

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).