

# How a county teenager went on to highlight racism scourge

LINCOLNSHIRE-born Inspector Paul Wilson hit the headlines when he spoke publicly about institutional racism during the inquiry into the death of black teenager Stephen Lawrence. Earlier this week, the Echo told how Insp Wilson had been chosen to lead a powerful black rights group – the national Black Police Association. Today, Insp Wilson tells the Echo how a young, aspiring Lincolnshire teenager went to London and found racial barriers that had to be overcome if he was to succeed in the Metropolitan Police.

**IT is now just over 20 years since I left my native village of Carrington, near Boston.**

I remember the day well: a hot July in 1979, with all my worldly possessions packed into the back of my trusty Triumph Herald.

I recall shedding a tear as I drove down the 'seven mile straight' towards Boston and then on to Peterborough.

I also remember arriving in north London at around 3pm and it was here that my troubles were to begin.

I had clear instructions – my accommodation was situated in Bayswater, central London, however, it was nearly three hours later that I managed to find Leinster Gardens W2, where I was to live for the next six months.

Bayswater was very much a cosmopolitan area, home for many of London's Middle Eastern community. A stone's throw from Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, I quickly made friends with the local footballers on a Sunday afternoon.

The transition from Boston to Bayswater was remarkably swift and painless. Prior to leaving home to sample London's bright lights, I had secured myself a job with the Metropolitan Police, working in its prosecuting solicitors' department as a law clerk.

The work was interesting and the accommodation in Bayswater was part of the package.

**As a young man, I couldn't ask for much more.**

London's nightlife was on my doorstep, I would bump into the occasional celebrity, and in fact a guy by the name of Paul Gadd (Gary Glitter) used the launderette at the end of my street. However, time passed and I grew restless and decided to spread my wings and move out



**TRAGEDY:** The death of Stephen Lawrence led to a public inquiry which spotlighted a host of issues.

economic status of black people in the wider London community was influenced by the absolute scarcity of black female car owners.

As I grew more accustomed to London, it became patently obvious that black people occupied a social 'underclass'. I found this frustrating because I had read quite extensively of the black American civil rights struggle and expected similar mass organisation among the West Indian community.

I was disappointed to find that a black power base, economic or otherwise, was absent.

Furthermore, the almost dogmatic insistence of the West Indian community to align with various Caribbean islands only contributed to what appeared to me to be a largely disjointed, uncohesive community with little common purpose.

**Except in times of tragedy!** The tragedy was to arrive

and began working at various Crown Courts. Spending much of my day in the company of police officers, within the court system, I grew more and more interested in policing as a profession.

I recall sitting in court one day watching a young police officer struggling to deliver answers to the seemingly hostile barrister when I suddenly thought 'I could do better than him'.

My subsequent application was rapidly processed and I began a long and sometimes tortuous introduction to life as a police officer at Hendon Police College.

Upon graduating, I found myself in deepest south London, walking the streets of Croydon.

I was popular and generally enjoyed my initial years. The work was often difficult and sometimes lonely. I retained a close circle of black friends. However, such relationships were frowned upon within the police culture as I was to experience when I took a black girlfriend along to a police function.

Promotion seemed to be a way of elevating myself above the 'canteen culture' and six years after joining I was promoted to Sergeant.

Shortly after my promotion there followed an instruction issued by the Metropolitan Police that the few hundred black officers attend a series of seminars at Bristol Polytechnic.

Designed to explore the reasons behind the disproportionately high resignation rate among black officers, these seminars were to change my career forever.

**For the first time, I was surrounded by black colleagues and able to articulate the sometimes painful experience of being black in the Metropolitan Police Force.**



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**Talking to black police colleagues in special seminars changed his career forever**

first Black Police Association was launched with the blessing of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon.

Much of our work was completed outside of working hours with little, if any, recognition. I somehow found the time, however, to study for my Inspector's exam, gaining promotion in February 1996.

In the early formative years of the BPA, I played a very much 'behind the scenes' role.

**Things were to change in 1997.**

Confident that I had developed sufficiently I applied for and was elected to the post of chairman of the Metropolitan Police Black Police Association.

However, it was the Stephen Lawrence Public Inquiry that 'catapulted' me into the public eye.

Following a written submission to that inquiry, I was invited to appear in person. Providing graphic examples of Institutional Racism, I quickly gained considerable prominence in the media.

I appeared to have broken the mould. I was considered a rarity, a black police officer who dared to talk candidly about racism within the police. However, my approach to the issue along with my non-threatening style has won over a considerable number of people both within the police service and the black community.