



This display is part of a year-long project by the West India Committee to uncover a shared history between the Caribbean and police services today - that of the creation of the Thames Police, a pioneer of preventative policing whose founding principles influenced the development of policing in London and around the world. The West India Committee is a charity that promotes the welfare of the people of the West Indies and the societies in which they live. This project is in collaboration with the Metropolitan Police Service, with the support of the Thames Police Association and Heritage Lottery Fund.

To find out more about the history of the Thames River Police, visit westindiacommittee.org/thamesriverpolice/

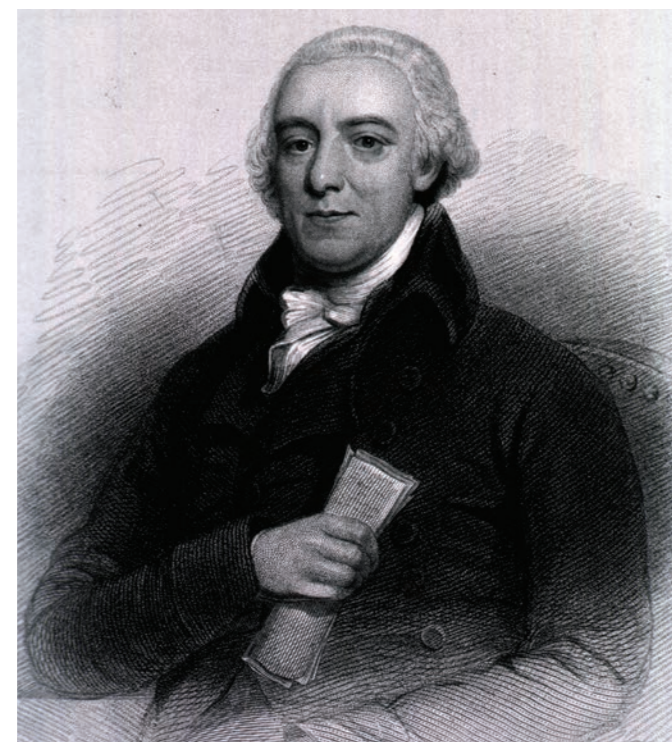
Trade and the West India Committee

The most important, profitable trade into the Port of London in the late eighteenth century came from the West Indies. Highly prized commodities such as cotton, sugar and coffee were grown through slave labour on plantations and were a major source of revenue for Britain as it entered the Industrial Revolution. Many West Indian plantation owners and merchants who lived in London were members of the West India Committee, a body aimed at promoting the economic and trade interests of the West Indies.



Crime

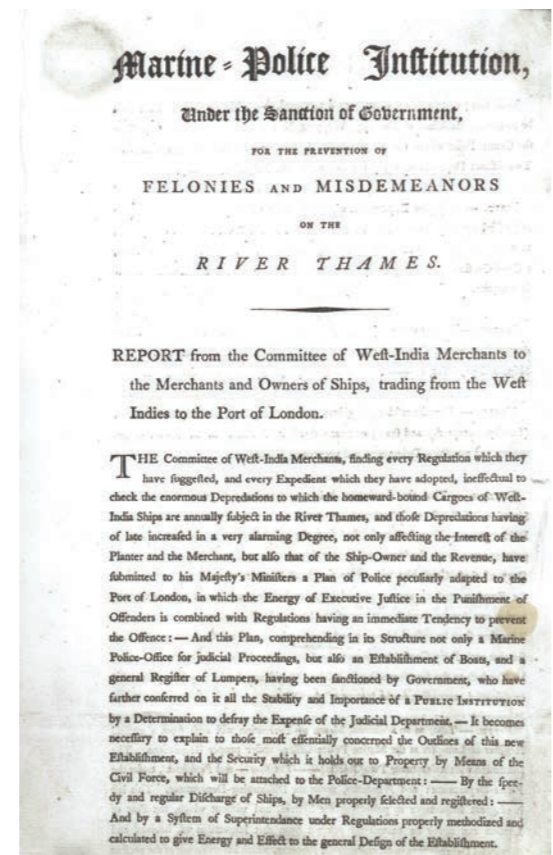
Goods imported from the West Indies were a popular target for thieves in the Port of London. In 1796 Patrick Colquhoun wrote a Treatise on crime in London, claiming that theft and corruption on the river were controlled by specialist gangs involving up to 10,850 criminals. Colquhoun identified the gangs with sensational names such as Night Thunders, Light-Horsemen, Heavy-Horsemen, Scuffle-hunters, and River Pirates. Colquhoun's Treatise proposed a radical plan of preventative policing to combat crime that later inspired the creation of police forces around the world.



Patrick Colquhoun, author of the Treatise on Crime in London, 1796. The West India Committee, 1796. The Port of London, 1796.



John Harriott, magistrate who helped found the Marine Police, 1798. The West India Committee, 1798. The Port of London, 1798.



Marine Police Institution, 1798. The West India Committee, 1798. The Port of London, 1798.

Establishment

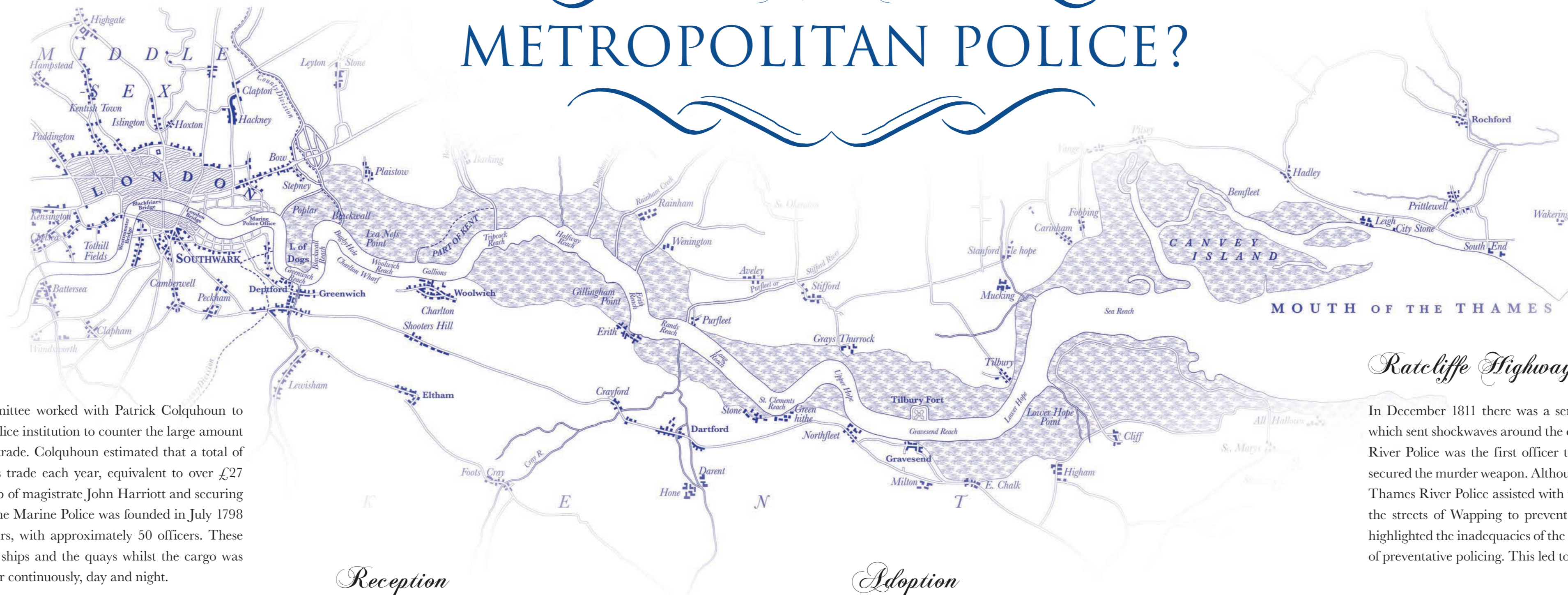
In 1798 the West India Committee worked with Patrick Colquhoun to produce a plan for a Marine Police institution to counter the large amount of theft from the West Indian trade. Colquhoun estimated that a total of £232,000 was stolen from this trade each year, equivalent to over £27 million today. Enlisting the help of magistrate John Harriott and securing the approval of Government, the Marine Police was founded in July 1798 at No. 259 Wapping New Stairs, with approximately 50 officers. These officers would stand guard on ships and the quays whilst the cargo was unloaded and patrolled the river continuously, day and night.

Reception

Although many welcomed the Marine Police, it was met by resistance from some river workers who felt that taking goods was a traditional perk of the job. In October 1798 there was a riot outside the Marine Police Office in Wapping, after a group of river workers were fined for taking coal. This resulted in the death of a rioter and a Marine Police officer.

“ABOUT HALF AFTER 6 O’CLOCK YESTERDAY EVENING, WHILE THE MAGISTRATES WERE IN EXECUTION OF THEIR OFFICIAL DUTY, A MOST FURIOUS AND OUTRAGEOUS MOB ASSEMBLED AROUND THE MARINE POLICE OFFICE, AND AFTER FIGHTING, INSTANTLY ATTACKED THE WINDOWS, BROKE THE OUTSIDE SHUTTERS, THREW IN LARGE STONES, AND DID A GREAT DEAL OF DAMAGE.”

The Times, 17/10/1798



Ratcliffe Highway Murders

In December 1811 there was a series of grisly murders in East London, which sent shockwaves around the country. Charles Horton of the Thames River Police was the first officer to arrive at the initial crime scene and secured the murder weapon. Although not technically their jurisdiction, the Thames River Police assisted with the ongoing investigation and patrolled the streets of Wapping to prevent further killings. The murder enquiry highlighted the inadequacies of the local constabularies and the advantages of preventative policing. This led to calls for police reform in London.

Adoption

The Marine Police were so successful in preventing theft and saving thousands of pounds that in 1800, only two years after they were established, they were nationalised and became the Thames River Police. They were now responsible for policing all the different trades on the Thames.



Thames Police, Wapping Wharf, 1800. The West India Committee, 1800. The Port of London, 1800.

CURATED BY THE WEST INDIA COMMITTEE

West Indians FOREFATHERS of the METROPOLITAN POLICE?



The West India Committee's library and collection is inscribed as a UNESCO Memory of the World.

The Metropolitan Police and Thames Division

In 1829 the Metropolitan Police were founded on the same ideals of preventative policing as the Thames River Police. Not only would they act as a crime deterrent, like the River Police they would draw their officers from the local community, reflecting London's increasingly diverse population. The Thames River Police are considered to be the forerunners of the Metropolitan Police and modern policing. They would remain a separate force until 1839 when they were amalgamated to become the Metropolitan Police's Thames Division.



Thames Division, Wapping, 1839. The West India Committee, 1839. The Port of London, 1839.

The Thames River Police today

Today the Thames River Police are known as the Marine Policing Unit and are still a distinct body within the Metropolitan Police. They are recognised by UNESCO as the longest continuously serving police force in the world and still operate out of the same site in Wapping as they have since 1798. The effect of their preventative principles can be traced throughout the Commonwealth and beyond, including the USA, Canada and the West Indies.



“MR BRANFORD WAS NOT AN EDUCATED MAN; BUT WHAT TO MY IDEA WAS OF MUCH GREATER IMPORTANCE, HE POSSESSED A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF POLICE MATTERS IN GENERAL. I SHOULD SAY HE WAS ABOUT THE ONLY HALF-CASTE SUPERINTENDENT THE SERVICE EVER HAD”.

Of Robert Branford, Metropolitan Police Officer & Superintendent 1838-66 From the memoirs of Ex-Chief Inspector TA Cavanagh, 1893