

Gangs are taking their gun battles to new turfs; Neal Keeling tells of how fresh feuds and splinter groups are spreading bloodshed on region's streets

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Body

AS a getaway vehicle for a gunman the BMW M3 was a conspicuous choice. Far from an anonymous run-around, the high-performance car is a swaggering, slick saloon and costs around £60,000 new.

On September 12 this year a black M3 was torched on land off Bolton Road, in Bamfurlong, Wigan.

It had been used in an appalling crime that points to a new chapter in Greater Manchester's gun wars.

That's a story of how the areas to the north west of Greater Manchester have become a gun crime hotspot and of how extreme violence is being used, with reckless abandon, by thugs in Salford, Bolton and Wigan involved in turf battles.

It's a story of how new splinter factions and new feuds between gangs and individuals are emerging all the time - and how a surge in raids on licensed gun owners, as well as eastern European supply lines - are fuelling bloodshed.

In the September 12 shooting a 41-year-old woman was blasted in the back, as she stood in her own front room at 12.20am, after the gunman pulled up at Redland Court, Bamfurlong, in the BMW that was later found burnt out.

Five minutes earlier it is believed the same gunman struck in Vicarage Road, Abram, peppering the front of a house and a car parked outside.

Nine days after those incidents shots were fired and a petrol bomb hurled at the Bryn Hall pub on Bolton Road, Abram, at 11pm.

The incidents are being linked.

They are among a spate of shootings this year in the north west corner of Greater Manchester.

But the Wigan shootings, police believe, are not evidence of a feud originating within that town.

A line of inquiry is that they stem from a fall out within a Salford organised crime gang involved in drugs and money laundering.

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Shootings in the region are rising again and, unlike a decade ago, south Manchester is not the centre of the problem.

Anti **gun**-crime police have recognised Salford as requiring special attention in the way areas like Moss Side and Old Trafford were in the noughties.

Tensions are also rising in Bolton in a separate underworld feud that has seen three shootings and a car bomb attack in the town.

They included the closest the region came to a fatal shooting, when a man was blasted at point blank range as he sat in his car, outside Outline Health and Fitness Centre in Lever Street, on July 12.

Prestwich and Radcliffe have also seen shootings, as well as Cheetham Hill, Swinton and Salford.

To the east of the city Ashton-under-Lyne also appears on the map of recent **gun** crime incidents, while the one south Manchester area to figure is Levenshulme, where there has been three shootings in 2019.

At its peak in 2007, **gun** crime resulted in 150 shootings in the region, causing 50 injuries and four deaths. A high percentage of those were in south Manchester.

By 2013 this had reduced to 22 with six injuries and no fatalities.

But, from April 2018 to April 2019, there were 62 shootings across Greater Manchester, largely to the north and the west.

Worryingly, 41 of these shootings have been since April. And in the 49 that have occurred since January, there have been 10 injuries.

Of all the shootings in 2019, 11 are thought to be linked to one gangland dispute.

Detective Supt, Danny Inglis, GMP's Serious and Organised Crime Lead, said: "We have done a lot of work in Salford because that is where a lot of the We have had crime groups over particularly drugs and Det Supt Inglis threat has been for some time. We have intensified activity there and are tackling it with a range of tactics, including executing warrants based on intelligence.

"In the next few months we will see the results of the intensification - through the court process.

"We have recovered a number of firearms in the last month.

"Salford is an area of focus because for some time we have had organised crime groups that are fighting over territory, particularly around drugs and the money that is earned from that trade.

"Where a discharge of a firearm occurs is not always where the threat lies", he added.

One key conviction has already been secured in connection with this year's shootings in Salford, of which there has been a dozen.

Darryl Hewitt, 25, was jailed for possession of a **gun** following an investigation into a broad daylight shoot-out in Pendleton.

In the shooting, on July 11 this year, a gunman on a motorbike and the occupants of a car exchanged fire on Liverpool Street.

In the aftermath police caught him with a converted Rohm blank firing revolver capable of discharging a 0.22 inch bullet.

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organised fighting territory, around money Danny Hewitt, of no fixed address, but with links to Salford, pleaded guilty to possessing a prohibited firearm and possessing a firearm when prohibited and was sentenced to five years at Manchester Crown Court.

Referring to one long-running feud in Salford between two notorious gangs, Det Supt Inglis said: "It is too simple to say it is A Team against the Anti-A Team.

"There are lots of people that are involved in criminality at various levels that are not really allied to any particular group - they are criminals in a locality and they fall out.

"And where they fall out there is little mediation done - there is street level violence and that results in an increase in gun crime."

To help in Salford, Xcalibre 2 has been deployed, a team of one sergeant and six officers who have responsibility for tackling gun crime across the region. They react to intelligence and incidents with the back-up of Operation Challenger, which seeks to dismantle organised crime groups.

Challenger disrupts by working with immigration enforcement, an illegal money-lending team, the modern slavery group and the National Crime Agency.

Innocents caught in the crossfire is a calamity police fear daily.

In 2015, Christian Hickey, aged seven and his mum, Jayne, were both hit in the leg after a gunman opened fire on their doorstep in Winton, Eccles. The shooter was seeking Christian's father.

The grim reality is gang wars in the region can often see those on the periphery of a dispute being drawn into it.

"Often they might be related to people which is where we start to see innocent people caught up in disputes.", Det Supt Inglis said.

"We have seen in Salford and other areas people shooting at houses to send a message.

"Very few of those responsible are trained marksmen - you can tell by the pattern of shootings.

"It is inherently dangerous - you have people who don't know what they are doing firing weapons."

However, Salford does not have a monopoly on sophisticated and dangerous criminals.

Indeed, as of May 2019, GMP intelligence had identified the existence of 124 organised crime gangs across the region, the M.E.N. can reveal for the first time.

Of those, 49 were shown to use firearms in their activities with eight involved in the supply of firearms.

"We have a real handle on what the issues are. We do have good intelligence and we make sure we map that so we know how to tackle it," said Det Supt Inglis.

Breaking the supply chain for guns is another issue for GMP.

Since January there have been 45 shotguns and four rifles stolen in nine burglaries in Greater Manchester - the highest number of weapons stolen in break-ins in the country.

In a message for licensed gun owners, of which there 9,000 in Greater Manchester with 27,000 weapons between them, Det Supt Inglis said: "It is important that people understand that weapon security is critical.

"Not only for their guns, but where they could end up."

Meanwhile, more and more guns have been found to be coming into Britain from eastern Europe.

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"It is known that we get some weapons from the Western Balkans that come into the country", Det Supt Inglis said.

Indeed, the majority of weapons used in Greater Manchester have never been used before, as opposed to the practice seen in the recent past of the same gun being 'rented out' to be used in multiple crimes. ? An one with information about organised crime in Greater Manchester can contact Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 or call 101.

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Graphic

Seven-year-old Christian Hickey was shot in 2015 Detective Supt Danny Inglis Darryl Hewitt was jailed earlier this year The burnt-out BMW believed to have been used in two shootings

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