

A uniform south London blacks are proud of

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criminal record. I knew I was going to have difficulties anyway because of my colour." His first job was cutting spectacle lenses — "incredibly boring once you've got the hang of it".

So he moved to London, where for the first time his would be one black face among many. How did he get into the police? "Accidentally. I joined in 1979 as a clerk in the Metropolitan Police Solicitors Department, with no intention of joining the uniform side of things." But promotion was swift and he soon found himself working in the courts and meeting policemen. ("I'm not saying I liked them.") He thought this was a job he could do. Although he was warned he would be one among very few black policemen, he joined in 1983, after "sus" was abolished. Posted to Croydon, he found himself happy and popular, even though "overt" racism was still tolerated.

I MEAN, I ask, I assume it would now be a disciplinary offence for a colleague to call him a black bastard. Wilson blinks furiously, and I almost regret using the phrase, even hypothetically. "Without a doubt that would be a disciplinary offence now," he says, recovering. "That really doesn't take place in this day and age. People are fearful, basically, of the consequences of being disciplined or being taken to an industrial tribunal. But there's still a culture that doesn't really accept minorities. If you ask closely, people will say: 'Oh well, half-caste I do use. I do call black people coloured.' To be told that is not acceptable usage is hard. So there is a corporate responsibility to equip these officers with the skills they need. Traditional white officers, placed in a multi-ethnic community, cannot be left to their own devices."

At Croydon, there were three other black officers, but they rarely talked. "There was an unwritten law among ourselves. For instance, in the canteen, very rarely would you see black people at the same table. I remember being asked, by a black sergeant, actually, whether I thought it was a good idea to have a social club for black officers. I said: 'No, we are under enough scrutiny.' I didn't want to bring attention to myself and, yes, I was doing very well, thank you. I was one of the lads."

Just six years after joining, he passed his sergeant's exam. So if he did, why don't others? Exams are open to all, are independently assessed. There are 27,000 police in London, 800 of them from ethnic minority backgrounds — shockingly few — but what defeats me is why only 19 hold senior ranks.

"That is why this issue is so sophisticated. It is not just taking the exam. It is what motivates people to take the exam. In fact, we have a disproportionate number of black graduates in this organisation. There are issues here of being under the spotlight, the toll it can take, going with the flow, bending, the coping mechanisms. There is the question of whether there are enough role models to motivate you."

So what motivated him? "Me? I was bloody-minded, had blinkers on. I just wanted to get up there."

Had he not seen unnecessary force used against black suspects? "I've seen a lot of things. I'm going to give you a political answer. I've seen a lot of things in my police career that I'm not proud of. I have been in positions where perhaps I could have and should have intervened."

The blinkers were removed at a series of seminars held in Bristol in 1990 to investigate the high number of resigna-

tions of black police. A hundred black officers at a time were bussed down. "What I heard there shocked even me. We were talking about overt racism, not just name-calling but assaults, unacceptable behaviour, bordering on the criminal. It was emotional and there was a bond, a bond never before experienced among black officers."

In response, the Yard set up an Equal Opportunities Unit. Wilson joined and helped draw up new training and grievance procedures. After a few years, however, the issue was again fading as a priority. When he moved on, the unit was left with no black officers on it at all, provoking him to draw up a petition of protest. It was now 1993. He started making phone calls. The BPA was formed with the support of every senior black officer in the country.

So I assume the Federation was no substitute. "The Federation," he says, "is a group of wholly white males over the age of 40. We do not feel they're really in tune with black perceptions or indeed, supportive, of multiculturalism."

If I understand him better than Mike Bennett, institutional racism is the opposite of Bad Apple Syndrome, the punchline of Lord Scarman's report 18 years ago which declared the Met harboured only individual racists. In Wilson's opinion, the entire police force conforms to the mores of a white culture. In the canteen, this means ritual male joshing. On the streets, it means treating everyone as if they were white (and getting upset when a young African Caribbean averts eye-contact, a pose which in fact signifies deference).

"What we are talking about is predominantly white officers meeting, in a confrontational context, black people, day after day. After work, they

retreat to the suburbs, Kent and Surrey. Perpetuated over the years, that can lead to almost unconscious views about black people. But you cannot blame any individual."

This may be the hardest lesson. After week after nauseating week of the Lawrence inquiry, our instinct is to attach blame. Wilson wants to detach it. He wants

instead better training (he has himself just been on a new racial awareness course — doesn't yet know how well he did), more non-confrontational contact between police and community, more joint projects, more talk. Symbolism is important too. So it matters that the Home Secretary will address the BPA's annual meeting this autumn. Above all the BPA wants more senior black officers, who'll inspire more black recruits, who'll inspire more trust outside.

YOU just wonder if, after the disaster of the Lawrence investigation, this virtuous circle will ever be created. I ask if he remembers hearing of Stephen's death at that Eltham bus stop five years ago. "I do. I do. It seems a long time ago. I'll tell you. With a racist killing it's not just the murder of an individual. When a racist killing takes place you know, as a member of the same community, that it's also directed against you. It is like when a police officer is attacked. You know you could have been standing there."

I am about to write that the one optimistic moment of my afternoon with Inspector Wilson is when he describes how he is typically greeted by black south Londoners. ("They count the pips on my shoulder," he says. "They say: 'Inspector? Good!' They're proud.") But I am wrong. What's hopeful is Wilson himself, a man whose heart bleeds impartially, in equal measure, for his race and for his profession.

'What I heard from other black officers shocked even me. We were talking about overt racism'