



The Thames River Police: Forefathers of Modern Policing

By David Wells and the West India Committee

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Introduction

An image exists in the mind of the British public of a policeman, normally of a Metropolitan Police Officer in a distinctively shaped helmet, pounding his beat. It is also widely believed that the Metropolitan Police were the first modern police force. However, twenty-one years before the Metropolitan Police were formed, another force was founded in London, one that can be described as the forerunner of Robert Peel's men, men who did not patrol on foot but instead in boats.

Originating as a partnership between the Government of the day and the West Indian planters and merchants of the West India Committee, the Marine Police were formed to protect the vital trade between the West Indies and London from widespread theft on the Thames. Over the last two centuries the Thames River Police, as they have come to be known, have continued to protect the river, patrolling, with very few exceptions, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week since their foundation.

The Thames River Police were not necessarily the first attempt at founding a modern style police force but they were the ones that succeeded, whereas others disappeared and disbanded in a short space of time. The principles of preventative policing on which they were based, i.e. preventing crime as opposed to merely catching suspects after a crime was committed, were proven to work and these principles would later form the basis of today's world famous Metropolitan Police.

Today the Thames River Police still exists as the Marine Policing Unit of the Metropolitan Police, protecting the river as they have done since 1798. They are now recognised by UNESCO as the longest continuously serving police force in the world and, as forerunners of the Metropolitan Police, are the founders of modern policing.

