

Bobbies, Beadles and Watchmen of Bermondsey Street

By Richard Miller



Sir Robert Peel

Sir Robert Peel founded the Metropolitan Police (also known as Bobbies or Peelers) in 1829, and the first police forces and stations were established within a seven mile radius of Charing Cross.

A newly created Southwark (M) Division served much of the Bermondsey area. Initially, the new 'Peelers' operated from a Station House at 4-5 Southwark Bridge Road, a former Watch House in Guildford Street (Great Guildford Street) and from Union Hall in Union Street, Southwark.



Rotherhithe gained a police station in 1835, and by the late 1840s, the rapid growth in London's population saw Bermondsey in need of its own. Located at number 47 Bermondsey Street (since renumbered 59), this opened in March 1851.

Bermondsey Street's new station was built on three floors with a basement and a yard. The architect was Charles Reeves, a surveyor for the Metropolitan Police, and his general design was repeated in other stations constructed around this time, including Gypsy Hill.

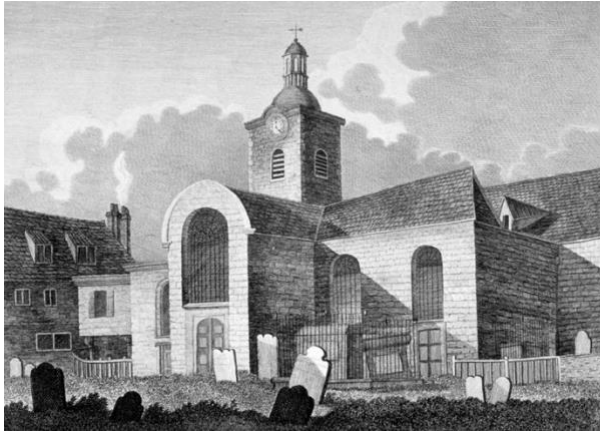


Before the police service was established in 1829, the parish of Bermondsey was served by constables and watchmen, who were administered by Surrey and operated out of Union Hall. Union Hall also served as a Court of Justice where magistrates sat to hear cases until 1845.



Local parishes in England had managed issues of crime and safety locally by appointing beadles. The role evolved over the centuries, and beadles serving the parish of St Mary Magdalene assisted religious ceremonies and oversaw parish watchmen who kept guard at night. They maintained order, mediating disputes between residents, and ensuring that vagrants, beggars, and the poor were dealt with in accordance with the laws in place at the time.

A session at Union Hall, reported in the Morning Chronicle, September 23, 1834, names a man called 'Mullawny', who was charged with committing violent assault (with others) on Chesney, the beadle of Bermondsey.



The report explains that two beadles (Chesney and Shaw) were set upon by a large mob who were anxious to get into St Mary Magdalene churchyard to attend a funeral the previous Sunday. Chesney and Shaw had been instructed to allow only bearers and immediate friends, due to frequent instances of damage to tombstones and new graves when large crowds were admitted. The crowd, eager to enter the churchyard, turned into a mob and set upon the beadles, who were rescued when police arrived. In the confusion

and mayhem, many of the mob escaped. The magistrate bailed the accused and other witnesses to answer the charge at a further session.

Beadles, parish constables and watchmen often worked in unison, but the introduction of the Metropolitan Police did cause some difficulties. Surrey constables continued to report to Magistrates at Union Hall, while local beadles and watchmen answered to the vestry of St Mary Magdalene. With the Metropolitan Police now becoming a third arm of the law, the lines of command were sometimes strained. Changes in local governance in London during the century led to the gradual disentanglement of these problems. The roles of beadles and watchmen diminished, and the Metropolitan Police emerged as the principal providers of law and order.



In 1851, Sergeant Martin Page and 20 constables lived at a Police Section House in nearby Long Lane. Section houses served as living quarters, usually for unmarried policemen, whilst policemen with families commonly lived independently in the area. The constables attached to the Long Lane Section House may well have served at the new station in Bermondsey Street.

The 1871 census tells us that Sergeants Brown, Hunt, and Dickman were overseeing 27 police constables at the Bermondsey Street Station. On the night of the census, the station held five prisoners, two adult males, a female and two boys aged 16 and 14. However, there are no clues identifying the reason for their incarceration.

Sergeant John Brown married Mary Lewis at St. Mary Magdalene in 1878, and they lived on Monnow Road, Bermondsey. By 1881, Brown had risen to the position of Inspector of Police. He served the Bermondsey area (M Division) for 13 years before transferring to Hammersmith (F Division) in 1884. He retired in 1892 after 25 years of service following the death of his wife Mary, and moved down to New Sarum in Wiltshire.

Bermondsey Street's Police Station operated for 50 years but was downgraded to a section house after Tower Bridge Police Station opened in 1902, closing permanently in 1906. The building was repurposed for commercial use in 1908.

Sources: Policing the County of Surrey from Union Hall – before the Surrey Constabulary, Peter Kennison PhD, Bermondsey Street Police Station and Section House, Layersoflondon.org, Edward Smith, Old and New London, Walter Thornbury 1897, Census records of 1851, 1871, and 1881.