

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.

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

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.

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.