

# Policing before 1798

Policing in Georgian England was a confusing mix of local constables, beadles and night watchmen employed by local parishes, lacking any proper overall organisation. Most parts of London had the traditional system of parish constables and night watchmen, normally unpaid public service roles which they carried out alongside separate paid employment. The majority of towns and cities in Britain had the same system. The City of London had paid constables and night watchmen that were able to provide a degree of protection for its inhabitants, as did some large cities such as Edinburgh. However, there was no proper system of instruction, training or uniform standards of performance. These police were reactive rather than proactive; they acted on information received to make arrests, rather than focusing on preventing crime.

Criminal justice tended to operate on a bounty system, with a reward being offered by government for information about a crime, usually payable on conviction of the guilty party. The bounty hunters who sought and caught these criminals were known as thief-takers and had a very poor reputation, with many engaging in corrupt practices to obtain the rewards, and often being actively involved with criminals themselves. This problem was not unique to thief-takers as many constables and night watchmen were also engaged in criminal activities.



Henry Fielding 1707-1754

The famous Bow Street Runners were founded in 1748 by Henry Fielding who served as Magistrate in the attached court, later succeeded by his brother John, following Henry's death. The Bow Street Office laid the groundwork for modern criminal procedure and also helped establish the first modern law courts. They were pioneers in detective work but have been criticised for being little more than thief-takers, still operating on a reactionary rather than proactive basis. They acquired a good reputation, guarding the King on state occasions and, if a local parish constable encountered a difficult crime, they would ask Bow Street for a Runner to help them. Although their ideas were never implemented, the Fielding brothers were two of the earliest proponents of preventative policing.

However, they were not enough to deal with all the crime in the fast growing metropolis and, in 1792, seven new Police Offices were created in London. These offices were modelled on Bow Street, each having only six police constables with Magistrates in command of the individual institutions. Around the country there had also been attempts at instigating new police forces. In Glasgow, in 1779, a small force of police was created to combat rising crime; however, this only lasted for two years before it failed. Another force was set up in 1788, which attempted a form of preventative policing, but this too failed after two years.

There was also a strong anti-police feeling in Britain. Many people were against the idea of a force employed by the state, feeling that it was incompatible with the British practice of unpaid constables working for the local parish. The former idea was seen as similar to continental police systems, particularly to that in France, which was viewed as tyrannical and designed to interfere with natural liberty.

## The Dublin Police

In 1786, the Dublin Police Act was passed, which resulted in the creation of a force with three commissioners and a number of paid constables. Although this body of men was still a long way from anything like our modern police, it was the first time that the word 'police' was officially used.