



# The Thames River Police: Forefathers of Modern Policing

By David Wells and the West India Committee

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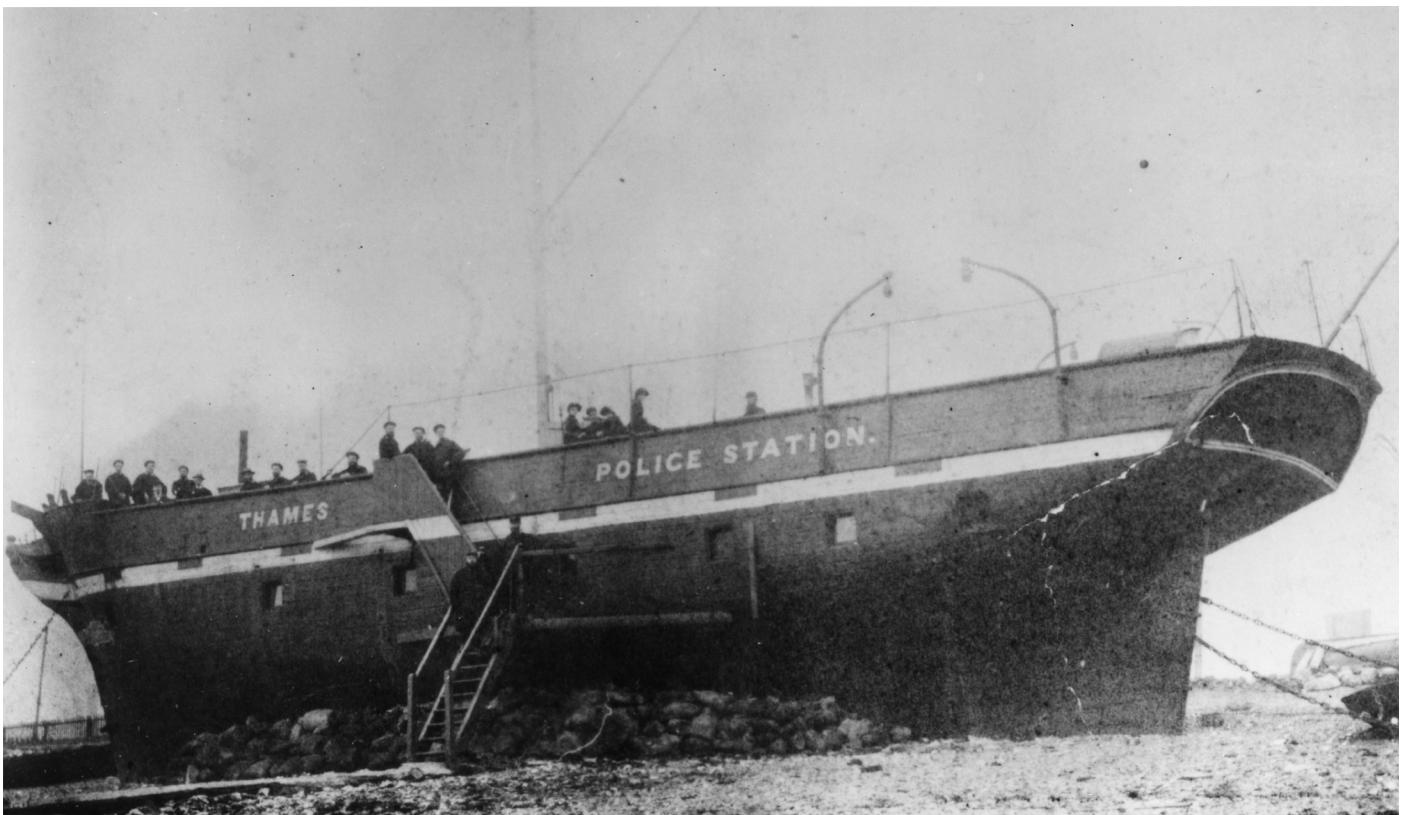
# Introduction

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.



# The River Thames

By Blondel Cluff

When compared to its competitors on the world stage, the Yangtze spanning over 3,500 miles, or the Amazon, or the mighty Mississippi, each stretching over 4,000 miles in length, the 215 miles covered by the Thames renders it a mere minnow. Yet England's longest river ranks among the most famous waterways in the world, one that gave birth to a capital. Passing through the counties of Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Surrey, skimming the border of Buckinghamshire en route to London, the Thames meanders through Kent and Essex before it reaches the sea, absorbing the waters of dozens of rivers, streams and brooks as it journeys along. This has been its route for over ten thousand years. Today, almost one and a quarter million gallons of water are transported along this waterway each day, moving at a pace of up to two and a half miles an hour.

The Thames is a tidal river, rising from fifteen to twenty-two feet at high tide at London Bridge. The iconic Thames Barrier, completed in 1982, is therefore essential to the very life of London, as a suitably high tide, combined with a storm surge from the English Channel, would prove catastrophic for central London. That is not to say that the river has not claimed its victims over the years, something of which the Thames River Police have always been very aware. The spring tides of the Thames are notorious for their vigour, which engendered the awe and wonder of ancient man, and the personification of the River as a being, known to us today as Old Father Thames. The miles of submerged forests that lie beside its shores from Blackwall into Essex are a testament to the powers of the river to reap and sow fertility and life. It is clear that London would not exist without the Thames. The river not only provided drinking water – essential to any human settlement, but also defence, and trade routes, each necessary for settlements to survive and thrive. The city evolved around one of the shallowest points on the river that could be forded easily by primitive transport. The tribes that lived there would eventually give way to the Romans who respected their name for the waters, Tamesa or Tamesas, modifying it to the Latin, Tamesis.



Father Thames

As the Roman metropolis evolved within its city walls, so the river's importance as a trade route became more significant, extending beyond domestic to international trade. Progressively the trading vessels grew, as did their draft, placing the point of embarkation firmly in the hands of Old Father Thames. The deepest, most secure expanse of the river lay beside the Tower of London and became known as the Pool of London due to its basin like nature.

The Great Fire of London in 1666 went some way to alleviating the congestion of medieval London, clearing huge swathes of the wooden city that had long burst out of the Roman walls that encompassed much of what is now the City of London, and spilt along the northern river bank, almost embracing the seat of government at Westminster, London's second city. The London that rose from the ashes was a cleaner city with broader streets and brick buildings, yet the Thames still called the

shots. Faced with the successive disasters of the Plague and the Fire of London, trade and best of all, international trade, was essential to the recovery of Britain and its capital. This meant the Thames had to work harder than ever to bring coffers into the Exchequer from the trading routes that had been forged in the slipstreams of the great explorers and which included the circuitous and infamous Triangle of Trade.

But the Thames was so much more. It was London's biggest open sewer into which the excrement of the city's many thousand inhabitants was discharged both directly and indirectly. It was also the recipient of animal waste, and the by-products of the fledgling industries that began to appear as the industrial revolution took hold. The mournful state of the once majestic river was no more apparent than at low tide when London's wholesale butchers, stationed at Smithfield as they are today, would take the waste from their abattoirs to piers along the river banks to be dumped midstream, filling its waters with the rotting remains. The situation was made worse by the fact that several rivers entered the Thames in London, not least of all the Fleet which appeared little more than a wide, filthy choking flow, earning the nickname the 'Ditch'.



A Caricature of a Fleet Marriage

The squalor of the Thames was nonetheless magnetic, not only because of its vital role as a trading link, but because of the very nature of London's society, and the peculiarities that dominated it. The 'Ditch' attracted a myriad of illicit activity along its own river bank due to the legal peculiarities that were originally attributed to Fleet Prison and then spilled out into the nearby area, such as the right to marry without banns or parental consent, making the Fleet the Las Vegas of its day. These clandestine marriages only stopped after the Marriage Act

1753. Along with the less than law abiding, the Fleet attracted so much debris that it became known as a drain. Over time it was enclosed to become the Fleet Sewer and one of London's subterranean rivers.

A myriad of characters abounded around the river in search of opportunity. Of these the more legitimate were the licenced carters run by the Guildhall that collected goods along a one-way system beside the Thames. The wagons and carts were carefully monitored and regulated, leaving little scope for adventurers. The position on the river was different. Here the ordered minds of the City of London had less influence. The lure of London was immense, offering a fast track from rural servitude to the independence of self-employment. With such high stakes at play, there was little room for morals nor sentiment. Pilfering and theft soon became a sophisticated business that engendered its own specialities and hierarchy. Nothing was beyond the grasp of London's light fingered, including men themselves, it taking until 1772 for a slave to be recognised as free on British soil due to the Somerset ruling; until then those Africans that had completed the three points of the triangle or creoles born in the Caribbean were not safe, presenting a tidy commodity by virtue of the bounties offered for their capture.

Thereafter black Londoners became a common sight, as did their mixed race progeny, as integration took hold among the lower classes, many becoming successful businessmen in their own right, whilst others were lauded for their literary and musical talent. One individual, Wilson, a former slave from Boston became one of the most famous life models of the Royal Academy due to his "*perfect antique figure*"! It is unlikely that they would have frequented the river, as the risk of kidnap and re-enslavement remained real, until the atrocious practice was finally exorcised in the mid 1800s. Instead the men that ruled the river were indigenous. Men of various origins that had forged together since the very beginning of the city to create the archetypal Londoner and they came in various guises from the bankers and aldermen of the City to the dwellers of the riverbank.



# 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.

# Trade in London

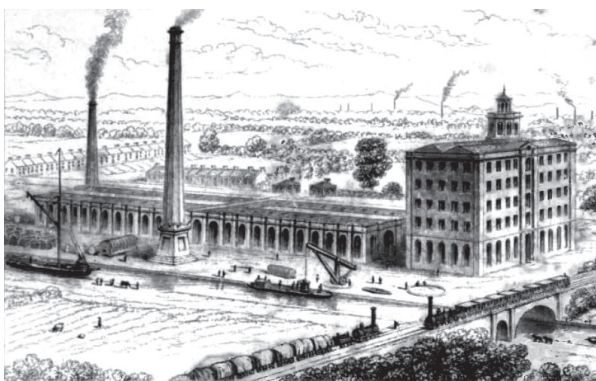
In the late eighteenth century London was arguably the busiest port in the world. Trade had grown rapidly over the previous hundred years, with goods and traders coming to London from all over the globe. Between 13,000 and 14,000 ships arrived and departed from the port of London every year. The expansion of trade in the eighteenth century was integral to Britain's economic development as it entered the Industrial Revolution, when manufacturing replaced agriculture and domestic production. Trade gave rise to levels of prosperity that had not been seen before in the years prior to 1798. This not only meant that there were more goods arriving than ever before but that the value of these goods had also increased. The commercial property on the Thames was greater than that known on any other river.

This unparalleled trading prosperity also meant that at least 120,000 individuals were employed in jobs relating to commerce on the Thames. Taking into account the affect that such jobs may have had on families and other dependants, the river trade may have supported 500,000 people. In addition to this, the taxes on goods being imported and exported meant that commerce provided over a quarter of public revenue.



A satirical image from 1757 of goods arriving in London

West Indian goods accounted for 25% of all imports into London by the mid 1790s, the largest individual proportion, and included some of the most highly-prized goods available on the market: items such as ginger, cotton, pimento, rum, tobacco, mahogany, dyewoods and coffee. Prized above all else, and comprising over two thirds of the imports from the West Indies, was sugar. Refined sugar had become a significant part of the British diet over the course of the eighteenth century, with the average Briton consuming around 25lbs. annually by 1770. These goods were so highly valued that, during an economic downturn in 1799, some merchants used them as deposits to secure loans from the Bank of England, worth millions of pounds today.



A Mill from the Industrial Revolution

Besides the trade with the West Indies, there was a variety of other important trading partners. Firstly, there was trade with India and the East Indies, led by the East India Company. In addition, there was commerce with Portugal, Germany, Africa, Scandinavia, Spain, Quebec, Poland, the Channel Islands, Ireland, Russia, Turkey and the Mediterranean. Another important trading commodity was coal. It was estimated that Londoners collectively bought £360,000 worth of coal each year, although losses to this trade through crime were estimated at almost £20,000, the equivalent of £2,358,409 in today's currency.

The trade from the West Indies was not just important to Britain because it provided such produce as sugar and ginger for the British populace, but it was also vital for trade with other countries. These goods were highly desirable for other nations, and thus they were re-exported alongside goods of British manufacture, especially to Britain's allies in the conflict that raged throughout Europe at the time. Before the outbreak of hostilities, France itself had been a major recipient of some of these products. In addition to the West Indian goods that were re-exported, Britain also shipped wares back to the West Indies, particularly manufactured articles, including textiles, glassware and metal work. This network of trade was vital for the British economy and helped turn Britain into a superpower.

# West Indies and West Indians

In the eighteenth century the majority of the products shipped to London from the West Indies were produced by slave labour, by Africans who had been brought to the West Indies through the Middle Passage. However, the labour force of the seventeenth century predominantly had been comprised of Irish, Welsh and Scottish prisoners from Oliver Cromwell's military initiatives in Britain, coupled with convicts sent to the colonies from courts throughout the British Isles. Slave labour fuelled the triangle of trade between Europe, Africa and the New World. The slaves in the Caribbean worked in harsh, brutal conditions and life expectancies were short, particularly on plantations that grew sugarcane. For almost four centuries a constant stream of newly-enslaved Africans were brought to replace dead workers.



A boiling house, where sugar was produced from sugarcane

The West Indian sugar industry began in Barbados and Guadeloupe in the 1640s and this crop dominated the Caribbean economy for centuries. Barbados was the first British sugar producing colony and remained the largest producer until overtaken by Jamaica around 1720. Approximately 70% of the total output of plantations in the British West Indies was sugar and molasses. Different islands produced different qualities of sugar; Nevis and Jamaica produced brown sugar, which was at the lower end of the scale, with Barbados producing very fine clayed sugar. Sugar production had peaked in

the early 1700s and was in decline for the rest of the century, yet it still comprised a huge proportion of the West Indian economy. In the 1770s almost 90% of the value of Jamaica's exports to Great Britain and Ireland came from sugar.

With sugar's decline, other products were produced in greater numbers. Rum, made from molasses, a by-product of sugar, was the second most important produce. Coffee was the next most important export after rum. Although cotton had been grown in the West Indies for many years, it was not until the 1770s that it became a major product. There were several factors behind this shift toward cotton production, including the boom in the British textiles industry. Many smaller plantation owners and farmers did not possess the quality of soil required for sugar production. However, cotton could be successfully grown on inferior quality land, enhancing the yield from the islands. Additional crops were cultivated, such as yams, Guinea corn and pigeon peas, which were not only sold but also used to feed the slave population. The sugar plantations were owned and run by the elite of white West Indian society, whilst other staple crops were produced by those lower down the social ladder.

Sugar prices fluctuated over the course of the century, but prices were high after 1795 and remained so, until a financial crisis in Europe in the middle of 1799. Despite the West Indies producing the vast majority of Britain's sugar, the law forbade them from refining it. As a result, London had a thriving sugar-refining industry. Some of this refined sugar would then be exported back to the West Indies. However, no such law applied to rum, which was distilled on many plantations.

It is believed that the annual income for the West Indies in the late eighteenth century was £17,000,000. The largest proportion of this income lay in the hands of West Indian plantation owners that had come to live in Britain. These planters were assigned a unique identity within British society - the West Indian of European heritage. Often drawn from well-established families in the

*Indian originated it was the Anglo West-Indian who claimed the honour of the description".* Many planters, particularly those from Jamaica and the Leeward Islands, brought their families to live in London to be part of British high society, leaving their plantations to be managed by others on their behalf. West Indians also settled around Britain in such places as Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow, where similar bodies representing West Indian interests were also established. Having made their fortunes in the West Indies, they desired to travel to Britain, to escape the high mortality rate of the tropics as well as the frequent wars waged in the region between the various colonial powers. The metropole provided the perfect stage for rich West Indians to flaunt their wealth and many purchased houses in Marylebone, then a fashionable village on the outskirts of the city. Meanwhile, their offspring received a good education, and were afforded the opportunity to make a name for themselves outside the colonies. Several mixed-race children made this journey with their planter fathers, joining the upper ranks of British society. This marked the beginning of a steady increase in West Indian intellectuals in London. Men, whose family had become rich in West Indian trade, now prospered in other arenas, including the arts, as poets, writers, journalists and musicians.



Lord Mayor William Beckford

When they arrived in Britain, however, their attempts to integrate themselves into high society met with a certain amount of scorn; they were viewed as the ‘nouveau riche’ of their day. Even those who felt British were classed as distinctly West Indian by the native-born Britons. Due to their extreme wealth, they often presented themselves ostentatiously and were viewed as being socially inept. During the eighteenth century, William Beckford was one such West Indian. A notorious Jamaican Planter who twice held office as Lord Mayor of London, Beckford was characterised by his show of wealth, lack of charm and broad Jamaican accent. He is believed to be the first British commoner to die a millionaire. As the abolitionist movement gained support, many came to view the white West Indians negatively, questioning the means by which they gained their colossal wealth. As a result, Beckford was given derogatory nicknames by abolitionists.

Many absentee planters became Members of Parliament. There were approximately fifty to sixty of these politicians, forming a significant voting block within the House of Commons, which held the balance of power in many situations, allowing them to exert a significant influence on the government of the day and promote what they felt was beneficial to the West Indies. There were also representatives in the House of Lords by virtues of strategic marriages, direct blood ties and appointments.

It was against this backdrop that the West India Committee, then the West Indian Merchants and Planters Committee, was born. West Indian men, based in London with trade interests in the islands, came together to defend their common cause. Some committee members were drawn from the richest and most powerful families of the West Indies, such as George Hibbert and Beeston Long, whose families had been long-established in Jamaica. Hibbert acted as agent for Jamaica in London and was later chairman of the West India Committee. Long’s family firm, Long and Company, was the oldest firm involved in the Jamaica trade and he, himself, served as Deputy Governor, and later Governor, of the Bank of England. Other members included John Wedderburn, whose father Sir John Wedderburn had been executed for siding with the Jacobites at the Battle of Culloden, and William Manning, whose family had long been established in St. Kitts.

These men campaigned on behalf of West Indian trade but had immense difficulty in combating the many thefts of slave-produced goods on the river.

# 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.

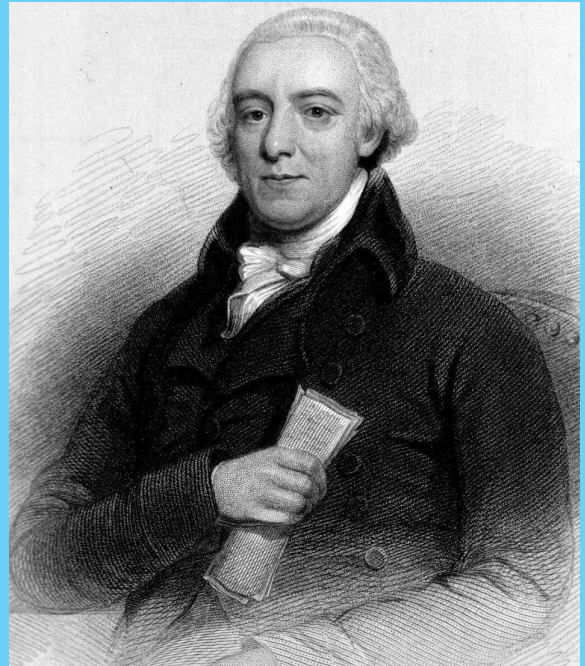
A whole range of items were stolen, from small amounts of copper to large, bulky items like cordage and ironwork. Empty vessels left unguarded often suffered the loss of all moveable items on deck and also their rigging. Even small boats could have their oars, sculls and benches purloined. Ships undergoing 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.

# Foundation

By early 1797 the West India Committee no longer wished to offer the huge rewards that they had previously. It was simply too expensive to do so, with the value of the stolen goods often being significantly less than the reward, particularly if rewards had to be paid to multiple parties. This was in addition to the legal expense that was incurred by prosecuting the thieves. Furthermore, these methods had not resulted in a demonstrable decrease in the crime rate. By February the Committee started to consider other possibilities to reduce thefts from West India Merchant Vessels.

They decided to approach Patrick Colquhoun, to help produce a plan to tackle theft on the river. Given his accomplishments, he was regarded as an authority on crime and policing and it was entirely natural that the West India Committee would approach him for help to develop a new strategy. He sent a letter outlining his ideas, which was duly discussed at a meeting of the West India Merchants Committee in January 1798. After considering his suggestions, they sent extracts of the letter to every Committee member so that they could make recommendations. Consequently, at the end of the month, they resolved that a Marine Police force, modelled on Colquhoun's plan, would be an excellent idea to check the "*enormous plunderage on board West India ships on the River*", and Colquhoun was invited to attend the next meeting to discuss his proposals.

Already, figures in Government were interested in the potential that this proposal might have; indeed the Duke of Portland, the Home Secretary of the time, wrote to Colquhoun to request that he might be informed of the outcome of the meeting. Planning continued over the next two months, with the Committee wishing to ensure that the costs of the new institution were kept as low as reasonably possible, to avoid a repetition of their previous situation. By the end of March, it was resolved that the Committee would establish a Marine Police force. Colquhoun was asked to draw up a concise plan from the ideas and discussions of the previous few months, so that the scheme might be shown to the Duke of Portland in the hope that he would approve it and thus the project might be instituted.

It was at this point that the other great figure of the early River Police appeared- John Harriott. As a merchant and in his role as a Justice of the Peace for Middlesex, Harriott also appreciated the problems on the Thames and he too had developed a plan for a River Police, which he had sent to the Duke of Portland in 1797, but it seems the Duke never read this. Harriott later attributed the proposed expense of £14,000 a year as the reason it was not adopted by the Duke. In April 1798, Colquhoun and Harriott met to discuss the latter's plan. Harriott's proposals made an impression on Colquhoun, who requested that he might be allowed to keep them so that he might show them to figures in government. As a result, the two men worked together over the next two years, with Harriott describing Colquhoun as the "*most indefatigable preserving man I ever knew*", crediting his efforts with the West India Committee and government, whilst Colquhoun praised Harriott's dedication, knowledge and intellect.



## John Harriott

John Harriott was born in Great Stambridge, Essex 1745 and has been variously described as a merchant, adventurer, inventor and buccaneer. Apparently inspired by *Robinson Crusoe*, he joined the Royal Navy at a young age, travelling widely. After his service, he joined the East India Company's army in 1768. On service with them in India he was shot and wounded in the leg, which necessitated his retirement from the Company. The injury would stay with him for the rest of his life. He returned home to become a farmer and farmed in both England and America at various times over the next few years, but was not as successful as he wished in either country. Although he did purchase some slaves during his time in America, he became an abolitionist. He returned to England where he became a Justice of the Peace for Middlesex and opened various commercial ventures. Eventually, after helping found the Marine Police, he wrote an autobiography called *Struggles through Life*

In a meeting on 8th June, following letters of support from the Duke of Portland, the West India Committee resolved to put the plan into immediate effect. Harriott was recommended to the Duke of Portland as the Resident Magistrate, an appointment that was confirmed, whilst Colquhoun became the Superintending Magistrate. The search began for a potential police office, preferably to be located at Wapping New Stairs, as this was geographically the centre of the Pool of London and thus the logical place for a police institution to monitor the trade on the river. There were also various other requirements for the building; a suitable room for a Court was required in addition to apartments, offices, waiting rooms and a Lock-up House. An appropriate building was located at No. 259 Wapping New Stairs.

The Marine Police Office officially opened on 2nd July 1798 and it is impressive how quickly arrangements had progressed from the reception of Colquhoun's initial plan in January. The personnel of the new institution were composed of various ranks, all of whom were subordinate to the magistrates at Wapping. Foremost were the Surveyors, a rank equal to modern inspectors, who were led by the Chief Surveyor. There were also the Watermen, who were responsible for rowing the boats and assisting Surveyors in the execution of their duties. Ship Constables were employed to stand watch on those vessels that were being unloaded, including staying aboard during the night. Eight land constables were appointed for work on shore, although they could also be deployed as deputy river officers. The officers themselves were sailors who had either served in the navy or worked on the river, and thus were well aware of the issues on the Thames, as they were part of that community.

The institution went beyond employing officers and also employed a force of Lumpers, to unload vessels, under the control of Master Lumpers as foremen, the idea being that they would be less likely to steal the goods they were unloading after having been vetted. This was known as the Discharging Department. The number of Lumpers employed by the institution rose and fell as demand on the river required, but in the beginning it was intended that there would be thirty-five foremen and three-hundred and fifty Lumpers, divided into thirty-five gangs. The exact number of people employed is debateable, in part due to the changing numbers of Lumpers but also on the basis of different definitions of Police Officer, but there were approximately fifty officers employed initially. The goods were also protected on the lighters that carried them back to the quays; the lighters were loaded under the watchful eye of police officers, with the number of casks and packages being recorded on a printed *way bill*, which was carried by a police officer accompanying the lighter and delivered to the Police Quay guards. The accompanying officer would then take a receipt for these goods and return to the ship.

#### **Marine Police Lumpers**

Marine Police Lumpers were subject to a strict dress code, in order to prohibit them from wearing those clothes that had been used to conceal stolen goods. They were not allowed to go ashore during the day, instead eating and drinking aboard the ship on which they were working, which prevented them from taking stolen goods ashore. They were required to assemble each morning at a certain time and would then be taken to the ship where they would work. They were searched upon boarding the vessel, so as to prevent them bringing items that could be used to steal goods, and when they left, for stolen goods. They were read a notice each morning by the attending Police Officer, warning them against stealing goods. This notice was also attached to the main mast of the ship to remind them of this throughout the day.

Surveyors were to patrol the river day and night in shifts of six hours so that, as one boat arrived back at the Wapping Office, the other set out, meaning that there was a constant police presence of two boats on the river. They were to watch out for suspicious activity on the Thames and intercept anyone who appeared to be stealing from a vessel or carrying what appeared to be stolen goods. They were also required to visit ships being discharged by the institution's Lumpers once during the day and once again at night, monitoring them at all times, especially West India vessels. The force, like so many since, also acted on information received from the public to apprehend miscreants. A Quay Guard, composed of three surveyors and thirty sworn officers, was employed to protect the goods being landed on the quayside, as demand required, day and night in shifts of six hours. Surveyors patrolling on the river would also visit, to ensure everything was in order.

# MARINE POLICE-OFFICE,

No. 259, WAPPING NEW-STAIRS,

*Established by a General Meeting of West-India Planters and Merchants,*

UNDER THE SANCTION OF GOVERNMENT.

## Rules and Orders

To be observed by Constables and Lumpers while on Duty on-board of West-India Ships, discharging their Cargoes in the River Thames.

### RESPECTING CONSTABLES OR WATCHMEN.

EACH Constable, while on-board, must be occasionally in the Hold as well as upon Deck; and, when Two Constables are on-board, One must be constantly in the Hold, and the other on Deck. They must be particularly careful, watchful, and active, in both Situations, that no Person steals Sugar, Coffee, Pimento, Ginger, Rum, Cotton, or any other Article; and, if an Attempt is made to pilfer even the smallest Quantity, the Offender (whoever he may be) to be instantly seized and confined, until he can be carried before the Magistrate in One of the Marine-Police Boats, together with the Article stolen. — It will also be the peculiar Duty of the Constables to see that the Calks and Packages are not wilfully broke or injured, or Sugar or any other Article scattered about, either in the Hold or upon Deck, and to point out the same when it occurs to the Captain, Mate, or Master of Lumpers, that it may be prevented and remedied. — One Constable must always attend each Lighter; and, in that Case, the remaining Constable or Watchman to do Duty on-board, both in the Hold and upon Deck; and each must watch all Night: — And, to prevent this last Duty from being too severe, Relief will be given by fresh Men.

It will likewise be the indispensable Duty of the Constables on-board, and also the Master of Lumpers, to see that no Person shall come on-board to work with a Frock, Trowsers, Jamies, Under-Waitcoats with Pouches, or with Bags or empty Stockings, or any Thing else by which any Article can be conveyed away in a clandestine Manner; and, where this happens, the Names of the Persons to be returned to the Marine Police-Office; and the Dresses, Bags, &c. to be produced in Evidence against them.

It will be required of each Constable that he shall keep a Check-Book of the Work done by the Lumpers, agreeably to a Form which will be delivered; in which shall be stated the Duty they themselves perform, the Time the Work commences and is left off, and every other Occurrence; which must be reported weekly to the Marine Police-Office.

All Persons must be searched carefully when going a-shore in the Evening by the Constables. This Regulation can only be injurious to Rogues, and none but Rogues can be offended at a Measure found to be so indispensably necessary; and every Person, on leaving the Ship, who shall be detected with any Article belonging to the Ship or Cargo in his Possession unlawfully obtained, to be apprehended, detained, and sent to the Marine Police-Office, to be dealt with as the Law directs.

Every Constable, who shall, contrary to his Oath of Office, be detected in receiving a Bribe, or in conniving at any corrupt or unlawful Practice, to be rendered infamous, deprived of his Situation, and prosecuted as an atrocious Offender.

It will be the particular Duty of the Constables to assist the Captain and Mate in whatever relates to the Provisions, furnished and cooked on-board; and to see that Nothing is wasted, taken away, or misapplied; and that no unnecessary Expence is incurred in victualling the Persons employed to discharge the Ship.

It will also be the Duty of the Constables to see that Two Lanterns are lighted soon after Sun-Set, and hung up in the Main Shrouds, at the

### RESPECTING FOREMEN-LUMPERS.

I. Each Foreman to go on-board in the same Boat with his Gang, and to see that every Person, whether Holder or Decker, shall be dressed in a round Jacket, Breeches, and Stockings; and that none shall enter the Ship either with a Frock, Jamie, or Trowsers; nor carry on-board any Bags, Stockings, Pouches, or any Thing else, whereby Sugar or other Articles may be carried out of the Ship.

II. Immediately on going on-board, the Foreman, assisted by the Gang shall get up the Derrick, and make every necessary Preparation for the Discharge, in which he is to proceed without Delay, and to see that his Gang perform their Duty with Diligence and Dispatch; and that he himself shews them a good Example. — The Working-Hours to be from Six in the Morning to Six in the Evening, in Summer, and from Sun-Rise to Sun-Set, in the Winter Months; and neither the Foreman nor any of his Gang to be permitted, on any Account, to go a-shore until after the quit Work in the Evening.

III. On quitting the Ship in the Evening, it will be the Duty of the Foreman to assist the Constables in searching all Persons going a-shore, and he shall afterwards accompany his Men in the same Boat.

IV. If, for Want of Entries or other Circumstances, Employment ceases in any One Ship, the Foreman with his Gang shall proceed to the Marine Police-Office for Instructions, unless he receives previous Directions from the Superintendent of Lumpers to proceed on-board another Ship.

### GENERAL RULES

*Applicable both to Constables and Lumpers.*

All Persons, whether Constables or Lumpers, employed by, or attached to, the Marine Police-Establishment, are to have their Breakfast and Dinner, free of Expence, on-board the Ship under Discharge. — To breakfast precisely at Eight o'Clock, and to dine at One: To be allowed Half an Hour to Breakfast, and One Hour to Dinner.

Every Person, attached to the Marine Police-Establishment, while on Duty, (whether Constables, Lumpers, or others,) are to shew the utmost Respect to the Captain and Officers; and to behave civilly and as becometh them to every other Person on-board the Ship in which they are stationed.

The Wages of all Persons employed by the Marine Police-Establishment, shall be paid punctually on Saturday Evening by the Cashier at the Office, No. 259, Wapping New-Stairs. If, however, any Person shall act contrary to the Rules now laid down, or shall quit the Gang before the Expiration of the Week, or if the Work is finished, or Permission is given, such Offender shall forfeit the Wages then due, or such lesser Sum as the Magistrate, or Superintendent of Lumpers, shall deem a proper Deduction, to deter such Persons from committing the like Offence. And all Persons who misbehave, get drunk, or are found incapable of performing their Work in a proper Manner, will be immediately discharged.

The original Rules and Orders for the Marine Police

Originally the jurisdiction of the Marine Police went no further upstream than London Bridge, but eventually expanded over time. Their efforts were, of course, primarily focused on the Pool of London. The aim of the institution was to embrace the objectives of detection, under the Police Department, and prevention, under the Discharging Department. It was estimated that the new institution would save £10,000 a year in sugar losses alone. It was planned to cost the same as had been previously paid for watchmen and Lumpers, with the hope that all the money saved through crime prevention would thus be profit. All West India Merchants and Ship Owners were invited to sign up to the new system.

# 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.

# Adoption by Government

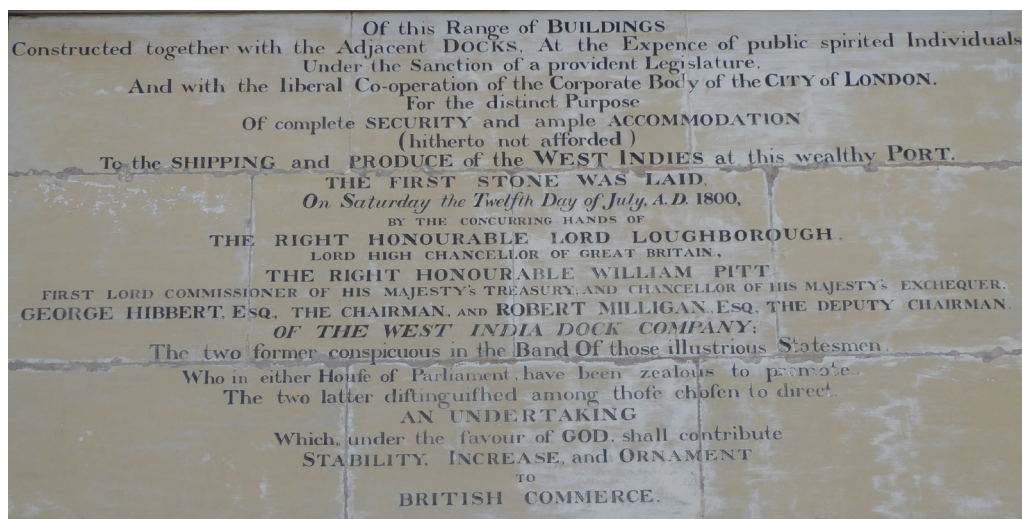
The cost of running and maintaining the Marine Police was a heavy one for the West India Committee to bear, despite the contributions from the government. Although focusing on West India Trade, the Marine Police were patrolling an area of the river used by other traders, who all benefited significantly from their work. The cost of running the Marine Police for the first 12 months was £4,295, 9 shillings and 5 pence (£506,468 today), of which £1,946, 9 shillings and 5 pence was paid by the West India Committee. Early in January 1799, the Committee sent a letter to the Duke of Portland, which included a request that he talk to the Treasury about further funding, to which the Duke agreed. In order to accommodate this level of spending, the Committee had to raise the fee on trade for several goods in May 1799. The issue of funding was so severe at times during the first two years of the force that Colquhoun and Harriott had to pay the men's wages out of their own pocket, a reflection of the dedication that both men had towards the institution.

It is clear, however, that Colquhoun had never intended for the Marine Police Institution to be forever run and paid for by the West India Committee but had instead hoped that it would be adopted by the government. As early as 1798, he had asked his friend, Jeremy Bentham, the great philosopher and social thinker, to draft a Bill for Parliament for the proper establishment of the police force. The Marine Police had existed with government support and sanction utilising provisions in the old Bumboat Act, not on the authority of a specific Act of Parliament. Eventually the bill, known as *An Act for the more effectual Prevention of Depredations on the River Thames, and in its vicinity*, was laid before Parliament and was passed in 1800. When the Act was implemented, the Marine Police passed from private to public hands and was renamed the 'Thames River Police', the name by which they are generally known even today, despite later changes. The Bill brought new responsibilities and powers, as well as changes in the law and the punishments for crimes. The size of the institution was increased, with the magistrates being tasked with employing a sufficient number of constables but no more than thirty Surveyors. As time went on, it was discovered that only around twenty Surveyors were needed, that being the number in 1814, with just over forty watermen/constables being normally employed. The cost was established as being no more than £ 8,000 a year, with an aim eventually to reduce that figure. Initially this bill, and thus the institution, was only to exist for a period of seven years. The magistrates now had the power to deal with matters on the entire river as well as in the counties of Middlesex, Surrey, Essex and Kent.

The West India Committee did not just rely upon the Thames River Police to manage crime on the river. Even before they instituted the Marine Police, the Committee had worked to establish a series of secure docks where goods could be unloaded and stored without threat of theft. Many years of work and lobbying led to the creation of the West India Dock Company, many members of which were also members of the West India Committee. In 1802 the Company opened the West India Docks. This fortress-like complex at the Isle of Dogs survives today both as a place name and also in the form of

a series of warehouses in which many businesses and restaurants are based, as well as the Museum of London Docklands. This building is but a remnant of the original warehouse that was at one time the largest brick-built building in the world, extending to over one mile in length.

The dedication stone for West India Docks





West India Docks

Police guards were employed at the West India Docks and whilst these officers were attached to the Thames River Police Office, they were paid for by the West India Dock Company. Many more secure docks were built over the course of the next few decades and the governing bodies of these requested, and were granted, the same arrangements for policing them.

With the passing of the 1800 Act, the Police became officially responsible for the protection of all trade on the river. The Discharging Department was, however, closed following adoption by the state. Patrick Colquhoun did not remain as Magistrate, returning instead to his former position at

Queen's Square, although he now became the Receiver for the Thames River Police Office, being responsible for taking all fees, penalties and forfeitures at the office and for paying salaries. John Harriott, however, continued serving the Thames River Police for the remainder of his working life. Other magistrates were also appointed to the Thames Magistrates Court but Harriott remained the driving force behind the institution.

The success of the Marine Police was built upon; most crimes that were dealt with by the Thames River Police and Magistrates Court were now petty larcenies and misdemeanours as opposed to the grand larcenies of old. However, the reduction in crime led to a decrease in seizures of goods, of which Thames River Policemen received a share by way of commission. In order to offset this loss of funds brought about by their own success, the officers received a pay rise. Crime on the river during the first decade of the nineteenth century was varied, with the Police not only preventing theft, but in one instance also intercepting a large shipment of counterfeit Prussian coins and even arresting a suspected French spy by the name of Giuseppe (or Joseph) Canolle, who was disguised as a sailor. In addition, there were issues with allegations of foreign sailors being illegally pressed into service on British vessels.

The great success that the River Police had achieved was reflected in the fact that pilfering goods had dropped dramatically. Now the Magistrates identified the theft of coals and timber as the most prevalent and difficult crimes to prevent on the river, whilst on land their most arduous task was to combat fighting and riots between foreign sailors, of which there were a large amount in Wapping at this point in history. This demonstrates that the Thames River Police were not just confined to operations on the river but were also required to maintain law and order on its banks. This reflected the need for an effective preventative police on land, a fact that would again become apparent in December 1811.



The Thames Police Office at Wapping

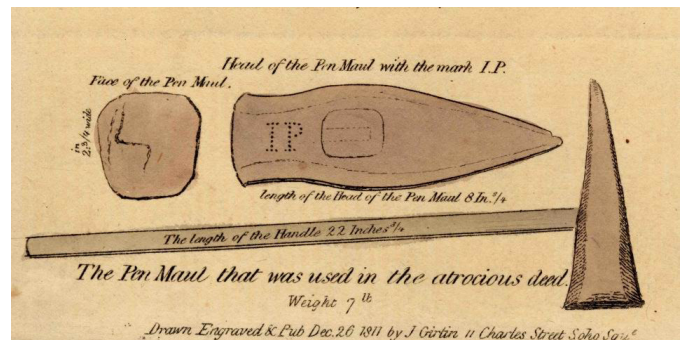


# The Ratcliffe Highway Murders of 1811

In 1811, Ratcliffe Highway was a busy road of traders, albeit with a reputation as a rough area. At No. 29 was a draper's shop owned by Mr. Timothy Marr, a twenty-four year old ex-sailor, who lived and worked there with his wife Celia, their baby son, a young apprentice named James Gowan and a servant called Margaret Jewell. Late on the night of 7th December, Mr. Marr sent Jewell on an errand. She returned shortly to find his shop shut. Having no response to ringing the bell, she waited for the parish night-watchman, Olney, to arrive. He also failed to gain entry. John Murray, a neighbour, alerted by the commotion, entered through the rear and found the bodies of the Marrs and Gowan with their heads smashed. Horrifically, the baby in its cradle had its throat cut. The news spread rapidly, reaching the Thames Police Office at Wapping.

Thames Officer Charles Horton ran to the scene and discovered what appeared to be the murder weapon, a large shipwright's maul or hammer and also a large chisel on the shop counter. On the Sunday morning, three separate authorities were investigating this crime: the Parish of St. George's in the East, Shadwell Police Office, under whose jurisdiction the murder technically fell, and the Thames River Police Office at Wapping. These forces cooperated, with John Harriott being invited to Shadwell Police station to take part in the questioning of Jewell, Olney and Murray. Harriott was determined to be proactive, visiting the crime scene and appealing for information. The Thames River Police searched shipping on the river, paying special attention to foreign vessels, reflecting a general xenophobic attitude in London at that time.

Harriott soon had the descriptions of three men seen loitering outside the Marrs' shop before the murders and offered a £20 reward for their arrest. However, in doing so, Harriott overstepped the bounds of his authority and was reprimanded by the Home Secretary. Nevertheless, the Home Office offered a reward of £100 and then raised this to an unprecedented £500, worth £37,060 in today's money. Such large sums indicate the deep impact of these brutal murders.



An image of the murder weapon



John Turner escaping the King's Arms

Eventually the Thames River Police released a description of the maul with the letters "IP" marked on its head. The chisel was identified as one that had been lost by workmen, whilst making alterations at the Marrs' shop.

Despite police efforts, another set of killings exacerbated the panic. On 19th December John Turner raised the alarm that murder was being committed at the King's Arms where he lodged. A small crowd forced their way in to discover the landlord, Mr. Williamson, a big and strong fifty-six year old, his wife and their servant, Bridget Harrington, with their heads beaten in and throats cut. It appeared that the murderer had fled out of the back onto a muddy bank, where a footprint was found. An iron bar, apparently the murder weapon, was lying by the victims. The Williamsons' granddaughter had survived, asleep upstairs. Turner provided the description of a man he had seen bending over Mrs. Williamson's body.

These murders inflamed an already tense situation. More rewards, raised by parishes and public subscription, were offered. Many people were arrested on little or no evidence, especially Portuguese and Irish individuals, reflecting both the panic and the prejudices of the day. Arrests outside

London showed how the panic had spread across the country. Amidst this confusion, John Williams, a sailor who had once sailed with Timothy Marr, was arrested on 22nd. He lodged at the Pear Tree Public House but frequently visited the King's Arms. He was arrested on the tenuous grounds of being seen near this hostelry before the murders, returning late to his lodgings and also possessing more money than usual; the latter he explained as being derived from having pawned some clothes. He was remanded and questioned.

John Turner did not identify Williams as the man he had seen, but did recognise him from his trips to the King's Arms. Mary Rice testified that she had washed Williams's bloody shirt a few days after the Marrs' murder but he claimed that this was the result of a bar brawl. The first real breakthrough came on Christmas Eve, when the maul was identified as belonging to John Peterson, a sailor who had left some possessions at the Pear Tree whilst he returned to sea. Mary Rice's son, William, was able to testify that the maul belonged to Peterson as he and his brother frequently played with it. Inquiries continued and John Cuthperson, another Pear Tree lodger, testified that Williams had washed muddy stockings the day after the Williamsons' murders, indicating a possible escape via the muddy bank.

On Boxing Day, Harriott and Thames River Police Office magistrates directed about ten of their officers to patrol the streets rather than the river, in order to protect and reassure the neighbourhood. They returned to river duty on 30th, after the Parish of Wapping had formed more night patrols. This demonstrated the need for a proper preventative land police similar to the Thames River Police.

The day after Boxing Day, Williams was found hanged in his cell, before he could be questioned any further. It was deemed suicide, with many viewing it as an admission of his guilt. It was decided that Williams' corpse would process around the crime scenes, stopping for a few moments outside each location. On Tuesday 31st December, his body with the maul, chisel and iron bar displayed beside him was duly paraded and then buried at the crossroads of Cable Street and Cannon Street, the traditional fate of suicides.



John Williams' body on display

The authorities believed there was a second murderer but they were never found. Although many were convinced of Williams' guilt, he was never convicted of murder and his exact involvement was questioned at the time: he had alibis and the evidence was highly circumstantial. He also bore almost no resemblance to the man seen by John Turner. Prime Minister Spencer Percival later commented that his "*guilt was still wrapped up in mystery.*" Some historians believe that William Ablass, another sailor with a history of violence, who knew Williams, was possibly the murderer. He was a large man with the necessary strength to overcome the burly Mr Williamson. He also was not able to produce a totally satisfactory alibi.

In the aftermath of the murders, Harriott recommended to a Committee of the House of Commons on policing that the old night-watchmen system should be scrapped, as the murders had highlighted their ineffectiveness and proposed that a new structure of protective and preventative policing, like that of the Thames River Police, should be introduced. Although no new system was introduced at this time, many were convinced of the necessity for police reform.

# The Metropolitan Police and Amalgamation

Following the Ratcliffe Highway murders, the Thames River Police continued to develop. It became clear that, although the Thames River Police had been highly effective in suppressing crime in the area they patrolled, it still existed further down the river, with River Pirates still operating near Gravesend. Thames River Police Sailing Cutters, first introduced in 1804, helped to limit their activities, and also prevent theft from naval stores and smuggling. The Cutter was crewed by one Surveyor and several Constables for periods of 14 days at a stretch. The East India Dock Company and other ship owners applied to the Thames River Police for assistance further downstream, a greater distance than the police rowing galleys could go; this showed how effective the Thames River Police were perceived to be at this time, but also demonstrated their limitations.

In order to cope better with the larger jurisdiction that the Thames River Police now had, Harriott proposed a new plan to the Home Office, which was accepted. To this end, they leased two old Hulks from the Navy in 1817, ships that had been used as prisons. HMS *Port Mahon* was placed beside Somerset House upriver from Wapping, whilst HMS *Tower* was placed downriver at Blackwall Point. However, John Harriott would not see this plan come to fruition. He died in early January 1817, whilst Patrick Colquhoun

died in 1820.

## Floating Police Stations

The *Tower* was retired as a floating police station in 1826 and *Port Mahon* in 1836. A replacement, HMS *Investigator*, was stationed off Norfolk Street. This was replaced by HMS *Royalist*, in 1856. Another vessel, the *Scorpion*, was also used between 1858 and 1874. The *Royalist* was stationed at East Greenwich after 1874,



The *Royalist*

the previous location being protected by the new floating Waterloo Pier Police Station. The *Royalist* was known as 'the Abode of Bliss', after Inspector 'Daddy' Bliss, who lived aboard the vessel. The *Royalist* was not retired until 1894, with the establishment of Blackwall Police Station.

Eventually, in 1829 the Metropolitan Police Act was passed and thus the London Metropolitan Police came into existence. Although the New Police, as they were known, were hailed at the time as being a new way of policing, i.e. preventative, community policing, they were in fact built on the proven work of the Thames River Police. Robert Peel's *Principles of Law Enforcement*, the

ethical framework for this new era of policing on land, reflected this. Issued to every new Metropolitan Police officer in 1829, the principles outlined a concept of community policing whereby, "*The police are the public and the public are the police*". This had been a philosophy crucial to the success of the Thames River Police, who drew their men from the river community, recruiting ex-navy men and those who already worked on the Thames. The premise was that officers would understand the complexities of the place in which they worked, and in many cases, have an existing relationship with the local community. Patrick Colquhoun's ideas are often cited as one of the main inspirations behind Robert Peel's New Police and, even today, the Metropolitan Police present themselves as being first and foremost a preventative police force.

The Police Offices created in 1792 were absorbed into the new force but the Thames River Police continued as an independent institution for another 10 years. The Metropolitan Police Act 1839 meant that they were finally integrated into the Metropolitan Police on 27th August of that year to become Thames Division, as the Met was granted jurisdiction over the river. Bow Street also continued as a separate force for those ten years and was amalgamated with the Metropolitan Police in the same year but, unlike the Thames River Police, they did not continue to exist as a separate entity. The structure of Thames Division was also changed with the Magistrates Court being separated from the Wapping Station and removed to Arbour Square in Stepney. The old courtroom at Wapping was

We have a unique insight into the River Police in the middle of the nineteenth century, from an article published in *Household Words* magazine in February 1853, written by the famous author, Charles Dickens. He tells us, at that point in time, Thames Division's jurisdiction extended from Battersea to Barking Creek and consisted of ninety-eight men with eight duty boats and two supervision boats.

Among other facts, he describes the state of crime on the river. Some of the problems were still the same, notably theft by Lumpers. The preferred clothing for this was now a loose canvas jacket with a broad hem at the bottom which, when turned inside out, could conceal packages. Like their predecessors over

fifty years earlier, these men also smuggled goods ashore on behalf of a ship's crew. They were able to dispose of their stolen goods via marine store dealers, demonstrating that the problem of Receivers endured. Copper nails and other items used in ship construction were still being stolen from the shipyards by Shipwrights and other workmen.

### Robert Branford

One example of Peel's police reflecting the London community was Robert Branford. Born in Stoke in 1817, Branford was described in Chief Inspector Cavanagh's memoirs, as "*the only half-caste superintendent the service ever had.*" Bradford joined the Metropolitan Police as a Constable in 1838, was promoted to Sergeant in 1846, permanently promoted to Inspector in 1852 and to Superintendent in 1856, retiring 10 years later. Cavanagh suggests Branford was highly respected, "*not an educated man; but what to my idea was of much greater importance, he possessed a thorough knowledge of Police matters in general*". Upon his retirement a Southwark Court Magistrate commended Branford on his "*well-earned testimonial*" and "*valuable services*". Branford reflects a rising black population in early 19th century London and challenges existing views about attitudes to race at the time. As the first Metropolitan Police officer of identifiable black heritage, he pre-dates modern-day preconceptions of black people's employment in the police by over a century.

### The first uniforms

Becoming part of the Metropolitan Police meant the Thames River Police were issued with uniforms for the first time. Previously the men had only been issued with greatcoats. The earliest Metropolitan Police uniforms were based on the fashions of the day, in order to reflect that the Police were part of the community. In the same manner, the earliest Thames Division uniforms were based on clothing normally worn by sailors to reflect their area of responsibility. They wore a straw hat, with a black canvas cover to protect it during the winter, as well as reefer jackets with waistcoats. Inspectors wore peaked caps with a plain black uniform, and a coat. The black colour of these uniforms led to Thames Policemen being nicknamed Black Beetles.



Other types of criminal had now appeared, such as the Truckers, more smugglers than thieves, who aimed to smuggle ashore larger parcels of illicit goods than the Lumpers could manage. They often sold groceries and the like to sailors in order to get aboard vessels without suspicion, making them somewhat reminiscent of those who sailed Bumboats on the river for the purpose of committing crimes. Dickens also described the Dredgermen, who under the pretence of dredging articles up from the bottom of the river, would lurk near barges and other low craft and, when the opportunity presented itself, threw whatever they could get their hands on into the river. They would then return at a later point to dredge up these goods from the riverbed. The more skilled of these were able to go dry dredging, where they would use their dredges to whip away anything that might be lying on the deck of a barge or low ship.

Lastly, there were the Tier-rangers, who would silently wait alongside the tiers of shipping in the Pool of London during the night until they could hear the Captain and the Mate snoring aboard ship. They then boarded the vessel, entered the Captain's cabin and made off with money, watches, items of clothing, boots and the like. Dickens also "*looked over the charge books, admirably kept, and found the prevention so good that there were not five hundred entries (including drunk and disorderly) in a whole year.*"

# The *Princess Alice* disaster of 1878

The *Princess Alice* disaster, now largely forgotten, is the worst maritime disaster to have occurred on the Thames. Whilst the Thames River Police could do nothing to prevent this, they and the other members of the Metropolitan Police were there to ensure that the aftermath of the unfortunate event was handled as safely and securely as possible.

On the evening of 3rd September 1878, the *Princess Alice*, a paddle steamer owned by the London Steamboat Company, was returning from Gravesend with a large number of passengers, some of them coming back from a day trip, others returning from holiday, when she sailed into the stretch of water known as Gallion's Reach. Commanded by Captain William Grinsted and named after Queen Victoria's daughter, she was a familiar sight on the river, famed as the "Shah's boat" as she once carried the Shah of Persia and his retinue, with the Persian sun and lion still painted on her paddle boxes. Coming the other way, on a return trip to Newcastle-on-Tyne from Millwall Docks, was the *Bywell Castle*, a collier (a ship designed to carry large amounts of coal). She was commanded by Captain Harrison, but was being steered by a Thames Pilot called Christopher Dix.

As these ships neared each other, a horrible accident occurred. When passing each other port-to-port, standard practice for ships even today, inexplicably the *Princess Alice* swung in front of the *Bywell Castle* causing the larger and heavier *Bywell Castle* to collide with the paddle steamer. The scrapes later measured on the *Bywell Castle's* hull were 5ft long, showing how far she had cut into the other vessel.

The *Princess Alice* was very crowded. In many cases whole families were aboard, including many members of Captain Grinsted's own family. No record was made of how many had boarded the *Princess Alice* downriver but it is clear that she was packed with over eight hundred people. The impact from the collision caused the *Princess Alice* to break in two.

As soon as the danger was evident, the *Bywell Castle's* crew did their utmost to save lives. This was not an isolated part of the river and there were many vessels and people who launched boats to rescue survivors, including men from the local gasworks. Despite the immediate response of those nearby, the disaster occurred swiftly. The *Princess Alice* sank in the space of three to five minutes, with those below deck standing little chance of survival; nor was being on deck much safer, as most Victorians could not swim. Additionally, many people were dressed in clothes that prohibited them from swimming even if they knew how. Women's long, heavy dresses were particularly dangerous. However, in one reported incident, a woman was wearing a padded woollen dress, which acted as a float, thus saving her life.

During Victorian times, the Thames was heavily polluted, owing to the large amount of sewage and industrial waste that was poured into it, and was infamous during hot summers for the horrible smell that it produced. The site of this disaster was not far from a sewage outlet and those who survived in the water were in many cases plagued by bad health for some time afterwards. At a conservative estimate, at least six hundred people died within the space of a few minutes. As there was no definitive list of people on-board, it is impossible to ascertain accurate numbers but the real figure is probably over seven hundred. This does not include those who survived the disaster but may have later died of health problems caused by the foul river water.

As the news slowly filtered down to Woolwich and further into London, different divisions of the police began to organise a response. Due to the sheer speed with which it had happened, there was never any chance of the message reaching any police unit, including Thames Division, for a rescue to be dispatched, let alone arrive, in time. Thames Division still exclusively used rowing galleys, and the Division's Superintendent Alstin had to specially commandeer a steam-powered launch to supervise matters at the scene. Given the time-frame of the disaster, had Thames Division vessels been steam powered, it would have made no difference to rescue efforts. Land police at Woolwich

organised mortuaries so people could identify the dead. Sadly, not all bodies could be recognised.

Thames Division arrived on the scene not to rescue the living but to aid in the recovery of the dead and to deal with the wreck of the *Princess Alice*, which now lay on the bottom of the river. They worked long shifts around the clock to recover bodies. They themselves had not escaped unscathed; Constable Edward King had been on the *Princess Alice* with his wife, Frances, and six-month old son, Edward. Constable King survived, as all Thames Policemen were required to be able to swim. The bodies of his wife and child were identified by relatives. He was not the only officer to lose his family; an officer who was still on the force in 1891 had lost his wife and all his family, save for his young son, during the disaster. Another officer had a narrow escape; he had just missed the *Princess Alice* at Sheerness and watched it sail away.



Inquiries at Woolwich Police Court

During the weekend following the disaster, several hundred deceased were pulled from the river by Thames Division and their assistants. Mortal remains were still being recovered later in the week, with Superintendent Alstin on his launch bringing up the bodies of a man, woman and child whilst on his way to Erith. Operations were hampered by the thousands of people that came to see the scene of the disaster. Pickpockets roamed throughout the crowds and at least one man was arrested for robbing a corpse. Both land and river police tried to keep order, the latter having to do so amidst the flotilla of boats that appeared upon the river.

Matters were made worse by the raising of the wreck, with many people trying to break off parts of it as souvenirs. Two such people were Arthur Mills and Richard Shepard. They were confronted by Thames Division Constables Pullen and Vine, whom they threatened with a knife, but were subdued and arrested, and later sentenced to fourteen days hard labour, without the option of paying a fine. Thames Division guarded the wreck day and night, alongside the men of the Thames Conservancy, paying special attention to the recovered boilers and engines, as these were attractive targets for metal thieves.

A memorial to those who died now stands in Woolwich Cemetery.



Recovering the *Princess Alice*

# The Late 19th Century and the World Wars

An article published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1891, *A Night with the Thames Police*, tells us about the state of the division at the end of the nineteenth century. It comprised two hundred and two men, with twenty-eight police galleys and three steam launches. Thanks to the regular patrols, the value of goods stolen on the river was now only about £100 a year. Smuggling still continued but was reduced to meagre items, such as a few coils of rope, an ingot of lead or even a few fish. Wapping Police Station now had a library, reading room and billiard room, with accommodation for sixteen single officers to live. 1891 saw the police purchase, from Bridewell Hospital, the freehold for Wapping Police Station and boatyard, where they had been tenants for almost a century.



Waterloo Police Pier

Waterloo Bridge was the most popular spot on the river to commit suicide, to the point that it was nicknamed the Bridge of Sighs. 25 bodies had been recovered from the river in 1890 and, when *The Strand Magazine* journalist went on the river with the police, they were still looking for 10 unrecovered corpses. During patrol, men would not only watch for evidence of theft but also keep an eye on the water for signs of bodies.

As for the men themselves, they were still drawn from the same stock, namely men who had served with the navy and the merchant service. Many of them were also old colonials. They were hardy, with a robust constitution, and were capable of rowing for six to eight hours in any one shift in all weathers. When the situation necessitated it, they were required to work for longer periods, in one instance for thirty-six hours at a stretch.

In the early 20th Century, around 1908-1909, there once again seemed to be an issue with plunder on the river. Thefts were mainly of exports wares, especially those bound for ports in Australia, New Zealand, and Tasmania. These goods were primarily stolen from dock sheds, principally the Royal Albert and Victoria Docks. The commodities kept in these sheds could remain there for several weeks. During the day, the sheds would be opened and labourers would move goods to various vessels for transport or bring new products in for storage. During these activities, cases were broken open and goods were taken by dishonest labourers, in the same manner as their counterparts over 100 years previously. Several barges were left totally unattended, which meant that they were easy targets for theft. Coal was still a very popular target; many complained that dredgers were stealing this fuel, reminiscent of the problems of the 1850s.

Waterloo Police Station had forty-eight men on duty at any one time, with four single officers living there. The old ship, the *Royalist*, which was once stationed at Waterloo, was now moored at Greenwich. Waterloo station was well known by those who sailed on the river for the pots of geraniums outside, as well as its climbing fuchsias. The evening that the writer spent with the police reveals other aspects of life and death in London.

## Thames Police Boats

Following the *Princess Alice* disaster, the Thames Division received steam-powered launches for the first time in 1884. They had been criticised both before and in the immediate aftermath of the *Princess Alice* disaster for still relying on rowing galleys, as they had since 1798. A steam powered vessel had to be specially hired for Superintendent Alstin to supervise the disaster scene. These new launches were infamous for regularly breaking down. The force still continued to use rowing galleys, with some eventually being motorised. The last rowing galley patrol took place in 1922. Petrol and paraffin fuelled launches, with an internal combustion engine, were utilised for the first time in the 1910s and diesel powered craft were also adopted around 1920.



Despite these issues, crime had decreased in the four years before 1909, a fact that Thames Division felt clearly indicated their vigilance. The First World War, however, presented its own difficulties with an increase in larcenies. The blackout conditions, imposed due to the threat of bombing by Zeppelins, meant that there were many more opportunities to commit theft under the cover of darkness, with police observation consequently being made more difficult.

Some serving officers enlisted, many joining the Royal Navy, but sadly ten Thames officers died during the Great War. The loss of men to the fighting forces resulted in the division being below normal strength and thus meant it could not provide full protection to property on the river. Despite these difficulties, the war caused Thames Division to adopt additional duties. They had to deal with deaths and civilian casualties from bombing raids, and seize and guard any enemy vessels that were still in the river following the outbreak of hostilities. Officers had to ensure the blackout was maintained, that there was no illicit signalling and to keep watch for enemy landings. Due to the recycling of materials in the Second World War, there are precious few records of Thames Division operations in the First World War. However, there are some stories passed down by word of mouth. According to one account, when wounded troops were being brought home from the Second Battle of the Somme, the train carrying them broke down at Wapping Station. Thames Division and ex-naval volunteers used ropes and tackle to hoist the men needing urgent treatment up from the train, stretchers being nearly impossible to use owing to the very steep stairs at the station.



Thames Division practising for a gas attack

The Second World War brought new trials. Thames Division, like all parts of the Metropolitan Police, had to assist with the effects of the Blitz, which destroyed many parts of London. Thames Division ferried numerous people across the river, out of the East End, which was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe. For many that they rescued in such a fashion, it was the first time that they had ever been out of the East End or even Wapping. Several other sites on the riverfront were bombed, with Thames Division rescuing those who were trapped and could not escape by land. On several occasions, police boats had to be used to move barges laden with

petroleum away from fires so as to prevent further explosions. Wapping Police Station, itself, had several close calls thanks to bombing and was on one occasion directly hit with a small-calibre bomb that fortunately resulted in only minimal damage. Its cells and basement were used as makeshift air raid shelters. One Thames Officer, PC Dove, a War Reserve, was killed in an air raid in July 1941.

The damage caused by the Blitz was not limited to the land. Shipping was targeted in the river; the Luftwaffe even dropped mines into the Thames. On 21st March 1941 officers, who were on duty near Barking Creek, heard a heavy explosion around 06:15 and saw the *S.S. Halo* enveloped in smoke and steam and clearly in distress. Another ship, the *S.T. Charners* was able to rescue the crew from the *Halo* and land them at Beckton Lower Jetty nearby. From the crew, Police Sergeant Bertram Davis learned that the Chief Officer and three sailors were on the *Halo's* forecastle, having just weighed anchor when an explosion occurred, blowing the men over the side of the ship. Davis boarded the now partially sunken *Halo* to search for trapped, injured survivors but found no one. Police Sergeant Helliar and PC McDonnell also boarded the vessel to aid in the search, turn off the on-board lights and place wreck markers on the vessel to alert other ships. Some metal and wire was found on the forecastle, apparently from an exploded parachute mine but no trace was found of the men that had been blown overboard. Thames Division also had to cope with other extraordinary events, such as dealing with a gunner aboard a merchant vessel, who was firing his machine gun at random. Fortunately they were able to resolve the situation before any serious damage or injury was done.

Like the First World War, many Thames officers joined the Armed Forces, five of whom died in action. Sadly, Sergeant Bertram Davis was among them, whilst serving in the Royal Air Force in 1944.



# The 20th Century and the *Marchioness* disaster

From the early twentieth century Thames Division patrols covered all thirty-six miles of the tidal river within the Metropolitan Police district, from Teddington Locks in Surrey to Dartford Creek in Kent. In the middle of the century they provided special escort during Queen Elizabeth's coronation. The 1960s saw an expansion of the division, with the non-tidal river up to Staines Bridge in Berkshire now within their jurisdiction. The 1970s are viewed as the high point in the division's existence, covering fifty-four miles of river with patrols going out from seven police stations. The 1980s saw the demise of commercial trade on the Thames and thus the loss of the division's founding purpose, whilst, unhappily, the end of the decade saw another disaster on the river.

## Thames Police Slang

Policing the river has produced its own words for some of the situations on the Thames. Large pieces of driftwood are known as 'knobblies', a 'wim-wom' is something that has fouled a boat's propeller, whilst a temporary metal patch on a boat's hull is known as a 'tingle'. A 'ropey' was a water-borne marine store dealer.



Thames Division carrying injured people in special stretchers

In the early hours of the warm and clear morning of 20th August 1989, the *Marchioness*, a pleasure launch owned by Tidal Cruises, was proceeding downriver with the tide. Captained by Stephen Faldo, she had 130 partying people on board, having embarked from Charing Cross Pier. Also coming downriver, from Nine Elms, was the dredging vessel *Bowbelle*, captained by Douglas Henderson. In between Southwark Bridge and Cannon Street Bridge, the two vessels collided at 1:46 a.m., with the starboard bow of the *Bowbelle* hitting the *Marchioness*' port side. The anchor of the *Bowbelle* sliced through the port side of the *Marchioness* and, as the *Bowbelle* was learning against the *Marchioness*, the *Marchioness*' stern was pushed away and the whole ship swung around the *Bowbelle*'s bow. As she did so, she started to flood, rolled over and sunk rapidly; in fact, she took only a matter of seconds to sink, possibly no more than thirty.

The Thames Division responded immediately; the initial message about the disaster came through on the radio to Wapping Station and officers were underway on two police boats within three minutes of the collision. At Waterloo Police Pier, around the same time, officers heard a passing vessel, the *Royal Princess*, sound her horn, alerting them to trouble. Two more police boats proceeded to the scene. Thames Division's quick response meant that, within five minutes of the collision, there were two police vessels on the scene, joined by another two within another five minutes. Between the four vessels, they rescued fifty-one people from the water. Other Police vessels later joined the search for survivors. A large number of officers from the Metropolitan Police were subsequently involved in the aftermath of the disaster, whilst the Commissioner's own launch carried Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to survey the scene on the afternoon following the sad event.

Thames Division searched the river for the next five days, recovering twenty-seven bodies, the remaining twenty-four being trapped in the sunken boat. The wreck was raised by the Port of London Authority, with The Metropolitan Police Underwater Search Unit, part of Thames Division, helping Port of London Authority divers to attach the cables to the hull. The Wapping Police Station yard was used as a temporary mortuary before the disused basement of the boat repair workshop was converted into one, with officers being drafted in from the Airport Division in order to allow Thames Division to carry out their work on the river. Other pleasure vessels that were in the vicinity at the time of the incident were able to start rescuing people before the police arrived, which meant that, out of the 130 people on board, seventy-nine survived the incident with fifty-one dead. This made it the worst disaster on the Thames since the loss of the *Princess Alice*.



The *Marchioness* after she was raised from the riverbed



The formal investigation, not held until 2000, found that the individual officers from Thames Division had performed well, with the crews of the first four boats on the scene being praised for putting their own safety at risk in order to save lives. It noted that there was a distinct lack of rescue craft and the police launches that the officers had used were not properly equipped for the task, although they had performed admirably in the circumstances. However, they found no basis to criticise the police for this, as there was no legal responsibility to create a contingency plan for disasters on the river. There is a memorial to the victims of the *Marchioness* disaster in the nave of Southwark Cathedral.

The late twentieth century saw a decrease in the strength of the division and the closure of the outlying police stations. A plaque recognising the Thames Division Officers who were involved in the *Marchioness* Disaster

# The Thames River Police today

Today the Thames River Police are a smaller force once again, but are still based in Wapping on the same site that they have occupied since 1798. Although the Pool of London is no longer the centre of trade that it once was, they still engage in many of the tasks that they have executed over the last two centuries. They still intercept hidden and smuggled goods bound for the Port of London, being called out to search for containers that are attached beneath the waterline to ships, that now dock further down the Thames and in the estuary. They also still deal with thefts from vessels on the river and have stop and search powers.

The Marine Policing Unit, as they were renamed in 2001, is now responsible for the stretch of the Thames between Hampton Court and Dartford, a total of forty-seven miles. In addition to this, they are also responsible for over 250 miles of waterways and other bodies of water across the rest of London. In the line of duty, they encounter many of the same situations that other Metropolitan Police Officers do. Increased cooperation with other police forces, the border force and the security services means that they often are asked to operate beyond their usual geographical area of responsibility.

Their response teams operate around the clock, every day of the week, with at least seven officers being stationed at Wapping at any one time in order to respond swiftly, if necessary. They engage in community policing in such waterborne communities as marinas, and they still patrol the river for the purpose of preventing crime, as they have been doing continuously since 1798. They remain responsible for the recovery and identification of bodies found in the Thames, with over fifty each year losing their lives to the river, fifty-three in 2015. Unfortunately, around forty of these are suicides. Although they respond to Marine emergencies, the technical responsibility for search and rescue operations on the Thames lies with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, operating from the Tower Lifeboat Station, which was once Thames Division's Waterloo station. This is the busiest of the Institution's stations with crews on call at all times in order to provide the fastest response possible.



A Patrol Boat passing the Tower Lifeboat Station.

The Marine Policing Unit assists in maintaining peace, public order and in keeping London safe, providing support for major events: the London Marathon, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee River Pageant, the Olympics, the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race and New Year's Eve celebrations. They also render support during large-scale demonstrations on bridges and near rivers, as well as advising and assisting private boat owners. In addition, when the situation arises, they also provide an escort for any warships that might be on the River. Officers may also be stationed on vessels coming into the city during times of heightened threat.

The nature of the Unit means that they also provide more specialist services, such as the Underwater & Confined Space Search Team, also known as the Dive Team. The Dive Team is the busiest such team in U.K. policing and carries out a range of tasks from recovering bodies to crime searches. As



A police diver operating in a confined space.

the official name suggests, this sometimes requires them to operate within confined spaces and hazardous environments not encountered by most divers, for which they receive special training. This can be difficult and unpleasant work with officers having to search with limited sight in the very muddy water of the Thames or possibly even with no visibility in some underground channels and reservoirs. One officer recalled searching for a body in total darkness only to find it rather gruesomely by putting his hand in its mouth.

The historical need to search beneath bridges on the river, which requires the ability to climb, means the Marine Policing Unit also hosts the Line Access team, which is responsible for performing searches at height, including the top of tall buildings and sports venues. Despite the origins of this practice, land-based searches are required far more frequently than ones on the river.

intensive training course, lasting up to a year and a half, which includes learning relevant legislation and acquiring local knowledge, along with boat handling and other related skills. Upon completion, they receive a certificate equivalent to the qualifications required to be a commercial boat master on the river.

Currently the Unit comprises sixty-five officers, who are specially trained in the wide range of policing activities that can arise on the river. New officers in the Unit have to complete an

Following this, they may train in one of the Unit's specialist areas, such as the Dive Team, or receive training in Tactical Marine Skills. This may involve learning advanced boat handling techniques or navigation skills, which in turn allows these officers to work alongside specialists in other Metropolitan Police Units, such as firearms officers or dog handlers. As in most careers, officers continue to learn after passing these tests, with a period of about seven years' experience of boat handling usually being needed to reach the required standard. They also regularly engage in further training to ensure that they are able to deal with any issue that may arise on the river.



Wapping Police Station as it looks today.

# The Thames River Police in popular culture

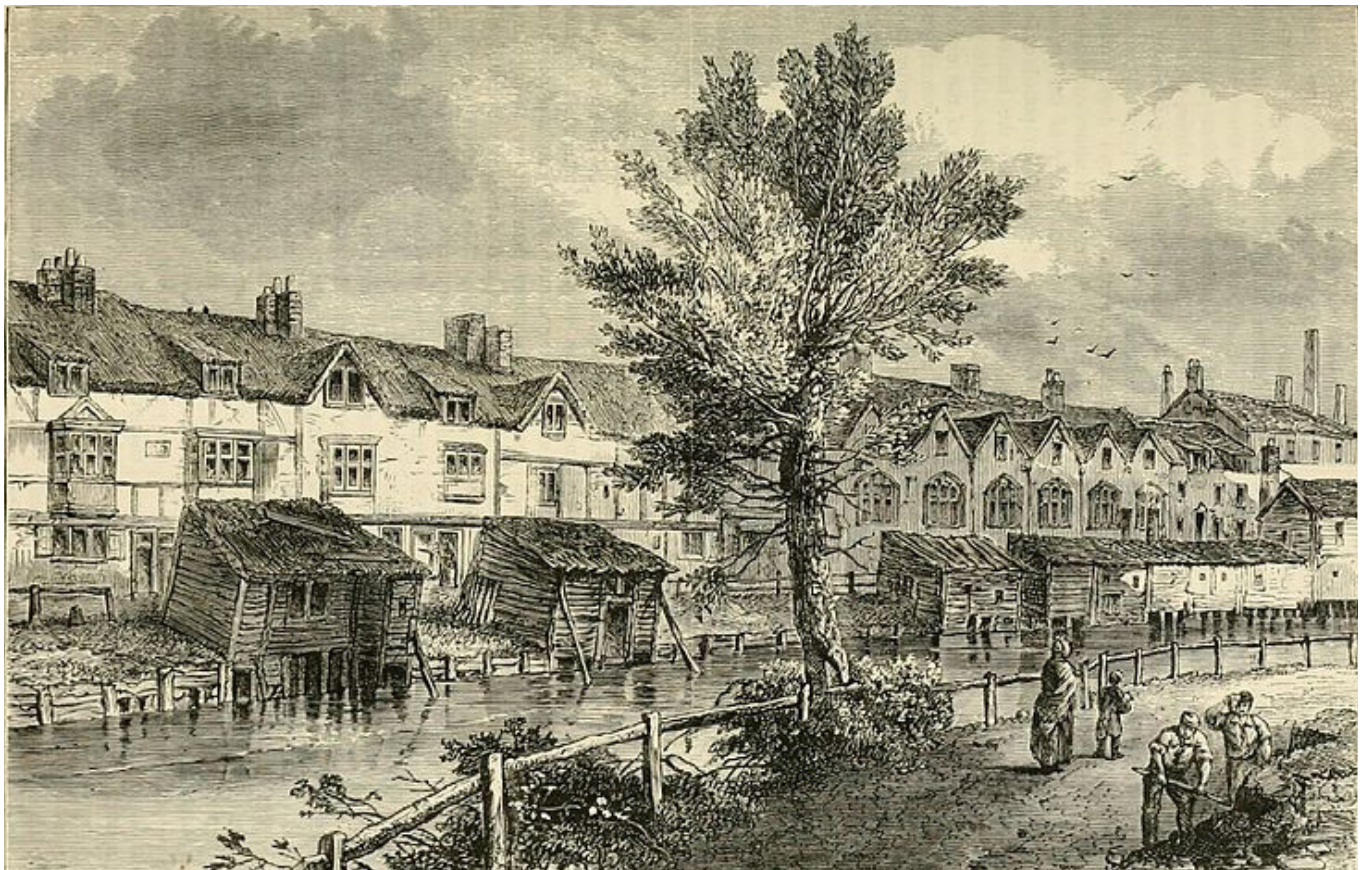
By Leah Alexander

While few people may be aware of the long and varied existence of the Thames River Police, references to them have seeped into popular culture throughout the centuries. They have been an inspiration for many of those writing novels about the nineteenth century London Docklands, and their gruesome work has made them particularly popular with those writing thrillers about the Thames.

The famous Victorian author and social commentator, Charles Dickens, appears to have had a particular interest in the Thames Police. He provided a unique insight into a Thames Police patrol in an article published in *Household Words* in 1853, in which he described his experience spending a night on the river with them. However, it is thought that Dicken's experience with the Thames Police was not confined to one visit, and may have extended to occasional patrols to explore the seedy underside of London, places he would later immortalise in his books. One such location was Jacob's Island, described in Dicken's 1830s novel *Oliver Twist*, as "*the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London*". A notorious "rookery" in London, the location was the backdrop for the death of *Oliver Twist*'s principal villain, Bill Sykes. Furthermore, Bill Sykes's notorious gang leader, Fagin, reflected the early criminals the Thames Police set out to catch. Described as a "*receiver of stolen goods*", Fagin reflected what Colquhoun referred to in his 1800 *Treatise on the Commerce and Police of the River Thames* as, "*noxious and hostile to the interest of Society*"; those who would sell stolen goods on the black market. Dickens' works explore the social reality and criminality of 19th century London, bringing to life the world in which the Thames Police would operate.



Fagin, one of Charles Dickens' most famous creations.



Folly Ditch, Jacob's Island.

The Thames Police have also found their way into popular late 19th century works, such as that of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective. The 1890 book, *The Sign of Four*, includes a boat chase, described by Geoffrey Budworth in his work on the Thames River Police as the "first fictional account of a powered boat chase". Holmes and Dr Watson board the launch at Westminster Pier, before embarking on a boat chase which takes them past West India Docks, Limehouse Reach, the Isle of Dogs and Gallion's Reach. Conan Doyle provides a vivid description of the mechanics of an early Thames police boat, describing how "The furnaces roared, and the powerful engines whizzed and clanked like a great metallic heart. Her sharp, steep prow cut through the still river-water and sent two rolling waves to right and to left of us. With every throb of the engines we sprang and quivered like a living thing." Perhaps like Dickens, Conan Doyle too spent time with the river police, learning about the river from the men who knew it best.



The front cover of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*.

More recently, with the Thames becoming a popular backdrop for movie filming, Thames Division have found themselves in cameo roles in some of Hollywood's biggest blockbusters. Pierce Brosnan's 1999 film *The World is Not Enough* opens with a dramatic boat chase, with Bond speeding down the Thames, chasing a villain in a speedboat from the MI6 headquarters in Vauxhall to the then Millennium Dome. Though unable to catch her, Bond is in turn chased by two river policeman, wearing the Metropolitan Police's trademark high-vis jacket emblazoned with the word 'POLICE' and driving two of the standard Thames Police rigid-inflatable boats (R.I.B.s).

# The influence of the Thames River Police

Although the Thames River Police do not enjoy universal renown, their influence has proved to be global. The necessity of policing the waters of major cities has become increasingly evident since the foundation of the Marine Police, and many other locales have created their own marine police force. The fact that they were visible and had full-time paid officers, who were familiar with the area they patrolled, set an important precedent. The principles upon which they were founded, namely that of preventative policing, heavily influenced the institution of the London Metropolitan Police, which has been both a model for other British police forces and indeed for forces around the world. Thus, these forces are also the inheritors of the legacy of the Marine Police. Even today the Metropolitan Police is still the best-known and most visible force in Britain and its methods and efficiency enjoy world-wide respect.

The Police System in many former British Colonies has been heavily based on the Metropolitan Police. In Hong Kong, following the formation of an initial police force by the military in the immediate aftermath of British acquisition of the Territory, the first Police Ordinance was passed and the police began to organise along British lines. To this end, three officers from the Metropolitan Police were sent to Hong Kong to lead the establishment of the new police force. This idea would be repeated in other places, with many Metropolitan Police officers being sent to serve and manage colonial police forces, taking the Metropolitan Police training manual with them. A number of police officers from the colonies were also sent to Britain to attend the Metropolitan Police training school.

Colonial police forces did not develop in the same fashion as the Metropolitan Police, with the semi-military model of the Royal Irish Constabulary being widely adopted as a more efficient means to maintain order. This is not to say that Metropolitan Police ideals were not implemented under British rule: they at least had some effect in Hong Kong, where their own Marine Police boasted the first integrated working force in the Hong Kong Police, with officers of British and Chinese origins living, working and socialising together.

Sydney, Australia established a force in 1833 modelled on the Metropolitan Police, albeit with additional duties. The urban Constabulary in Cape Town, South Africa was also very much based on the traditions of the Metropolitan Police. Canada, whose legal traditions grew out of a combination of French and English ideas, established the Toronto Police in 1835, again based on the Metropolitan model. This would be followed a few years later by the foundation of similar forces in Quebec City and Montreal. It is interesting to note however, that Canada's most famous police force, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, originally founded in 1873 as the North West Mounted Police, was based more on the models of France and Ireland, in that it was run on more militaristic lines than the Metropolitan force.

Law enforcement in the Caribbean had previously followed the traditional English system of policing based on parish constables and watchmen, albeit supported by military forces and local militia in fear of a slave rebellion. There were constables in Bermuda going as far back as 1620. The Caribbean's long history of policing led to it being a testing ground for reform to a Metropolitan model. Following the abolition of slavery, the Colonial Office attempted to establish a civil police force



A Hong Kong Police Officer in the early 20th Century



A Mounted Police Officer in Barbados

modelled on the Metropolitan Police, and worked with the Metropolitan Police to produce a system that was designed to be 'wholly free from local influence or any class of person', so that the new police force would not be under the control of the local planters who would use it to impose slavery by another name.

These reforms were carried out far in advance of similar reforms elsewhere in the empire and did result in reorganisation and modernisation on many islands. However, after 1838, the local context, rather than the original model, determined the nature of Caribbean Police forces. Many ideas were also retained from the more militaristic Royal Irish Constabulary, resulting in a blend of the two models.

Ultimately real reform failed; the resulting colonial Caribbean police forces were quite different from the Metropolitan model, with officers often being drawn from other islands and thus not being part of the community. Many officers were also old soldiers from the West India Regiment, who saw little difference between soldiering and policing. Many of the old colonial Caribbean forces are now famed for their brutality.

Whilst the Metropolitan model was frequently altered by local context, and contended with the harsher, militaristic aspects of the Royal Irish Constabulary model, the most important principle taken from the Thames River Police was universally applied throughout the British Empire, that of preventative policing. The Metropolitan Police today continues to have an effect on policing in the Caribbean and across the rest of the world by cooperating on various issues. In recent years, Metropolitan Police officers have either been seconded to or employed by police forces in the Caribbean region to assist with operational policing, training, tackling corruption, improving relations with the local community and reform.

Colquhoun's ideas and the Metropolitan Police model did not just spread throughout the British Empire. In fact, Colquhoun's *Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* was very well received in the U.S.A., which had long since declared independence from Britain, and which utilised some of its ideas in the creation of its own police forces. However, it was not until the 1830s that the British model of policing was adopted in the USA. The New York Police was founded in the mid 1840s, not on a totally identical system to the Metropolitan Police, but instead adapting the model to incorporate American values and concerns. Nevertheless, it did still utilise some of the British force's most important aspects as it was based on the prevention of crime and disorder and visible patrolling of fixed beats, whilst also utilising rules based on those of the Metropolitan Police. Other major American cities would follow suit over the next decade and also establish police departments whose main focus was the prevention of crime and disorder.



# Conclusion

In conclusion, the Thames River Police were highly successful with their original mission to protect the trade with the West Indies on the River Thames. This success led to their adoption by the state in 1800, expanding their remit to protecting all trade on the river. In the process they continued to prove their worth, not just in combating crime on the river but also in aiding with the land investigations into the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811.

Such actions demonstrated that a preventative police force could work and would be a positive force in London. This contributed to the creation of the Metropolitan Police, based on the same principles of preventative policing as the Thames River Police. Ten years later, they amalgamated with the Metropolitan Police and unlike the other police offices, including the famed Bow Street, they continued to exist as Thames Division. They continued to police the river through the tragedy of the *Princess Alice* disaster, the danger of the World Wars and the trials of the twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Although the river has changed over the last two centuries, particularly in the last fifty years with the decline of the docks, the Thames River Police today carry on as the Marine Policing Unit with the same mission that they have had for most of their existence, namely to protect people and property on and by the water. Although the decline of the docks meant that the founding function of protecting trade on the river vanished, they still contribute by assisting with operations further out in the Thames estuary where ships now dock. The inscription of the West India Committee's archives as a UNESCO memory of the world ensures the preservation of the Thames River Police's early history.

As forerunners of the Metropolitan Police and thus all the forces that the latter has inspired, the Thames River Police are the founders of modern policing and their principles are still practised globally. They remain the oldest continuously serving police force in the world, founded by a partnership of Patrick Colquhoun, John Harriott, the Government and the West India Committee in 1798 and their historical significance is indeed accurately reflected in their association's motto – 'Primus Omnium', the first of all.

