

# VILLAINS OF VICTORIAN LONDON

## THE METROPOLITAN POLICE FACTOR

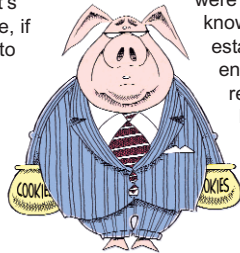
by Paul Brett

Throughout the history of the homo sapien race, there has always been good v evil. Sometimes looking back at events, it's hard to differentiate between what's good and what's bad. For example, if someone is starving, is it a crime to take food from someone who has plenty? In the latest crisis to hit our lives, The Global Credit Crunch, is it not a criminal act for those that caused it, to profit even more from our taxes by way of bail outs, when the individual small business or person is hounded to the Gates of Hell for the slightest debt? Should the Bankers, Politicians and Speculators be the ones to suffer and not the hungry? When is a Crime not a Crime? It all depends doesn't it on how the powers that be, perceive and legislate against criminal offences. In previous issues of Live in London I have written articles on the Villain's of Victorian London, but in this article I am featuring our protectors. Yes indeed, the good old British Bobby.



**Bowstreetrunner  
JohnTownsend**

It all started by the establishment of an outfit called 'The Bow Street Runners' back in 1753. Based in Bow Street, their actions were deemed successful and more of the same spread across London. There was also a "Marine" Police Unit which in 1798 was formed to counter the rising robberies from warehouses and the like along the Thames, many of which were situ-



ated in the vicinity of London Bridge. However, it was not until 1829 that the Metropolitan Police Force came into being. Credit for this is given to Sir Robert Peel who was Home Secretary at the time. Such individuals who were employed in the new force became known as "Peelers". Like all anti-crime establishments, they were faced with the enormous task of Policing brothels, receiving outlets (these were usually based in Rag and Iron shops) which were a veritable haven for disposing of stolen goods. Then there was counterfeiting of coinage, street and house robberies, murder most foul and just about everything that is perceived as 'criminal' went on then, much the same as it does today. In fact it is reported that a state of 'rampant criminality' engulfed London at the time. Even well dressed children were subject to being robbed and stripped of their clothes and possessions (mobile phones!). Pets were kidnapped and held to ransom as well. It is also reported that many criminals that were arrested, never saw the inside of a jail due to the bribery and corruption that existed in the Police Force itself. So, was it just those that couldn't afford to pay bribes to the Police that were put in front of the Magistrates? Again, the poorest in society seemed to have come off worse, much the same as today.

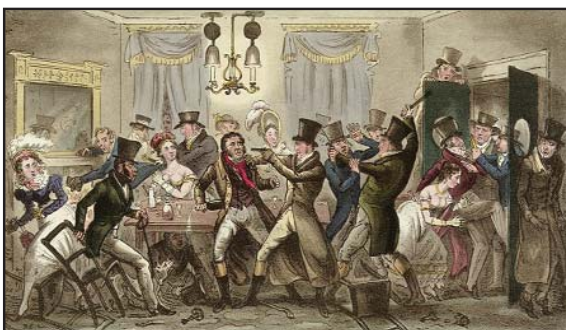
The areas between St.Catherine's Dock (now an upmarket area) and Limehouse were the haunts of a group calling themselves "The Water Rats" (not to be confused with the current Showbiz Organisation). Their expertise was in robbing shipping and cargo that used the Thames to transport goods. Then there were the 'good old pubs', a major source of all that respectable society scorned, yet many secretly used. There were around five thousand pubs across London and many were regular haunts of the criminal classes. However, all attempts to incorporate the City of London Police Force into the 'Met' failed. These 6ft plus 'coppers' were there to protect the City and all it's financial institutions and those 'gentlemen' who worked and speculated there. In fact, the 'Met' was greeted with great hostility, not only from those it was meant to pursue, but also from Magistrates who were supposed to uphold the rule of law. They did however quickly establish themselves by reducing crime and slowly their presence became more acceptable to the wider public. By the 1880's, the Police were far more popular than in the 1830's. They now used a whistle (instead of the original rattle) to alert other Officers and the public in general that a crime was, or had been committed and they were in pursuit of the suspect (s). They displayed a heavy presence on the Streets which acted as a deterrent to criminal activities

in the main. These days, they sit behind cameras, ride in cars and leave community foot policing to lesser trained and paid personnel who do not have full officer status. No more rattles and whistles for our boys in blue, they now have Blackberries! Is that word PC!



The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) started in 1844 when Sir Robert Peel's successor, Sir James Graham (always a 'Sir' that gets these jobs!) gave a few sergeants the right to wear plain clothes and mingle unnoticed with the public. This was not well accepted as a whole although it is widely accredited that the author Charles Dickens, popularised their efforts in his writings. Scotland Yard, had from the beginning, been the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police. But in 1891, they moved to a new base adjacent to Parliament Square. This became inspirationally known as ....you guessed it....New Scotland Yard! Many crimes however still went unreported or were not considered crimes as they are today. Domestic violence and infanticide were largely ignored, as was rape and crimes against women.

So were the Police the sole reason for the reduction of crime in Victorian Times in London? In his book 'The Welfare State We're In' James Bartholomew observes other reasons for society taking a more responsible grip on it's activities, he writes *"that the radical toughening up of the conditionality of welfare benefits in 1834, forced individuals, families and communities to take responsibility for themselves. They were obliged to act more responsibly to make their way in the world. They were strongly incentivised to create and join friendly societies, mutual societies and trade unions. These further encouraged a sense of mutual responsibility. Meanwhile there was increased reason to avoid having children outside marriage. The illegitimacy rate fell, with consequent benefits to the children who grew up in circumstance which were less likely to lead them into crime."* Whatever side of the coin opinions fall as to the effect the Police had or have on protecting us from criminal activity over the years, are we safer now from modern Villains of London than our forefathers were from the Villains of Victorian London, or are they in fact, still one and the same? In January 2008 the Met ran a 'Dickensian' operation code named 'Operation Caddy'. These were a series of raids on suspected immigrants (modern day Fagin's) who were thought to be training young children in the art of pick pocketing which had plagued London in Victorian times and was doing so again. How does "You've got to pick a pocket or two" translate into Romanian!



*Bow Street Runners break up a late night party in London, 1824*