Protecting London: The work of the Metropolitan Police Marine Support Unit

Transcript

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by

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Good Afternoon Ladies & Gentlemen.

It is my pleasure to be able to address you today on the subject of policing the river Thames a responsibility I held for three years from 1999 - 2002. Before I start however I wish to put you in the mood and show you a short piece of film from bygone days.

Show Slide 2 - Video Clip

I wonder how many of you remember those days, I certainly do!

To begin the history of policing the river Thames we must go back to the end of the 18th century when London was a major Port, the busiest in the World in fact.

Show Slide 3 - Old Engraving

At that time somewhere in the region of 13,500 ships came in and out of the Port of London every year, but the port only had 1,400 feet of legal quay space between London Bridge and The Tower of London plus 20 'Sufferance' Wharves along the south side of the river to ease pressure. It was so crowded that most ships were unloaded in the river by barges, which became known as 'Lighters' as they made the ships lighter. The men that operated them became known as 'lighter men' a profession still carried out in Ports to this day. The turn around time for a ship coming in was between 2 - 6 weeks dependent on size, cargo and volume of work at that time. There were never less than 1,000 ships in the Pool at any one time. The Pool of London was the area between London Bridge and Limehouse. Often the queue of vessels waiting to be unloaded stretched between Vauxhall and Greenwich. The term 'A Forest of Masts' was coined to describe it and at times it was possible for a person to cross from one side of the river to the other by stepping from deck to deck on the ships moored there. So what we are talking about here is a very busy place indeed!

Now London at that time was a pretty lawless city and a dangerous place to be for the unwary. There was no Police Force in existence, so one relied on 'watchmen' who were often incapable of keeping the peace due to being elderly, infirm or drunk and in some cases these were the very people you needed to avoid if you didn't want to be a victim of crime. Crime and corruption amongst 'officials' was rife. As was piracy!

Show Slide 4 - Pirates

There were many famous pirates that plied their trade along the river Thames, although I'm not too sure that Captain Jack Sparrow was amongst them. If you were a pirate, then London was a good place to operate. It may not have the climate of the Caribbean, but it had the advantage of always being close to home and rich pickings, very rich pickings indeed that were readily available to those that wanted them. Probably the most infamous of these was Captain Kidd who suffered a pirates fate after execution of being left in the river till three tides had washed over his corpse, this was done as a warning to others. Clear references to: 'Tough on Crime & 'Justice Must Be Seen To Be Done'. The PH next door to Wapping Police Station is named after him. At the end of the 18th Century thefts per year from shipping in the Port of London amounted to £500,000 per year, which is a lot of money today but a huge sum then! Half of this was from ships belonging to the West India Company.

In 1795 a magistrate named Patrick Colquhoun wrote a treatise entitled 'Policing the Metropolis', which had one chapter devoted to the river Thames and the Port of London.

Show Slide 5 - Patrick Colquhoun
Another Magistrate, John Harriott read this treatise and was so inspired he contacted Colquhoun and together they set about creating a police force to tackle the problems of crime and piracy on the river.

On 2nd July 1798 the two together founded the West India Merchants & Planters Marine Police Institute

A title that just rolls of the tongue!

It comprised:

Watermen - To row the boats

Surveyors - To act as the inspectors

Lumpers - for integrity of unloading

Lumpers were the men that unloaded the boats and the most obvious source of criminality. By recruiting Lumpers into the new Force it ensured the honesty & Integrity of those that unloaded the boats - a bit of Poacher turned Gamekeeper.

The role of the new Force was to protect the interests of the West India Company's shipping.

Those employed within this new Force were given the powers of Constable, an ancient office that continues to this day. All police officers in Great Britain, regardless of rank hold the 'Office of Constable', which gives them their power to arrest amongst other powers.

The establishment was:

2 x Magistrates

2 x Superintendents

4 x Inspectors (surveyors)

Approx' 50 others (watermen, lighters, lumpers, boat repairers etc).

Today we speak of the extended police family of Police Officers, Police Community Support officers, Police Staff, Special Constables, Volunteer Staff and Volunteer Cadets, but this shows we have just gone full circle for as can be clearly seen there was an extended police family with the very first police force.

The Force was based at Wapping Police Station on the river Thames, which incorporated a magistrate's court to hear the cases, Thames Magistrates Court and a boatyard to maintain the boats. The present Police Station is on the same site; the current boatyard is a few yards away upriver whilst the Magistrates Court is now a few miles away in Bow Road.

To set up this new police force, the first of its kind in the World cost £5,000 a princely sum in 1798, however in its first two years it saved £100,000 by reducing the amount of theft by that sum, so it proved to be a very sound investment indeed. It's what we call today value for money. Such was the success of the West India Merchants & Planters Marine Police Institute that in 1800 an Act of Parliament was passed that officially recognised the Force and renamed it The Marine Police and extended its remit to cover ALL shipping in London, not just those belonging to the West India Company.

The two years, whilst very successful for the Force, had not been an easy ride and tragedy had struck very early on.

Gabriel was a 'Master Lumper' and they very often had other jobs, usually as landlords of pubs. The idea being that Lumpers would meet at the pub before work and adjourn there afterwards for payment, which would be distributed by the Master Lumper.
and he would then ‘relieve’ them of their hard earned pay in exchange for drink that he sold in his establishment, quite a profitable business indeed.

I have to be honest, this is NOT a photo of Gabriel Franks, as cameras hadn’t been invented at that time, it is in fact a replica of a Marine Policeman in the museum, sadly we do not have a picture of Gabriel.

There was at that time a regular practise amongst ‘Coal Heavers’, those that unloaded coal from barges.

Coal that had been dropped onto the foreshore during unloading and became wet was regarded as ‘waste’ and it was legal for people scavenging on the foreshore to pick it up for their own use or to sell. The ‘practise’ was to dip a bag of coal in the water and then claim it as ‘dropped coal’ at the end of the shift to sell it on for a profit. It was a widespread practise and generally regarded as a ‘perk of the job’. However the new police force thought differently and in October 1798 one James Eyres and two others were convicted of theft of coal and fined the princely sum of £1 each by Magistrates Harriott & Colquhoun. On leaving the Court, which at that time was at Wapping Police Station, James and his brother Charles decided to take the law into their own hands and ‘claim’ the money back from the Court by threats of violence, remember the police force and court had only been in existence for three months. A fight broke out that quickly escalated to a full-blown riot outside the police station. Harriott & Colquhoun ordered that the building be shuttered to prevent any rioters from entering. A stone thrown by a rioter smashed a window at which point one of the officers opened fire on the crowd killing one man. This led to a brief lull in the riot and Colquhoun ‘read the riot act’ a legal requirement that then enabled force to be used to disperse any persons that remained behind and continued rioting. On hearing this the riot broke out once more. Gabriel Franks was in a pub nearby and on hearing the noise he went to the station found it shuttered and was unable to get in. Franks began collecting evidence as all good police officers do, in that he used his initiative and stood outside making notes as to who was doing what etc. For his own protection he went to get his cutlass but en route was shot and died 7 days later. Before he died he was questioned as to who had fired the shot and he honestly replied ‘I have no idea’. Regardless of this James Eyres was tried and convicted of Gabriel Franks murder and sentenced to death. Gabriel Franks was unfortunate to have the unenviable title of being the first police officer to be killed on duty and it is even more tragic that his murder came about because of the resentment of a fine of £1 for theft of coal.

There was initially great resistance to the river police as the Corporation of London and the Middle Classes saw it as a restriction on civil liberties generally. But when they saw how successful it was the resistance to it rapidly eroded.

49 years earlier In 1749 Henry Fielding an author and magistrate in Middlesex had founded the Bow Street Runners, a small group of thief takers to apprehend criminals in and around the Bow Street area (Covent Garden and environs) another hotbed of criminality. Although the Bow Street Runners predated the Marine Police, they were never a police force per se. Nevertheless they continued to operate at the same time as the Marine Police.

31 years after the founding of the West India Merchants & Planters Marine Police InstituteorMarine Police, as they had become formally known, Sir Robert Peel then the Home Secretary founded the Metropolitan Police Force. There is no doubt that he would have been inspired by the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police in particular, but when it started on 19th June 1829 it comprised neither of them.

The new Force comprised:

2 Commissioners

8 Superintendents

20 Inspectors

88 Serjeants (old spelling of the only military rank used)

895 Constables

The new headquarters was established at 4 Whitehall Place, and the back entrance, used by visitors to the Commissioners, was in Scotland Yard, hence the name still used today and recognised worldwide.

So at that time there were three discrete Law Enforcement Agencies operating totally separately from each other in London.
The Metropolitan Police was not popular in its early days. Its first PC (Collar number 1) lasted 4 hours before he was dismissed for drunkenness. More disturbingly in 1830 when PC Joseph Grantham became the first Metropolitan Police Officer killed on duty in Somers Town, Euston the jury returned a verdict of justifiable homicide by those that had attacked him. Again in 1833 when PC Robert Culley was killed during the Coldbath Fields Riot (Grays Inn Road) the jury not only returned a verdict of justifiable homicide but also a trophy, 'The Culley Cup' was awarded to those that returned the verdict criticising the police for the unnecessary use of force.

Things did however improve and in 1836 the Metropolitan Police absorbed the Bow Street Runners and in 1839 an Act of Parliament was passed in which the Marine Police became a part of the Metropolitan Police forming Thames Division a name it retained for the next 161 years.

The river Thames is a dangerous tidal river; in fact it is technically the sea until Teddington Lock and is (just about) salt water up to that point. The river has vicious currents running in different directions and at great speed at many points along its journey, especially through central London and by the bridges, pontoons, piers, moored vessels and other obstacles both visible and those underwater. Until fairly recent times the river has also been heavily polluted and certainly throughout the 19th century and for much of the 20th, that remained the case. The police on the river have been involved in dealing with the tragic outcomes of accidents throughout their long history and association with it. The first major disaster that Thames Division were involved with was 130 years ago, that of The Princess Alice on the 3rd September 1878. The Princess Alice was a wooden passenger paddle steamer (251 tons, 220ft. long and 35ft across) conveying passengers from Swan Pier (Fishmongers Hall by London Bridge) to Sheerness in Kent. It was a glorious summer's day and for the many hundreds on this overloaded vessel it was a well-earned and greatly anticipated day trip to the seaside and return to London by the early evening. About 7.30 pm on the return journey The Princess Alice was close to Barking but as it was travelling against the tide, to avoid the worst effects of it, she was on the south side of the river and opposite Barking Creek, which at that time was quite literally a large sewage outlet releasing thousands of gallons of raw sewage from London direct into the river, a foul and smelly place indeed. Coming toward The Princess Alice in the middle of the river and with the tide was a large empty Collier vessel The Bywell Castle that had left Millwall Docks and was travelling to the estuary and on to Newcastle. The Bywell Castle was an iron built screw-ship (890 tons, 256ft in length) and travelling fairly swiftly. The river at this point was wide, traffic was light and there was plenty of room for both vessels to pass each other safely in accordance with agreed navigation rules. For a reason unknown to any of the few survivors at the last moment The Princess Alice turned across the bow of The Bywell Castle and they collided, with the larger iron vessel driving into the side of the smaller wooden one nearly splitting it in two.

Unfortunately the Captain of the Bywell Castle in a vain hope of avoiding a collision had ordered the engines to be put 'Full Astern', which for non-nautical types amongst you means...reverse. Obviously it takes a while for this to take effect so on collision The Princess Alice was more or less wrapped around The Bywell Castle. There followed a brief moment of inertia then the 'full astern' took effect and The Bywell Castle began to move away from the wreckage of The Princess Alice, casing it to immediately flood with water and completely split in two. To add to the disaster the Beckton Outfall was at that moment releasing raw sewage into the river as the vessel rapidly sank (4 minutes) disgorging its passengers into very heavily polluted water. The death toll was 640 and the reason for the high casualty rate was the pollution, which caused infections that medicine at that time could not cure. It has been classified as the World's 15th largest maritime death toll. A recommendation from the inquiry into the disaster was that Thames Division should be equipped with Steam Launches to replace its rowing boats, for speed and manoeuvrability.

In the mid 1880's the first Steam Launches were commissioned and in 1905, Thames Division ceased using rowing boats.
In 1910 steam gradually gave way to motor power as Thames Division expanded during the century.

Show Slide 14 - Launches

At its height in the 1950's/60's it had riparian police stations at:

Erith
Blackwall
Wapping (its HQ)
Waterloo (World's first floating police station)
Barnes
Hampton
Shepperton
Richmond (office for occasional use at the lock)

and was commanded by a Chief Superintendent (today a Chief Inspector) and had between 150 - 160 men.

Show Slide 15 - Duty Boat (Colour)

In the 1970's the London docks began to close as shipping had reached the container age and new container ports, such as the one at Tilbury became more attractive to shipping companies and the docks and wharves of London became less so and more costly.

Show Slide 16 - Ship in Dock (Colour)

As the docks declined so did the fortunes of Thames Division. As there was much less river traffic combined with the fact that at that time the Port of London had by then established its own police force (not in existence now) there was no longer a need to have such a large police force on the river with so many police stations and gradually they began to close as the Division downsized.

Thames Division continued to play its part in policing the river although more and more emphasis was being placed on search and rescue. This was a function that it was obliged to carry out under International Maritime Law, which established after the sinking of the RSS Titanic in 1912 that any vessel had a responsibility to attend a distress signal from another. Despite the fact that Thames Division did undertake this function and did so very well, there was no statutory responsibility for it to do so, nor indeed was there for any other river agency e.g. Port of London Authority.

Then on the night of 20th August 1989 a ‘Party’ river boat, The Marchioness set off on its final journey down the river Thames. It passed under Southwark Bridge and was approaching Cannon Street Railway Bridge, when the much larger and heavier dredger, The Bowbelle struck it from behind capsizing the Marchioness in seconds.

Show Slide 17 - Marchioness & Bowbelle

51 of the passengers on board the Marchioness, who were attending a private birthday party, drowned. Four police patrol boats were on scene within six minutes and together with The Hurlingham another ‘Party’ river boat, they set about a search & rescue operation. Of the survivors the crews of Thames Division rescued approximately half, with the others being rescued by other vessels in the vicinity or being fortunate to reach one of the shorelines of the river. Some of the officers on duty that night were left severley traumatised by what they witnessed during the rescue operation.

In 1999 I took over as the Unit Commander of Thames Division and part of my brief was to restructure the Division and make it more relevent to policing 21st century London and in preparation for the Millennium.

Show Slide 18 - Wapping Police Station today
After the Millennium celebrations were over, fortuitously for me in 2000 Lord Justice Clarke was appointed to lead two inquiries, one into Thames Safety and the second to examine the Marchioness incident itself. I worked with the other agencies on the river in support of the inquiries and one of the key recommendations arising from them was that an agency should be appointed to have a statutory responsibility for search and rescue on the river Thames. This was eventually given to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, who employ the Royal National Lifeboat Institute to undertake this function on their behalf. The RNLI's central London base is the old floating police station at Waterloo Pier.

My review of Thames Division and its subsequent restructure led to a name change and on 4th September 2000, after 161 years, the name 'Thames Division' ceased to be, as it became formally known as the Marine Support Unit (MSU). New boats were purchased to replace the ageing and ailing fleet, boats that were far more versatile and effective for its new remit.

The MSU's focus was now very much on crime & disorder across all of London's inland waterways, not just the river although a large part of its daily activity takes place on the Thames.

In 1998 the Good Friday Peace Agreement had been signed in Northern Ireland and for a while, sadly just a short while it transpired, it seemed that Terrorism was a thing of the past for us. Then came 9/11 and with it arose the spectre of International Terrorism and the advent of maritime terrorism.

I was then tasked with setting up a Maritime Counter Terrorism Strategy for London. Of the 52 Constabularies (or Police Forces) that make up the UK 22 of them have a coastline and that had to be factored into the planning of a London based CT Strategy as vessels coming into London will be passing by some of these other forces.

London has many attractive terrorist sites, some of which have been targeted in the past by the PIRA.

Part of my strategy was to put in place procedures and tactics that would enable the MPS to intercept large ships and small vessels long before they entered central London and training took place to develop this capability.

A maritime firearms capability was developed at the same time, whereby officers from the MSU were trained to deliver Specialist Firearms Officers SFO's to any location on water for operational purposes. This specialist skill was used to great effect during the Millennium Dome robbery, when the gang of robbers had intended to make good their escape by use of a high-powered boat. Before they could do so they were intercepted by MSU vessels containing SFO's.

Specialist climbing skills were developed as part of the maritime counter terrorism work although it is also used for crime scene searching (for evidence) in difficult to reach places as well.
As the MPS 'Competent Person' for working at height this led me from time to time to climb with the team e.g. masts protruding from the Millennium Dome, although I drew the line at The London Eye, where they have operated on a few occasions dealing with protestors at the very top of the Eye and on the first occasion in 2000, the climbing team were awarded a Commendation for their work, very well deserved it was too.

A Tactic for small vessel intercepts was developed alongside all of this as the risk of waterborne attack is not confined to large ships coming in from the estuary, it may be delivered by a small vessel entering London from upriver.

Show Slide 29 - Small Vessel Boarding

Many Naval Ships from the Royal Navy and overseas Navies visit London throughout the year and as has been seen off the coast of north eastern Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East, they are particularly vulnerable from suicide waterborne attack by small craft. So the MSU together with the Air Support Unit, which I also commanded, developed tactics to protect them.

Show Slide 30 - Naval Ship at Dartford Crossing

Since the 1960's Divers have long been associated with policing the river Thames and today the Underwater & Confined Space Search Team provide this specialised service for London. They search any water area either by wading or diving and predominately search for evidence relating to a crime although they do get involved in preventative searches as well for security purposes. Usually they dive in polluted water and in nil visibility so nearly all search is consequently done by touch. They have even searched cesspools containing raw sewage, although special provisions have to be put into place to protect them form disease and infection. They are also trained to work in confined spaces for example, culverts, drain systems and sewers where manoeuvrability is severely restricted and where there is always the risk of the air quality dropping to a level that could be hazardous or even fatal. They are very good at what they do! One thing they do not do is underwater rescue, because the reality is if a person goes into and under the water, then unless they are pulled out very quickly they will drown and by the time the team are deployed it will be too late. They will however and sometimes do, recover victims of drowning. There is also an issue for them with regard to searching the river Thames itself. As it is a tidal river it ebbs and flows twice a day and does so very fast. A diver in the water at the height of either tide would be swept away. As a consequence of this the dive team can only dive in the tidal part of the river Thames during the ‘slack’ period between tides, which lasts for about 30 minutes each time. Diving is a hazardous occupation, especially in the river Thames.

Show Slide 31 - Divers

For those of you that are keen divers they are all trained to BZAC Standard, which is the Industrial Standard and far more specialised then PADI, although some of them are PADI sports divers in their off duty time as well. As the Unit Commander I had the privilege of diving with them and searching some central London sewage systems with them in my capacity as the MPS Diving Contractor.

The MSU has recently undergone another name change to the Marine Police Unit or the MPU to reflect that it is a policing unit in its own right and does more than provide a support function.

Today it has an establishment of about half the number of its heyday, although a move forward with the times shows that a percentage of the officers are now women. During the Second World War Thames Division had its own War Reservists and Special Constables and to this day it retains its own dedicated team of volunteer special constables, commanded by a special inspector (a lady inspector at that).

Above the door of Wapping Police Station and enshrined on its emblem are the words ‘Primus Omnium’, which I am led to believe means ‘first amongst all’ to reflect that it was the first true police force (I never had a classical education). The people at the MPU at Wapping are very proud of this and whilst the police unit's name has changed a few times its motto has held firm. This is what policing the river looks like today.

Show Slide 32 - Modern video clip

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

Show Slide 33 - Any Q's - World's most dangerous dog