

Net loss

John Dean looks at how thieves are using internet auction sites to shift stolen property

They are the 21st Century version of the car-boot sale, the method whereby just about anything can be bought and sold – and not all of it legally.

Police officers are finding themselves increasingly dealing with cases where stolen items are offered for sale over the web on auction and sale sites. Forces are also working more closely with a number of companies that offer such services, eBay prime among them.

That is certainly the case for officers from Cleveland Police who have been monitoring the sale of car parts stripped from stolen cars.

At the heart of the trade is a change in the nature of auto theft itself, according to Mark Kewley, a civilian support vehicle examiner and auto theft intelligence officer attached to the force's Vehicle Intelligence Unit. He says: "Cars in themselves are no longer as lucrative for the thieves. You may get a £15,000 car stolen but sold for two or three hundred pounds. However, if they strip it down and sell the parts, they can be worth much more.

"Things like automatic vehicle systems can cost £500-£1,000 to replace, and it is the same with the likes

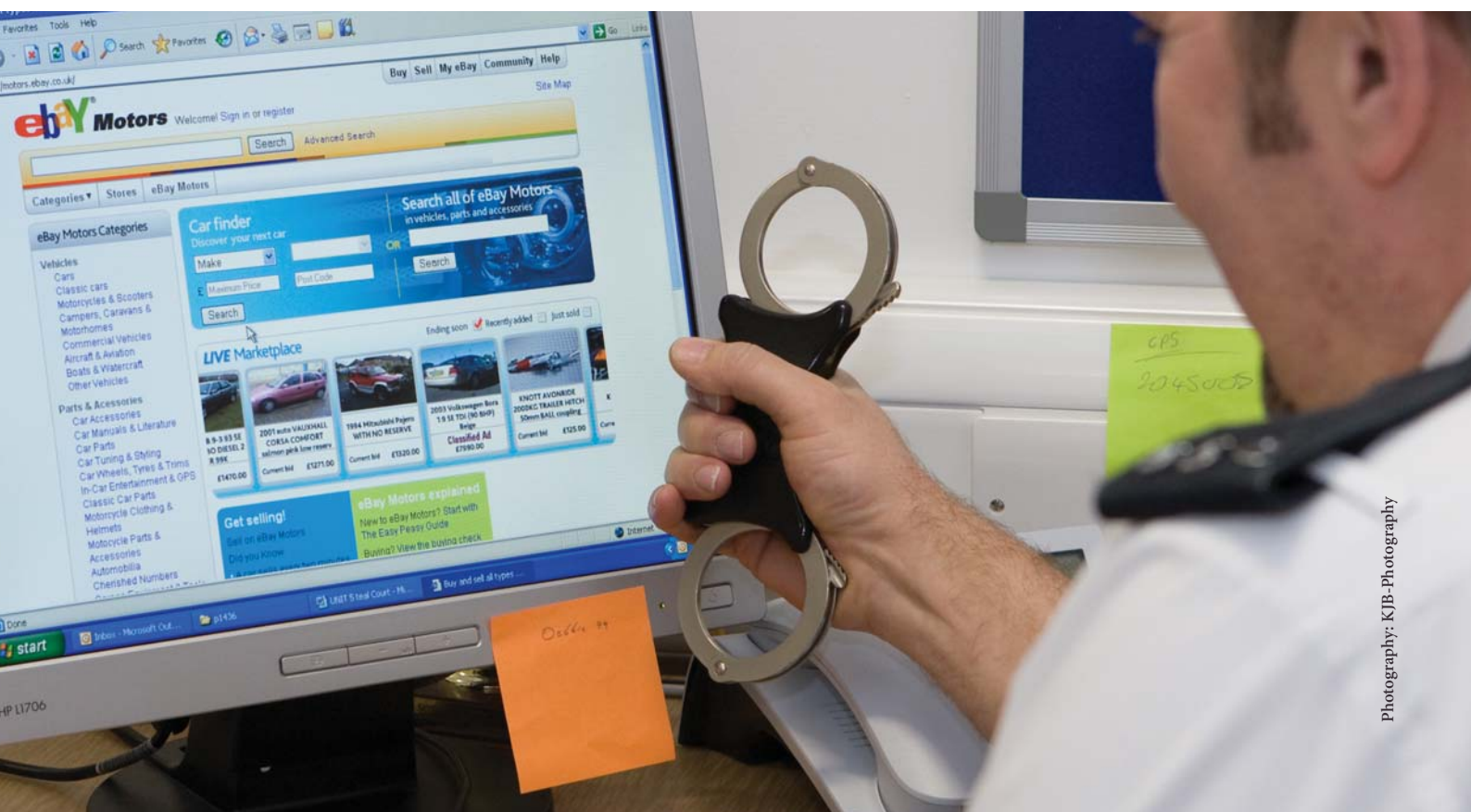
of airbags. The thieves can make money by selling them on sites like eBay."

In one case last year, the team dealt with a man who had his Mazda stolen and tracked down the parts to eBay. When police raided a Teesside workshop, they found stripped down vehicles and auto parts. The man behind the trade was eventually convicted of car-related offences. And in August last year, Cleveland Police arrested three men and seized about £80,000-worth of suspected stolen car parts, which police believed were being sold on the internet. The inquiry is ongoing.

Mr Kewley, who was involved in both cases, says: "It is not just car parts, it can be things taken from cars. We have found everything from children's buggies to CD box sets up for sale.

"We do monitor these websites. Sites like eBay are a more technological way of selling and are replacing the bloke at a car boot sale, who has a table full of car parts.

"For the thieves, selling on the internet is high gain with little risk. It can be difficult to trace people who sell, particularly if they are using details of victims of identity theft. And if you do track people down, you still have to





Web patrol: (left to right) John Hutt, DS Darren Birkett and Mark Kewley of Cleveland Police investigate the trade in stolen car parts on internet auction sites

prove that the items are stolen and that they believed they were stolen; they might claim they bought it from a bloke in the pub for £20.”

Detective Sergeant Darren Birkett of the force intelligence unit, who was acting inspector in the case last August, said the internet was increasingly being used to sell stolen items.

“People using these sites are often selling these items to feed their drugs habit and they do not care what they sell. They will sell anything.”

However, the police say that because the sites can have many thousands of similar items for sale, inquiries must be focused rather than spending many hours trawling through sites in the hope of finding stolen goods. The exception would be something so distinctive that it was easily spotted.

DS Birkett says: “We feel that finding stolen items for sale on the internet has to be intelligence-led. We have had cases when we have suspected people are dealing in stolen auto parts and have been able to go out to search auction sites.”

Mr Kewley says: “The internet is part of building a bigger picture. It allows us to show a jury how the crimes are organised. It allows us to show that the people were dealing with stolen cars, stripping them down and selling on the parts.

“If we have the vehicles and where that was happening, we can point to the sale of parts on eBay and similar sites and show the extent of the business and prove that that were running a chop shop. If we can prove that, and have other evidence, we can say to the people we arrest ‘you have a problem here.’”

John Hutt is another support vehicle examiner and auto theft intelligence officer attached to the force’s Vehicle Intelligence Unit, who was also involved in the two recent cases. “The internet sites are a more upmarket way of selling stolen auto parts, and for us it is like putting together the pieces of a puzzle,” he says.

DS Birkett does not believe that the internet is being used by major organised crime dealing in car parts. He says: “You will probably get three or four people at a time involved in this kind of thing.”

Nevertheless, because of the mobile nature of autocrime, the police do spread their net far and wide. Mr Kewley is chairman of Regional 2 Vehicle Intelligence Forum, which involves forces from Humberside up to the Scottish Borders. They share information and also feed it into the national police intelligence network.

The force says it has a good relationship with website operators. Citing eBay, Mr Kewley says: “They are very good when we talk to them about these incidents. They do help us.”

Durham Police, which reports similar co-operation, has heard about a number of scams. Most tend to be cases where people have been sold stolen items, or been promised items that have not arrived even though their money has been taken. Other scams range from criminals selling stolen cameras for low prices to those selling stolen cars at knock-down prices.

Force records show that the number of cases of alleged fraud involving the website eBay recorded in Durham between October 1, 2006, and 30 September 2007, was 44. The value of items involved was £40,713.

Twelve people were prosecuted and one was cautioned.

Detective Inspector Geoff Smith, of the Economic Crime Unit, says: “We do see these cases but they tend to be reported by divisions as crime in the area. The problem with these kind of cases is that the criminals can be difficult to trace. And if you do track someone down, it can be difficult to prove because you have to prove that they knew something was stolen.

“Also, you may get cases about non-arrival of items where one person may say they sent it, the other person may say it did not



arrive and you have one person's word against the other.

"The more astute criminals may make contact through sites like eBay but will get the customer out of the eBay arena as quickly as possible. They might say 'look, why pay the commission? Let's do this privately'. If that happens, there are none of the guarantees connected to buying from a website."

That desire to get the buyer away from the website is replicated in many cases with items such as cars sold in motorway service stations, at car parks, or when parked outside homes which the criminal wrongly claims to be their own.

There are other uniting features: the sellers use web addresses that are difficult to trace rather than with major providers such as BT and AOL, and may well hint that the items being sold are cheap because they were illegally obtained.

A typical scam is a criminal selling cheap cameras online, claiming that a relative illicitly obtains them because they work in a camera shop, or for a manufacturer. Such an approach makes the buyer less likely to go to the police for fear of being implicated in the original crime.

Pointing to the stereotyped image of a criminal as not particularly bright, DI Smith adds: "A significant number of these fraudsters are well-educated. It makes it difficult for us to spot their mistakes but they do make them. People need to be more suspicious and learn to smell a rat when they encounter these kind of activities."

eBay – "a bad market place for stolen goods"

Richard Ambrose, Head of Trust and Safety for eBay UK, said: "It would be naïve to suggest that there are never stolen items for sale on eBay because it is such a massive market place. However, we would argue that eBay is actually a very bad market place for stolen goods because it is so transparent and is visited by millions of people."

He urges people not to enter into private transactions away from the site because using eBay means customers can use the Paypal service, which is secure and carries insurance.

Mr Ambrose says that eBay employs a full-time police trainer, who advises forces on how to tackle the problem. He added that in 2007, eBay received 9,000 inquiries from law enforcement agencies. Not all were cases, many related to officers in the early stages of investigations, many of which did not come to court.

- In December 2005, a man from Northallerton, in North Yorkshire, helped return a bronze shield stolen from the Battle of the Standard monument in the town. The collector was doing a routine check of sites when he spotted the shield for sale on auction site eBay. The company selling it gave it back as soon as it was realised it was stolen.

- In September 2006, a 30-year-old man from Middlesbrough was jailed for two years for a scam which used eBay to sell stolen car roofs. He admitted two charges of handling stolen goods and had 65 previous convictions, many relating to cars, including vehicle theft and interference, aggravated vehicle taking and dangerous driving.

- In August 2007, a woman was left £4,600 out of pocket after buying a car from an eBay fraudster. The 22-year-old, from Bishop Auckland, County Durham, saw a new Volkswagen Beetle for sale



on the site. The person she contacted took the money but the car never appeared. Ebay took the car off the site when they realised what had happened.

- In September 2007, a court heard that a 31-year-old woman made and sold pirate DVDs and computer games to help meet debts. Durham Crown Court was told police raided the premises, in Stanley, and found two computer systems, a DVD re-writer, sealed envelopes bearing delivery addresses containing copied DVDs, more than 1,400 DVDs and games and documents and order forms from prospective buyers, relating to transactions from eBay. The woman admitted seven charges relating to either possession, distribution or making items for sale or hire, infringing copyright. She was given a 12-month community supervision order.

- In November 2007, two internet fraudsters who operated out of a house on Teesside were reported to have fled the country following

a police investigation. The Assets Recovery Agency (ARA) obtained a Civil Recovery Order for £60,000 cash against two students, both Chinese nationals, who sold counterfeit designer Tiffany jewellery and high-value designer handbags on eBay.

