

A Touch of History

EARLY NZ POLICE MOTOR VEHICLES

by Ken Brewer

In this modern technological age we take the convenience of motor transport for granted and with the exception of traffic congestion and safety issues, we give little thought to the multitude of problems once experienced when the motor car was in its infancy.

Whilst the first private motor car appeared in New Zealand in 1900, it took another nineteen years for the police to acquire its first powered vehicle and for the next three decades it had to rely largely upon a succession of unreliable second hand, mismatched examples. Even then they were initially retained for use by senior officers and routine patrolling remained with the age old (and cheap) horse, bicycle, or size ten boot.

In 1919 the police in Auckland, Wellington (and I believe) Christchurch were each issued with a new Ford Model TT motorised light truck and a restored example exists today with the New Zealand Police Museum collection. Unable to meet the full cost of such expensive items of equipment, the police were forced to involve local government in cost sharing by utilising the vehicles as ambulances as well as police vehicles, despite each bearing police markings.



ABOVE: A Police Museum photograph of the Wellington 1919 Ford Model T showing the stretcher and its storage box between the wheels. NZ Police Museum photo.

In 1920 Auckland was provided with a Huptmobile Tourer petrol engined vehicle that went down in our history as one of the first examples of a car in police use, albeit exclusively intended for the superintendent in charge. The Auckland example remained in continuous use until 1932.



ABOVE : A 1918 Dodge stuck in the mud. This 1923 Weekly News photograph illustrates the kind of road conditions that routinely confronted early New Zealand travellers and being mid winter at the time Cummings and Fox made their historic journey to Tuakau, they would have faced something similar.

On 25 August 1920 the first recorded instance of investigating police using a motor car to attend the scene of a crime occurred following the murder (the previous day) of Sydney Seymour Eyre at Tuakau in South Auckland. Auckland's Superintendent A. H. Wright instructed Detective Sergeant James Cummings and Sergeant John Fox to use his new Huptmobile to travel to the scene. Whilst today this trip would take about an hour, it was not so simple in 1920 when the roads were mainly mud.

Cummings' career was so successful that he gained the nickname of the "Sherlock Holmes of New Zealand" and in 1944 he succeeded his brother Denis as Commissioner of Police. He is featured as a significant character in the upcoming made for TV movie, "Spies & Lies," about his time as head of the secretive wartime SIB.



ABOVE: The 1926 Austin Sixteen Six was seen as a very fast car in its day but this example proved somewhat unreliable. Just visible in this photograph taken at Auckland Central Police Station is an almost bald front tyre! Photo source not known.

It would be the late 1960s before the New Zealand Police were able to begin standardising the national fleet and this followed the creation the of the Australian Holden Motor Company who developed a reliable and robust series of vehicles that were produced at affordable cost. Apart from a brief foray with Ford vehicles in the late 1970s to 1980s, the Holden largely remained the favoured vehicle for many decades.

The use of high performance patrol vehicles became necessary to meet the relentless increase in crime committed by the highly mobile modern criminal.



ABOVE: Whilst lovely to drive in a straight line, bends and power poles were unkind to the powerful English Humber Super Snipe, as this example shows at Auckland Central.



ABOVE: The American made Chrysler proved to be a popular vehicle among drivers, but they were expensive and hard to obtain. NZ Police Museum Photo.



ABOVE: The early Holden saloons proved perfect for police use, with their powerful but cost effective engines, roominess, comfort and simplicity. NZ Police Museum photo.

From very shaky beginnings the New Zealand Police began to develop its fleet from a diverse range of often unreliable early vehicles into the modern fleet of practical and efficient vehicles. Rumours abounded in the 1970s that Ford had offered to supply the New Zealand Police with Ford patrol cars free of charge on the proviso they be permitted to advertise the fact. This was declined on the basis the police might be perceived as obligated to Ford and did not want to be seen as receiving a "Gift." Years later the supply of sponsored community cars made a mockery of such a view.



ABOVE: Holden vans were also adapted for secure prisoner transport and were later recommended for the carriage of police dogs once they had become operational, but they were deemed to be unfit for dogs, so continued to carry prisoners! NZ Police Museum photograph.



ABOVE: The 1955 Wolseley 6-90 series 1 was trialled following its success whilst in use with the British police.



ABOVE: Two police Holden patrol cars outside the Papatoetoe suburban police station in the 1960s.



ABOVE: A later model Holden vehicle of the late 1960s. Shortly after this the vehicle colouring was changed to light grey.



ABOVE: Holdens gave way to Ford Falcon patrol cars in the late 1970s and the solid roof light bar appeared. This particular model was comfortable to drive, but the loud electric engine cooling fan noise could be heard for miles on a quiet night even when idling.



ABOVE: A new grey coloured Holden prisoner van in the late 1960s at Wellington. NZ Police Museum photo.



ABOVE: The early 1980s saw the introduction of sponsored patrol cars, for use by the growing number of community constables as the police began to pull back from centrally based reactive style policing. This Ford Laser is photographed at Mangere in 1988. They were not all equipped with radio communications and in South Auckland the lights were rarely operable.



ABOVE: The ubiquitous Holden HQ proved to be the ideal police patrol car, but the early front bench seats sometimes created driver discomfort that became widely known as "Holden Back."



ABOVE: Sergeant "Curly" Carr and Constable Graham Endicott-Davies with a Ford Falcon dog patrol van in Tuakau in 1980. This vehicle appeared with the early crest on the doors once more.



ABOVE: The upgraded Holden that saw the introduction of the white colouring and the twin blue roof lights and illuminated police sign. The reflective door badges were very expensive and were to be dropped. It was around this time that many smaller police stations were closed, or reduced to patrol bases as police became centralised and reliant on responsive mobile patrols.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

It's true that we don't know what we've got until we lose it, but it's also true that we don't know what we've been missing until it arrives.