

BFI Screenonline: Police (1982)

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Police (1982)

Courtesy of BBC



BBC1, 04/01-15/03/1982

9 x 45 minute episodes

Director	Charles Stewart
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Producer	Roger Graef
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Production Company	BBC Bristol
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Series Editor	John Shearer
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Fly-on-the-wall documentary about the routine and life of the men and women of 'E' division of Thames Valley Police.

Police (1982) was another tele-verité exercise by the BBC to lift the lid on British institutions, following *Sailor* (1976), *Hospital* (1977) and *Strangeways* (1980). Filmmakers *Roger Graef* and *Charles Stewart* were given the keys to Reading police station and spent a year trailing the bobbies of Thames Valley's E Division. Consent came from senior officers and the Home Office itself, who were anxious to stem a growing mistrust of the police, particularly among Britain's inner city ethnic minorities. Shooting on the series wrapped in early 1981; that summer the police fought pitched battles in Brixton, Toxteth and Bristol during Britain's worst race riots. When *Police* was finally transmitted in January 1982, the public stakes had been raised immeasurably.

Police was quintessential fly-on-the-wall fare. Favouring long takes over fast editing, and shorn of commentary, background music or interviews, the series offered instead the drama of real, unpredictable, life and challenged the fictional stereotypes that had dominated television police drama. While the cop-show scenario of an armed standoff in episode one proved a false alarm, the drama of a disciplinary hearing, in which a plainclothes officer was returned to uniform, and reduced to tears, was almost unbearable.

Police showed the force as all too human but sometimes far from humane. In episode three, 'A Complaint of Rape', a woman with a history of psychiatric treatment claims she has been raped by three strangers and is, in turn, bullied and cajoled by three male officers who dismiss her story out of hand. "This is the biggest bollocks I've ever heard," erupts one officer. The woman remains unseen as the camera assumes her point-of-view, trapped in the claustrophobic confines of the interrogation room. As she is subjected to the most hostile questioning, the accusing officers fill the frame in penetrating close-ups and the viewer gains some sense of her double violation.

Transmitted soon after an infamous court decision (in which a judge had accused a hitchhiker of "contributory negligence" in her own rape), 'A Complaint of Rape' caused a public outcry and led to a change in the way police forces handled rape cases. Within months, a new rape squad of five female officers was formed in Reading. "The most we can hope is that people will rethink their assumptions - including policemen," said *Graef*. *Police* showed that the fly-on-the-wall doesn't just watch the world. It can change it too.

Joe Sieder
