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Sir Robert Peel

By *Ben Johnson*



In Britain today all policemen are commonly referred to as 'Bobbies'! Originally though, they were known as 'Peelers' in reference to one Sir Robert Peel (1788 - 1850).

Today it is hard to believe that Britain in the 18th century did not have a professional police force. Scotland had established a number of police forces following the introduction of the City of Glasgow Police in 1800 and the Royal Irish Constabulary was established in 1822, in large part because of the Peace Preservation Act of 1814 which Peel was heavily involved with. However, London was sadly lacking in any form of protective presence and crime prevention for its people as we entered the 19th century.

Following the success of the Royal Irish Constabulary it became obvious that something similar was needed in London, so in 1829 when Sir Robert was Home Secretary in Lord Liverpool's Tory Cabinet, the Metropolitan Police Act was passed, providing permanently appointed and paid Constables to protect the capital as part of the Metropolitan Police Force.



© Greater Manchester Police Museum

The first thousand of Peel's police, dressed in blue tail-coats and top hats, began to patrol the streets of London on 29th September 1829. The uniform was carefully selected to make the 'Peelers' look more like ordinary citizens, rather than a red-coated soldier with a helmet.

The 'Peelers' were issued with a wooden truncheon carried in a long pocket in the tail of their coat, a pair of handcuffs and a wooden rattle to raise the alarm. By the 1880s this rattle had been replaced by a whistle.

To be a 'Peeler' the rules were quite strict. You had to be aged 20 - 27, at least 5' 7" tall (or as near as possible), fit, literate and have no history of any wrong-doings.

These men became the model for the creation of all the provincial forces; at first in the London Boroughs, and then into the counties and towns, after the passing of the County Police Act in 1839. An ironic point however; the Lancashire town of Bury, birthplace of Sir Robert, was the only major town which elected not to have its own separate police force. The town remained part of the Lancashire Constabulary until 1974.

Early Victorian police worked seven days a week, with only five days unpaid holiday a year for which they received the grand sum of £1 per week. Their lives were strictly controlled; they were not allowed to vote in elections and required permission to get married and even to share a meal with a civilian. To allay the public's suspicion of being spied upon, officers were required to wear their uniforms both on and off duty.



Sir Robert Peel

In spite of the huge success of his 'Bobbies', Peel was not a well liked man. **Queen Victoria** is said to have found him 'a cold, unfeeling, disagreeable man'. They had many personal conflicts over the years, and when he spoke against awarding her 'darling' Prince Albert an annual income of £50,000, he did little to endear himself to the Queen.

When Peel was **Prime Minister**, he and the Queen had a further disagreement over her 'Ladies of the Bedchamber'. Peel insisting that she accepted some 'Tory' ladies in preference to her 'Whig' ladies.

Although Peel was a skilful politician, he had few social graces and had a reserved, off-putting manner.

After a long and distinguished career, Sir Robert came to an unfortunate end ...he was thrown from his horse while riding on Constitution Hill in London on 29th June 1850, and died three days later.

His legacy remains however as long as the British 'Bobbies' patrol the streets and keep the population safe from wrong-doers ...and help lost tourists find their way back to the comfort of their hotels!

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