

Security blanket

At a time when security at the UK's major airports has never been tighter, law enforcement's attention has increasingly switched to securing other so-called 'soft targets'. John Dean examines the increased security at one of the UK's smaller airports

One of the initiatives under way to tighten security is a decision by Durham Constabulary to double its Special Branch team working at the only airport in the constabulary's area. The initiative is designed to crack down on different forms of organised crime, such as smuggling, as well as gathering intelligence for use in the worldwide fight against terrorism.

Durham Tees Valley, near Darlington became a civilian airport in 1963 and a terminal was opened in 1966. Until April this year, the airport was covered by eight Special Branch officers but their numbers have been boosted by an extra seven detectives and two police staff, who specialise in data analysis.

Police accommodation at the airport has been improved, new computer equipment installed and Automated Number Plate Recognition facilities are being used to target suspect vehicles.

The team is also preparing for the government-led initiative E-Borders, which is being rolled out across the country and allows the police and other agencies, such as Customs and Immigration, to share information more easily. E-borders is expected to be operational by 2012 and will help track the movement of passengers using air and seaports to enter or leave the UK.

Although such airports may not seem like obvious targets, Det Supt Neil Malkin, head of CID Operations for Durham Police leading the team, said: "There may be a perception among some criminals that access is easier at places like Durham Tees Valley and we are just as vigilant as the likes of Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester. The expansion of the team here is a sign of that.



Photography: Keith Blundy

Det Supt Neil Malkin

"In the past, the airport has almost been a forgotten area of policing, but all that has changed in recent years. The officers based there have done a tremendous amount of good work. Increasing staffing levels will enable us to make even more inroads into serious crime."

For Det Sgt Graham Brown, senior ports officer based at the airport, Durham Tees Valley's small size may actually work against criminals.

He said: "With a larger airport, criminals can blend into the background but at a place like Durham Tees Valley, with much lower numbers of passengers, it does make them more exposed and easier for us to watch.

"We do have to respond to the relaxed border controls within the EU and also to the fact that the presence of cheap flight airlines gives local people access to Europe and beyond.

"For instance, we have a number of flights each day that go to and from Amsterdam and once they get to Schipol Airport, passengers can go just about anywhere in the world. We also have flights to Spain from which it is a short journey to North Africa with its links to the drugs trade. That is why we have to be as vigilant as larger airports."

The team works with other law enforcement agencies at the airport, namely officers from the Customs and Immigration services, Durham Tees Valley's own security team and has made some significant breakthroughs.

Last year, the police team seized more than £260,000 worth of property going through the airport, including hundreds of thousands of smuggled cigarettes. They also intercepted £100,000 being smuggled in or out of the country. At the end of last year, they seized three and half kilos of cocaine, a case currently going through the legal system.

One of the team's more high-profile cases was the seizure of nearly £38,000 from two Libyans flying into the airport. Abdul Redhwan and Talal Abosbiaa, 26-year-old students

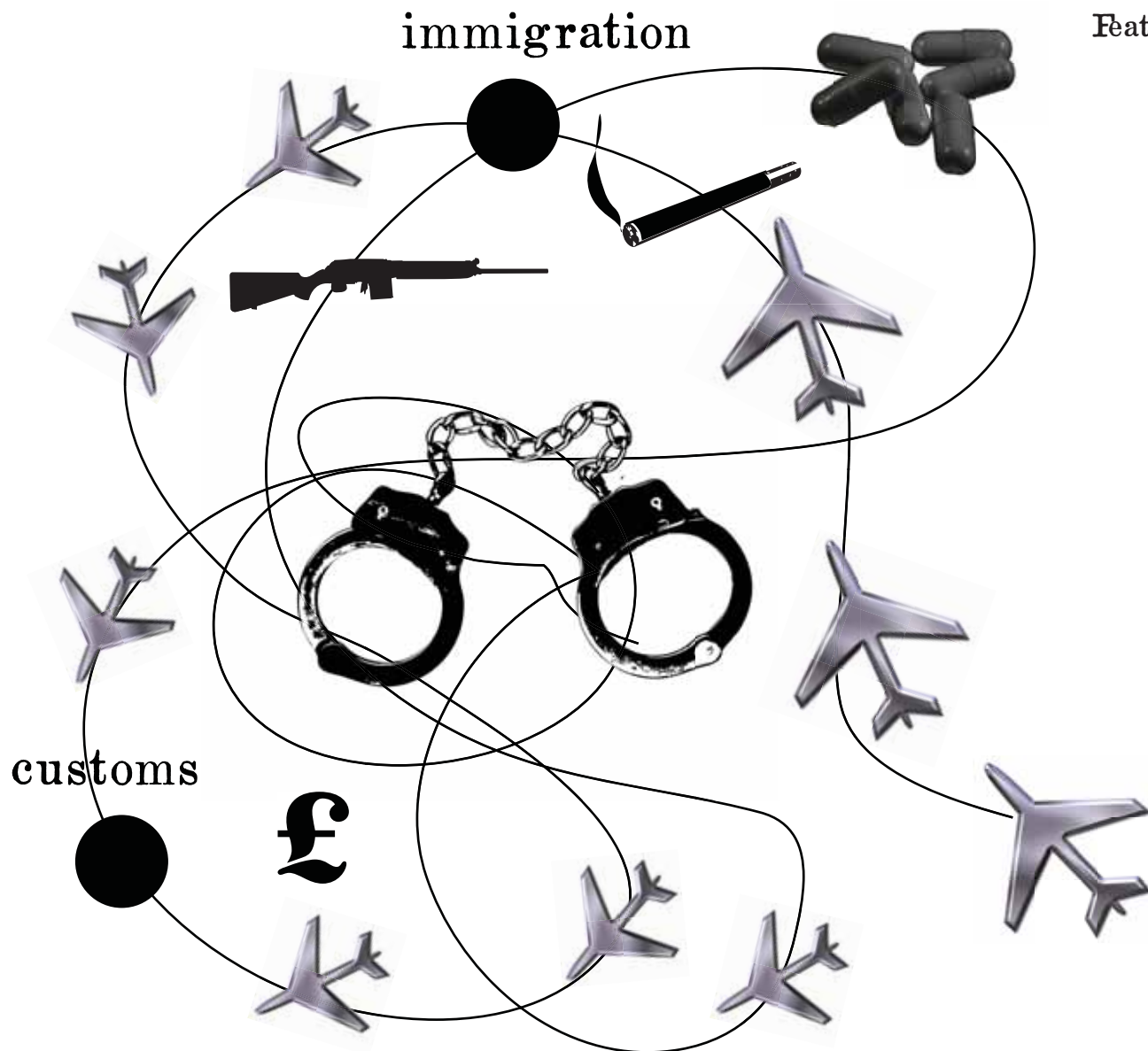


Illustration: Police Federation

at the University of Teesside, Middlesbrough, were stopped in February last year and explained their possession of the money as proceeds from a business deal relating to the purchase of a lorry cab.

Police inquiries uncovered six or seven similar deals relating to the purchase of vehicles and concluded that, as the men were no longer studying at the University, they were actually carrying out a business.

Magistrates agreed the seized money could be confiscated by Durham Constabulary under the Proceeds of Crime Act. Both men appealed against the decision, in their absence, at Durham Crown Court on March this year but lost the case.

This year, the police team's activity has increased. Using the Terrorism Act, officers carried out 128 searches in the first three months of the year, up 44 percent on the previous three months. A further £25,000 was seized.

Det Sgt Brown said: "Working with other agencies is important. For example, Immigration may stop someone trying to get into the country without a legitimate passport. Our job is to find out why they are trying to do that and what they planned to do when they get into the country."

That information may not lead immediately to an arrest and a lot of the team's work feeds into bigger operations against terrorism and smuggling. Det Supt Malkin said: "A lot of our work is preventative and we are gathering intelligence that can be a tool for operations outside the Durham Constabulary area. We have introduced more IT and brought in two staff who can analyse the information which our team picks up."

That co-operation with other agencies, and neighbouring police forces such as Cleveland and North Yorkshire, will continue to increase. The team also has responsibility for ports and airfields in the Durham area and another remit is flying schools, a number of which are based at Durham Tees Valley Airport. Det Supt Malkin said: "If you go back to 9/11, a number of those involved used flying schools to train as pilots. We have to be aware of that."

The team know that their workload can only increase. Durham Tees Valley is in the throes of multi-million pound expansion plans by the company who owns it, which will see a larger terminal area, more airlines, many of them offering cheap flights and a vastly expanded cargo-handling operation.