

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.