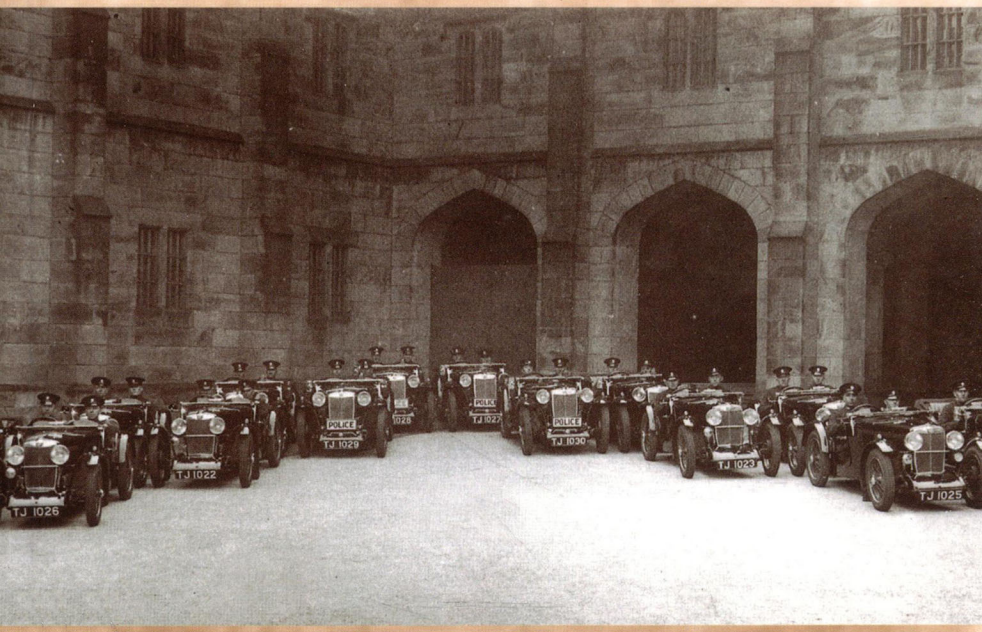
POLICING IN ENGLAND AND WALES, 1918–39



THE FED, FLYING SQUADS AND FORENSICS

KEITH LAYBOURN AND DAVID TAYLOR

Policing in England and Wales, 1918–39

The Fed, Flying Squads and Forensics

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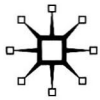

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HOOLIGANS, HARLOTS AND HANGMEN

POLICING THE VICTORIAN TOWN
The development of the police in Middlesbrough c. 1840–1914

Dedicated to Julia and Thelma

List of Illustrations and Tables

Illustrations

Front cover photograph is of the Lancashire Flying Squad in 1933. There are 14 MG Mag(n)ettes on display (Lancashire County Police, permission given by the Lancashire County Records Office, Preston).

Tables

Acknowledgements

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photograph of the Lancashire Flying squad of 1933, which adorns the front cover of this book.

The vast majority of this book is drawn from the primary evidence gathered in the above-mentioned archives. However, in providing the historiography of debate, we have referred to the vital secondary books and articles that have shaped our thinking. These have generally been referred to within the context of the debate. Occasionally, there have been very short quotes, but these in no way have reached or exceeded the guidelines normally accepted by publishers. In every case we have given them full attribution amongst the 800 or so notes we have supplied.

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Abbreviations

AA	Automobile Association
CCA	Chief Constables' Association
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
DORA	The Defence of the Realm Act
HMIC	His Majesty's Inspectors of Constabulary
MPD	Metropolitan Police District
MPU	Metropolitan Police Union
NUPPO	National Union of Police and Prison Officers
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
RAC	Royal Automobile Club
SJC	Standing Joint Committee
TUC	Trades Union Congress

Contents

1
Introduction

Despite the continuing interest in the inter-war years and the recent rapid development of police history there has been surprisingly little research on the general development of policing in the 1920s and 1930s. Further, much of what has been written paints a negative picture of policing in the period. However, it is our contention that the inter-war years witnessed the start of certain fundamental changes in policing that laid the foundations of later, and more publicised, developments that took place, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The focus of the book will be on two complex but important drivers of change. The first encompasses concerns about police organisation and politicisation in the immediate aftermath of the Great War with wider concerns about the growth of extremist ideologies, their infiltration into British society and their impact on public order. This resulted in a drive to professionalise the police through better pay and conditions, better training and greater use of science and technology but also involved a change in the relationships between individual police forces, their local authorities and the Home Office. The second set of influences relate to the impact of the advent of a motorised society, which set in motion changes that altered basic policing practices, encouraging specialisation and moving (some) policemen off their feet and onto their seats and that also recast the wider relationship between police and public.[1] This is not to suggest that there were not other important developments. Clearly there were; and some, for example, the emergence of women police, have been analysed elsewhere.[2] Nor is it to deny that there were important elements of continuity in policing that ran through the first half of the twentieth century. Equally clearly there were; but such continuity is but one part of a more complex story and one that has been allowed to overshadow important changes that first emerged between the wars.

Clive Emsley, the doyen of British police historians, in his most recent book, *The Great British Bobby*, stresses the continuity with Victorian practices. 'The Bobby still plodded his beat on foot... largely unchanged from the system that had developed during the Victorian period.'[3] It is almost as an afterthought that he notes 'the succession of new and major challenges' before 1939 and it is only in the 1960s that he sees significant change taking place.[4] A variation on the theme of significant post-war change is to be found in Philip Rawlings overview, *Policing: A Short History*, in which he writes of 'fundamental changes... in the air [and]... a dizzying array of... experiments' that preceded the much-praised changes in Kirkby, immortalised in the TV series *Z Cars*.[5] To a large extent both Emsley and Rawlings were repeating the argument advanced by earlier writers. The first modern police historian, T. A. Critchley, who had been secretary to the Royal Commission on Policing in 1960–62, was impressed with the modernisation that took place in and after that decade after the delays of the 1950s when reform was 'on an ebb tide'.[6] Similarly, Martin and Wilson saw the inter-war years as a period in which '[t]he police service changed less ... than did many other aspects of life.'[7] There was the occasional dissenting voice. Philip Stead, writing in 1985, noted that 'the inter-war period saw much police innovation'.[8] But this was the exception. The new orthodoxy in the general police histories is reflected in a number of local studies, most notably Brogden's study of policing in inter-war Liverpool which puts great emphasis on the routine of the beat and, somewhat surprisingly, in view of the chief constable's concerns with and actions on traffic problems, makes no reference to traffic policing in the city.[9] However, Weinberger's oral history of English policing from the 1930s to the 1960s, while recognising the importance of 'traditional' beat work, is well aware that even before the Second World War 'the car... changed life drastically for the police'.[10] The idea that there were 'real-world' changes has been argued provocatively (though not entirely convincingly) by Howard Taylor who sees the criminal statistics in general and traffic offences in particular as being the product of supply-side politics that had more to do with an existential threat to the police in the harsh economic conditions of the years after the Great War.[11]

Developments in policing have also been widely discussed by labour and social historians concerned with other questions. The policing of strikes in general, and the General Strike in particular, has generated a significant specialist literature; so too has the policing of public protest. Fearing that many of these events were perpetrated by the communists inter-war governments prepared for the threat by introducing the 1919

Police Act to form a Police Federation, in place of a trade union, to stabilise the police and to organise bodies for their representation. Most historians who have written about public order policies suggest that inter-war governments worked closely with chief constables, the army and other interested bodies, in order to co-ordinate an effective response to threats of public order. They generally maintain that public order was better organised in dealing with disturbances and, consequently, that the police response to public disorder was more effective and less violent than might have been expected, although the police were still prone to organising baton charges and effecting local abuse of their power.[12] This is a view with which we would concur.

In 1929 the *Report of the Royal Commission on Police Powers and Procedures* was being disingenuous when it rejected out of hand the claim of some of its witnesses that the police frequently abused their powers. In particular it dismissed the claim that there was amongst the police a 'post-war mentality' that was 'more arbitrary and oppressive to the public than... before the war' but it could not help boasting that there had been a 'post-war magnification of the executive' and that pay, conditions and training had created 'in spirit if not in form' a 'unified National Force'.[13] The mindset of the Royal Commission was clear: it was one of an unequivocal rejection of the evidence it received of the high-handedness of the police and the abuse of their powers. However, the Home Office papers on this matter cannot be denied, for they show that the Home Office was aware of abuse of police powers and was informing and advising chief constables, for instance, in the art of obfuscation in matters of law during the coal dispute and the General Strike of 1926.[14] Even before then, as is evident from Chapter 3, the local control of the police had certainly been circumvented by secret arrangements between the Home Office and chief constables.

Similarly, the growth of motor traffic has attracted attention from historians who, to a greater or lesser extent, commented on the attitudes and actions of the police. Thorold's *Motoring Age* is not primarily concerned with the policing of traffic but on a number of occasions presents the police in a negative light, persecuting innocent drivers.[15] Other historians have been less sympathetic to the plight of the driver and have focused more on the (pedestrian) victims of the emerging motorised age. O'Connell and Moran have emphasised the social and political influence of the motor trade and the motoring organisations in deflecting criticism from perpetrators to victims (the careless pedestrians in particular) and helping to shape government traffic policy in their favour.[16]

O'Connell sees the police as part of the wider problem facing road safety reformers, singling out (as if typical) the Chief Constable of Salford, Major Godfrey, for particular criticism for demanding coroners to return suicide verdicts in certain cases of road fatalities.[17] A more nuanced and more convincing account of the demonising of the 'road hog' is given by Emsley, but even he fails to do justice to the variety and complexity of police responses to this most pressing problem.[18]

Before moving to our main themes it is important to sketch in the background – both specific and general – that will provide the backcloth for the detailed discussions that follow. The general economic background is well known and only the most salient points need to be mentioned here. Despite more positive interpretations of the inter-war years, no historian has seriously questioned the undoubted financial difficulties that faced successive governments during the 1920s and 1930s. The cost of fighting a world war combined with the severe economic downturn of 1921 put immense pressure on governmental resources – pressure that was intensified by the conventional, neo-classical economic thinking that prevailed. Barely had the economy recovered in the late 1920s than it was hit by another economic downturn which, though not as severe as that experienced in America or Germany, was a depression of sufficient dimensions to make exceptional demands on governmental resources. The search for government economies was a recurring theme. The (perceived) need to cut back on public expenditure impacted dramatically on the police. As a consequence there was an ongoing tension for the police (and those responsible nationally and locally for policing) between, on the one hand, the demand to be more professional and to take on more responsibilities, which required more resources, and, on the other hand, the need to be economical by operating on reduced or static resources. These tensions were particularly evident after the economy cuts of the Geddes' Axe in 1921 and the cuts imposed by the National Government in 1932. A second general factor was the concern for social and political stability in an era when threatening ideologies appeared to be undermining national institutions and fomenting popular discontent.

Any discussion of inter-war policing must start with recognition of the weak position of the force as a whole at the end of the Great War. The 'collection of Victorian bric a brac', as Critchley rather harshly described the police at the outbreak of hostilities, was subjected to immense pressure as the demands of war increased. The total authorised strength of the 58 counties and 128 boroughs in 1918 was 35,536 regular police – in theory a small increase over the figure for 1914; but, in practice, the actual strength was 21,113, or just under 60 per cent of the authorised

strength. The situation was worse in the boroughs where the figure was just under 56 per cent. The deficiency was made good, in part at least, by the employment of thousands of special constables, almost one thousand of whom were actually deployed on duty on any one day, and by the use of a small number of specialised women's patrols.[19] Leonard Dunning was of the view that 'the war has taught them [citizens] to rely upon their own powers for the protection of themselves and their property instead of leaning on the police.'[20] It was a prospect that filled him with anxiety – and not just for the wellbeing of the country at large. At a time when increased demands on the police suggest that there had been a quick return to the habit of 'leaning on the police' restoring numbers to something like pre-war levels was seen as essential. A further problem, clearly identified by the Desborough Committee, which dealt with police pay and conditions in 1918 and 1919, was the proliferation of small police forces across England and Wales. Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Selected police statistics: county and borough forces in England and Wales (excluding London) 1919–39

	Authorised strength	Vacancies	Vacancies as % authorised strength	Population per constable	Police women attested
1919	35,780	3308	9.25	805	37
1920	36,033	1795	4.98	800	33
1921	36,439	850	2.33	835	31
1922	36,415	2065	5.67	835	36
1923	36,488	2436	6.68	834	42
1924	36,562	2203	6.03	832	48
1925	36,604	1643	4.49	831	56
1926	36,640	1165	3.18	831	65
1927	36,751	1029	2.8	827	62
1928	36,895	974	2.7	824	65
1929	37,088	951	2.56	820	66
1930	37,187	833	2.24	818	71
1931	37,352	733	1.96	850	70
1932	37,294	842	2.26	851	81
1933	37,368	954	2.55	850	84
1934	37,573	843	2.24	845	89
1935	38,113	759	1.99	833	92
1936	38,799	819	2.37	818	89
1937	40,530	1216	3.00	783	93
1938	41,107	902	2.19	772	98
1939	42,708	1279	2.99	743	99

Source: HMIC *Annual Reports*.