

# Crime on the River

Crime on the river was rife, having been a serious problem since the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was estimated that one third of the people involved in dock labour were engaged in some form of criminal activity. This amounted to a significant criminal fraternity when added to thieves who were not employed on the docks. As a result, working on the river was viewed as disreputable.



Ships on the Thames (© Museum of London)

The port of London was a very busy place with 1,000 to 1,400 trading vessels moored together, whilst there were an additional 7,000 stationary vessels. The river was not totally without security; there were ship guards and watchmen for Customs and Excise. There were even some constables, attached to the various bodies, like Trinity House, that had authority over different aspects of the river. However, these men did not constitute a unified system of protection, and bribery and corruption were rampant amongst them. Thus it was very easy to steal goods, particularly as the system of loading and unloading vessels gave several opportunities to do so. Ships were moored in the river, unable to dock at the Legal Quays, where goods could be legitimately landed in the port. The Lumpers, the men who unloaded ships, would remove the goods from a ship's hold before placing them onto smaller boats known as Lighters, manned by Lightermen, to be transferred to the quays. There were between 200 and 500 lighters on the river at any one time, adding to the chaos of the port. Thus, the goods passed through many hands and were exposed to numerous opportunities for theft. Even when the goods had landed, the West India Merchants did not have sufficient warehouse space to store all of them safely, so many goods had to wait on the quays, or on lighters and ships before they could be properly housed, which also exposed them to theft. Even warehouses were not impervious to pilfering. The situation was so notorious that, by the end of the century, dockside labour or work on the river itself was considered to be the most disreputable and least desirable form of work. The river itself was tainted by association with smuggling, theft and general bad habits.

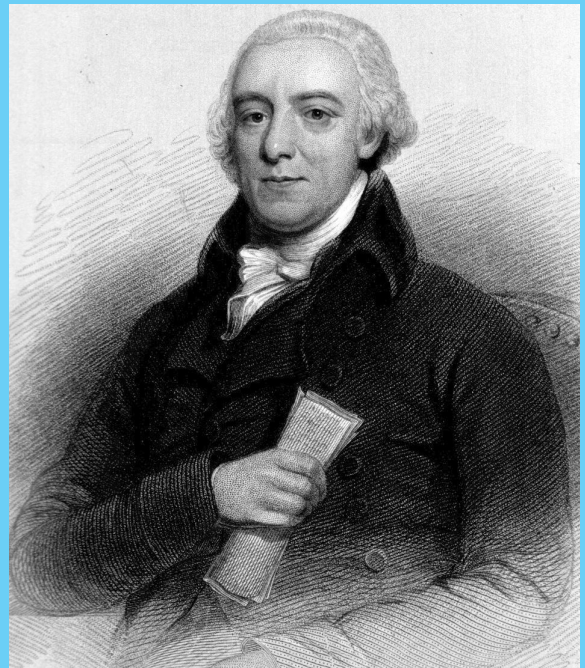
A whole range of items were stolen, from small amounts of copper to large, bulky items like cordage and ironwork. Empty vessels left unguarded often suffered the loss of all moveable items on deck and also their rigging. Even small boats could have their oars, sculls and benches purloined. Ships undergoing repairs in docks were frequently robbed of their new copper sheathing, whilst ships' stores were not safe, as apparel was often stolen, a fact that was not usually discovered until at sea.

Patrick Colquhoun, in his research on river crime, identified several types of thieves: River Pirates, Night Plunderers, Light-Horsemen, Heavy-Horsemen, Scuffle-hunters, Night Plunderers, Journeymen Coopers, Mudlarks, Rat Catchers, Game Watermen and Game Lightermen. Colquhoun may have invented some of the more elaborate names himself, although some, such as River Pirates, were clearly in use at the time. These thieves would use ingenious methods to commit crime, like the Rat Catchers who released rats aboard vessels so that they had an excuse to go aboard and steal goods. Colquhoun believed that Receivers were one of the key problems, as they provided a market for the stolen goods. There was significant corruption amongst watchmen, Revenue Officers and sailors, with many accounts of bribery or even direct collusion with criminals. On West India ships, a tradition that the ship's mate was entitled to the extra sugar swept up in the ship's hold, following unloading, encouraged criminal dealers to get close to them.

### Patrick Colquhoun

Patrick Colquhoun was born in Dumbarton 1745 and, after some time in Virginia, came to live in Glasgow where he became involved in the linen trade. He established the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, the first body of its kind within Britain, and held a variety of roles in that city, such as Chief Magistrate and Lord Provost. Eventually he moved to London, where he became a magistrate at the Queen's Square Police Office in Westminster. In 1796 he produced his most famous work, *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, an in-depth examination of the state of crime and its causes in London which outlined a method of policing that could prevent these crimes from occurring. Throughout his life he wrote other treatises on crime and poverty, also engaging in philanthropic work. His work brought him into contact with many leading figures of the day, including the famous philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the Duke of Portland, the Home Secretary.

These connections proved useful in creating the Marine Police. However, he was not universally popular and was the target of a riot in 1794. His 1800 *Treatise on the Commerce and Police of the River Thames*, outlined the issues with crime on the Thames and how the Marine Police combatted it.



Even when these goods had been landed, they were still not safe from thieves, as a large amount of plunder also occurred within unsecured warehouses. It was estimated that the value of sugar lost in this fashion every year was approximately £70,000 (£8,254,432 today), exclusive of thefts of other West Indian products. Even when offenders were caught, prosecutions could be rare due to the endemic corruption at all levels. It is clear that an effective system was needed to prevent crimes being committed in the first place.

Many Lumpers may have had no choice but to turn to theft to support themselves, as many worked under Lumping gang-masters, who were often publicans that took a large share of the pay for themselves. Another issue was that many of the thieves on the river regarded taking goods as a longstanding, traditional perk of their work rather than a crime. It is clear that it had been customary for river workers to take some of the goods they handled, but this did not mean that all employers permitted the practice. Just because it was customary did not mean that it was legal and, over the course of the eighteenth century, more and more employers attempted to stamp out the practice, as it was clear that the claim of custom was used as an excuse for theft. The most audacious example of theft by Game Lightermen was when a lighter took on a shipment of oil. The Lightermen turned the casks containing the oil so that the bungs faced downwards and thus oil leaked out into the lighter's hold. When the lighter arrived at the quay, the owner of the oil noticed that the casks had been moved from their original position. He retrieved 15 casks' worth of stolen oil from the hold. The Lightermen claimed that the oil was their perquisite and were offended at being deprived of it!

## The Light-Horsemen

These gangs were described by Colquhoun as the most pernicious. They were often led by Receivers, who conspired with corrupt Revenue Officers and First Mates, and also comprised Coopers, Watermen and Lumpers. They bribed either the crew or the watchmen to allow them on board West Indian ships during the night, each ship targeted being known as a Game Ship. The Watermen provided as many boats as required for the booty. The Lumpers removed the sugar casks from the hold and the Coopers opened them up. All gang members shovelled sugar from the casks into bags dyed black so that they could not be seen at night. These were known as Black Strap and could contain 100lbs. of sugar, to be carried away by the Watermen. The casks were resealed and put in the hold again. The crime would go undiscovered until the ship was officially unloaded and the casks opened. They stole as much as they could in the time their bribe had bought and did not just confine their activities to sugar. Although sugar was the most prized, coffee was more easily accessible, with other commodities such as pimiento, ginger and rum also being purloined. It was estimated that the Light-Horsemen seldom stole less than £150 to £200 a night in these raids, between £17,688 and £23,584 in today's money.



An artist's recreation of a Light-Horseman

## The Heavy-Horsemen

Also known as Day Plunderers, these criminals were primarily Lumpers whose job it was to unload the ship. Whilst unloading, they would take the opportunity to steal what they could. They would wear something known as a Jemmy under their clothes, which had pockets both in front and behind for concealing stolen goods, whilst long, narrow bags and pouches would also be lashed to their legs underneath wide trousers. The crown of a hat was also popular for concealing small items. It was standard practice for the owners of the ships and captains not to provide food and drink for the men on board, which meant that the Heavy Horsemen had an excuse to go ashore, in many cases as often as three times a day. Each time they aimed to ensure they carried as many stolen goods as possible, a habit it is believed led to their name as they were weighted down with plunder. A Game Ship targeted by the Light-Horsemen provided the best opportunities for theft and it was not unknown for Lumpers to work aboard such ships for no pay, for the chance to acquire a large amount of plunder.



An artist's recreation of a Heavy-Horseman

## Mudlarks

These comprised some of the poorest members of society, including the elderly and children. Mudlarks would wait beneath the bow and quarters of a Game Ship in the mud at low tide, hence their name. They received goods thrown down by those unloading the ship and would then take these goods to Receivers as part of a pre-conceived plan. As the Receivers did not live far from the waterfront, this allowed the Mudlarks scope to make several trips during low tide. They were also known to receive sheets of copper and copper nails from dock gates, thrown down by artificers and other workmen.



An artist's recreation of a Mudlark

## Scuffle-hunters

Drawn from the lowest class of society, they stole from the quays whenever goods were being loaded or unloaded, offering their services as porters by the day or hour. A long apron was a useful piece of clothing for the men on the quays to protect their clothing, but the Scuffle-hunters used theirs to conceal the goods they stole. Once fully laden, they normally left the scene of the crime promptly. This type of crime was widespread and large numbers of Scuffle-hunters were punished every year by the Lord Mayor of London. Scuffle-hunters were notoriously effective before the River Police and their quay guards were established; it was estimated that less than one in fifty such acts were detected and punished.



An artist's recreation of a Scuffle-hunter

Colquhoun estimated that the plunder of imports resulted in an aggregate loss to the Exchequer of £10 million during the eighteenth century (over £1 billion today). Losses from ships on the river in an average year amounted to £500,000 (£58,960,227 today). A House of Commons committee in 1796 determined that theft from West India produce resulted in an annual loss on average of £150,000 to the West India merchants and £50,000 to Exchequer. Colquhoun later estimated that the loss could have been as high as £232,000 per year, which would be worth around £27 million today. Although this was only approximately 2% of the total value of the West India trade, it still was a hefty financial loss. George Hibbert later provided figures indicating that the total losses were almost double Colquhoun's estimate. There were thefts from exports as well, yet no figures existed in respect of these. The West India merchants were undoubtedly also affected by the loss of the goods used as collateral for loans.

An attempt had been previously made to reduce crime. An Act was passed in 1762, popularly known as the Bumboat Act. Bumboats were small vessels that, under the pretence of selling tobacco, alcohol and other goods to vessels on the Thames, committed acts of theft and vandalism. The Act made it an offence to buy or receive stolen goods from vessels on the river, punishable by a fine of 40 shillings for a first offence, and 14 years transportation for subsequent transgressions. This was the only existing legislation concerned with theft on the Thames. It is clear that the Act did little to nothing to improve the situation; in fact the amount of water-borne thieves actually increased after this legislation was introduced. The detection rate was very low, with Colquhoun believing that the penalty for the first offence was not actually applied to one in 300 or 400 offences. The criminals were business-like enough to establish a general subscription club so that, in the rare occurrence that one of them was caught, they would be able to pay for the penalties and forfeitures, all supported by the profits of crime.



Sugar and rum, popular targets for thieves.

Much of what we know about crime in London during the late eighteenth century comes from Patrick Colquhoun. However, some historians have accused him of exaggerating the nature and extent of crime, and with arbitrarily defining criminal groups. Some have even gone so far as to accuse him of 'criminalising' the workers on the river and convincing others of the same. Some of his estimates about the number of criminals are clearly too high and suspiciously precise, leading to accusations of deliberate inflation and sensationalism in order to try and win support for his reforms. However, his work was the first attempt to analyse crime in London systematically and, given how well-received these writings were, it is clear that it was accepted by people at the time, even if there are doubts about the accuracy of his figures. There was generally great concern about crime throughout the eighteenth century, resulting in a strong appetite for police reform and creation of Police Offices such as Bow Street. The river had a bad reputation long before Colquhoun came to London. Many near contemporaries supported his analysis of the extent of crime, with some even claiming that it was greater than Colquhoun believed. It also appears that Colquhoun was more careful with his estimates concerning money.

Since 1765 the West India Committee had paid large rewards for the apprehension and the conviction of any offender who had stolen goods from a West India ship. They had also ruled in 1767 that a ship's mate was not entitled to the sugar sweepings from the ship's hold, in an attempt to weed out this corruption. This did lead to an increase in prosecutions but did not seem to affect the overall crime rate. Those whose evidence could convict a suspect were, for the most part, guilty themselves. Rules about the loading and unloading of goods were introduced in 1789 to reduce thefts. With no means of actually enforcing these regulations, they were totally disregarded by the workforce. Thus the problem continued.