

# 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