



ANOTHER BLACK RAT STORY

Happy New Year, 黑鼠年. The year of the Black Rat!

OK so I slipped the 'black' in!

As some have not heard the term before, and, as so many variations of the origin, here it is as told by the originator.

The origins of the Black Rat are subject to many differing tales, some of detectives falling foul to a keen Traffpol after being stopped for not wearing a seatbelt (although wearing a seatbelt is probably not in a detectives remit) to a Traffpol issuing a ticket to his own mother for speeding, with one or two more tales thrown in for good measure. We, at Black Rat Merchandise have always been under the impression that the Black Rat logo was drawn circa 1982 so was growing old gracefully although we never knew who was responsible for its birth.

Imagine our complete surprise and gratitude when we were contacted a month or so ago by a retired Traffic Officer called (I'm sure he won't mind me giving his name) Michael Bartlett.

Michael has given us a comprehensive history of the Black Rat logo and has owned up to being the 'artist'! I have suggested he go into hiding now as Mrs Black Rat (Neils wife Louise) wants to have a word with him!!!!!!

What follows is an extract from Michaels email:

I was recently made aware of your website and as the person who did the initial concept design of "the rat" I wondered if you would be interested in its history and how it began life as a sketch on a canteen napkin at TDM in Bermondsey.

Before I go into detail I would point out that I am more than happy the design has been Trademarked by yourselves and especially pleased that your site is being run by serving officers supporting the Traffic Patrol Orphans Gift Club.

Sorry, I don't know who you are, but as you appear to be Met. based I assume you are familiar with the original structure and formation of Central Traffic Squad in the dark eons of the 1950's and the first Traffpol uniform, black Gannex military style riding coats, worn with a black "Corker helmet" and black leather puttees over stout boots. As a matter of pride the uniform was never cleaned, coated with fag ash and waterproofed by the generous quantities of oil, applied while scrabbling around under heavies or sprayed through the many leaking gaskets around the crank case. The then derisory term, "Black Rat," was allegedly grudgingly ascribed by a CID officer who had been stopped by one such heavily whiskered traffic officer.

When I joined the job in late '71 the name "Black Rats" was common parlance throughout the job. I joined traffic in late 1974 and went to Maltby Street, TDM, just off Tower Bridge Road. Before I made the Met. my career choice I initially wanted to get into Graphic Design and it struck me that, although the Black Rat brand existed, there was no related logo. This became the subject of a lot of discussion during grub breaks with the oft mulled over problem of how to encapsulate the "brand" in the image. Napkin after napkin was used, with ideas and advice pitched by many. The first prototypes looked more like Roland Rat on the day he lost his virginity than the leering figure I had in my mind's eye so the napkins continued to pile up, especially after comments such as, "Why are you using a mouse?" or "It looks like a Ferret!" Finally, I decided the answer was to focus on the face and after many more attempts the "grin" was looking better and better.

I took "the Rat" (it has never been given a name) to a printer in Bermondsey and asked if it could be put onto a tee-shirt. The proof that came back looked nothing like the original because, the printer informed me, it had to be cut for screen printing, no computerised anything in those days; it was down to a man and a scalpel! It looked like someone had sewn its mouth up, it was a disaster. "Can't be done mate," I was told when I emphasised the importance of the grin. It all looked like a wasted effort and "the rat" would have to be consigned to the rubbish dump at Surrey Quays.

A couple of months later, at a party in Blackfen, I struck up a conversation with a school teacher called Chris, who had just started a screen printing business on the side. Having trained at the London School of Printing he was a lot more

positive about translating the image. We sat down together and within an hour, “the rat” was born. My image and his expertise worked perfectly and within a few weeks the first tee-shirt delivery was made, available only in light grey, S.M or L with the grinning black rat’s face leering out from the right breast, above the initials T.D.M. I sold the lot in 24 hours, stuck half the profits in the Widows and Orphans box in the front office and reinvested in a larger order. I decided to look at car stickers and ordered 500, which sold for 50 pence each. They too went like hot cakes. It seemed like Traffic had finally obtained its identity.

The then Commander of Traffic Division had a particular well-honed skill. As youngsters today can intersperse the word ‘like’ several times into every sentence so too could he insert expletives in a similar fashion. Together with his booming voice terms such as , “What the.....were you thinking?” and “What in the name of Christendom will thoseers think of this?” Came thick and fast. “It’s f..... elitist!” he exploded again. From the colour of his face and the amount of spittle coating my shoulders it wasn’t difficult to determine he was a tad upset and wasn’t too keen on “the rat.” I did wonder if it was because I didn’t have a teeshirt size that fitted him but having been summoned to the Big House for what I thought was a bit of praise I decided it would be probably circumspect to keep the two stickers I had for him firmly in my pocket.

It transpired a 728 had been submitted by one of the supervisory ranks at the garage, requesting “the rat” could be formally adopted and the proceeds donated. Nice thought but in the political climate of the time it probably was not the best idea.

The rat went underground and remained there for several years. Secret supplies were trafficked around the Met. and into some constabularies but the profile was minimal and always kept intentionally low. Many retired officers, who had chopped in their warrant cards for a green badge, displayed a sticker on their taxis, but it was all low key.

Despite this approach stickers and associated photographs began to appear of “the rat” leering out from tea houses on the Everest trail, on the side of warplanes and one even survived a short ride on Ronald Reagan’s bumper

during his 1984 state visit. Clearway magazine often featured these and I am indebted to the Editors for keeping the image going.

I did find myself back in the same CO office a few years later, speaking to another Commander, when Fast Bikes magazine gave away free Black Rat stickers bearing the words “Don’t nick me, I’m one of you.”

Around 1990, with the rat, now in his mid-teens, I was asked if it could be brought out of the cellar and used to raise funds for BLISS, the baby life support charity. I agreed and the range of memorabilia really provided new impetus. Pretty soon it was being spotted the length and breadth of the land, with many Traffic Officers taking pride in both their name and image. “the rat” had earned acceptance and even the two Commanders who bollocked me later displayed it with pride.

I’m pleased that what started as an idea in a job canteen, and survived numerous attempts to exterminate it, has gone on to raise so much money for charity and has become an enduring symbol of who we “Traffpols” are.