We all remember mothers sewing names into school pullovers to improve the chances of recovery should they go astray. The idea has survived, been refined and, as Douglas McCartney explains, could help prevent valuable machinery from disappearing.

If the most profitable criminal activity in the world is drugs, the second most profitable is most definitely theft. Overall crime is estimated to cost Britain more than £20 billion a year.

During the late 1980s the UK motorcycle industry was faced with a crisis which threatened its very existence. That crisis was theft. In 1989 nearly 85,000 machines - around 10% of all registered motorcycle - were stolen. Losses were so great that in 1990 the industry’s leading insurer, with 62% market share, announced a withdrawal of theft cover for high performance machines, no theft cover for high risk areas and no theft cover for owners under 28 years of age.

In short, the industry was faced with virtual destruction.

The main problem centred around “ringing” - machines stolen and broken for spares or re-built from written-off machines. As in most cases of professional crime, police intelligence units were aware of those involved but the ease with which existing markings such as frame and engine numbers could be altered or deleted when attacked by electrical or magnetic devices, or even exposure to low level radiation,Tags vary in size from as small as a grain of rice to a credit card.

Tags are read by scanning devices supplied to Police, Customs and other authorised bodies free of charge. When an item is scanned the tag number is displayed on the scanner and is then cross referenced with the Datatag mainframe computer through a private Videotext system also supplied to authorities free of charge.

Since 1992 Datatag has reduced motorcycle theft from 10% of bikes registered to less than 1% and is available through all motorcycle main dealers. Recoveries of whole or part machines are currently around 55%. Numerous prosecutions have resulted. More than 120,000 bikes are now fitted with Datatag and discounts are available from all leading insurers.

With a proven system and a national infrastructure Datatag is a total spend will exceed £4 million in order to satisfy fully scanner and Videotext demand.

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A game of TAG

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The result, in many cases, was that suspected stolen property was being returned to those suspected of stealing it.

Physical security products such as hitch locks, wheel clamps, ground anchors, padlocks etc. present only a mild irritation to the determined thief. Though such products may deter the opportunist amateur they would not provide a long term solution to the problem.

It was reasoned by the police and auto crime experts that a truly effective, permanent identification system, would greatly increase risk of detection/conviction and at the same time greatly reduce the value of items stolen. Technical groups from the leading motorcycle manufacturers began testing various existing marking systems - eye legible, magnetic and electronic. Both eye legible and magnetic were cheap but easily overcome and were discounted.

The final solution was Datatag, an electronic identification system, developed by multi-national giants Yamaha Motor and AEG Electronic of Germany.

Datatag scanning gun

At the heart of the Datatag system is a coded microchip transponder or “tag” which is designed to be hidden inside property. These tags do not require power and because they are so small they can be covertly fitted to items ranging from something as small as a Bonsai tree through to large earth movers.

Tags contain a microprocessor circuit linked to a read/send antenna and are preprogrammed with a 10 character Hexi-Decimal code which enables more than 500 billion code combinations. Programming is carried out using a sophisticated laser etch system which means codes cannot be