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History of Scotland Yard

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Published

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2015

On the Web at jgkeegan.com

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Preface

The following paper was submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements in The Age of Revolution 1848—1917, a Graduate level course, at Millersville University, spring 1996. If anyone would like to use it in their research please email me (keegan@jgkeegan.org)

John Keegan
February 2015

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Introduction

London is one of the oldest cities in the world, and tracing the history of its police force was not easy. One could go back to 1285 when there was in London something that almost looked like a police force, but it was not citywide nor did it look after the needs of all the people. Until the Nineteenth Century London had no citywide police force, then in 1829 Scotland Yard was formed. This paper will discuss why it happened, how it came to be, and a writer's view of The Yard. In the end, this paper will outline a short history of the oldest police force in the world.

The London Police Before 1829

Before 1748 methods of law and order had changed little from the Middle Ages in Britain. What policing there was met the needs of a decentralized feudal society in which crime was sporadic and unsophisticated. One of the most important people in the system was The Justice of the Peace. He was responsible for the investigation of crimes, the detention, and charging of the culprits. Helping the Justice in his policing function were Petty Constables. These men had no training and no skills. The government did not pay the Justices, so some in the poor areas of London had to live off of the fees paid by the people who came before them.

That changed in 1748 when Sir. Henry Fielding took over as Justice of the Peace in the Bow Street Police Office. Fielding made major changes in the system. First, he persuaded the government to pay him a small salary to stop the payment of fees to him. Being a barrister he ran his office like a proper court. The earliest reference to Fielding's time in Bow Street was made in the St. James's Evening Post for December 8–10 1748:

Yesterday John Salter was committed to the Gate-house by Henry Fielding Esq., of Bow Street, Covert Garden ...for feloniously taking out of a bureau in the house the of Rev. Mr. Dalton a quantity of money found upon him.¹

¹ Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, *Bow Street Police Office* (New Jersey: Patternson Smith, 1972), xiv.

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To put the above another way, Salter broke into Dalton's house and took some money from a bureau, and Fielding's thief-takers found him with the money.

The thief-takers, later called the Bow Street Runners, would upon the reporting of a crime ride after the criminals. Fielding emphasized the importance of accurate information regarding crimes, and the necessity for the victims of crime to try to identify the perpetrators to help his thief-takers find them. To that end Fielding published a Notice and Request to the Public in 1749:

All persons who shall for the future suffer by robbers, burglars etc., are desired immediately to bring or send the best description they can of such robbers etc., with the time place, and circumstances of the fact to Henry Fielding Esq. at his house in Bow Street.²

At their greatest strength the Runners were no more than a dozen men, and were not paid by the government or Fielding. According to Richard Harrison the author of *Scotland Yard* the Runners were:

Available for the arrest of criminals only to such as could afford the heavy fee they charged, and they were not always above suspicion, being often enough, it is said, open to be bought off by the man they pursued.³

The system Sir Henry Fielding left behind when he died in 1754 was not the best, but it work at least for the up and coming middle and the well-entrenched upper classes of the early Industrial Revolution. As time passed, more and more people came to London to live and work. As a result, crime increased, and the men of Bow Street could not cope with it.

The London Police In 1829

The level of lawlessness on the streets of London was more than Parliament could overlook, and in 1829 Sir. Robert Peel, Home Secretary, put before Parliament the Metropolis Police Improvement Bill. The Bill did away with the system, as detailed above, and in its place put the new police. The new police answered not to local authority, but directly to the Home

² Fitzgerald, xv.

³ Richard Harrison, *Scotland Yard* (New York: Ziff-Davis, 1949), 193.

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Office. This put a stop to the people of London paying, what they called blood money, for every arrest. According to Peel, "The certainty of detection is a far greater deterrent from crime than severity of punishment."⁴ Before The Metropolis Police Improvement Bill British criminal law was focused on punishment not prevention. Peel's new police was to change that.

The new force was composed of retired non-commissioned army officers with good records. These men were put under two commissioners who were chosen with the same care as the men under them. The first two were, "Colonel Rowan a retired soldier, and Richard Mayne, a lawyer, were men of the highest capacity and character."⁵ Peel wanted the character of his police to be above suspicion. The upkeep of the force was paid by a small police tax which was much cheaper than paying per arrest. There were some in the public that opposed the new Act, and some of them were law-abiding citizens:

Who saw it as a threat to liberty, and public opinion was expressed by the nicknames given the new force as "Blue Devils," and "Raw Lobsters," later modified to the more appreciative titles of "Peelers" and "Bobbies"....⁶

The Act, nevertheless, took hold, and by 1830 the police had 3,000 men working in and around London. By 1840 the importance of the force was clear, and the number of men was increased to 18,000. The home of The London Police was, and still is, Scotland Yard.

Police Procedure

Given Peel's view that the certainty of detection is a far greater deterrent from crime than severity of punishment officers had the power to arrest:

All loose, idle, and disorderly persons, whom they shall find disturbing the public peace, or whom they shall have just cause to suspect of any evil designs....⁷

The above meant, in the early years of the force, that the police were impartial in their stopping and questioning of suspicious person's "respectable" or not. Until, that is, the upper class

⁴ Anna Augusta Whittall Ramsay, *Sir. Robert Peel* (New York: Libraries Press, 1969), 89.

⁵ Ramsay, 88.

⁶ Harrison, 195.

⁷ W.R. Miller, *Cops and Bobbies* (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1972), 54.

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complained the police were too impartial in such matters. Apparently, they believed that their external respectability was enough to keep them from police suspicion. According to Miller “respectable” complaints centered on:

Policemen stopping and searching people suspected of carrying stolen goods. Bobbies indiscriminately stopped carriages or pedestrians no matter how respectable they were.⁸

The above, also, included the poor who were always under the suspicion of the police. In 1839 London’s police act spelled out the power that police had to search persons suspected of carrying stolen goods. There was, in fact, very little change in the powers given police from the 1829 act. The only difference, having just cause to suspect a person of any evil designs, was no longer enough to stop and search someone. The officer had to see someone carrying or moving goods in such a way that would lead to the strong suspicion that the goods had been stolen only then could he arrest someone for stealing. There were times, however, when police used what were called Blanket or Cover charges. The police used such charges to assert their authority over some uncooperative citizens. Such people would be charged with obstruction of an officer or disorderly conduct. Needless to say, some Londoners objected to this form of street-corner punishment. A journalist in 1838 charged, “People of ‘correct morals’ were arrested simply because they refused to go home; to submit obsequiously to the behest of a policeman.”⁹ By 1854 there was even a maxim some officers used “necessity is the mother of invention; so when you find it necessary to make a charge against someone you have locked up, invent one.”¹⁰

The commissioners put a stop to the above by demanding that inspectors on duty at the station refuse all such charges unless the inspectors were satisfied with the details of the arrest as reported by the arresting officer. They not only had the power to dismiss charges of obstruction of an officer or disorderly conduct the inspectors could dismiss any charges an officer made. Add to that the power to lock up or release prisoners, and the result was a loose

⁸ Miller, 55.

⁹ Miller, 62.

¹⁰ Miller, 62.

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law code or, at the very least, what looked like one. If the officers arrested people on cover charges it is possible that a few inspectors made some of them stick, for they had, as stated above, the power to lock up or release prisoners.

The one area in which the public did not question the actions of Scotland Yard was in the questioning of suspects. It was in that area the police made up for the shortcomings of some of their number. The commissioners, in 1844, told their men that in no way were they to force a prisoner charged with a felony to confess to the crime. That did not mean, however, the police could not take a statement if the prisoner gave one, but the officers took it to mean just that. Many officers told their prisoners to say nothing about the charge against them. And that act, sometimes, put the brakes on the wheels of justice.

A Writer's View of the Yard

The last part of the paper will discuss the view of Sir. Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes. By 1842 Scotland Yard formed a detective force of eight men. By 1887, the time in which *A Study in Scarlet* was set, there were no more than forty for the whole of London. It was in that story that Holmes stated that the two inspectors he had to work with the most were quick and energetic, but too conventional.¹¹ And, from time to time, Holmes would solve a crime, but let the matter of punishment drop. "I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies," he once told Watson.¹² It was Holmes' sense of justice, and the sense that it could not always be found in the law or at the hands of the police that made the public take to him. In one of his last cases he stated, "The law is what we live with; justice is sometimes harder to achieve."¹³ While, this was the view of one writer, and there were doubtless others the stories of Sherlock Holmes were as well read in the late 1800's as they are today, so it was more than

¹¹ Sir. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Doubleday, 1930), 27. "Gregson is the smartest of the Scotland Yarders, he and Lestrade are the pick of a bad lot. They are both quick and energetic, but conventional –shockingly so."

¹² Conan Doyle, 257.

¹³ Jeremy Brett, "The Red Circle," *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Granada Television, 1994).

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possible that opinions expressed by Holmes about The Yard were shared in some way by the people of London.

This paper has discussed why Scotland Yard was formed, how it came to be, and a writer's view of The Yard. In the end, this paper has outlined a short history of the oldest police force in the world.

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