

Reception and the Wapping Coal Riot

The Marine Police had an immediate impact on river crime, establishing themselves more effectively than any of the previous methods that had been attempted. *The Times* declared on 26th July 1798, less than a month after the foundation of the Office, that “*It is astonishing the effect the Institution has already had, in preventing piracies and robberies as well as Illicit Trade on the River.*” Less than a month later, on 15th August it claimed that the River Pirates and other suspicious persons had been totally banished from the river and that “*The River Thames never in the memory of man was so favourably circumstanced as it has been since the establishment of the Marine Police.*”

Patrick Colquhoun estimated that cargo owners may have saved £100,000 thanks to the institution, and the government may have saved £50,000 in duties for the public finances. He also believed that the plunder stolen in the first year of the Marine Police’s existence did not amount to one fiftieth of the loss sustained in previous years. Glowing reports were not only received from the newspapers; in October 1798, fifty-one ships’ captains reported the large number of benefits that they had received as a result of the new policing arrangements. The body of Wharfingers also wrote to express their appreciation, as did the Buyers and Factors of Coals.

The Marine Police did not just prevent theft from West India trade, but also helped to prevent depredations against all branches of trade on the river. The Surveyors and watermen did not discriminate during their river patrols and Lumpers were intercepted by those carrying goods from non-West Indian trades, for example tea and pepper that had been stolen from the East India Company. In addition, the Marine Police were also able to protect the actual vessels themselves in dangerous circumstances, such as bad weather. On one occasion, the Marine Police patrols were able to save the brig *Tyger* from drifting when she had become detached from her moorings, thus saving the ship and her cargo from a potentially destructive accident. They also helped to reduce the plunder from Royal Naval Victualling and Military stores, a long-standing problem, with the Commissioners of the Navy sending a letter of thanks to Mr Colquhoun in May 1799. The reputation of the Police also extended beyond London, with enquiries about the system from the West India Merchants of Liverpool and also the Proprietors of Trows and Barges on the River Severn.

The new procedures were not well-received by everyone, however. Those Lumpers that had profited substantially under the old system apparently did their best to approach captains newly arrived into the port and prejudice them against the Marine Police. This may have had some effect as, despite the clear benefits and the fact that the Marine Police system for unloading vessels was recommended by the West India Committee, approximately one third of captains and owners chose not to use it. There were also complaints that the fee charged for unloading vessels, and that charged for the protection of vessels, was too high. These concerns were dismissed, as they were actually both included in the one charge and it was felt that such ships were also well protected by the river patrols and quay guards for which the captains and owners paid nothing. Colquhoun wrote, “*The Lumping Rates have been ultimately settled on the lowest Terms for which honest labour can be procured for daily wages.*” In other words, ship owners were highly unlikely to obtain the services of honest lumpers for less. The West India Committee also felt it unfair, given the successes in crime prevention, to compare the expense of unloading ships through a comparison of costs of the old and new systems, which differed considerably.

The Marine Police were naturally poorly received by the criminal element. John Harriott recalled in his autobiography that when someone was brought up before the magistrates accused of stealing from the cargo of a ship, their defence was always the same: that it was traditional that they should take some of the goods. It has been argued that such practices were indeed traditional, but it must be remembered that the Marine Police plan was the latest, and by far the most successful attempt to deal with what had clearly been considered a problem with theft for a very long time. Tradition did not supersede the fact that such practices were illegal, and the attempt by some thieves to conceal

what they were doing indicates that they were fully aware of this. Harriott insisted in his memoirs that the magistrates attempted to be lenient, reprimanding first time offenders, but, when this failed to reduce crime, they were forced to use stronger measures.

If the magistrates were indeed being lenient, the river workers did not perceive it and eventually matters were brought to a head on 16th October 1798. Charles Eyres was convicted, along with two others, of having stolen coal and was fined 40 shillings. Outside the Police Office was his brother James who, upon learning that Charles had paid the fine, dragged his brother by the collar, exclaiming, *“Come along and we will have the money back, or else we will have the house down.”* After this a man began to break the windows over the door of the Police Office with a stick and people began to cheer and throw large objects, such as paving stones, at the Office, causing significant damage.

The Police responded; Harriott later claimed that he had given orders for officers to load their pistols and fire at the rioters. Constable Richard Perry made no mention of such instructions in his testimony, saying that he fired the first shot through a broken window in an attempt to disperse the crowd, feeling that the lives of everyone in the office were in danger. Another pistol was fired from the office, and one of these shots killed a rioter. Following this, Colquhoun went outside the front door, with suitable protection from officers, to read the Riot Act to the crowd and order them to disperse. It was at this point someone fired a pistol from the crowd and shot officer Mitchell through the hand.

Police Equipment

Originally in 1798 Marine Police officers carried a type of cutlass, a sword used by sailors, known as a hanger and, at least in some cases, a pistol, to protect themselves against the dangerous criminals on the river. They were also issued with staves. For over a century the sword remained part of



Thames River Police equipment. It eventually took the form of a straight sword with a polished brass handle, with the MP cypher and the date stamped on the blade; it was issued until at least 1862. Swords were carried on patrol into the early 1920s. Their arsenal of blunderbusses was relinquished when they amalgamated with the Metropolitan Police.



More shots were fired from the Police Office in the ensuing violence. The death of the rioter aggravated other rioters, including James Eyres. During all this, Gabriel Franks, one of the Police Office's Master Lumpers who supervised other Lumpers, had come to help. Although he was a Lumper rather than a policeman he frequently helped out around the office. He had managed to arm himself with a cutlass and was attempting to restore order when he was shot in the chest by persons unknown. Although he lived for several days, he died of his wounds. Gabriel Franks is the first name listed on the Roll of Honour for members of the Thames River Police that have died in service.

The riot eventually dispersed. The dead rioter was never identified, his body having been borne away by others in the crowd. James Eyres, after two days, turned himself in, even though there was no warrant out for his arrest. He was put on trial on 9th January 1799, charged with the murder of Gabriel Franks, as it was held under the law of the day that he was ultimately responsible because he had incited the riot. He denied the charge but was found guilty by the jury and sentenced to death by hanging. No other arrest was made for either the murder or the riot. The Wapping Coal Riot, as it later became known, was a clear demonstration of the antipathy with which workers on the river regarded the new Marine Police institution. It also demonstrated that the Marine Police were determined, able to defend themselves and refused to be intimidated. They were here to stay and in time many people would come to appreciate that fact and work with the Police.