



# SPRAY AND PAY

Taggers beware, writes Gary Mascon, British Transport Police officers are now using hi-tech equipment in the fight against graffiti vandalism

**G**raffiti vandalism is a major issue for railway operators. Vandals often look for new, more daring places to 'tag' because of peer pressure, putting themselves and others in danger.

In January last year, for example, two teenagers were killed when they ran into the path of a train at Barking station in the UK. Fatalities have also been caused by vandals stepping onto live railway tracks.

The British Transport Police (BTP) is committed to arresting graffiti vandals and working to prevent future deaths. But catching people in the act is a difficult and dangerous task. Graffiti vandalism often takes place at night or in places with bad visibility, making it difficult for police to keep track of suspects.

Patrolling officers have also found it difficult to monitor graffiti vandals hiding in bushes near railway sidings and have been restrained from carrying out searches near the tracks because of the risk to their own safety.

In September 2007, the force decided to equip some of its L division officers with Irisys thermal imaging cameras to enhance their efforts to tackle graffiti. The compact, easy to use infrared cameras can be taken on patrol and used to monitor the actions of graffiti vandals. They detect individuals by their body heat, even if they are hoping to be hidden by foliage.

## Nowhere to hide

In one instance, the BTP officers were faced with a group of graffiti vandals who split up and ran in different directions to make it difficult

to be caught. Thanks to the thermal imaging cameras, the police did not need to chase the group, but were able to detect them in their various hiding places.

Not only did the cameras help to track the group members, but they also allowed the officers to stand guard over the offenders' hiding places. This prevented them from leaving and allowed time for additional officers to arrive and make arrests.

Insp (operations) Andrew Jackson, is in charge of tackling the vandals for L division.

**'You cannot put a price on the safety of our officers and these cameras are money well spent'**

He says: 'The cameras can be used to detect people from a distance of up to 100 m, which means officers can assess a situation and call for back-up, if necessary, before getting involved. In the past, police sometimes lost track of the suspects because it was too dangerous to follow them onto railway tracks.'

Insp Jackson believes that the investment in purchasing 30 thermal imaging devices was worthwhile. Not only do the cameras provide night vision and close surveillance at the crime scene, but a long range feature means images can also be used to provide evidence in court. BTP bought the thermal

imaging devices primarily to tackle graffiti crime, but officers have found a number of other useful applications.

Police officers also deal with those who gain access to the railway to steal the valuable electrical cables from tracks during the night. The theft of railway cables is a real problem for the rail network, causing signal failure that leads to train delays. The cost of replacing stolen cables and managing delays takes its toll on the rail budget and results in rising ticket prices. With thermal imaging cameras, police can tackle these crimes when it is dark.

## Preventing injury

Thermal imaging can also be used to address the problem of stone-throwing on the railway. Young people compete to see who can break the most train windows and underestimate the potentially terrible consequences of such behaviour.

In recent years, there have been a number of incidents in which bricks have been thrown through train windows and train drivers and passengers were seriously injured. The cameras can help police identify where offenders may be located.

The London branch of the BTP has pioneered the cameras, however their success is becoming known around the country. Insp Jackson says: 'They have become a useful part of our kit. You cannot put a price on the safety of our officers and these cameras are money well spent in terms of the assistance and assurance they provide.' ■