

The Growth of the Police Force

At the start of the nineteenth century the enforcement of law and order in England and Wales was the same as it had been during the Middle Ages. The main people in charge of law and order were the Justices of the Peace (J.P.s) who were chosen by the king. These people were helped by constables and watchmen.

However, as Britain's population gradually increased so did the number of crimes that were committed. This meant that law and order also had to improve. 'Bow Street Runners' were appointed in London and the Thames river police were set up in 1800. But whenever there was a serious problem in London the government called the army in.

Why was the Metropolitan Police Force set up?

At the start of the nineteenth century, law and order was under constant threat. By 1829, London's population had grown to 1.5 million, yet it only had 450 constables and 4,000 watchmen. London, depended on the army or the local militia, and on spies and informers, to keep the peace, and to restore order during serious disturbances. The need for a preventative police force was highlighted by the Peterloo Massacre and Chartist uprisings in London. The tactics for preventing and dealing with crime in London were often inefficient and caused more problems. Added to this situation was the apparent growth in homicide, robbery, theft and burglary, all of which were increasing as a result of the Industrial Revolution.

Metropolitan Police Force - 1829

The first major reform of law enforcement in the nineteenth century was the Metropolitan Police Act in 1829. It was the work of Robert Peel, who believed that existing methods of maintaining law and order were inefficient. The Act set up a Metropolitan Police Force of 3,200 men to cover an area extending 7 miles from the centre of London. There were 17 divisions, each with four inspectors and 144 constables.

The police officers were soon known as 'bobbies' or 'peelers' after Robert Peel. They wore a uniform that included dark blue longcoats and a tall hat. They were unarmed except for truncheons - this was supposed to make them as unlike the army as possible but left them open to vicious attacks from criminals in London. In 1870, the tall hat was replaced by a helmet similar to that worn by the Prussian army but without the spike on top.



Early Problems for the New Police Force

There were many problems at first. Most of the early police recruits were unsuitable (often due to drunkenness) and soon resigned or were sacked. Many people – rich and poor alike – hated the police. Many policemen suffered violent attacks. Some people drove their coaches straight at policemen on traffic duty – they did not like being told what to do by somebody in uniform.

In 1833, a man who had stabbed a policeman to death during a political riot in Cold Bath Fields, was found not guilty of murder. The judge felt that the 500 'peelers' brought in for crowd control had been an overreaction and that the policeman deserved to be stabbed.

Gradually Londoners began to realise that the police were having an effect on the level of crime. This was an important factor in the public's approval of the new police force. Although some politicians did exaggerate the impact of the police on organised criminal gangs in London. Apparently many criminals just left London to carry out their underhand activities more easily elsewhere.

It is important to remember that Peel's Police reforms were only applied to London. Law and order did not really change in the rest of Britain.



Late Nineteenth Century Developments

In 1842, a Detective Department was created within the Metropolitan Police. There was great suspicion about this new development and by 1848 there were still only eight plain clothes detectives – see illustration on the left. In 1869, the National Criminal Record was set up: it dealt with only the most notorious criminals. Communications had been speeded up by the telegraph, which was introduced in 1867. In 1877, a Criminal Investigations Department (CID) was set up with 200 detectives: this was increased to 800 in 1883. Also in 1883, the Special Branch was created to deal with Irish nationalist terrorists known as the 'Fenians'.

Questions:

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1. How was law and order enforced in Great Britain at the start of the nineteenth century?
2. Draw a spider diagram in your book illustrating the different reasons why the Metropolitan Police Force was set up in 1829.
3. What problems did the Metropolitan Police Force face in its early years?
4. Draw a timeline of police reforms in the late nineteenth century – include dates.