ridgeway at the critical times, providing extra pairs of eyes at the critical times.

This second phase included liaison with other Police forces, in an attempt to identify any travelling criminals, already known to Police, who were engaged in this type of activity (the problem of rural 'beauty spot' crime is not restricted to the Ridgeway). This liaison produced an additional source of information and this was processed into the operation and relevant parts were given to our partners in the Action Group.

## **Phase Three**

The third phase of the operation was the pro-active stage, involving covert observations at the 'hotspots', by plain clothes officers with uniformed support. Utilising the now established partnership with the local authority, council vehicles were made available to the Police, to use as observation vehicles in the car parks. During the course of these observations, there were sightings of persons and vehicles obtained from surrounding Police forces one of which, Hampshire Police were actively targeting these individuals, under a much larger operation. This phase also included the use of covert 'sting' vehicles. On several occasions, vehicles were sourced from local garages under sponsorship from the business concerned and they were used at the 'hotspots' on the Ridgeway. The vehicle would be parked and left unattended, with a item of property which historically,

**would have been the target of offenders engaged in vehicle crime. The vehicle was then kept under observation, with a uniformed response being nearby to render assistance, should an attempt be made to break into the vehicle.**

### **The Results of Operation PLOVER**

The initial Crime Survey detailed 203 offences between July 1994 and March 1997, an average of 6 per month. During 1997, whilst Operation PLOVER was running, between January and December, 19 offences were reported, a drop of 74% in reported crime. The trend continues to date, with only 5 offences being reported throughout 1998 and 9 offences so far in 1999, 6 of which were committed by the same persons. Of the 30 offences committed since the inception of the operation 9 were detected which represents a detection rate of 9%.

The evidence gathered during phase three of the pro-active operation (i.e. the sighting of suspects and vehicles, details of which were provided by surrounding forces), was given to Hampshire Police, as part of their investigation into similar offences. This evidence played a small part in the conviction a group of travelling criminals, based in Wiltshire but who travelled extensively throughout the UK, committing vehicle crime. The group were convicted of Conspiracy to steal from vehicles and were sentenced in April 1999 at Winchester Crown Court, to substantial terms of imprisonment.

### **Project Contact Person**

PS 2980 Simon Morris  
Thames Valley Police  
Police Station  
**Church** Street  
Wantage  
Oxon  
OX12 8BW

Tel : 01235 776045  
Fax : 01235 776051