

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST VEHICLE IDENTITY THEFT and CAR CLONING



Become a victim of car cloning and you might
be in trouble with the police while the crooks get away!

by Colin Haynes

An ebook sponsored by Speedyreg.co.uk



issued in the interests of United Kingdom cherished number plate owners

This information has been carefully researched, but in view of the varied and constantly changing nature of car crime, the publishers can take no responsibility for any consequences arising from your use of this document. Please check with your local police, the vehicle licensing authorities, and qualified legal experts for further guidance.



Thank you for downloading this ebook.
We hope that you will find it helpful.

There is more helpful information at www.speedyreg.co.uk

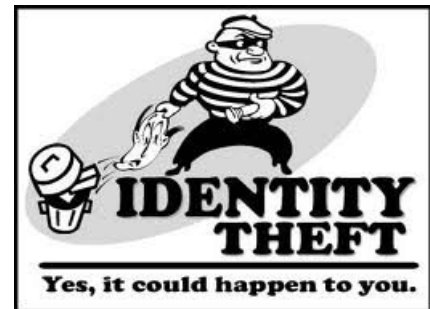
*What are vehicle identity theft and car cloning?

The short answer is BIG TROUBLE if you are a victim.

And you may not know that you have become a victim until you are in big trouble, battling to limit your losses and to establish your innocence.

The gangs involved are now able to steal a car or commercial vehicle on Friday and have it cloned with false plates and documents ready for sale over the Internet on Monday.

A recent example, was Speedyreg.co.uk being asked to help the owner of a truck that had been seized by HM Customs, the cargo impounded and the driver imprisoned. The truck's identity had been cloned, but the databases and other records being accessed by the authorities involved were not up-to-date. So the Speedy Registrations database - which is updated every 24 hours with details of some 35 million UK vehicles - was needed to help establish the true identity of the truck and the innocence of the owner and his driver.



The resultant legal tangle, costs and stress inflicted on the victims demonstrate how much damage can be caused and why Speedy Registrations is campaigning to raise awareness of both vehicle and personal identity theft and the measures you should take to protect yourself, your business and, of course, your vehicles.

*CAR AND PEOPLE CLONING ARE LINKED

Cars and commercial vehicles have long been cloned and false number plates used for many years, but latterly this has become increasingly prevalent within the category of offences that include several forms of identity theft.



Estimates of the numbers of cloned vehicles on Britain's roads indicate that the total is probably over 20,000 and rapidly increasing as the economic downturn bites. Too many people now believe it is worth the risk to drive a cloned vehicle or on false plates to avoid the central London congestion and parking charges, or fool forecourt security cameras when they refuel and drive away without paying.

The blitz on vehicles being driven without valid insurance provides yet another incentive to the cloners, often known as "ringers".

There is still the legacy of the theft of hundreds of thousands of blank registration forms from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea. The DVLA has taken steps to try to counter the official forms being used by organised criminal gangs to clone vehicles, but there are still large numbers of these stolen documents concealing the true identities of vehicles which have been stolen, written-off after accidents, or have failed MoT tests.

Cloning is commonly used to give a new identity to a vehicle being offered for sale that has been stolen, illegally imported, or perhaps was an insurance write-off cheaply repaired. The buyer may not find out he or she has been duped until the time comes round to get a new tax disk or renew insurance and the false documentation is exposed. The crooks make a profit and the victims have very little chance of getting their money back.

If the cloning has been for a crook to mask his own identity to dodge congestion charges or speeding and parking tickets, the first the victim may know is when he or she starts getting tickets for offences that they could not possibly have committed. Or the police may bang on the door because you have become a suspect in an investigation into drug dealing, robbery, or even terrorism.



If your car is cloned - which can happen without its number plates physically being taken - then the owner has an important element of his or her identity stolen also, just as happens if your credit cards, passport or banking details are cloned. These thefts of identity are a form of fraud in which the consequences for the victim can be very serious.

Just how serious is revealed in many case histories described online in various forums, including the Institution of Engineering at <http://www.theiet.org/forums/forum/messageview.cfm?catid=227&threadid=26111> where there is a particularly detailed account by the victim of a Land Rover cloning.

Usually, the only reason why anyone should pretend to be someone else is to disguise their own identity to commit an illegal act of some kind, avoiding blame in the hope that it will be assumed - at least for a time - that the genuine owner of the vehicle is the perpetrator. The victims may be both individuals or organisations and include those who are deceived or defrauded as well as those who have had their identity stolen.

So if there is any indication at all that your identity or that of your vehicle have been cloned, take immediate action. You may already have become a criminal suspect and an attack launched on your assets and reputation.

***FLEET OPERATORS FACE PARTICULAR RISKS**

The operators of vehicle fleets are particularly at risk of vehicle identity theft, which may go undetected for a considerable period, particularly if employees are involved who are familiar with individual fleet management procedures.

Commercial vehicles are increasingly targets. Irish garda (police) and Scotland Yard have been collaborating in pursuing a gang with members drawn from the Traveller community. The gang steal large numbers of vans in the UK and clone them before resale in the Republic and elsewhere.



Dublin has become a centre for this organised cloning of all kinds of vehicles, which has now

extended to tractors and plant vehicles.

The cloned cars and commercials find a ready market in Eastern Europe and, particularly, Africa. Thousands of stolen vehicles find their way by various routes into African countries, with their lax border controls, high levels of corruption, and the strong demand for both left- and right-hand drive vehicles without too many questions asked about their provenance.

*DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS HELP THE CROOKS AND THE POLICE

We have seen an escalation of all kinds of identity theft since the term was coined in the 1960s and subsequently became applied to vehicles as well as people. The digitisation of data about ourselves and our vehicles is giving the authorities some powerful weapons to combat these crimes, but also helping the crooks to obtain false plates and generate fake documentation.

The term cloning has been used with increasing public awareness of plant and animal cloning.

Identity theft ... you might be a victim and not even know it!

The effects can be devastating. Because it is often invisible, identity theft may not be noticed by its victims until significant damage has been done — often several months and thousands of dollars later.



Acquiring personal information you store on unsecured sites on the Internet. Using personal information about you from all kinds of sources. For example, a law employee that gets your information from a credit application or by "skimming" your credit card information when you make a purchase.

Such cases can be seriously damaging, since you may not realize anything is wrong until you notice unfamiliar charges on your monthly bills or statements. This information could prove invaluable later in proving you are not responsible for false debts or even crimes. Suggested items to record:

It is important that you act quickly if you suspect you are a victim of identity theft. How Identity Theft Strikes — What to do if you think you have become a victim of identity theft. Identity theft occurs when someone steals your personal information to take over your credit accounts, open new ones, take out a loan, rent an apartment, access bank accounts, or commit many other crimes using your identity.

First, they steal your personal information by: Going through your mail or trash, looking for bank and credit card statements, unapproved credit offers, and tax information. Stealing personal information from your wallet or purse such as identification, credit, or bank cards.



Establishing phone or cellular service in your name. Opening a bank account in your name and writing bad checks on the account. Counterfeiting cheques or debit cards, and draining your bank account. Doing work by taking out auto loans in your name. Getting your credit card issuer and providing to the you, changing the address on the account. Big get sent to the new address, so you don't realize there's a problem until you check your credit report. Hiring at banks using your name to avoid paying debts they've incurred under your name. While a thief may use your information to apply for a new credit card, some types of identity theft don't involve credit cards at all. Someone with a bad credit rating may use your personal information to get a car loan, acquire phone, cellular service, or another utility service, or do so

Credit seminars

You will enjoy my Credit Seminars with my focus and humorous advice are we discuss the subject of credit, making the subject matter easy to understand, remember and act on, by content is, for everyone, not just the credit challenged. The seminar has helped numerous people take charge of their credit and get in shape for a mortgage or just loan, or get out of debt. Seminar schedule at The Learning Annex you can register by calling the Toronto office at 416.964.0011. Credit for Dummies, Course #2779 Thurs, Jan. 20, Thurs, Feb. 24 Credit vs. Mortgages, Course #2876 Mon, Jan. 27, Thurs, Feb. 17. Christina's Credit Seminars also offer independent seminars and consulting services throughout North America.

Legally it is more accurate to talk of cloning than identity theft. It is not actually possible to steal the identity of a vehicle or a person, but you can copy or clone identities to commit crimes of fraud or impersonation.

As data about identity is increasingly computerised, the cloning can take place without the victims ever finding out how or why they became targets, and to what crimes they may be linked. Indeed, the crimes and the consequences may not emerge for a considerable period, which can add to the stress and risks suffered by victims.

The growth of e-commerce also fuels identity theft - you can buy fake number plates online even more easily than fake ID documents. There is a legal loophole that allows fake vehicle registration plates to be advertised online as being for offroad use only.

You may not know for a long time until the unpleasant consequences start emerging that a crook has selected your vehicle registration number to attach to a vehicle used in a crime.

There is software like the Zeus programme which can enable unskilled crooks to steal credit card information and details of other important personal information. Cloning vehicles is much easier and does not require special software or particular skills. Consequently, it has graduated from being mainly a comparatively petty crime of, for example, stealing a tank of petrol from a filling station.

Now crooks identify a particular make, model and colour of vehicle to use in such serious crimes as bank robberies, kidnappings and murders. It could be your car parked in your drive way or at an airport long stay carpark., a particularly attractive location because the registered owner of the vehicle may be away for an extended period on holiday or a business trip, which will complicate the subsequent police investigation.

Then the crooks acquire an illegal set of number plates matching those of the genuine vehicle. They fit these to the vehicle they use to commit the crime.

When the cloned vehicle's number plate shows up in surveillance camera recordings, the police refer to their version of the national registration database. If the make, model, and paint colour in the photograph or video match up to the database records, the investigation focuses on the registered owner. If he or she is away and cannot be contacted, and their vehicle may be among thousands in a long-term airport car park, the investigation is delayed as it pursues this false trail.

***CLONING BY ORGANISED GANGS**

The seriousness of the offence and the degree to which it is organised has been revealed with cases of car-cloning on both sides of the Atlantic.



Pablo Barrio became a federal fugitive in the US when he escaped after being arrested as a key suspect in OPERATION DUAL IDENTITY, one of the largest auto theft cases anywhere which involved a major car-cloning scheme.

The investigators uncovered a massive, highly-organized group of Cuban car thieves operating in the USA and Mexico who stole more than 1,000 vehicles.

Some 50 law enforcement agencies worked together as a task force to take down the criminal enterprise.

The Traveller community have been implicated in organised vehicle theft and car cloning in Ireland and the UK. One gang leader, Michael O'Donnell, from Salford, Greater Manchester is in jail for over nine years after being recaptured when the ambulance taking him to hospital was ambushed by four masked men in a stolen BMW who attacked it with baseball bats and bolt-cutters.

O'Donnell led a gang of seven crooks who stole vehicles worth more than £1 million which they sold on by cloning with false number plates and documents.

Police had to undertake the year-long Operation Banker before smashing this car-cloning ring, but there are many other crooks still at large perpetuating similar crimes and adding to the growing list of unsuspecting victims.

***OUTDATED DATABASES A MAJOR PROBLEM**

Even if - or when - the victims of the vehicle identity theft are contacted by investigators, there can be serious difficulties in establishing their innocence because the police and other authorities may not be maintaining their databases properly. This is an increasing issue with the current public service cutbacks in the UK.



Some 750,000 vehicles are flagged very month in the UK as being of potential police interest, many of these alerts resulting from the tens of millions of readings of number plates captured every day

by the UK's surveillance and traffic control cameras.

Even the best systems meticulously maintained could not cope with this vast continuous flood of information without making some errors - and there is considerable evidence that the police and other authorities do not always have the best systems maintained to a high standard.



Because of the millions of number plate readings being handled automatically at the National Automatic Number Plate Recognition Processing Centre in London, there must be a substantial total of errors in the penalty notices and police alerts being automatically generated.

But a psychological dependence on IT records is prevalent in the public service - "the computer can't be wrong" attitude that makes the official record appear more reliable than the protestations of innocence by a victim of vehicle identity theft. So proving you are innocent can be particularly difficult and stressful.

Thousands of incorrect penalty notices are also issued - and paid by innocent motorists - as a result of police and traffic wardens making mistakes when capturing details of car number plates and registration and insurance discs. By the time the tickets are issued, the mistakes have been captured as computer data and it again becomes a real challenge to take the time to dispute that you have been a victim of the "garbage in, garbage out" basic principle of data processing.

But if you KNOW you are innocent, you MUST protest, and document your refusal to accept a low fine or other penalty in return for fast payment. Similar to phoney invoicing, this is an official form of coercion that causes great concern to groups seeking to protect civil liberties.

***NUMBER PLATE & VEHICLE THEFT**

Nearly 40,000 number plates are stolen in the UK annually, so Speedyreg.co.uk now provides free anti-theft plate fasteners to its clients. It has also initiated a fast response online and telephone service to help victims who are struggling to establish their innocence.

Speedyreg.co.uk consultants have immediate access to database information updated every 24 hours on nearly 35 million UK vehicles.



"Identity theft is now growing for vehicles as well as people, so motorists, the motor trade, and the police and other authorities, need to take urgent action," says Des Elton, founder and CEO of Speedyreg.co.uk, the UK's leading dealers in dateless personalised vehicle registrations.

"Our alarm bells started ringing when one of our fleet of over 6,000 mopeds was summoned for speeding along the M1, and another was alleged to be parking on a yellow line in central London.

"But the tyres on our thousands of bikes hardly ever touch a public road. We use them to store personalised and collectible registration numbers for fast transfers to our clients, so they only leave secure storage to get to and from their MoT tests, and then they travel in closed vans.

"Fortunately, we are geared as a business to deal with vehicle identity theft and so could prove quickly that the police were using out-of-date vehicle registration databases or the numbers had been cloned or stolen. But individual motorists may become very distressed and subject to time, expense and endless hassles when charged with a crime related to a vehicle bearing a number apparently registered to them.

"Some estimates of vehicle identity thefts exceed 10,000 annually in the UK, but nobody really knows because the legitimate owner of a registration may never be aware of becoming a victim until the police come calling. We are only seeing the tip of the iceberg, but there is obviously an increase in these problems because of the summonses that we get for the Speedyreg fleet of motorcyles which are locked inside our warehouses."

***ECONOMIC RECESSION AGGREVATES PROBLEMS**

"I fear the cloning and plate theft problems will only get worse because of the economic recession," warns Des Elton. "Some authorities not updating their registration number databases regularly, and the increased use of plate recognition cameras, which, even if they make comparatively few mistakes, still wongly identify thousands of vehicles.

"The incentives for crooks to clone vehicles is increasing as fuel prices rise. Some areas of the UK have already seen a significant increase in motorists stealing plates, attaching them temporarily over the top of their own plates, filling up with fuel and then driving away without paying.



"They dump the stolen plates as soon as possible, and then steal another set when they start running low on fuel.

"This petty theft has now extended into a 'service' offering a cheap fill up to motorists approached in places like pubs. For, perhaps, £20, the crooks will borrow the car keys, and use a set of stolen or false plates to steal a tankful of petrol or diesel.

"Usually the only clues that the police have to follow up is the filling station's security camera shot of the vehicle with the stolen or false plate, or perhaps the plates themselves which have been abandoned.

"Plate stealing is also a routine action by crooks before using a vehicle to commit a crime. They target a similar make, colour and model to lay a false trail. The crooks tend to steer clear of personalised distinctive numbers - they want a registration plate that is as unremarkable as possible.

"Vehicle cloning and plate stealing result in many innocent motorists now facing accusations of being involved in a whole range of crimes, some serious offences in which the vehicle is incidental but provides the most obvious clues for investigators.

*FAKE PLATES TOO EASY TO BUY ONLINE

"Aggravating things further is the difficulty at present staffing levels for police and traffic wardens to check for false plates, which have become far too easy to buy online. In theory, the British Standard for plates and new requirements about how they are issued should be reducing the numbers of fakes, but I fear this is not the case."

"The databases of registrations used by investigators following up on vehicles suspected of being involved in crimes may be out of date and poorly maintained because of shortages of trained staff," Des Elton warns.

Speedyreg.co.uk updates its database of nearly 35 million UK registration numbers every 24 hours primarily to give a fast sales and valuation service to clients buying or selling cherished numbers.

Now, as Speedyreg's contribution towards dealing with vehicle identity theft, Mr. Elton says all clients automatically receive anti-theft plate fasteners without charge. In addition, Speedyreg has allocated expert staff to help any clients who become victims to get copies of database extracts and the company's paper records to establish their innocence.

"It's not difficult to prove that a moped unable to top 40 mph could not break the speed limit doing over 80mph on a motorway," says Mr. Elton. "But other vehicle identity theft cases can be very complex to resolve."



Antitheft screws and bolts cannot be removed easily without a special tool, and so reduce the risk of opportunist plate stealing.

*WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOUR VEHICLE HAS BEEN CLONED?

The very worst thing to do is - NOTHING. You could find yourself subject to intensive police investigation - even arrest - and in the position of having to prove your innocence if a clone of a vehicle registered to you has been involved in a crime.



Too many people just pay rather than go through the hassles of challenging tickets for small traffic offences of which they are not guilty. You must challenge - in writing to the issuing authorities - any tickets for which you know you were not responsible and which could not have been incurred in respect of your vehicle.

Immediately notify the police as soon as you discover that your number plates have been stolen or you start receiving tickets for traffic offences in places or at time which you know could not have been committed using your vehicle. Check with any authorised driver of the vehicle to confirm that they have not been liable for a ticket. Ensure that - however minor the alleged offences - that the police give you a crime reference number or at least make a written note of your complaint which can be referred to later.



Just one or two tickets or demands for a toll payment might be due to errors in number plate recognition technology. If you can get these sorted out quickly it will indicate - but not guarantee - that there has been a technical recognition error and your vehicle has not been cloned. Keep all documentation and messages relating to this, and check that the DVLA still

has your correct registration details.

As soon as you have grounds for believing that you have been a cloning victim, notify the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea. Keep a record of all relevant correspondence and telephone calls.

You may need to continue using your cloned registration number unless the DVLA considers that the cloning is going to present continuing problems.

If your plates have been stolen, you will need replacements before you can legally use the vehicle. Take your documented evidence to an authorised number plate supplier, do NOT go online for a fast cheap fix from an unauthorised supplier - it could cause you more serious problems.



The DVLA's vehicle information services have been moved to the Direct.gov service, and there is a useful reference page with links at <http://www.dft.gov.uk/dvla/vehicles.aspx>

As part of the UK's Review of Public Administration, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland (DVLNI) and the Driver & Vehicle and Testing Agency (DVTA) have been combined under the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). This means that a single organisation is responsible for licensing and testing vehicles and drivers in Northern Ireland. In the short term, the services currently delivered by both Agencies will not change. There is more information at <http://www.dvani.gov.uk/>

***NUMBER PLATE REQUIREMENTS**

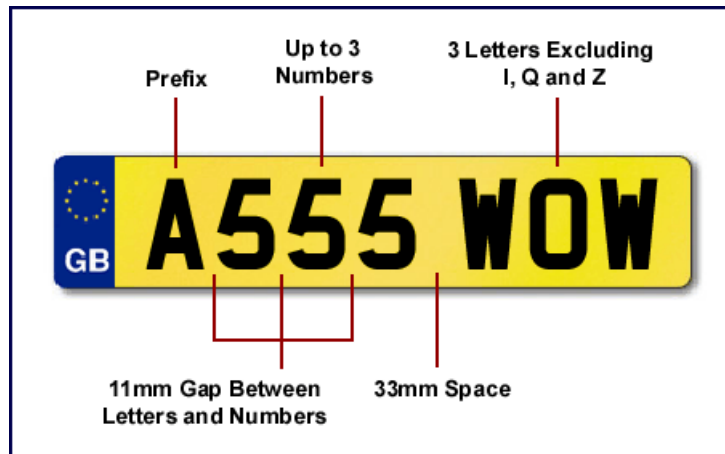
All authorised number plate suppliers in the UK must register with the DVLA and any other relevant authorities. The suppliers are required to record every sale, together with documents establishing the customer's identity and entitlement to the registration number on the plates before they are made.

The supplier must - as an MOT requirement - put its name and postcode on the plate to make it legal. This provides a check to identify illicit plates. There should also be the British Standards number BSAU 145d printed in the bottom right corner.

UK motorists have a choice of a standard 'Euro GB' badge, or one which depicts the badges of Wales, England or Scotland. Here are the main requirements:



You cannot manipulate the numbers or letters to "personalise" a plate - and no reputable cherished plates dealer will do this. For example, you must not alter, rearrange or misrepresent the letters or numbers, nor move characters from one group to the other (e.g A242 ABC must not be changed to A242A BC).



The above are the basic requirements, and the legislation clearly states that plates must not be customised with stylised letters such as italics, or fixing screws or bolts used that alter the appearance of the letters, numbers or spacing.

Not following the rules may lead to a fine of up to £1000, the withdrawal of the registration mark, and failure of the MOT test

***HOW TO AVOID BUYING A CLONED CAR**

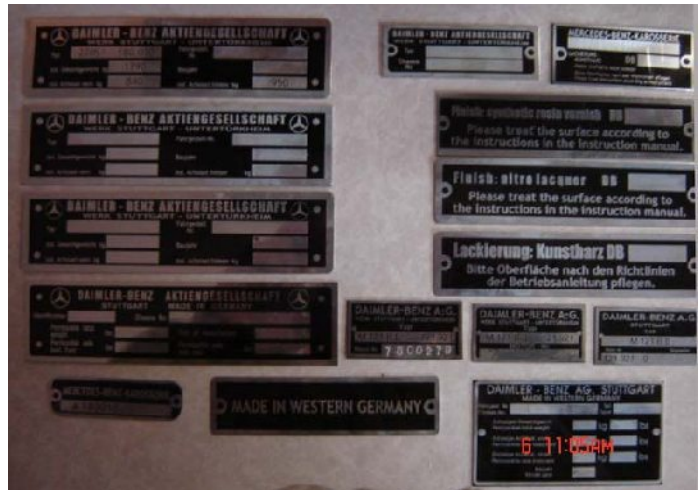
The reputable plate suppliers will do what consumers should do when they buy a used vehicle - check all the paperwork for any indications that something might be suspicious.

These days, however tempting the apparent bargain, do not buy from strangers without establishing that they are who they say there are and that they are legitimate owners of the vehicle. This is particularly important when you meet sellers in unusual or public places such as bars, car parks or premises where the seller does not "belong".

Check the vehicle's identification number - the VIN which is attached to the vehicle at the time of manufacture.

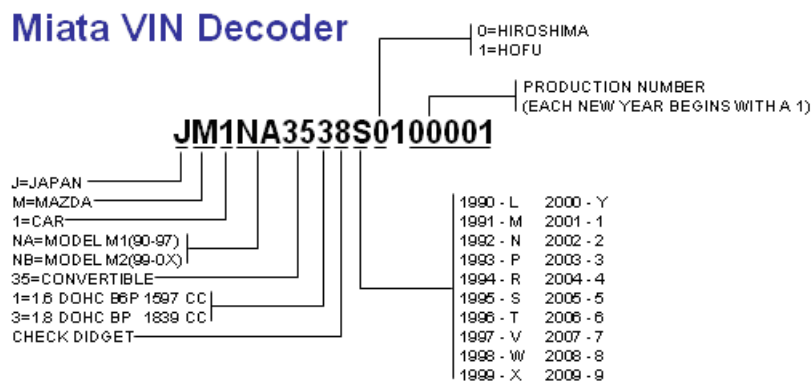
There are many types of VIN labels - indeed, they have become collectible items of automotive memorabilia.

Depending on the age and country of origin, the location of the VIN may vary - it may be inside the engine bay, on the door frame, viewable through the windscreen on the dashboard, inside the glove box or on a door or the trunk lid, or on an engine casting.



For example, on some Mercs it is tucked away on a flat piece of casting just below number two cylinder, while some Toyotas have it stamped into the floor near the driver's seat.

This example shows how a typical Japanese manufacturer - Mazda - codes information for a Miata onto the vehicle's VIN plate:



Some vehicles have VIN details etched into the glass and the entire VIN or other relevant numbers - eg. engine numbers - are recorded in several locations.



Early version of a Retainacar window etch and warning decal

Ensure that they all match with each other and with the documentation, and that there is no indication of tampering.

There are a number of companies providing security labelling and etching systems to provide the vehicle with a unique identity that can be verified throughout its life. The motor industry is also increasingly putting identifying marks on major components.

Retainagroup and Supagard are two leading UK companies providing vehicle identification services. You can use the 24-hour number etched on the glass or go online to check the International Security Register at <http://www.retainagroup.com/isr-registration.html> .

There are several online services that also provide vehicle history reports. But they vary in cost and quality. The DVLA has a useful guide at http://dvlaguide.co.uk/index.php/reports_records/vehicle_history_report/ and you can telephone them on 0904 194 0305. Calls cost £1.53 per minute plus network extras

Here is a selection of some of the UK services:

<https://www.mycarcheck.com/>
www.moneysupermarket.com/vehicle-checks/
www.autocheck.co.uk/
www.autotrader.co.uk/vehiclecheck/
www.comebuycars.co.uk/HPIVehicleCheck.asp
mycarcheck.co.uk
www.drivearchive.co.uk/
www.vehiclecheck.co.uk/
www.businessdata.co.uk/car-check.html

***BEWARE OF BOTCHED REPAIRS**

Very large numbers of vehicles have found their way back on to the UK's roads after being declared to be insurance write-offs. Many of these are clones that are not safe to drive and pose a serious risk to all road users.



It is believed that there about 1.5 million vehicles on UK roads which should not have been repaired after being involved in accidents, and another two million that the insurers assessed as not being financially viable to repair. In all those cases, there is a strong possibility that the repairs were carried out as cheaply as possible and that the vehicles are not roadworthy.

So a check at freevehiclecheck.co.uk is important before purchasing. It will give you access to information from the Association of British Insurers indicating whether the vehicle's safety may have been compromised by repairs after an accident, or is a clone. .

Just verifying that there is no outstanding finance or other lien on the vehicle is NOT enough these days. You should check on all documents and other information relating to the vehicle's provenance.

***SNIFF TO CHECK FOR WATER DAMAGE**

Special problems are posed by vehicles refurbished after being written off because they were involved in floods. Some research indicates that up to 50% of vehicles damaged by floods may have found their way back onto our roads. They are obvious candidates for cloning to make them sell more easily - or at all.



You don't need to be an expert to spot a vehicle that has water damage. Just your sense of smell may be enough. Any smell of mould or mildew or a sour odour lingering in carpeting or the fabric of seats is a dead give-away for water damage.

A close examination might reveal traces of moisture in many places where there should be none - for example, inside the housings for lights, in the glovebox or other storage compartments, the spare wheel well, etc.

Premature signs of rusting or replaced and mismatches in carpeting and seat covers provide further indications. The vehicle may seem mechanically sound, but water damage can emerge later in such forms as the early failure of electrical components, the engine and transmission, or accelerated rusting.

If the vehicle was an insurance right-off, then you certainly will not have valid claims under warranty or recalls from the manufacturers.

Be suspicious even if there has been no flooding in your region. It is a common trick to move water-damaged vehicles to other areas - with cloning used to disguise them further.

A vehicle check through any of the services mentioned earlier may not be enough to reveal if a vehicle has been compromised by water damage. It may take a detailed examination by an expert, The cost of this may not be worthwhile. If you have any grounds for suspicion about a vehicle - however good the deal seems - it is probably best to walk away.

***BEWARE OF FOREIGN SPECIFICATION IMPORTS**

Be particularly careful of used cars which have indications of Japanese or other national specifications, or which have some kind of "grey" provenance because they have arrived in the UK by unusual routes. There are legitimate exporters of used Japanese vehicles which may represent good deals, but there are also some unsatisfactory players in this major business sector.



Take with a pinch of salt explanations that any imported used vehicles originated from Africa or Asia under some diplomatic or armed forces scheme. Cloning such vehicles is a way of elevating their value and making them saleable in the UK.

The Japanese tend to get rid of their cars years before motorists in other countries. So there is a thriving international trade in left- and right-hand drive vehicles stolen from Japan, or exported from there because it is no longer viable to license them under the very strict Japanese legislation.

Such vehicles may have unsuitable build specifications for operation in other markets than Japan, components may be difficult to source, and the manufacturers will probably not want to know about them if you have problems.

If you are involved in a legitimate importation of a used vehicle into the UK, it may be cost-efficient for you to use this occasion to obtain a personalised or cherished registration number at the same time. The Speedyreg.co.uk experts can advise on this.



There is a particular cloning issue over foreign number plates. These have become a form of cloning operations, disguising UK vehicles because the UK authorities lack efficient resources to track and impose penalties for vehicles with foreign plates picked up by cameras or parked in violation of traffic regulations.

Lots of vehicles are driving around London with illicit foreign plates to avoid congestion charges.



***BUYING THROUGH AUCTIONS**

Buying through vehicle auctions can pose particular problems. They turn over large volumes very quickly and so it is difficult for the auction houses or buyers to verify every unit.

The reputable auction houses will offer - perhaps for a small fee - indemnity insurance to protect buyers of vehicles that subsequently prove to be cloned or stolen. It is well worth the money.

Arrive at an auction early to check out vehicles of interest to you and take a reputable price guide or auto trader publication, or the cars for sale classified section from your local paper. These will help you to assess values. If you have a smartphone, netbook or tablet computer with you, go online to make further checks ahead of the bidding. The auction house may have a wifi network, or you can go online with your own mobile connection.

In addition to the usual visual checks of a car, pay particular attention to signs of recent repainting. Very clean areas around windows and trim indicate where masking tape has been stuck. A look along the length of the vehicle should reveal any dents, and a pocket magnet will help you to check for non-metallic filler.



You will not be able to take a test drive, but the auction staff may informally tip you off to obvious problems, and there may be a service history to help make a judgement.

Study the auction conditions of sale and identify if there are likely to be delays in you getting title to the vehicle transferred into your name. Don't forget that there is often a buyer's premium or other charges which might inflate the price to more than the vehicle's true market value.

Don't get carried away by the excitement of bidding war and spend too much. Fix your maximum bid in advance - and take an expert with you, if you can. If you know a dealer who will be attending, it could be worth paying a small fee for expert advice on the spot.



***PROTECT YOUR VEHICLE - AND YOUR IDENTITY**

There are strong links between vehicle cloning and the theft of personal identities. One crime can lead to another - and frequently does.

So here are a few basic tips that may help to prevent you from becoming a victim.

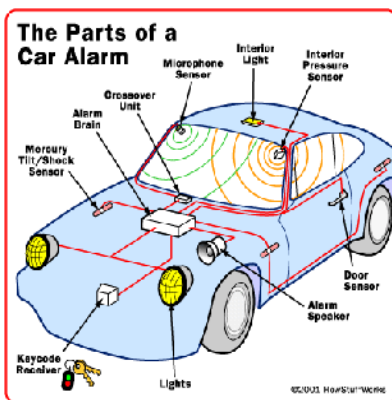
Do not leave personal documentation, keys, or the remote control for your gates or garage door in your car. Thieves can use these to access your home or business premises.



You do have a legal requirement to carry your driving licence and have registration and insurance documentation available when using your vehicle on public roads. But don't keep these in the glove compartment - on balance, documents are probably safer in an inside pocket of your jacket or in your handbag. When your car is broken into or stolen, thieves look first in the glove box - which is easily opened, even if it has a lock.

Do not leave anything valuable inside the car and visible through the windows.

Get identification numbers etched into your glass and, when leaving your vehicle in vulnerable areas, use a high visibility gear lever, handbrake or steering wheel lock. These act as deterrents so that all but the most expert and determined thieves will move on to easier targets.



Fit a car alarm, if you don't already have one - and then use it to protect yourself and your home as well as your vehicle. Carry your keys - along with the alarm remote - when going to and from your car in potentially vulnerable places. Also keep the keys and alarm remote with you inside the house - and within easy reach when in bed. Then you have a portable panic alarm if there is an emergency - but run a test in different parts of the house to make sure the car is parked or garaged within wireless range.

(Note that most of the benefits of a car alarm are negated if it generates false alarms - and there is no faster way to antagonise

the neighbours!)

As further precautions against all kinds of threat, including identity theft, ensure that your premises are protected with good locks on doors and windows, backed up by a security system including motion sensors.

Fasten your number plates with antitheft screws or bolts which can only be loosened with a special tool - it will at least discourage opportunistic petty theft.



If you are a motorcyclist you have particular security problems because most bikes are stolen by a gang of two or three strong men who simply lift the bike onto a truck or into a van, and deal with any security device later at their leisure.

So park your bike out of sight within your home security perimeter, if possible. In vulnerable public areas, use a very heavy duty chain and padlock to attach it to a secure anchor, such as a support pillar or barrier in a car park.

Protect any digital data about your vehicle and personal identities by the informed use of basic computer security, including firewalls, effective passwords, and anti-virus software. Of course, all those precautions are of no use if you exchange your banking details with Nigerian Princes offering attractive foreign currency deals, or you fall for any other of the many online scams!



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