

Glasgow Police: The First Twenty Years, 1800 - 1820

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This article is a continuation of an earlier work published in this journal in 2000. Written by Alastair Dinsmor, *Glasgow Police Pioneers* convincingly argued that Glasgow established the first 'new' police in Britain. He rightly objected to using '1829 as the historical base line' and emphasised the example of Glasgow.¹

This work will look at the composition and work of this new system of policing between 1800 and 1820 in a city that had more than doubled its population in the second half of the eighteenth century to 77,000, and had developed into Scotland's trading and industrial hub.

Dinsmor detailed the two false starts for the police in Glasgow in 1779 and 1788. The City Council persisted, and on 30 June 1800, royal assent was given to the Glasgow Police Act. This piece of legislation was successful because of the financial stability provided by rates on property in the city; the police could now be afforded. Another factor crucial to its success was the acceptance by the magistrates that the elected Commissioners should be pre-eminent in police affairs. The Act became a pattern for other towns to follow, and the first quarter of the nineteenth century saw the growth of new police systems throughout Scotland's cities and

burghs.

On 4 August 1800 Police Commissioners were appointed to the 24 wards in the city. The occupations of these Commissioners in August 1800 are illuminating; dominating the group were 13 Merchants, then four Manufacturers and the remaining seven were shopkeepers or tradesmen.² These men, with vested interests in the city, sought to impose the police for economic and social reasons; the rapidly expanding city with accompanying social tensions had to be stabilised and regulated to allow trade to grow; indeed, Glasgow's motto became 'Let Glasgow Flourish'.

On 29 September 1800, the meeting of the Police Commissioners considered the election of a Master of Police. Being pioneers they saw no example to follow, so naturally enough, they elected one of their own number; John Stenhouse, merchant. This was followed by the election of Sergeants and Officers of Police.

One of the sergeants was Donald McLease, a Sergeant in the Argyllshire Fencibles, and, 'to be police officers, Bryce Davidson, cook in Glasgow, William Barry, shoemaker, James Buchanan, weaver, Andrew Anderson, shoemaker'. The full complement was a Master of Police, three Sergeants, six Officers and 68 Watchmen.³ They also

agreed that the Watchmen were to act as scavengers and sweep the streets, echoing the practices of the past.

In a trend that was to be followed in police forces all over Britain, the large turnover of men leaving and joining the police started; one officer resigned before the force was mustered on 15 November.⁴

The initial plan was for three shifts; one Sergeant and two Officers were on duty in the police office for 24 hours, one Sergeant and two Officers on patrol, and one Sergeant and two Officers were on a rest day. The table on the rank structure on of the Glasgow Police on the following page shows the growth of the establishment in the first 21 years.

This new force took to the streets of the 24 wards of the city with the officers instructed to 'constantly patrol through such districts' to deter crime.⁵ They also had the additional

¹ Alastair Dinsmor, "Glasgow Police Pioneers," *Police History Society Journal*, November 2000, 9.

² E/1/1/1 Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 4 August 1800, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

³ *Ibid*, 29 Sept. 1800.

⁴ *Ibid*, 6 October, 1800.

⁵ John Scott, *Abstract of the Police Acts with a Summary of the Powers and Duties of Special Constables* (Glasgow: James Hedderwick, 1821), 9.

Glasgow Police Rank Structure 1800-1821

	1800	1811	1814	1816	1817	1821
Master of Police	1	1	1	1	1	1
Serjeant	3	?	N	N	N	N**
Officers	6	Y	Y	Y	Y	25
Watchmen	68	Y	Y	Y	Y	134
Patrolmen		?	Y	Y	Y	Y***
Lieutenants		?	2	N	N	N
Head Constable		?	N	3	2	Y
Secret Service*		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Criminal Constable					2	6
Total	78					168

* It is not known if the Secret Service had any officers, however it did have a committee.

** Master of Police designated Superintendent, however he was known as Captain.

*** Watchmen and Patrolmen combined.

? It is not clear if the rank was used.

N Rank not used.

Y Rank was used but it is unclear how many men held the title.

Source: E1/1/1 – 21. *Minute Books of the Police Commissioners, Glasgow.*

duty of keeping ‘a sharp look-out after the Watchmen...(to)...ensure that they are all sober.’⁶ The majority of the servants of the establishment were Watchmen wearing greatcoats with their number painted on their backs, and issued with a lantern and a stave. They manned sentry boxes at fixed points in the city and maintained elements of the old system of policing.

From the very start the efficiency of the Watchmen was questioned. Within the first three months, they had to be warned not to wander off their station or go home when on duty, and particularly not to sleep on duty.⁷ It is clear that many of these men were old and decrepit, and proved to be easy targets for drunks, particularly students, who took great delight in fighting with them and overturning the boxes.⁸

It is clear that the Police Commissioners were extremely ‘hands on’ and concerned themselves with the efficiency of their police. In January 1802 one commissioner had requested a ‘List of Defaulters’ from police

officer McMurrish and been refused. The Sergeants and Officers were instructed to fully co-operate with the commissioners and to call on them every second morning.⁹

By March 1802, the Sergeants and Officers were instructed to keep an eye on the Watchmen to ensure they were sober. The watchmen’s’ regulations were restated. They worked from 10pm to 5am between April and September, and 9pm to 6am, between October and March.

He must attend at the Police Office with his great coat and staff every night half an hour before he begins his watch... He must go through his ranges or rounds every half hour and call the time distinctly.

There were more warnings regarding being drunk or sleeping on duty, and instructions to apprehend vagrants and disorderly persons and escort them to the Police Office, to look out for suspicious persons, inspect the lamps, turn out for fires, monitor road traffic and sweep the

streets. The Master of Police reminded them, ‘Watchmen... you have taken a great and solemn oath... to faithfully perform your duty as a Watchmen under the Police Establishment’.¹⁰ Nevertheless, forty of the watchmen protested, considering these new guidelines too strict and threatened to leave. In the end, only seven resigned.¹¹

In September 1802, Stenhouse was again elected as Master of Police against opposition from two merchants and two ex-military men.¹² He was informed that his uniform should be; to dress in black with a cocked hat, a medal suspended by a ribbon and with a white rod or baton.¹³

It appears that relations between Stenhouse and the Commissioners had deteriorated, as they found it necessary to remind him that while he had ‘charge of the other servants, Master of Police was their servant’.¹⁴

It is difficult to ascertain what the people of Glasgow thought of this new institution. Correspondence in the *Glasgow Herald*, which did not reflect the musings of the working class, displayed a broad support for the police. Nevertheless, the newspaper is peppered with examples of the establishment failing in their duty, with watchmen unable to hold onto prisoners, ignoring crime and in the case of one lame ex-soldier working as a watchman, breaking into a shop and stealing liquor. He absconded and the Commissioners offered a reward of ten pounds which was matched by the watchmen, anxious to show their outrage at one of their number betraying the establishment.¹⁵

In August 1803, Stenhouse was replaced by another merchant, Walter Graham, who also lost his job two years later.¹⁶ James Mitchell, who had served in the Lanarkshire Militia, replaced him. In a trend that followed the election of each new head, Mitchell, ‘the tallest master of police

we ever saw', set about improving the efficiency of the force.¹⁷ He complained that 'the whole officers have been very remiss in the execution of their duty'.¹⁸ A committee enquiry, agreed and reported a catalogue of failures by the officers; they were insolent, drunk on duty, unfit for duty and neglected their duty. Four were dismissed.¹⁹ The Commissioners also received regular complaints about the Watchmen, including failing to deter thefts, sleeping on duty and allowing prisoners to escape. They decided to inspect the Watchmen 'as a number of them appear old and infirm'.²⁰ They marched past the Watchmen and Lamps Committee, and appeared to be satisfactory. The complaints continued and the Commissioners agreed not to employ Watchmen who were 'wanting an arm or otherwise disabled'.²¹

In November 1811, the Police Commissioners asserted their privilege to intervene in police business and set up a committee called the Secret Service. This nascent criminal investigation department did not have any officers, but met to try and formulate 'some Regulations for the more effectual detection of Robberies, housebreakings, etc'.²²

In September 1817 another committee which had been formed to look into investigating crime decided 'it will be most expedient to employ two persons... to devote their time, solely to the criminal department', and the following month two men were appointed.²³ Two months later the Police Commissioners noted that the Criminal Constables 'have been very active' and they considered rewarding them with 5 shillings each. It appears that much of the success of these officers was because they openly bought information regarding crimes. In just their first month, they had paid out 6 shillings and 8d 'procuring information'.²⁴ By 1820 the Secret Service Committee were so

alarmed by an increase in crime that two more Criminal Constables were appointed.²⁵ Unlike in London 20 years later, the minutes do not reveal any debate over the morality of using detectives.²⁶

Throughout the early years of the force the Commissioners received a constant stream of complaints about the efficiency of the police, and in April 1812 they moved that they were 'not satisfied with the conduct of any of the Officers during the year' and proposed to dismiss them.²⁷ However, the conditions of service imposed by the Master of Police and the Commissioners also led to a large turnover in men. One of the officers, Henry Anderson, asked to be allowed to leave because of fatigue after night shift. A surgeon supported his case, incredulous at the conditions officers were expected to endure:

*If the duty of an officer of police requires that he be kept constantly employed for thirty-six hours at a time without any interval for sleep and more especially if that duty is required of him twice a week I am decidedly of the opinion that he is totally unfit for it.*²⁸

By 1817 a pattern was established whereby extra officers were periodically employed to campaign against beggars, and the Special Constabulary was extended to 700 men to address the frequent disturbances, food riots, New Year celebrations and the riots that accompanied the King's Birthday. On the King's birthday in June 1819, all of the police establishment paraded and were supplemented by 40 of the local militia's Sergeants.²⁹ The magistrates pasted posters around the city asking the public to show some restraint, and they prohibited 'all Bonfires, carrying of Burning Tar Barrels... and the Firing of Pistols and other Fire Arms, on the Streets and Public Places in the City'.³⁰

Mitchell continued to eradicate

drunkenness and improve efficiency, and the Police Commissioners' Minutes are sprinkled with rewards given to members of the force. For example, 'one guinea be given to William Lennon, Watchmen for his activity in apprehending two persons carrying a dead humane [sic] body'. Clearly the Watchmen were not all decrepit, infirm and ineffective. However, at the same meeting, another committee on efficiency decided to sack one Head Constable, one Officer, eleven Watchmen and three Patrolmen - around 11% of the force.³¹

6 John Scott, *Abstract of the Police Acts with a Summary of the Powers and Duties of Special Constables* (Glasgow: James Hedderwick, 1821), 10.

7 E1/1/2, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 11 December 1800.

8 Ibid, 16 January 1801.

9 Ibid, 18 January 1802.

10 Ibid, 25 March 1802.

11 Ibid, 6 May 1802.

12 Ibid, 21 September 1802.

13 E1/1/3, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 19 October 1802.

14 Ibid, 19 October 1802.

15 *Glasgow Herald*, 4 April 1806, p. 2.

16 E1/1/1, 3 June 1805.

17 Peter Berresford Ellis and Seumas Mac a'Ghobhainn, *The Radical Rising: The Scottish Insurrection of 1820* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016) 17.

18 E1/1/4, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 1 April 1806.

19 Ibid, 8 July 1806.

20 E1/1/6, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 25 January 1810.

21 E1/1/7, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 1 November 1811.

22 Ibid, 21 November 1811.

23 E1/1/9, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 18 September 1817.

24 Ibid, 6 November 1817.

25 E1/1/4, 3 February 1820.

26 Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

27 E1/1/7, 23 April 1812.

28 Ibid, 24 September 1812.

29 E1/1/10, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 31 May 1819.

30 SR22/62/1 King's Birthday Poster, June 1819, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

31 E1/1/10, 9 September 1819.

In the decade following the Napoleonic Wars, Glasgow was the scene of much violent disorder and rioting. Economic distress, declining wages and the return of thousands of soldiers and sailors to the labour market was met with little or no assistance from Lord Liverpool's government. The Lord Provost set up a scheme to assist the 'Industrious Poor' and a number of public works were initiated to alleviate poverty in the city.

Notwithstanding this, the condition of the working people did not improve and support grew for the radical movement, which called for representation in Parliament and annual elections to address the people's distress. This article will not examine the events which culminated in the Radical War of April 1820, however it is important to note that this attempt at an uprising was countered not primarily by the police officers and watchmen, but by the use of government and police spies to infiltrate and report back on the radical's plans and the use of that blunt instrument, the army.

In November 1819, the Lord Provost was so concerned by the threat of revolution that he called on the police to assist in 'establishing an armed association... for the protection of the peace'. All of the police were armed 'to guard against any invasion of our established laws and constitution by the promoters of sedition and dissatisfaction'.³² It is clear that the Lord Provost and his fellow merchants in the Commissioners had the most to lose by any disturbance, whether it be a food riot or revolution. Nevertheless, Hugh Thomson, No. 1 Officer, refused to take-up arms along with the rest of the police and he was immediately dismissed.³³ James Mitchell's views on the radicals were the same as his Commissioners; they were 'vipers' and 'vermin', but he ordered the police to ignore the crowds of people



Contemporary sketch of a Glasgow policeman c1800

unless they were being assaulted or there was the chance of damage to property. Mitchell had by a system of spies, a form of intelligence-led policing, restricted the revolt to the posting up of the proclamation and there was no large uprising.

Even at this time of social upheaval, normal policing continued with reports on the dirty 'state of the closes [sic]', beggars apprehended and three bakers charged with walking on the pavement with baskets on their heads.³⁴ This emphasises the role of the police to impose a safe, clean, orderly environment where the wheels of business could roll along unimpeded.

The first twenty years of policing in Glasgow were eventful as they strived to impose a new order on the streets; the period ended with the involvement of police spies to defeat a revolutionary movement.

The first 25 years of the force saw the Police Commissioners select five Masters of Police, three merchants, a Justice of the Peace and a military

man. After 1832, every leader of the Glasgow police had experience of commanding another police force.

Dinsmor is correct to state that preventative policing had been established in the majority of eleven cities and towns who had their own police Acts prior to 1829. Barrie, however, has added a note of caution on the issue of whether they were new police. He rightly asserts that all of the new forces continued with components of the old system.³⁵ This is most clearly shown in Glasgow with the employment of watchmen. Despite the many concerns over the calibre of watchmen employed, they did walk their 'ranges' or beats, and acted as a preventative police.

I believe that Glasgow started a process that developed and continued until the Police (Scotland) Act of 1857. Only with the establishment of an Inspector of Constabulary insisting on efficiency and the incentive of government money did most county, burgh and city forces move towards a recognisably new police model.

³² Ibid. 15 November 1819.

³³ E1/1/11, Minutes of Glasgow Police Commissioners, 16 December 1819.

³⁴ E1/1/11, 20 April 1820 and 8 June 1820.

³⁵ David G. Barrie, *Police in the Age of Improvement: Police development and the civic tradition in Scotland, 1775 - 1865* (Cullompton: Willan, 2008), 6.



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