

ORIGINS OF THE 'BLACK RATS'

I knew there would be problems when having asked three ex Trafpol's what was the origin of the 'Black Rat' in respect of Traffic Patrols, I got three answers!

Having had two weeks to send in your answers, I have tried to work out who was the first Black Rat in Traffic Patrol and how the term originated. I tried very hard to analyse all the explanations, but it appears that the true story is very unlikely ever to emerge, although there is a chance that one of the suggestions is the definitive answer.

I have shown below the general thoughts and recollections of all contributors to this cause and leave it to you to pick the one that you like the best.

If you want to buy any '**Black Rat**' items, please see the last page.

Bill Ramsden

Suggested that 'Buster' Eastman serving at Barnes was well 'In the frame' as he was noted as a prolific Process gatherer. A story imparted to me by 'Widget Wright' who knew him well, goes as follows: He was so well known at Southwestern Magistrates Court that one of the Stipendary Magistrates was known to instruct the Court Inspector to "Get Mr Eastman to Court immediately!". On more than one occasion he appeared in Court in his old gardening clothes having been picked up from his allotment by a Police vehicle. This Magistrate used him as an Expert Witness when he was not sure on some technical Traffic Offence matter.

Geoff. Tolcher

Thinks it may have a connection with the CID's 'Drink Culture' around the 1970's when Trafpol's were known to arrest CID Officers for Drink/Drive offences. This obviously caused some problems for them and so we were christened Black Rats: Later to be upgraded to Fluorescent Filth! A name that failed to catch on.

Clive Abraham

The story goes that a certain PC (nut case) was informed that he had to take a week's holiday or lose it and was dually directed as to what week this would be (no consultation)

He took the week off as directed and went camping, the venue for his weeks hols was the A3 just south of the Robin Hood roundabout.

He then spent the entire week doing process fully dressed in uniform.

He was apparently christened " A Black Rat" by the local foot from Kingston, appearing from his hole(tent) as appropriate.

A name was mentioned but being nearly 50 years ago I am afraid it's gone.

Phil Lloyd

I don't know if there was a 'who' or where the expression came from but a little personal history may help? I originally joined The Job on the 18th December 1972 and went to Kensington the following March. As, what is these days termed a 'petrol head', I naturally started to gravitate towards an interest in TD. One of the more senior PC's on my relief went to Traffic during 1973 and frequently returned to the station to see old friends (of which, I was not one, as a new boy) and to wind up old jobs. He was nicknamed 'Tiny' and a Triumph 650 looked like a toy when he got on it. I never heard anyone refer to him or any of the other TDB units that used our canteen as 'Black Rats'. I left the job in 1974, returning in 1976, when I was posted to Walthamstow. I was in Lea Bridge Road Section House with several budding CID (The Banana Bunch) who always referred to TD as 'Black Rats' or 'The Hitler Youth'. The latter died off but it was the Traf'pols who took Black Rat to their hearts, in much the same way as American Colonists did with the insult 'Yanks'.

'Dickie' Bird

Submitted this exchange of memories:

Dear Dickie

Black Rat episode. I arrived at TDZ in 1956 and understandably there were a considerable number who only ten years previously had fought for their country. I cannot remember the names of all, but the nickname Major was attached to one such chap who had been a Major during the war.

When he came back he was interviewed by senior police staff and he asked for an appropriate rank from his military service, sadly he was told he could have his old job back as PC in Traffic. Not being very pleased he was known to take this disfavour out on the general public and understandably was thereafter known as "Major". He was certainly fearsome but I cannot swear he was the original Black Rat. **(No name to work on)**

Bernard Norton

Dickie,

I was a Junior Cadet in the old Garage at DT4 (Heath Road, Thornton Heath). There I was reliably informed by the old guys that the 'original' Black Rat was a DT4 P.C. called Roberts; 'who would have stuck his old Grannie in the book'...hence the title Black Rat! At the outbreak of the second World War, as with many coppers, he joined the armed forces and fought the enemy. It is said that he rose to the rank of Major and upon demob (with said rank in mind) he wrote to Dave Deller the Guv'nor of Z Division (Traf'pols came under the division within which the District garage was based) offering

his services and requesting what position he could offer one who held the rank of Major in the British Army. Apparently 'Dave', who had pre-war knowledge/experience of Major Roberts, replied to the enquiry with the firm offer of *the position of Police constable!* That's what I was brought up on; don't know what the outcome was and I have no further details but it sure made a good story as I trundled thro' The Job.

Regards,
Graham Bailey

Hi Graham,

Thanks for the reply.

I have been checking the old garage records that I have and turned up a Albert Walter Charles ROBERTS DOB 17.4.19 PC 610 Wt No 64/129850 who joined the Police 19/12/33 and then served in the Royal Engineers 23/11/39 until 5/6/46. Re-joined the Police 2.12.46 after the war. Served 3/8/47/ Z Div at ZD 27.2.50 Z Div DT4 1/4/68 B8 TDZ.

Could this be him?

Dickie

Hi there again Dickie.

That sounds like 'Bert' Roberts who was at DT4/ZTU/TDZ when I was Cadet/P.C./whatever. He had a brother, George who was at PTU (Lewisham) garage and who I worked with when I was posted there from TDB (on my way back to ZTU), where I had been sent at the great change-over in '65! What a great job it was.

Bert definitely was never the 'Major' Roberts of our great mystery search. The infamous 'Black Rat' had long gone when I was a fresh faced little Junior Cadet in '57.

'Beardo': The nick-name rings a bell and I can see his face now but I cannot recall his real name. He had a 'posh' voice and was a smooth type but the memory box cannot put the name

on him, although I seem to think that the nick-name 'Beardo' chimed in with his proper name. For sure however he wasn't a Roberts/The Black Rat.

Evenin' Dickie,

Great. Bernie would have known better than me but as 'only a lad' I hovered up all the info and tales available.

Maybe The Major is the one, maybe not. It's all 'Black' and white to me.

Cheers,

Keep up the search guys, Graham Bailey

Hi Dickie

I was always led to believe that the term Black Rat came about when the first Traffic patrols arrived on Motor Bike Patrols. It was to do with their dress Flat caps and spats. They were also believed to eat their own.

Tom Cowper

The information about the original Black Rats was written in one of the Classic Bike Publications. I also have an anniversary booklet from the driving school I will dig it out and see if it refers to the first traffic patrols

Tom Cowper

Hi Dickie,

My father, Ted Jarvis, says he thinks a PC at Lewisham was the original "Black Rat". He also remembers someone called "The Major" but isn't sure if they are one and the same.

He says that Chief Inspector Janet Knott had a toy stuffed black rat on her desk, and she would know the history of it. (No name to work on)

He asked me to ask you if you remember that he was the former Champion of the Hooley Bends and that he had a certificate on the wall in the Clerk's Office at TDM to prove it.

Also that there used to be a notice up saying "A Merry Christmas To All, Except One" ; it most amusing when people asked who was "The One"!

Kind regards,
Sue Mahoney

Henry Philpot

I believe it was term to describe us by misguided CID officers who had run foul of us, sometime in the late 60s or 70s.

I accept with Pride.

Henry

Trevor Pryke

Did not know the origin, but sent a picture of a very large 'White Rat' emblazoned on the back of his high visibility vest, which he never goes anywhere without!!!

Chris Walker

Origins of Black Rat. I'm sure you are aware lots of stuff on the www about this.

My (uninformed) view is that

1. The original motor cycle police (traffic) in The Met had black bikes (Triumphs), black 'corker' helmets (post flat caps and pre white helmets), black boots etc.

2. The fact that black rats (real) eat their own young and TD officers were known to be unforgiving to all offenders, regardless. From the latter was the fact that Traffic 'had no friends'.

(note. At TDB one Christmas (68/9?), just prior to the garage Christmas dinner, a Watney's brewery artie turned over in Barnes High Street. Assistance was given from the garage and, as the load was condemned, a number of party 7's/8's or whatever, found their way into TDB. Unlike Foot Duty and the CID we had no real 'home ground', so no pub owners/managers for 'donations'.)

Of course there were also the bunch known as CTS (Central Traffic Squad) 'S**ts'.

Happy Days!

Chris Walker (ex TDM(Trio), TDB (Barnes), TDQ (Alperton - APU), MDS Hendon, TDB.

Mike Lovelock

Did'nt know the answer but did want to know where he could buy the 'Black Rat' items. (See below)

Chris Latham

I joined TDH in 1988. I was told we were Black Rats because 1- We were dressed in Black 2 - Like the rodent(black rat) we would "Bite/eat our own" i.e a copper sticking a copper on...Something I never did although I knew people who did and were proud of it. I always thought there were enough scrotes about without picking on 1 of our own

Love to hear any other versions

Regards

Chris Latham ex HB, TDH, TDC, Driving School. Now happily retired and enjoying the rural life in Lincolnshire

Brian G Davies

42 years ago when I joined traffic at Maltby Street, I asked the same question and was told by a very experienced Traffpol the following :-

In the days when motorcycles were black Triumph Speed Twins and the uniform and crash helmet were black, officers working in the Rotherhithe tunnel out of TDH would emerge into daylight after dealing with an incident the same facial colour as their 'bikes and helmet from all the fumes. On

seeing this a motorist was heard to remark; "They look like black rats coming out of a sewer pipe" The rest (apparently) is history.

I hope it was true, if it isn't it should be.

Brian G Davies ([PS 130TDM](#) [PS 48 TDS](#) [PS 13NW TDQ](#))

John Lines

Derek, I always understood that it was a chap called Tom Hughes who was originally known as the Ebony Rodent. The number 511 rings a bell but I cannot recall what division or garage, it may have been DT4 but I could not swear on that. Regards John L

David Clark

Derek,

I went to TDP in 1975 and there was a chap called Ron (Davies I think) who had the job over. He basically left the job and started up an electrical firm. He then applied to come back into the job and when they said that he would have to shut the company, his argument was that he would have to sack the people working for him. So they relented and he kept the firm going but of course could not do any work. He took a lot of sick time (busy stuff electrics). He was always referred to as the black rat when people spoke about him.

David

So there we have it; no conclusive answer to the question.

Thanks to everyone who took the trouble to reply.

For those who would like to buy some 'Black Rat' memorabilia this site is selling many items for the benefit of the Traffic Patrol Orphans Gift Club and some of the stuff is a real surprise: Have a look now.

www.blackratmerchandise.co.uk

Regards,

Derek.