



SHE TOOK THEM ALL TO JAIL, BLACK MARIA.

Tony Butler

1830 USA, outside a sailors lodging house in - shall we say the rougher quarter of Boston Philadelphia; a lone policeman is losing a struggle with a desperado physically his superior. As the policeman is about to succumb beneath overwhelming odds a black woman, best described as larger than life, comes to his rescue and, after delivering him from his debacle, arrests his quarry for him.

Following reports of this deliverance, the lady, of whom all the unruly now stand in dread, is often called upon to assist the police whenever trouble erupts in that area.

The name of this queen-size lady is Maria, Maria Lee and, from then on, in a sort of butterfly effect, all horse drawn prisoner transporters become known as 'Black Marias'.

Other origins of the name Black Maria have been proffered. A black racehorse filly foaled in Harlem New York in 1826 went on to win many races providing purse winnings amounting to \$15, 000. Her most famous win being at the Union Course, New York in 1832 with a purse of \$600, her name was Black Maria. In 1870 an article about her in 'Harper's New Monthly Magazine' considered that it was too much of a coincidence that a police van was given the same name in the same town where this famous black mare won her greatest race. Others have suggested that Queen Victoria's name gave rise to 'Black Maria' due to the London cockneys fondness for referring to her as Ria or Maria

New Police - New Vehicles.



The Black Maria was introduced to London by the 'New Police' (formed by Robert Peel later Sir Robert Peel with the passing of the 1829 Metropolitan Police Act). The Metropolitan Police had just two vehicles, one of them stationed at Carter Street Police Station, south of the river Thames and one at Kentish Town Police Station, north of it. Prior to this British police forces used various carts to convey prisoners to and from the courts, to gaols and to executions, or a walking escort would be provided. Carts were also used for transporting stores and equipment. A Chief Constables' transport was more stylish, although they had to provide the purchase cost of it from their own means. They could claim the services of a constable to act as their coachman and an allowance to cover their running costs, which would include overnight lodgings and horse feed.

By August 1891 the London police had eight 35cwt horsed Black Marias in service. Each vehicle was of wooden construction and equipped to carry some six prisoners, housed in narrow individual cells without windows and with only a small roof ventilator for air. Many later versions had a clerestory roof for improved lighting and ventilation. These prototypes were, painted jet black with the royal arms and monogram on the side panels. Causing them to be nicknamed 'her Majesty's carriages' by some.'

A narrow passage from front to rear allowed access to the cells. The vehicles were pole drawn by a pair of horses and usually manned by a police constable driver and a sergeant escort. The Metropolitan police employed sixty-seven horses in total. Constables were required for stable duties.

The police prisoner transport department was estimated to cost the Liberal Government funded General Police Fund, £12,000 a year. Thomas Tilling of London's Thomas Tilling Ltd the largest horse omnibus provider in the capital saw an opportunity and bid to provide the same service for £8,000 using his horses and his drivers. He could, he said; work the service with forty-eight horses as opposed to the police's present sixty-seven. The Home Office agreed to a six-month trial and initially two of Tilling's vans were taken into service. By October 1900 there were thirteen 'Tillings' built Black Marias in full service with the drivers supplied by Thomas Tilling.

By May of 1922 the London prisoner transport department consisted of fourteen horse drawn 'Black Marias', crewed with a Tillings driver and police constable and a sergeant escort and another six vehicles were held in reserve. By now the Police also had two motor vans, on hire from Tillings. On 27th February 1923 the Home Office approved the purchase of six more motor vans, each to be built by Messrs Tilling Ltd. They also authorised the purchase of the two motor vans already on hire for £1,220 each. Motor vans gradually replaced the old horse drawn vehicles some of which were nearly forty years old.



It is of interest to briefly compare the French equivalent vehicles across the Channel. French early Fourgons Cellulaires (vans with cells) were pretty disgusting by comparison, being used for touring the streets to collect vagrants, drunks and arrested felons, but the later carriages of the Ministry of Interior Penitentiary Administration which took prisoners to and from prisons and police stations were of exceedingly high quality with well equipped interiors, as the images show.



A prisoner-transporting problem in Aberdeen spawns an unusual version of the Black Maria.

Aberdeen in the late 1800's; at 3.0 o'clock in the quiet darkness of the night's small hours, two police officers, handcuffed to two prisoners and accompanied by a police sergeant, walk (hopefully unobserved) through the streets of the city, to the new Craiginches prison, a journey of some two miles. Craiginches prison was built by, Messrs D. Andrew and Co. in 1891 to replace the antiquated Aberdeen city prison. Its location though had its problems the nocturnal transportation of prisoners from Police Office to Prison being the main one. With the old city jail being next to the courthouse the transfer of prisoners had presented no problems. However, the new prison being situated two miles from the city courthouse meant prisoners were confined in the police office until transfers could be effected, during the night at 3.0 o'clock was considered the safest time. At the council meetings prisoner transport was a continuing subject for discussion. On 11 September 1891 at a meeting of the city council's 'Watching, Lighting and Fires Committee', four months after Craiginches became functional, it was proposed that the commissioners should pay £75 annually for the conveyance of prisoners from the police office to the new prison. This was on the understanding that the Council should procure a horse and van for the transport. Until that time the temporary arrangement of prisoners escorted on foot at 3.0 o'clock in the morning should to continue. A two-wheeled single horse Black Maria, box van style, was supplied by an Aberdeen manufacturer and delivered to Craiginches towards the end 1891.

It's a long way to Inveraray.

Following what is believed to have been a long service life at Craiginches, a motorised vehicle replaced the Black Maria, which was discarded and eventually assumed the role of a garden shed complete with a fitted sink. A second relocation, around the time of the Second World War, brought it to Cobblestock Farm, Peterculter close to Aberdeen Scotland where it was used as a farmyard store. Some 50 years later a local historian discovered it. He encouraged Aberdeen Prison staff to purchase it and they secured it for just ten pounds.

A long process of restoration then began. The bodywork was found to be in good condition, put down to the fitting of a corrugated iron roof at some point during its enforced retirement. Unfortunately the wheels and the undercarriage were missing. Replacement wheels, axle, springs and shafts were all sourced locally. The vehicle was repainted and embossed with a royal coat of arms to complete its restoration. It was then kept at the jail as an exhibit being taken to various functions in and around Aberdeen. In 1991 it took a central role in the Jail's centenary celebrations attended by the Princess Royal Princess Anne and the Black



Maria also took part in a parade in Aberdeen city centre. It also featured in the BBC drama 'Micawber' filmed in Edinburgh and starring David Jason.





Inveraray.

In 2004 the Governor of Craiginches Jail offered the Craiginches Black Maria to Inveraray Jail, on the west coast of Scotland, on a permanent loan. From the 1880's most small Scottish prisons were run down and the empty ones gradually fell into disrepair. Inveraray closed as a functional Jail in 1889. But its fate was rosier than others, its significance as 'the finest 19th century county courthouse and prison in Scotland' was recognised and an extensive restoration was undertaken. Inveraray Jail opened to the public as a museum and visitor centre in May of 1989, almost a hundred years after the last prisoners departed. But the old Black Maria's last 'internment' was not without obstacle. As the Jail has no double doors it required the services of a crane, to hoist it into the jail.

Following a further restoration, carried out in the main by the staff of Inveraray, it is now the central exhibit in the jail's history of the Scottish prison service.



My thanks for information on this subject to:
 Police History Society
 Janette Gibson. The Governor Inveraray Jail
 Archibald Orr Residents Manager Craiginches prison Aberdeen.
 Maggie Bird.

Picture Credits:

The Governor, Inveraray Prison
Fourgon Cellulaire. Interior of a van of the Ministry of Interior Penitentiary Administration
France. Photo courtesy of Patrick Magnaudeix. 'Figoli'
Fourgon Cellulaire. A van of the Ministry of Interior Penitentiary Administration France.
Photo courtesy of Patrick Magnaudeix. 'Figoli'