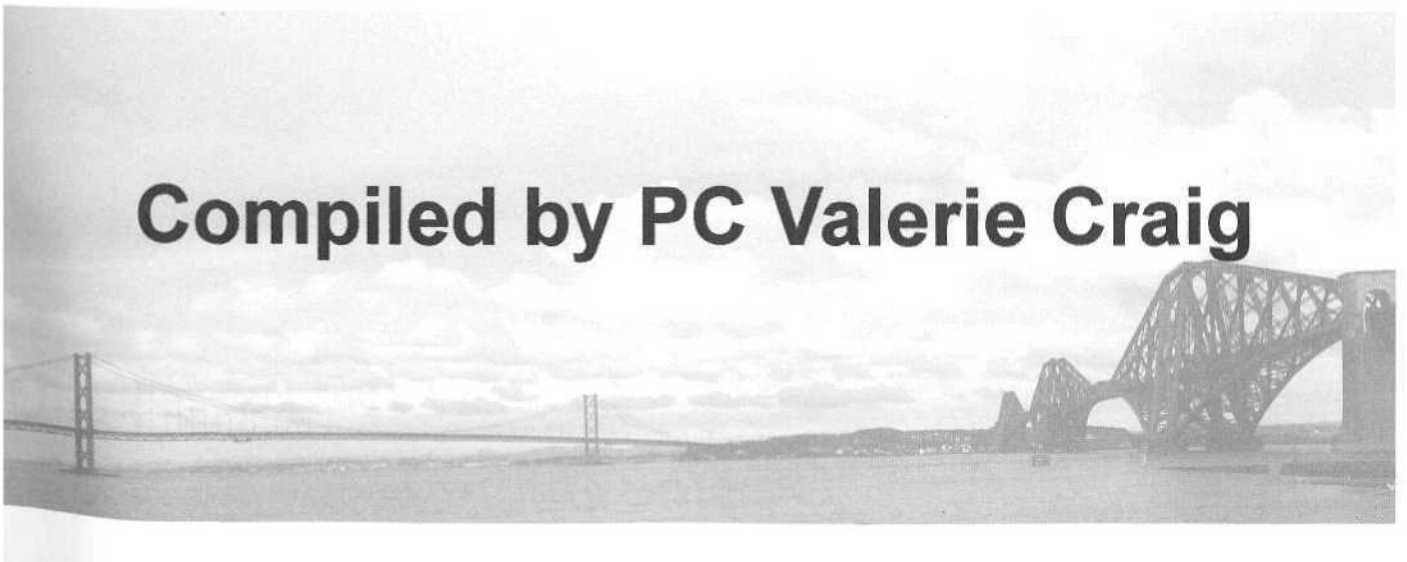


# FIFE CONSTABULARY



Student Pranks-  
No Thanks!

**Compiled by PC Valerie Craig**



# **STUDENT PRANKS - NO THANKS!**

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## **STUDENT PRANKS – NO THANKS!**

### **Thefts in the town of St.Andrews**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

St.Andrews is a small town located on the coast of North East Fife with a population totalling to approximately 24,000 residents. The town is famous for its golf courses and its highly regarded University and continues to attract hundreds of visitors during all seasons throughout the year. St.Andrews is thought of as a relatively safe town and is steeped in historical repute. With this combination, this makes the town a popular tourist attraction.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The University of St.Andrews was founded in 1413 which makes it Scotland's first University and the third oldest in the U.K. It has approximately 8200 students and staff which accounts for a third of the town's total population. The University is situated very closely within the town; the modern purpose built library and many of the academic schools are located centrally. Most of the flats occupied by students are contained within the town centre area, which also houses public houses, commercial premises, other businesses and residences owned by local residents. There are approximately 12 Halls of residences within the town and it is mostly first year students who reside in the halls. These halls are located centrally within the town and on the outskirts of the town.

It has become a tradition for the students to "remove" items such as, Traffic & Shop signs, traffic lights and many other items that are commonly known as "beer trophies" throughout the Academic year. Each November, another tradition, which goes back centuries, is Raisin Weekend. Each Fresher (1<sup>st</sup> year student) is allocated an academic mother or father (normally a 4<sup>th</sup> year student) to look after them during their first year at the University. Come November, the Fresher has to give the Academic parent, a gift that is usually something "acquired", in other words, stolen. These items can be taken from anywhere around the town and are very rarely returned to the rightful owners resulting in thefts/losses being reported to the Police. These items often amount to high monetary value. This resulted in an increase of crime figures.

The property has a tendency to remain within the flats or Halls of Residence until the end of term when they have to vacate their property. Students are then left with the dilemma of what to do with their "trophies". At the end of each term, skips are located for student to dispose of rubbish and other items that they don't want to take back home. It had become apparent last year that the items stolen were being simply disposed of and this had been the case for many years. An Action Plan was devised to coincide with the departure of the students for the summer vacation.

## **SCANNING**

The Property Amnesty was aimed to tackle the problems of theft within the town. Historically, this has been a tradition within the town for a number of years amongst the students. The object of the project was aimed to improve relations between the town and University and to increase public satisfaction.

The problem was initially brought to the attention of the Police by Halls of residence and complaints by members of the public. This would often result in letters of complaint being sent to the Police or calls which would result in Crimefiles being raised and subsequently increase the crime figures in the Force. This was often a difficult scenario as some of the items that were stolen, it could easily be established that they were taken as “student pranks” and that there was no real personal gain for the perpetrators.

Due to the area covered in respect of the Halls of Residence, there were no specific locations being repeatedly targeted. The victims of these crimes were the local pubs and businesses, Fife Council, local residents and golf courses. They were not specifically targeted due to this, these thefts were sporadic and random. Matters concerning these issues were often raised at Community Council meeting and the Town & Gown Liaison Group. These groups have representatives from the town, being the Council, local residents and business and of course from the University. This is to improve relations in the town between the locals and the University, so there is no “them and us”.

These thefts or “student pranks” affected the community within St. Andrews as a whole. It resulted in businesses losing money, the local residents continually complaining to the police and the University and the students being blamed for most of the crimes occurring in the town.

## **ANALYSIS**

The problems the police commonly encountered are as follows

- The offenders in these cases are mostly the students. Due to the large amount of students in the town, it was often proved difficult to identify those responsible, even with descriptions from eyewitnesses.
- Lack of Criminal Intelligence from the students or the University – There has been no reported intelligence from the university.
- No CCTV in the town
- The difficulty in relaying the message to students.

The idea of the property amnesty was welcomed by those attending the aforementioned groups, namely the St. Andrews Community Council and the Town & Gown Group.

As previously indicated, there were no specific items of property being continually targeted or area being targeted. The area was wide spread. The

timescales when these crimes were committed revealed that these thefts were more likely to happen in the evening. This was likely to be increase at the weekend, being a Friday, Saturday or Sunday night.

The items that were being stolen were not being taken as a result of lack of security. Often items that were taken were properly secured and not just left lying on display as an open invitation to any thief. Secure items or items out with normal reach were often seen a challenge.

Students were ignorant to the fact that these pranks were actually thefts. There was some difficulty in getting this message across that these pranks are actual crimes.

From research conducted, it was decided that the issue of these thefts required to be dealt with. It could clearly be seen that this problem was occurring time and time again. It was decided that the best way to tackle this was using Problem Orientated Policing. This would allow the victims, locations and the offenders. Using the PAT triangle and SARA model would allow the problem to be considered in detail and to consider the various responses and eventually to assess the success of the project.

The problem was not only how to target these thefts, but how to get the message across that is was actually theft. Also, how can the problem be tackled in such a way that the Police will be showing that theft would not be condoned, but at the same time, ensuring the safe return of the property that the students had acquired throughout the year.

**The Victim** - the victims in these cases would appear to be Fife Council, Roads Departments, Local Residents and Businesses. Again, the aforementioned were not specific targets and the thefts were random and opportunist.

**The Offender**- the offenders in most of these cases would appear to be the students.

**The location**- due to the fact the thefts were random and often sporadic, there were no specific locations. The accommodation resided in by the students is fairly widespread. An obvious contributory factor in these cases was the lack of security, i.e., CCTV in the town. Some areas were also poorly lit so the opportunity existed to take these items without being seen.

## RESPONSE

On 5<sup>th</sup> May, 2002, a decision was reached after consultation with Supervisory Officers, the University and Fife Council on how to tackle this problem. It was agreed to hold a Property Amnesty. It was advertised throughout the University and was supported by the University, local businesses and public. Although Fife Constabulary were not in any way condoning the theft of any item, it was decided that this was the best course of action to recover the property and return same to their rightful owners. Students were afforded the opportunity to return the items from where they were initially taken or drop the items off at the designated points throughout the town. This generated a vast media interest appearing in all the local newspapers and a feature was shown on a regional television channel, Grampian Television was also aired on BBC Radio Scotland

The amnesty was held between 20<sup>th</sup> May - 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2002. This is the time when students were vacating their Halls of Residence and other accommodation. The normal practice in previous years was for each of the Halls to hire builders skips for the students to dispose of items they had acquired throughout the year and other belongings they wished disposed of. Ultimately, all property would end up at the local clump. This proved to be more popular than first anticipated. A Police Unit was devoted to the task for the entire period of uplifting the property, lodging of same and the return of the items to the owners.

It proved to be a huge success and was well received by all. It received support from the Merchants Association, a group of local businesses and local councillors.

Examples of the recovered property is shown as follows:-

- 46 Road Work Signs (various sizes) – valued between £55.00 - £105.00 each (value range £2530 - £4830)
- 38 traffic cones - £28.00 each (value £1064)
- 2 sets of temporary traffic lights - £600.00 each (value £1200)
- 16 x 18<sup>th</sup> Green Flagpoles from the Old Course - £40.00 each (value £640)
- 22ft Mast - £850.00
- Large Shop Sign (ripped from wall of a local business) £680.00
- 4 Life Belts - £65.00 each (value £260)

Although this is not a definitive list, the above is an example of the property and the respective amounts shown. Dozens of other items were also surrendered with an estimated value amounting to the total of in excess of £9000.00.

The majority of the property recovered, which was either reported lost or stolen was returned to the local residents and businesses. Most people were delighted to say the least that the property they thought they would never see

again was returned. The response shown from the public was overwhelming with many requesting that this amnesty be carried out every year.

The amnesty was advertised as a "once only event" but due to the huge success of last year's initiative, it will be repeated again.

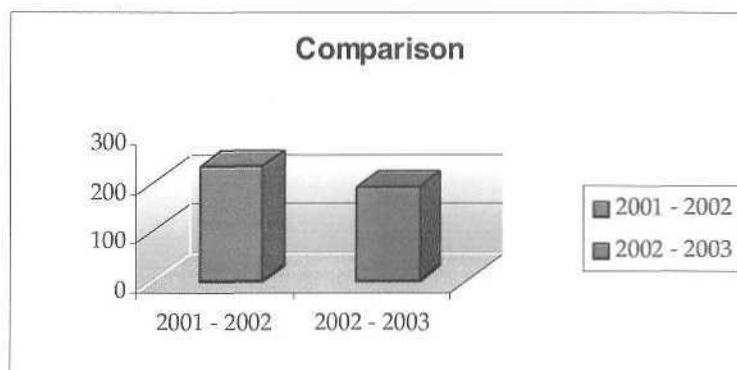
Since the success of last years Amnesty, St.Andrews has had CCTV installed in the town. This in itself should cut down on the number of thefts within the town centre area and other areas that are monitored by CCTV cameras.

The University Police Officer has liaised with all Halls of Residences and the Students Association, explaining the problems the Police have encountered and pointed out the consequences for carrying out what appears to most students as "just a student prank".

Due to the high number of students at the University, it has proven difficult to get messages across. However, after consultation with the University the following practices have been adopted when the Police have required to relay important messages -

- A system whereby link up e-mails can be sent to all students
- Information on the University website
- Messages on newly installed information screens in Halls of Residence and the Students Union.
- Regular Police features within Student's newspapers
- The installation of Police Noticeboards in all Halls of Residence
- A liaison group of Landlords and letting Agents of all private student lets in the town recently formed.
- University Crimeline - an anonymous way for students to report crimes using a freephone number.
- Police Crime Bulletins for students - a way of letting students know crimes which have been happening locally and the appeal for witnesses.

### **ASSESSMENT**



The above graph represents "prank" related thefts such as shop signs, traffic lights etc.

Although this problem has not by any way been completely resolved, figures show that there has been a vast reduction of crimes of dishonesty. Figures prepared by the Force Crime Analyst shows that from the period of September 2001 - June 2002 / September 2002 - May 2003 the number of thefts per monthly average in this area relating to 'student pranks' has reduced by 17%.

Although a full survey has not been carried out, early indications are that the Community feel that the project has been a success. A full survey will be carried out amongst local residents and businesses in due course.

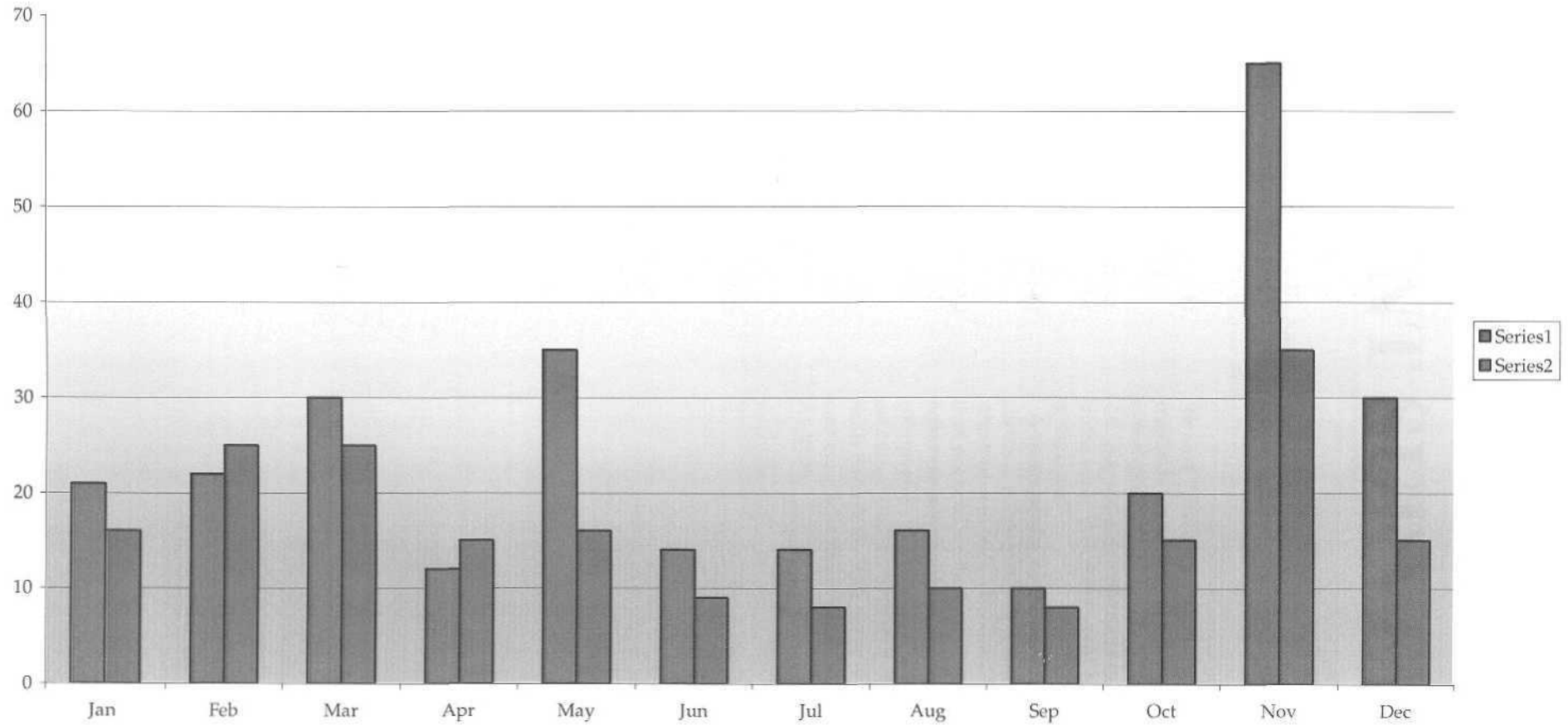
This reduction in these figures has by no doubt reduced the demand for police resources. There has been a reduction of letters of complaints to the University and the Police Station relating to student pranks.

The tradition of "Raisin Weekend" will continue, with students "acquiring" items of property from around the town but has been revised. The event on the Monday, which involves the handing over of the "gifts" to academic parents is closely monitored by the Police. Students are made aware in advance that any person found in possession of property which has been reported stolen or is suspected stolen will be dealt with accordingly and they person could subsequently be charged with theft. This is a message not only passed on by the Police but by the Principal of the University.

Raisin Monday in November, 2002 passed without any incidents of note.



Student Related Thefts Trends over 2 Year Period



The above statistics show a dramatic increase of student related thefts during the month of November which coincides with Raisin weekend.

**Appendix 1. Graph**

# PRESIDENT RAPS STUDENT SURVEY

By Andrew Gold

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SEVEN out of 10 current undergraduates at St Andrews University, who participated in a survey for the student newspaper, have admitted to theft during their time in the town.

The controversial survey, carried out for The Saint – which is read by an estimated 2000 students – also alleged that three out of 10 had been in trouble with police while under the influence of drink.

Participating students also claimed almost 40 per cent had been in a fight while intoxicated and 70 per cent suffered injuries while drunk.

In the survey, 70.3 per cent admitted participating in a drunken “steal,” while 32.5 per cent put their hands up to having been in trouble with the law owing to actions whilst drunk.

When it came to admitting being in a fight while drunk, 39.2 per cent said they had, while 70.6 per cent claimed that they had injured themselves when drunk.

The level of drinking among undergraduates was also covered by the results, with students claiming that they spent an average £42.33 per week on alcohol.

Nine out of 10 undergraduates alleged that they had played drinking games, while almost eight out of 10 stated that they had lost their memory through the effects of alcohol.

However, the shock figures have been heavily criticised by a leading student representative, who claimed that the results were not representative of the true situation.

Student Association President, Rory O’Hare admitted that the survey “doesn’t do the reputation of students much good” but questioned it’s accuracy.

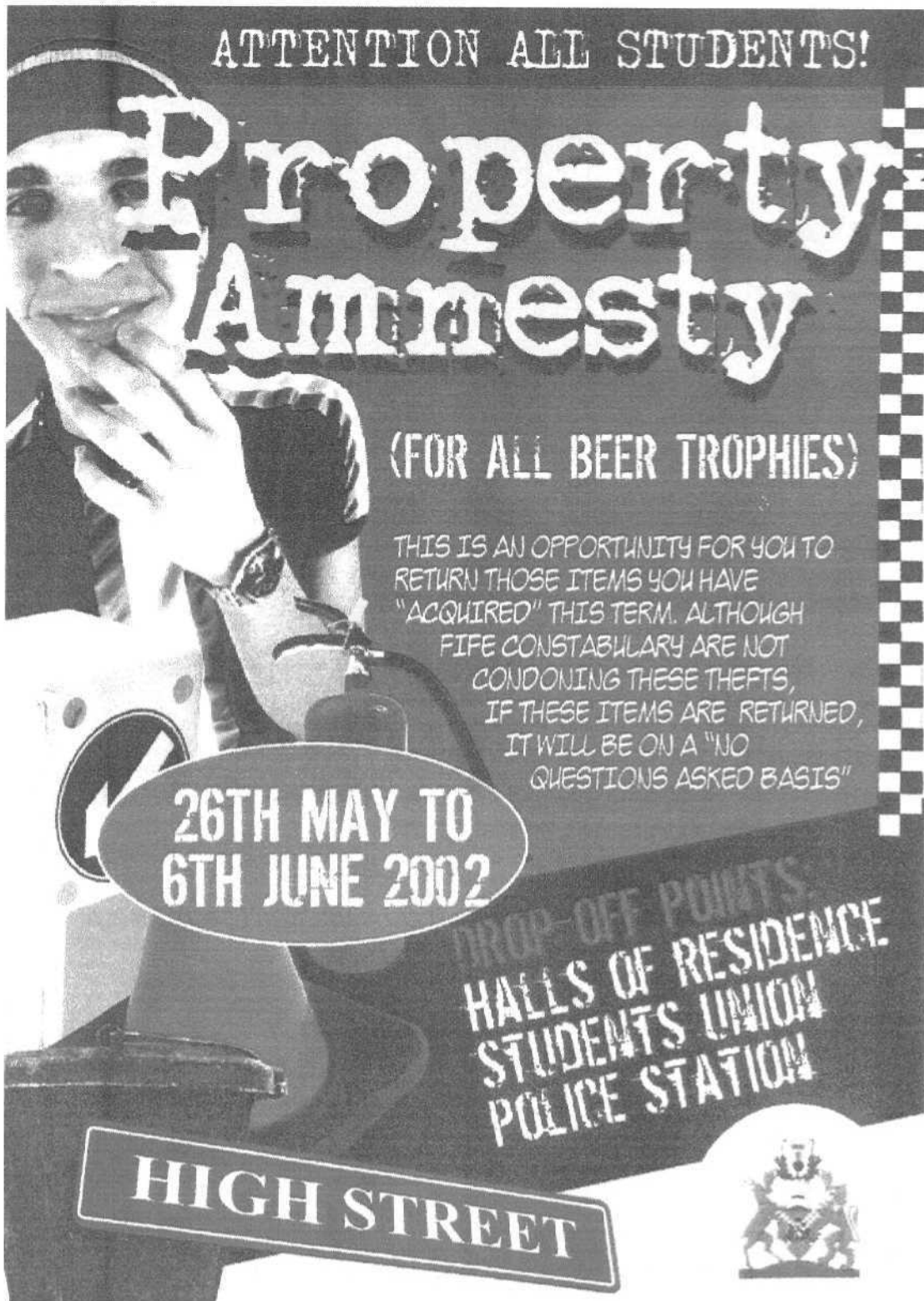
Mr O’Hare, who is soon to stand down at the end of his term as president, said that he was dubious about the results and the precise number of under graduates who responded.

He said “There is no quantification and the results do not appear correct given my own experience of five years in the town.”

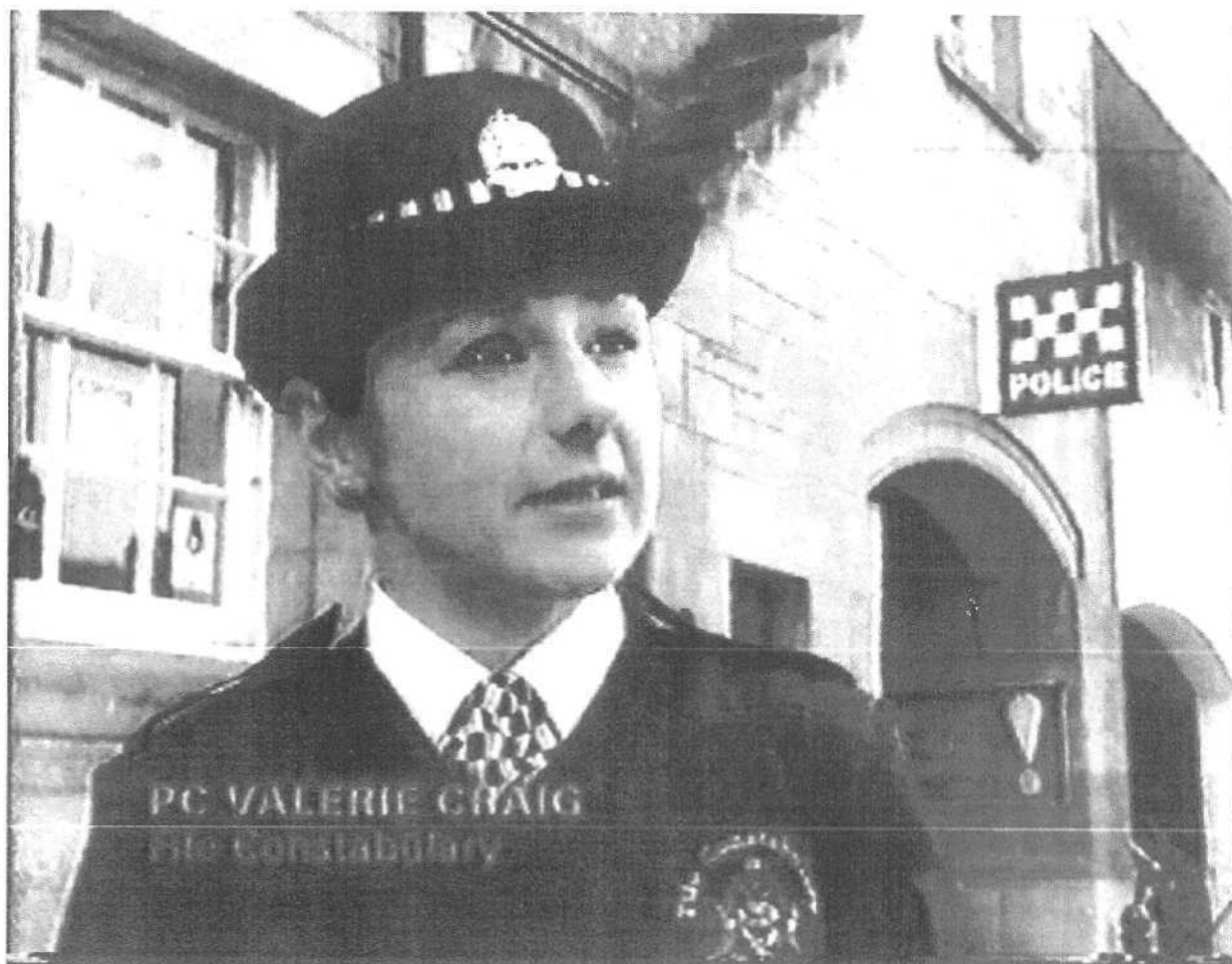
“If four-and-a-half thousand students had stolen items, then there would be nothing left in the town”.

A spokesperson for the university said: “This survey is not properly representative of the whole student body. However, the university does not condone the kind of anti-social behaviour associated with excessive consumption of alcohol and prefers to encourage students to develop their social skills through the wide range of extra-curricular activities available to them in St Andrews.

## Appendix 2. Press Cutting from St.Andrews Citizen



Appendix 3. Property Amnesty Poster



Appendix 4. Video still taken from Grampian Television Interview



Shop signs, benches, supermarket trolleys and even, on one occasion, a set of temporary traffic lights have all been "posted missing" during term time at the University of St Andrews, with traffic cones being an almost weekly occurrence. Today (10/6/2002) a lifebelt and a sign from a local hotel - uprooted complete with the concrete still attached to its legs - were added to this long list.

With the end of the current term at the weekend, Fife Police had organised a two-week temporary amnesty to allow anything which had found its way into student flats and halls of residence to be returned without questions being asked.

"This was not a case of criminality being condoned," explained the Fife Force's University Community Constable PC Val Craig with a smile, "but it was simply a window of opportunity being recognised and opened to allow previously purloined pieces to be returned safe and sound.

"Previous experience suggested that these type of things, often valuable and frequently fragile, just tend to be dumped into skips as premises are vacated for the summer, but this year we hoped that this wanton waste could be avoided.

"We worked with the University to help facilitate any hand-backs," she continued, "with an open invitation to return goods via the Halls of Residence receptions, the Students Union or even through St Andrews Police Station itself.

"Thanks to the University we were able to e-mail every student informing them about the amnesty and posters too advertised the opportunity.

"We were hopeful that as many people as possible would take advantage of this once-only offer and help us return a variety of items to their rightful owners."

And what was returned exceeded even the expectations of PC Craig and her fellow Community Constables like PC Brian Balnaves.

"So far," he said, "more than 100 items have been recovered, including the hotel sign and the lifebelt which must clearly serve to underline the risk factors sometime involved in what some might dismiss as being a prank.

"A life could have been lost as a result of this belt being removed for a lark, for instance, something which, in the cold light of day, is really no laughing matter."

PC Balnaves added that it was expected that even more items might come to light as halls are emptied but said that such was its success that the concept could now be repeated in future years.

**Appendix 5. Post Property Amnesty press cutting and photograph of PC Balnaves**