

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.

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 By the 1880s this rattle had been replaced by a whistle.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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Police Commissioner William J. Bratton lists the following guidelines on his blog. There is some doubt among scholars that Sir Robert Peel actually enunciated any of his nine principles himself — some researchers say they were formulated in 1829 by the two first commissioners of London's Metropolitan Police Department.

PRINCIPLE 1 "The basic mission for which the police exist is to prevent crime and disorder."

PRINCIPLE 2 "The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions."

PRINCIPLE 3 "Police must secure the willing cooperation of the public in voluntary observance of the law to be able to secure and maintain the respect of the public."

PRINCIPLE 4 "The degree of cooperation of the public that can be secured diminishes proportionately to the necessity of the use of physical force."

PRINCIPLE 5 "Police seek and preserve public favor not by catering to the public opinion but by constantly demonstrating absolute impartial service to the law."

PRINCIPLE 6 “Police use physical force to the extent necessary to secure observance of the law or to restore order only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient.”

PRINCIPLE 7 “Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.”

PRINCIPLE 8 “Police should always direct their action strictly towards their functions and never appear to usurp the powers of the judiciary.”

PRINCIPLE 9 “The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with it.”