

CAR SECURITY –

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

Modern Cars Have Never Been More Secure - Or So We're Told. Jonathan Crouch Puts The Claim To The Test & Checks Out Ways To Make Your Vehicle Absolutely Thief-Proof...

`Lock it or lose it'. It's a familiar cry that doesn't ring true any more, for if you lock it, the chances are that you still may lose it, particularly if the item in question is a brand new car.

Nearly a quarter of all crime involves theft of or from motor vehicles - and the figure is still rising, by around 17% a year according to recent figures. And this is only 40% of the true story as the police report that 60% of crimes go unreported. Worse, the car crime problem in England and Wales is higher than in virtually any other European country. Like it or not, the UK has a huge network of very clever car thieves.

Over the last decade, the motor industry has belatedly woken up to the problem. In the Seventies, it didn't matter too much if you locked the keys in the car; a handy coat hanger would soon get you in. So first, we had better shielding around the door locks. And of course, the thieves worked out a way around them. So then it was car alarms. They didn't delay the light-fingered for very long either and even when they did, most passers-by just ignored them, so unreliable did many of the devices prove.

A more effective deterrent in recent times has been the vehicle immobiliser, a device incorporated into the vehicle's electrical system, which makes it impossible to `hot-wire` the car into starting. Early systems were operated with a separate key that you lost at your peril. Today, most of the major manufacturers have incorporated everything in one. Immobilisers are now standard on many new cars - though not all. Some come incorporated with alarms, while others ask extra for an additional audible deterrent. Ask in the showroom before you buy and walk away if the answers don't satisfy you.

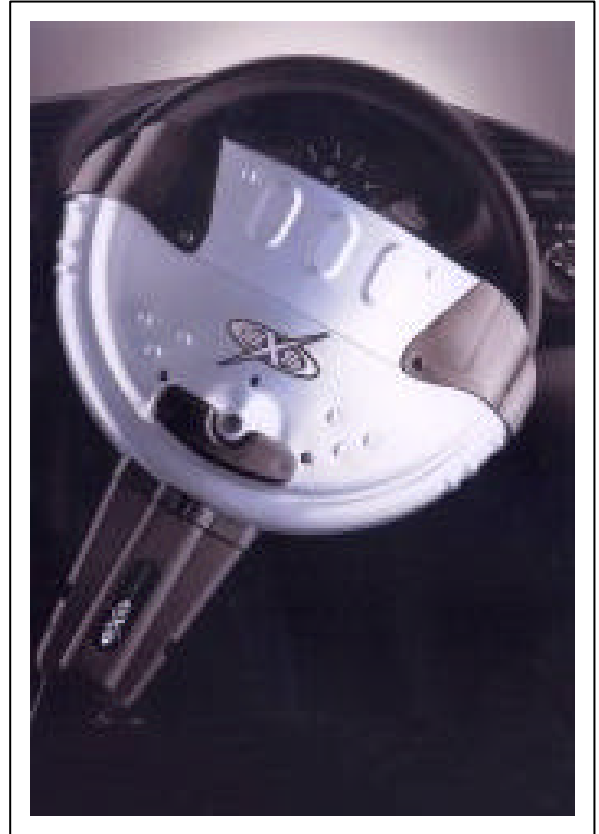
Ideally, what you're looking for is a car with all three of the measures I've described. As one expert put it recently in *What Car* magazine, "a car needs layers of security, like the skin of an onion. Each layer should make the thief's eyes water." Today, you'll find many. Modern cars have never been more secure.

Not that any of this should leave you with a false sense of security, or persuade you that there's nothing more you can do to make sure that you don't become one of the 1,700 car theft statistics created in the UK every day. In fact, it's a question of two things; Active and Passive security.

Active Security

In other words, things you can do to make the car thief's life as difficult as possible. Following all these measures is likely to encourage the criminal to move on to easier pickings.

- 1) If you have one, always use your garage overnight or when you leave the car for any length of time. Always lock it, even in the garage.
- 2) If you don't have a garage, park where unauthorised interference would draw attention. Leave it `out front` under a lamp post rather than in some dark alley `round the back` where a thief can get to work uninterrupted.
- 3) Always lock your car, even if you are leaving it for just a few seconds. Never leave keys in the ignition, even when you are filling it at the garage or paying for petrol.
- 4) Don't leave valuables or anything loose on display in your car. If you are unable to remove your belongings, at least lock them in the boot.
- 5) If possible, vary the locations where you leave your car. Regular patronage of the station car park is the classical commuter's downfall.



- 6) If you have anti-theft devices fitted, make sure you always activate them. Always ensure your steering column lock is engaged by twisting it until it `clicks`.
- 7) Audio systems have many anti-theft devices incorporated. Some have a flashing light to indicate they are `armed`. Since the light is similar to that used on more expensive alarm systems, it may deter the thief from raiding your car as well as targeting your radio.
- 8) Park with your wheel faced into the kerb. This will make it difficult for organised thieves to drag your car onto a transporter.
- 9) Use lockable fuel caps and specify extra devices like lockable wheel nuts.

Passive Security

Just because the manufacturer has thought about the security of your car, it doesn't mean you don't have to. If you want to be totally sure of keeping your car, there are a number of extra deterrents you can add.

The first category of these concerns the visual devices that hopefully will discourage joy riders and encourage the professional thief to move on to easier pickings. These tend to be mechanical implements that hook onto your steering wheel, pedals or gear lever and you can pay anything from £10 to £300, depending on what you buy.

Be assured of one thing for certain; you get what you pay for. Some of the really cheap products can be thrown aside by the experienced thief in as little as five seconds. Others will last a few minutes. None are foolproof, despite what their makers will tell you.

Much more effective are the more proactive new `tracking` systems that will ensure that your car is recovered if it is stolen. These work just like the homing devices you've probably seen in spy films. A small Tracker receiver is hidden somewhere in your car (you won't be told where) and is activated by the network once they and the police have been informed of a theft.

It then begins to broadcast a silent homing signal, leading police cars and helicopters equipped with tracking computers directly to your car. This has proved extremely effective - the `Tracker` system for example, claims an astonishing 94% success record.

Most cars equipped with this kind of measure tend to be recovered the same day, many in under two hours. There's nowhere for the thieves to hide either; the Port of Felixstowe Police recently used the system to pinpoint a Mercedes 300SL, stolen for the second time, and hidden in one of 56,000 containers.

Summary

So it's true; new cars have never been more secure. You can buy with greater peace of mind than ever before, a factor to remember if you're considering the merits of new versus used. That doesn't mean you can relax however. The thieves, after all, never do...