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## THE PLAGUE OF THE BLUE LOCUSTS

### POLICE REFORM AND POPULAR RESISTANCE IN NORTHERN ENGLAND, 1840-57

*Because the English Bourgeois finds himself re-produced in his law, as he does in his God, the policeman's truncheon [...] has for him a wonderfully soothing power. But for the workingman quite otherwise!*

F. Engels<sup>1</sup>

The implantation of a modern police in the industrial districts of Northern England resulted from a new consensus among the propertied classes that it was necessary to create a professional, bureaucratically organized lever of urban discipline and permanently introduce it into the heart of working-class communities. The coming of the new police represented a significant extension into hitherto geographically peripheral areas of both the moral and political authority of the state. This was to be accomplished by the creation of a powerful and quite modern device – a bureaucracy of official morality. By 1840 it came to be “an axiom in police that you guard St. James by watching St. Giles”.<sup>2</sup> This was a novel attitude. Eighteenth-century governments and the upper classes in general were surely apprehensive of the movements of the lower orders, but did not consider it either useful or necessary to watch St Giles *all the time*. One could learn what one needed to know about what was on the collective mind of St Giles when it rioted; one might even use or manipulate its riots in useful ways as the reform movement of 1830-32 did with great success. Previous to the nineteenth century urban disorder was not necessarily perceived as subversive of the social order. “Provided that the ruler did his duty, the populace was prepared to defend him with enthusiasm. But if he did not, it rioted until he did. This mechanism was perfectly understood by both sides, and caused no political problems beyond a little occasional destruction of property [...]. Since the riots were not directed against the social system, public order could remain surprisingly lax by modern standards.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Condition of the Working Class in England, in Marx And Engels On Britain (Moscow, 1962), p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> “The Police System Of London”, in: Edinburgh Review, July 1852, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels (New York, 1965), p. 116.

The mission of the new police was a symptom of both a profound social change and a deep rupture in class relations in the first half of the nineteenth century. By this time, both the actions and the “language” spoken by urban masses were, if intelligible at all, deeply frightening. The notion that movements of the lower orders had comprehensible or “legitimate” objectives – cheaper gin, the deposition of a hated minister, lower bread prices – was replaced by the feeling that they aimed somehow at the utter unravelling of society. By the 1830s and 1840s dread of the “dangerous classes” could be transformed into near hysteria at times of great social and political tension. Many members of the propertied classes were now prepared to argue that unless new agencies of social discipline were created, “secret societies [...] working in the gloom of night, may surprise us when surrounded by the noblest, the best, the fairest of our land, when music floats through our halls – may even strike us in the house of God on that day devoted to prayer, may render our homes desolate, and involve country and city in one common ruin”.<sup>1</sup> By the 1840s this type of rhetoric was not uncommon among the bourgeoisie. Under such circumstances not the military, nor a band of special constables, but only a strong police securely lodged in the working-class neighborhood “could preserve property – the countless millions possessed by the wealthy, the industrious, the prudent; the trade of the merchant; the works of artists; the factories of manufacturers; [...] the hospitals for the sick; [...] the schools; [...] lastly those sacred edifices from which flow those pure streams which prepare man for a future and eternal home”.<sup>2</sup> In short the very fabric of society was thought to be threatened. By this period popular disorder of any type, even manifestations usually devoid of overt political content – public-house affrays, dog-fights, races, popular fêtes of any type – seemed to constitute a clear and present danger to the social order.

Such apprehensions were often expressed in a concern that the masses had totally eluded all contemporary mechanisms of social control, or worse that they had somehow broken down. For this reason the doings of the working class after release from the salutary industrial discipline of the mill or workshop became a matter of pressing interest. It was clear that what workers did after passing out through the factory gates in the evening into the *terra incognita* of the working-class neighborhood was both unwholesome and potentially dangerous. Joseph Livesey, a Preston cheese merchant and temperance reformer, wrote: “My most anxious wish is to see this country peaceful,

<sup>1</sup> E. A. Antrobus, *London. Its Danger And Its Safety* (London, 1848), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

prosperous and happy. Whatever other changes take place, we shall never realize this till all the people are morally reformed. Whilst trade and commerce, arts and sciences are rapidly advancing, I think it will be conceded on all hands that the morals of the great bulk of the people have not made equal progress. [...] Unless the people are morally improved, being now brought into large masses, and possessing increased facilities for mischief, the result [...] may sooner or later, be internal commotion if not a national wreck.”<sup>1</sup>

The industrial city, classically described by Engels, separated class from class and eroded away older, more personal mechanisms of social control. “Unhappily”, wrote a Liverpool businessman, “it is true that, with the growth of wealth and population, the wall of moral separation appears to have become broader, higher and more impassible. The rich see less of the poor than they used to do, know less of their habits, their feelings, and their wants. [...] So far as our towns are concerned, the cases are few [...] in which there is any personal tie between rich and poor – any recognition [...] of a connexion that does not end with working hours, or of any [...] claim on an individual for anything besides fair wages and honest work. [...] The subdivision of labour [...] sever[s] the personal connexion which established an evident mutual claim between master and servant. Regard to history confirms the fears of common sense that a state of national life, in which the moral unity of the nation is broken [...] is the sure forerunner [...] of rapid national decay.”<sup>2</sup> This kind of analysis – paralleling that of Marx and Engels in significant ways – expressed itself in bourgeois hands either in the language of middle-class benevolence or else in the rhetoric of “dangerous classes”.

The “licentiousness which prevails among the dense population of manufacturing towns is carried to a degree which is appalling to contemplate [...]. And in addition to overt acts of vice, there is a coarseness and grossness of feeling, and an habitual indecency [...]. They are exempt from the restraints of other classes”.<sup>3</sup> Because moral reform and social discipline could only be generated – it was thought – from above, the rupture of tradition lines of authority and deference was much lamented. The Liverpool businessman quoted above remembered with great feeling and nostalgia that his father “knew

<sup>1</sup> Livesey’s *Moral Reformer*, January 6, 1838.

<sup>2</sup> “A Man Of Business” [William Rathbone], *Social Duties Considered With Reference To The Organisation Of Effort In Works Of Benevolence And Public Utility* (London, 1867), pp. 2-14. Cf. J. Foster, *Class Struggle And The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), pp. 22-26.

<sup>3</sup> J. Wade, *History Of The Middle And Working Classes*, third ed. (London, 1835), p. 582.

every one of the [...] hands whom he employed, they lived in their employer's cottages, close to his house and mill, within reach of the daily visits of his family".<sup>1</sup> Because those threads could never again be pieced together in the new environment of Liverpool or Salford or Bradford, because the physical and spiritual withdrawal of the upper classes was seemingly so total and permanent, the way was open for the introduction of novel types of surrogates – modern bureaucracies of official morality: Somerset House and the new police.

For these reasons the police received an omnibus mandate: to detect and prevent crime; to maintain a constant, unceasing pressure of surveillance upon all facets of life in working-class communities – to report on political opinions and movements, trade-union activities, public house and recreational life. The upper classes were not totally agreed on the ideal administrative structure of the police nor on the precise relations between the localities and central authority, and there continued to be considerable local resistance to any highly centralized model;<sup>2</sup> but there were few quibbles about the mission the police were created to carry out in working-class districts.

By 1830 the deficiencies of the army in order keeping were manifest. The inflexibility of the military, its inability to act with anything less than the maximum of force when compelled to intervene, and the consequent and frequent refusal of its commanders to act; but more important its inherent unsuitability to the task of providing the type of daily protection now demanded<sup>3</sup> made its use increasingly inappropriate except in pressing emergencies. Similarly, the old parish constable system was now considered worse than useless. Thomas

<sup>1</sup> "A Man Of Business", *op. cit.* For other nostalgic glances back in a similar vein see N. Scatcherd, *The History Of Morley* (Leeds, 1830), p. 180; "Past And Present Times At Gildersome", in: *Leeds Times*, February 4, 1843.

<sup>2</sup> See L. Radzinowicz, *History Of The English Criminal Law* (London, 1968), IV, pp. 215-221; H. Parris, "The Home Office And The Provincial Police", in: *Public Law*, Autumn 1961, pp. 230-255; J. Hart, "The County And Borough Police Act, 1856", in: *Public Administration*, XXXIV (1956), pp. 405-417.

<sup>3</sup> F. C. Mather, *Public Order In The Age Of The Chartists* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 153-181; F. Darvall, *Popular Disturbance And Public Order In Regency England* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 80, 262, 267; First Report Royal Commission On Constabulary Force [Parliamentary Papers, 1839, XIX], p. 83; Foster, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67. Supt Martin, who led the London police in the 1837 Poor Law riot at Huddersfield, the 1838 Poor Law riot at Dewsbury and the Birmingham Bull Ring Riots of 1839, pointed out that police can act individually in a crowd. Troops have both hands full and cannot leave their ranks without orders. Moreover they must either charge or fire and indiscriminately kill; Second Report House Of Commons Select Committee On Police [PP, 1852-53, XXXVI], p. 92. The Colne anti-police riots discussed below perfectly illustrated the inadequacies of the military.

Ashton, a Lancashire millowner, complained: "Residents have their relations or friends interested and you cannot get them to act [...]. The leet constables [...] are all connected by family or some other way, they are of no use; we never could get a protecting force from the neighbourhood."<sup>1</sup> A Norwich manufacturer pleaded for a force under "independent control". The local police would not protect industry "from ignorant and unlawful violence" – i.e. trade unionism –, being under the control of local tradesmen dependent on the working classes and under the necessity to "bid for popularity to the very lowest of the voters".<sup>2</sup> A Lincolnshire magistrate urged a reformed police, pointing out that local constables were unable or unwilling to suppress undesirable popular recreational activities: "If any active, influential individual is wanted to interfere amongst the disorderly beerhouses, to suppress cock-fightings, drunkenness, pugilistic combats [...] or any other outrage, there is none to be found. [...] Our present constable [...] has never acted, and declines to act: he has been sent for to quell riots in the streets, to take up drunken brawlers, fighters, etc., but to no purpose."<sup>3</sup>

As far as the working class and its political movement was concerned, whatever reformed police structure was to be imposed, it seemed certain that the new demands being raised among the propertied for surer preservation of civil order and social discipline would determine that the new police would inevitably personify both alien values and an increasingly alien law in the inner core of the modern industrial city.<sup>4</sup> Whatever power the new policeman's truncheon might be invested with, it was sure to be "wonderfully soothing" – as Engels pointed out – to the bourgeoisie; but "for the working-man quite otherwise". The 1839 Constabulary Force Commissioners were ironically well aware that the implantation of a modernized police structure necessitated

<sup>1</sup> First Report Royal Commission On Constabulary Force, op. cit., p. 82. The Manchester police were careful to draw the force from outside the community. See remarks of Capt. Willis in Second Report House Of Commons Select Committee On Police, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> First Report Commission On Constabulary Force, pp. 75-76; cf. Foster, op. cit., pp. 56-61.

<sup>3</sup> First Report Royal Commission On Constabulary Force, pp. 104-105.

<sup>4</sup> See the remark of E. P. Thompson, "'Rough Music': Le Charivari Anglais", in: *Annales*, XXVII (1972), p. 310: "Une des formes les plus extrêmes d'aliénation qu'on puisse trouver dans les sociétés capitalistes et bureaucratiques est l'aliénation de la Loi. Le fonctionnement de la Loi cesse d'être assumé par ceux qui dirigent des communautés; elle est déléguée, monopolisée, et utilisée par d'autres [...] contre eux, à tel point qu'il ne reste plus dans la communauté que la convention ou la peur d'être remarqué." Cf. for generalized working-class mistrust of all agencies of authority H. Pelling, *Popular Politics And Society In Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), pp. 1-6, 16-18, 62-71.

the overt cooperation and the moral assent of the community.<sup>1</sup> This paper deals with the question of the degree to which that moral assent was received. It proposes to examine the impact the imposition of the police had upon working-class communities; to discuss the threats working men perceived the coming of the police to contain; to detail the attitudes and responses of the working-class political movement; and to reveal a hitherto undiscussed history of riotous protest against a reformed police structure.

Working-class political leaders consistently suspected that the new police was “a *political*, not a *protective* force – that its object is not so much to prevent thieving as to watch political feeling, and give reports to the Ministers of the political movements of the working classes.”<sup>2</sup> The attitude of the working-class political movement in the eighteen thirties and forties toward a reformed modernized police system had solid roots in political experience: the days of Sidmouth, Oliver and Castle were not far behind after all.

E. P. Thompson has written that the radical populace viewed any police as a potential engine of political oppression until Chartist times.<sup>3</sup> In fact this attitude persisted past the Chartist period. Much of the hostility directed against the police from within working-class communities resulted as much from their interference in neighborhood and recreational life as from the suspicion that they had been implanted to carry on political surveillance. A great deal of the bitterness against the new police was a consequence of the fact that they were placed among the working classes to monitor all phases of working-class life – trade-union activity, drinking, gambling, sports as well as political activity. The overall mission of the police was to place working-class neighborhoods under a constant and multifaceted surveillance. The police, wrote one working-class leader, were “really soldiers; it was no matter whether they were clothed in blue or red. [...] They were a set of blood-seeking vermin [...]. They must exercise their strength to put down this blue-bottle force, or this country will soon be like Venice, governed by a little band of tyrants. [...] Was it not shameful [...] that they must be watched. [...] A man could not talk to his neighbour without one of these blue devils listening.”<sup>4</sup> The abolition of the London

<sup>1</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 229; First Report Royal Commission On Constabulary Force, pp. 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Destructive And Poor Man's Conservative, November 2, 1833.

<sup>3</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making Of The English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Poor Man's Guardian, April 7, 1832.

police became a prominent plank in the radical platform. Hetherington felt that a reform in the representation would guarantee only partial freedom. Englishmen could not be free until "the police, like the rotten boroughs are abolished".<sup>1</sup> London radicals in the 1830s pointed to the danger that the traditional liberties of the subject would be eroded, as well as the prerogatives of the old parishes; sentiments which appealed to both the working classes and the rate-conscious London lower middle classes.

The example of Manchester is interesting in this regard. In the struggle of Cobden and his supporters to obtain a municipal charter and a borough police, radicals and trade unionists aligned themselves with the Tory anti-incorporators. A poster of 1838 printed by the trade-union leader John Doherty read:

"Men of the Borough  
Be Up and Stirring Betimes on Friday  
Morning, by Ten o'Clock,  
Be at the  
Manchester Town Hall  
Remember! The Penalties for Non-Attendance are  
Whig Misrule  
New and Oppressive Taxes  
A Bourbon Police".<sup>2</sup>

Doherty and the Manchester trade unionists were perhaps less quixotic than they seemed. When Sir Charles Shaw the government police commissioner told Sir Charles Napier that the Manchester police were finally to be turned over to the town, the latter seriously feared that they would become "a means for oppression in the hands of faction. A large town like that requires a police, but ought to be ruled and paid for by a responsible chief unconnected with [...] manufactories. He ought to [...] keep the rich manufacturers from grinding the poor to powder when raw cotton is falling in price; such people naturally desire a police paid and governed by themselves."<sup>3</sup>

The idea that any significant change in England's police structure would be unconstitutional and might pose a multiple threat to working-class political and trade-union activity and to the entire fabric of local neighborhood life ran deeply through the writings and speeches

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, November 5, 1831.

<sup>2</sup> A. Redford, *History Of Local Government In Manchester* (London, 1939-40), I, opposite p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Sir W. Napier (ed.), *The Life And Opinions Of General Sir Charles Napier* (London, 1857), II, p. 146.

of radical leaders<sup>1</sup> from the time of the establishment of the London police to the attempt by Russell to extend the new police to the manufacturing districts of the North.

In London the radical vestries of Marylebone and St Pancras became the foci of anti-police propaganda after 1829. A pamphlet distributed in Marylebone in 1830 urged the public to consider the constitutional question as well as the awful expense involved and then to "UNITE in removing such a powerful force from the hands of Government, and let us institute a police System in the hands of the PEOPLE under *parochial* appointments."<sup>2</sup> The same arguments advanced in London during the 1830s were repeated by northern radicals when the Whig government carried the County Constabulary Act of 1839 and created a new police force in Lancashire. Peter Bussey the Bradford Chartist charged that the government "appeared bent on a destructive system of centralisation, which tended to destroy the last vestige of the liberties of the working men of the kingdom". "Would the people", he asked, "submit to 27,000 rural police being placed all over the kingdom [...] in effect, another standing army, - to make the people submit to all the [...] oppressions which Government contemplate forcing on them."<sup>3</sup>

J. R. Richardson raised the frightening prospect that the government by establishing a "depot for *gend'armerie*" in every town might use the police to carry the New Poor Law into effect "by first overawing the people, and then thrusting it down their throats".<sup>4</sup> Richardson felt the time was approaching when every Poor Law union workhouse would have barracks for policemen beside it.<sup>5</sup> Oastler accused the Hyde

<sup>1</sup> An exception of course was Francis Place. See C. Reith, *British Police And The Democratic Ideal* (London, 1943), pp. 72-73; Radzinowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 179; S. E. Finer, *The Life And Times Of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London, 1952), p. 30. Place was enthusiastic about Chadwick's seminal essay "Preventive Police" (1829). He was a friend of Supt Thomas of the London police and advised him on methods of crowd control in the 1830s. For resistance to the London police in the early 1830s see Radzinowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-189; W. A. Lee, *A History Of Police In England* (London, 1905), pp. 245-261; G. Thurston, *The Clerkenwell Riot: The Killing Of Constable Culley* (London, 1967), *passim*; T. A. Critchley, *A History Of Police In England And Wales 1900-1966* (London, 1967), pp. 54-55; H. Vizetelly, *Glances Back Through Seventy Years* (London, 1893), pp. 58-65; Reith, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-77, 90-98.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Reith, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52, 68. The fear of the cost of the new police sometimes tended to draw working-class and lower middle-class elements together in opposition, cf. the situation in Lancaster, below pp. 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> *Northern Star*, March 9, 1839.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* It should be noted that behind at least some of the rhetoric about the threat to the good old constitution lay a solid tactical consideration: parish constables were much easier to live with, and if need be to intimidate.

<sup>5</sup> *Northern Star*, August 3, 1839.



magistrates of begging for a county police, "a frenchified gens d'armie [sic], in order to help MR. MARCUS to creep into the cradle of the babes and poison them with gas".<sup>1</sup> The spectre of a government plot to make the new police an auxiliary of Somerset House was less fanciful than may be imagined. Oastler and the Chartists were merely taking Chadwick and the Poor Law Commissioners at their own word.<sup>2</sup> Nor should it be forgotten that at Huddersfield and Dewsbury anti-poor law manifestations were met by disciplined and efficient detachments of London police who stayed and fought the crowds in marked contrast to the local constables.<sup>3</sup> The fierceness of the London police on these occasions was surely in the minds of working men and their leaders when the government began to press for a county constabulary in 1839.

Resistance to a reformed police had roots in a number of fears: the traditional fear of a standing army; of the political uses which might be made of such a force; of the effects of police intrusion upon daily neighborhood life; and fear of the police as an agency which might be used to enforce the New Poor Law. There were also great apprehensions about the role the police might play in trade-union affairs and strikes. The Constabulary Force Commissioners had spoken of the "need of an efficient police for the protection of the greater interests of the community of labourers against violence" as well as the need to afford protection "to the use of machinery", which is "protection to the great source of the manufacturing prosperity of the country". The new police would be used to frustrate the attempts of strikers "to deprive the capitalist of his free choice of agents for the employment of capital".<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the working-class political movement were concerned that the police would become the guardians of unfettered capitalist economic development and of a free labor market as defined by orthodox political economy.

Testimony before the Constabulary Force Commissioners by a parade of northern millowners redoubled these suspicions. Thomas Ashton of Hyde said that "in case of turns-out it would be desirable to have a force to protect the people that are willing to work".<sup>5</sup> Henry Ashworth of Turton pleaded for a county force and described the difficulties he

<sup>1</sup> Northern Star, March 2, 1839. Thomas Ashton of Hyde had indeed appeared before the County Constabulary Force Commissioners to plead for a new police. It was not for the reason Oastler cited, but to break the power of trade unionism.

<sup>2</sup> Report From His Majesty's Commissioners For Inquiring Into The Poor Laws. [PP, 1834, XXVIII], Appendix A, pp. 197, 579.

<sup>3</sup> For these episodes as seen by the London police see Second Report From House Of Commons Select Committee On Police, pp. 61-92.

<sup>4</sup> First Report Royal Commission On Constabulary Force, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

encountered importing blacklegs into the district during the spinners' strike of 1830. Ashworth's mills were situated at the junction of three townships. When he called upon the constables those belonging to two townships refused to appear at all; the third offered his services but was later discovered to be an intelligence agent of the unionists.<sup>1</sup> Sheriff Alison of Glasgow saw the establishment of a new police as the only efficient counter to trade-union power. His remedy for what he called "intimidation" was to station forty to fifty police night and day around a struck mill to protect the manufacturer's property and the right of entry of blacklegs.<sup>2</sup> Chadwick himself felt that a new-style police might be useful in dealing with trade disputes. He argued that even in Sheffield in 1868 a force of 245 was insufficient to cope with a "turn out of associated trades". He urged that flying squads of London police be used to deal with "picketing and terrorism" anywhere in England. This would strike a useful blow against the "pot-house conclaves" who he felt ran the trade unions.<sup>3</sup>

Mr John Foster has ably illustrated how important a concern control over the police was to the working-class movement in Lancashire.<sup>4</sup> In Oldham, local constables were subjected to popular pressure both when they were controlled by the vestry and later by the police commission. The County Police Act of 1839 represented a great political defeat. State intervention and the increased power of the JPs which it entailed transformed the police into a weapon of the employers. Henceforth they could be more freely used as both political spies and escorts for strikebreakers.

In the spring of 1840, detachments of the new Lancashire police began to arrive in the localities amid cries of execration from the working-class press and from local communities whose initial contacts with the police had been shocking and disturbing. From Middleton: "Blue Devils: We have now got four of those blue plagues, called new police, to torment [...] the virtuous part of the [...] inhabitants of this town, and it is afloat that we are to have two more."<sup>5</sup> The arrival of the police in the Rochdale district threw many of the poor into consternation by busying themselves monitoring and harassing street traders, peddlers and match sellers.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> E. Chadwick, "On The Consolidation Of The Police Force And The Prevention Of Crime", in: *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1868, pp. 11-12, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-51.

<sup>5</sup> *Northern Star*, May 2, 1840.

<sup>6</sup> *Northern Star*, June 6, 1840. Cf. R. Cobb, *The Police And The People* (Oxford, 1970), *passim*; Henry Mayhew, *London Labour And The London Poor* (London,

The appearance of the new police contributed to the shock of initial contact. They were described as “well clothed and shod, with a pair of white gloves [...] and a great coat for bad weather. They go strutting about [...] armed [...] with a bludgeon, striking terror through all the old women and children, who see them with 18s per week [...] while the labourer toils from morning till night for 10s”.<sup>1</sup> There were complaints from Mansfield, where a detachment of Metropolitans had been sent, that they were forbidding working men from chatting together in groups in the road “while a set of idle drones are lounging about our streets”.<sup>2</sup> The epithets used to describe the new police – “blue bottles”, “blue idlers”, “blue drones”, “hired mercenaries”, “unconstitutional bravoos” – reveal one of the most profound sources of resentment against them. The police were hated because they were felt to be unproductive parasites. Most of the terms used to describe them were synonyms for men who do not really work for a living. A meeting at Middleton was called in February 1841 to memorialize the Lancashire magistrates to abolish the new police. The meeting was attended not only by workers but by small shopkeepers upset about rate increases. All applauded when a weaver asked: “Who sent for the police? The middle class. The middle class chose the men who concocted and passed the law empowering the police to become in society nothing but outlaws”.<sup>3</sup>

A significant item in the plans of a number of Chartist risings in 1840 was the outright murder of the police. This was the case at Newcastle until cooler heads prevailed and at Sheffield where the “policemen were special objects of vengeance, all the conspirators having instructions to murder every policeman they met with”.<sup>4</sup> The radical and Chartist leaders of the 1830s and 1840s articulated the resentment felt against the police on a day-to-day basis in working-class neighborhoods. The phenomenon of anti-police resistance and its manifestation in its most exacerbated form – the anti-police riot – was directly linked to the sentiment that the police were intruders and represented a threat to many aspects of community life. In a significant number of cases episodes of violent resistance were directly traceable to police inter-

1851), I, p. 16: “To serve out a policeman is the bravest act by which a costermonger can distinguish himself. Some [...] have been imprisoned upwards of a dozen times for this offense [...]. When they leave prison [...] a subscription is often got up for their benefit.”

<sup>1</sup> Northern Star, June 6, 1840.

<sup>2</sup> Northern Star, March 27, 1841.

<sup>3</sup> Northern Star, February 20, 1841.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Devyr, *The Odd Book Of The Nineteenth Century* (Greenpoint, New York, 1882), pp. 199-200; cf. R. E. Leader, *Reminiscences Of Sheffield* (Sheffield, 1876), p. 273.

ference with established or customary leisure activities or with pub or beerhouse life.<sup>1</sup> Most of the major anti-police riots are concentrated in the period 1839-1844; however it should be noted that even in the relatively calmer 1850s similar incidents, though on a smaller scale, took place in the West Riding when county police were introduced in 1857.

So far an approach has been made to a number of questions. Some insight has been gained into the reasons working-class leaders were suspicious of the police before their actual introduction. By outlining contemporary statements made by magistrates, millowners and others the conclusion has been reached that those fears were not the result of demagogic impulses but were, considering the historical context, reasonably legitimate. Second some understanding has been gained of the real shock experienced on the local or neighborhood level once the police were placed on duty.

It remains now to detail and analyze a number of specific episodes of anti-police resistance in the 1840s and to examine their causes and course. Seven incidents, four in Lancashire (Middleton, Manchester, Lancaster, Colne), two in Yorkshire (Hull, Leeds) and one in the Potteries (Lane End), have been selected for discussion. In most of these instances anti-police activities were prolonged and extensive, often covering a large portion of town. It is useful to remember however that the anti-police riots of the 1840s represented an exacerbated form of a common, even daily, phenomenon in every industrial town at almost any time. The more routine, circumscribed disturbances which one might pull at any time from police records or the local press are equally important pieces of data for the social historian. Incidents which in the 1850s or 1860s might have remained confined to one neighborhood, one street or one pub, often resulted in the mobilization of a whole town in the more tense 1840s.

The purposes or objectives of the participants varied. In some cases – above all where police were newly implanted – the chief objective was broad in scope: to permanently drive the police out of the community by force. In places which had been policed for some time anti-police eruptions had more limited aims: to preserve popular recreations or customs, prevent interference in strikes, protect wanted individuals, protest against police interference in political activities, protest against instances of police brutality, rescue arrested persons,

<sup>1</sup> The present writer is currently preparing a paper dealing with the role of the policeman as “domestic missionary”, with the question of daily relations on street level between the police and working-class communities up to 1900, and with the problem of the impact of the police on popular leisure patterns.

etc. In a number of cases – Leeds, Manchester, Hull – local crowds appeared against the police only after a confrontation between the latter and a group of outsiders to the community – off-duty soldiers on liberty in the town. The local populace entered at first in solidarity with the soldiers – though with their own set of grievances – and often stayed out against the police long after the troops had been subdued or removed by their officers. Off-duty soldiers often acted as the spark which ignited a local working-class crowd and encouraged them to engage in a disturbance. In such incidents the grievances of the latter were “mediated” through the discontents of an outside group. At Lane End, Middleton, Lancaster and Colne this phenomenon was not observed. The response of the working-class community was unmediated and direct.

The major examples of the first type of disturbance in the 1840s occurred at Manchester and Leeds, however a smaller precursor of the same kind took place at Hull in July 1839. A private in a regiment of foot stationed there was arrested by a borough policeman for being drunk and disorderly. As he was being taken off his mates turned out of a beerhouse to assist him.<sup>1</sup> More police arrived on the scene and a large civilian crowd gathered. In this case the police were driven off when the civilians entered the affray on the side of the troops.<sup>2</sup> The incidents at Manchester and Leeds were much more serious and wider in scope.

During the evening of May 22, 1843, police arrived to quell a minor row between two soldiers at a beerhouse in Bengal Street. The soldiers’ mates and local workers in the beerhouse closed ranks to prevent the arrest. The police retreated to the station house, called out reinforcements and returned. The arrest was successfully made, but not without a rescue attempt being made by a large civilian crowd armed with stones. Rumors flew about the next morning that hostilities would be resumed. That evening an immense crowd led by soldiers emerged from Bengal Street and converged on the police office. The police barricaded themselves inside and waited for reinforcements, but by the time they arrived the crowd had broken in to another police office in Kirkby Street and severely beaten a number of constables. In Port Street five soldier leaders were captured, but local residents turned out of their homes to battle the police and effect a successful

<sup>1</sup> Police intervention at the pub often ended all rows, but sometimes in ways not pleasant for the police. For a random example see Leeds Times, December 19, 1835: Constable Pullan came to the White Horse to quell a row between a group of woolcombers and sailors. When he entered, the combers and sailors closed ranks and thrashed him.

<sup>2</sup> Napier, *op. cit.*, p. 56; Hull Advertiser, July 26, 1839.

rescue. At 6.30 p.m. an inspector walking along Oldham Road in search of a cavalry unit saw a large crowd of perhaps 1000 led by nine soldiers heading towards Piccadilly. The evidence suggests that this crowd was separate from the one reported in Port Street at about the same time. One must conclude that anti-police activities had spread by this hour over a significant portion of the Ancoats district. By about 10.00 p.m. order was finally restored with the help of troops under officers.<sup>1</sup>

The Leeds police riot of 1844 was an even more serious affair. Once again the immediate cause was the arrival of the police at a working-class recreational center to deal with a minor incident; once more off-duty soldiers were directly involved. The appearance of the police at the Green Man beerhouse in York Street on Sunday evening June 9, 1844 touched off a series of massive confrontations lasting three days, involving an extremely large number of local civilians. By anyone's standards what ensued must be considered nothing less than a mass uprising against the Leeds Corporation Police. At 8.00 p.m. two policemen on duty in Kirkgate interviewed an individual who complained that some soldiers at the Green Man had beaten him and taken 2½d from his table. The constables went to the beerhouse and apprehended a number of soldiers, but on the way to the lock-up they were fallen on by the soldiers' mates and beaten with fists and military belt buckles.<sup>2</sup> More policemen arrived and a general melee ensued confined – for the time being at least – to police and soldiers. No local civilians took any part in these events except to cheer the soldiers on. The next evening (Monday) some forty soldiers belonging to the 70th Regiment of Foot assembled in the Green Parrot beerhouse in Harper Street to further revenge themselves on the Leeds police. They issued from the pub armed with bludgeons and belts and attacked a number of policemen in Vicar Lane. As they entered Briggate they encountered a huge crowd of local civilians estimated by the press at more than a thousand. The soldiers raised the cry "Down With The Police!" and the crowd, which had been giving way – not exactly knowing the soldiers' intentions – moved to join them. The civilians according to the local press followed the soldiers not "out of love to the soldiers themselves, but from [...] feelings of hatred towards the police".

Why were there so many civilians assembled in Briggate? Were they originally simply onlookers gathered to watch the police and soldiers fight things out? If so, why were they in Briggate when the

<sup>1</sup> Manchester Guardian, May 24, 1843. Engels saw this incident as more than of passing interest, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, loc. cit., p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Belt buckles were the favorite weapons of off-duty English soldiers and were noted to have been liberally employed in the Manchester riots a year earlier.

“action” was taking place in Vicar Lane? Or were there perhaps two anti-police crowds out, one military and one civilian, each with its own grievances? This question is difficult to answer, but some evidence exists to support the latter view. These events took place in the midst of a campaign by the Leeds magistrates and police to stop Sunday political meetings in the Free Market on ostensibly sabbatarian grounds. There is also evidence to suggest that on the previous day (Sunday) the police had tried to stop a meeting in the Free Market.<sup>1</sup>

The Briggate crowd now led by soldiers marched together down Kirkgate forcing the police to break and scatter. As in Ancoats one year earlier, the disturbances spread rapidly. By the time the evening’s proceedings had terminated and the streets of central Leeds swept entirely clear of any police presence, four separate groups of local civilians had been reported out against the police: the original Briggate crowd, one composed of Leeds Irish in York Street, another in Park Row and a fourth, which had gathered at the barracks in Woodhouse Lane to cheer the soldiers. What is of most interest in the rioting of Monday evening is that rather early most of the soldiers involved were rounded up by other troops under officers and marched back to barracks. With the soldiers removed from the scene, local workers remained to battle the police alone and on their own account. This was the case as well the following night. All soldiers were strictly confined to barracks and did not appear at all. In the battles of Tuesday night a local working-class crowd faced the Leeds police unaccompanied and unled by any outsiders. The magistrates and police had prepared themselves well however. The police were densely concentrated – making it difficult for the rioters to isolate them in small groups or as individuals on their beats – and armed with cutlasses. By about 10.00 p.m. order was finally restored and calm returned to the center of the city for the first time in three days.<sup>2</sup>

As far as the participation of local civilians was concerned, no doubt the anti-police uprising of June 1844 was in part a result of factors which must remain hidden. Yet this affair is extremely instructive. Surely the decision of the magistrates to suppress Sunday meetings and the implementation of this policy by the police created a separate and volatile focus of civilian discontent, which erupted in violence once the lead was given in another quarter. Probably this does not go far enough in accounting for the extreme violence nor the long duration of the reaction. It seems likely that the Leeds anti-police riot was the end result of a very long history of accumulated grievances and resentments

<sup>1</sup> Leeds Mercury, June 15, 1844.

<sup>2</sup> J. Mayhall, *The Annals And History Of Leeds* (Leeds, 1860), pp. 505-506; Leeds Mercury, June 15, 1844.

against the corporation police going back to their introduction in 1836. Ultimately it was the quality of day-to-day police-community relations on the neighborhood level over a nine-year period which resulted in this episode.

The final model-examples of community resistance to the police in the 1840s did not conform exactly to the pattern of Hull, Ancoats and Leeds. No soldiers were involved at any time, except insofar as they were employed by the authorities; resistance from local residents was direct and not mediated through the grievances of any outside group. What accounts for the marked difference in pattern observed at Hull, Manchester and Leeds and the outbreaks at Middleton, Lancaster and Colne?

In Hull, Manchester and Leeds a new police had been well implanted by the early 1840s. Leeds possessed a modern uniformed police since 1836. Certainly few people entertained the idea that it was possible to rid the locality of the police. The fact that the police had time to sink roots in these communities during a period of relative political calm may be linked to the fact that outbreaks, when they occurred, required some kind of outside catalyst. Instances of direct, unmediated resistance took place in communities in which the police were novelties, and usually occurred upon the introduction of the police in the first instance. In Middleton, Lancaster, Colne and the Potteries the main issue was not police brutality, interference with popular leisure patterns, interference in strikes or with popular political meetings, but the presence of the police itself.

In mid May 1840 at Middleton – the scene of much previous anti-police agitation – a number of new police went to serve an assault warrant on a young miner. He could not be located but a row ensued between the police and the suspect's mates. As one man was being led to the station house a crowd of some hundreds of people slowly began to gather. The police, fearing a rescue attempt, tried to rush their captive out of town. "Marching through the Little Park [...] the road was crowded with men, women and children. A hooting was set up, and striking with bludgeons and fists, kicking with clogs and shoes, and throwing stones and brickbats became the order of the day."<sup>1</sup> In the confusion the prisoner made his escape. The whole of the new Middleton police were forced to make their own escape and took refuge in Manchester. They were ultimately reinstated only with the help of a strong contingent of Manchester police.

<sup>1</sup> Northern Star, May 16, 1840. This detachment of rural police had arrived at their posts only two weeks earlier; none were "connected" with the town.



One year earlier, immediately after the introduction of new police in the Potteries, a similar incident took place. On May 7, 1839 the police entered a beerhouse in Lane End to quell a typical row. When they arrived they were insulted by all parties to the dispute. Five persons were arrested, but as the police tried to leave the scene with their prisoners they were met by a speedily assembled crowd. The police succeeded in reaching the lock-up, however the next morning a full-scale riot erupted. A large crowd congregated around the lock-up, stoned the police and threatened to effect a rescue at nightfall. People milled about the jail all day long while the magistrates called for police reinforcements from Stoke and Fenton and for the yeomanry. Under an escort of troops the prisoners were transferred to Newcastle while a furious battle raged in the streets. Barricades were erected out of earthenware crates, the Riot Act was read and the yeomanry ended by firing on the crowd with ball cartridge. For the next few days the district resembled an armed camp. Regular troops were brought up from as far away as Liverpool. One report stated that the origin of the riot was in no way connected with politics "but appears to have arisen solely from a hatred of the [...] police".<sup>1</sup> Relations between the lower classes of the Potteries and the police did not improve, prompting local respectables, clergy, etc., to emphasize the constant danger to the lives of the police "lately established in the Borough of Stoke" and to plead with Russell for a permanent force of troops to be stationed in the district.<sup>2</sup>

At Lancaster serious disturbances took place on the racecourse with the first appearance of the new rural police at the annual races holiday.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This account is based on reports in Leeds Times, May 18, 1839, and Northern Star, May 18, 1839, drawn from Times of London. If the chief objective of the rioters was to drive off the new police, they were nearly successful, at least in the short run. One local magistrate, pleading with the government to permanently station troops in the district, wrote that police morale had been so shaken by the riots that mass resignations from the force were expected. Copeland (?) to Russell, May 27, 1839, Public Record Office, HO 40.48.

<sup>2</sup> Memorial of the Clergy, Chief Constables, Churchwardens, and Individuals of the Staffordshire Potteries, HO 41.15. On the continued inability of the police to cope with popular disturbances in this district see Radzinowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 265, 278-279.

<sup>3</sup> Some writers have correctly noted the intimate connection between popular protest and popular fêtes. See N. Z. Davis, "The Reasons Of Misrule. Youth Groups And Charivaris In Sixteenth Century France", in: *Past & Present*, No 50 (1971); N. Z. Davis, "Religious Riot In Sixteenth Century France", *ibid.*, No 59 (1973); E. P. Thompson, "Rough Music: Le Charivari Anglais", *loc. cit.* In some English towns Guy Fawkes celebrations were often strongly tinged with overtones of popular protest. Guy Fawkes could be both a ritualized day of licence as well as an annual opportunity to have a "legitimate" go at the police. See Leeds Times, November 11, 1848 and November 8, 1851 for Huddersfield;

Here feeling against the implantation of the police had been running high for some time not only among the lower classes but among middling rate-payers as well. In July 1840 the High Constable of the hundred complained that he was unable to file his police rolls; rate-payers were adopting the "impediment system" as a technique of passive resistance and refusing to pay the police rate.<sup>1</sup> Many felt that in the hundred of Lonsdale South there "was no need for an organized force, as was needed in the more industrial and more heavily populated parts of the County [...] The establishment of the rural police [...] had more than doubled the County-rate. In many townships the police-assessment exceeded the poor-rate."<sup>2</sup>

Even before the creation of the rural police Lancaster Races were not totally unpoliced. Up to that point, they had been monitored by the borough police of Lancaster. It is not certain whether the Lancaster police had traditionally behaved with more indulgence towards gambling, drinking and other normal concomitants of popular fêtes. In any event, the roots of the anti-police outbreak in 1840 do not lie entirely in the manifestation of a harder attitude; on the contrary the new rurals were under orders to behave with restraint.<sup>3</sup> It was not the overt behavior of the new police which gave offense; it was their presence itself. Lancaster Races not only attracted persons from the city but farmers and tradesmen from the surrounding areas. It was probably the feelings of people such as these which created the smouldering atmosphere at the opening of the meeting. One witness later testified: "Heard many people calling out against the police – 'We want no police here', 'Go home to your own country'."<sup>4</sup> There were many farmers on the course. They were loud in expressing their feeling against the rural police. There were respectable farmers."<sup>5</sup>

York Herald, November 7, 1863 and November 15, 1873 for Richmond and Malton; J. K. Green, *Fireworks, Bonfires, Illuminations And The Guy Riots* (Guildford, 1952). For a similar day of licence at Leicester see W. Kelly, *Notices Of Leicester Relative To The Drama* (London, 1885), p. 177, and *Leicester Journal*, February 19, 1847.

<sup>1</sup> Even some of the magistrates were personally holding back payment, *Lancaster Gazette*, July 25, 1840. Cf. proceedings of a ratepayers' meeting at Clayton in the West Riding to petition against the introduction of county police in *Northern Star*, September 12, 1840.

<sup>2</sup> *Lancaster Gazette*, July 25, 1840.

<sup>3</sup> *Lancaster Gazette*, August 1, 1840.

<sup>4</sup> From the names of the police mentioned later at the trials it appears the force had a healthy complement of Scots and Welsh. One of the usual sources of mistrust of the police was their lack of connection with the local populace.

<sup>5</sup> *Lancaster Gazette*, August 1, 1840; *Preston Chronicle*, August 15, 1840. Other familiar epithets used were "rural rascals", "Blue bottles", "soldiers in disguise".

On the first day of Lancaster Races, July 22, 1840, a detachment of Lancashire rurals under Inspector Walters moved up to the race-course with orders to assist the borough constables in dispersing gambling tables and preventing breaches of the peace. After the last race the county police were attacked by a large crowd. A sergeant reported that the people "called the police 'Bloody Rurals'" and threatened to break their heads if they returned to the races the following day.<sup>1</sup>

On the following evening, the Chief Constable of the Lancashire force arranged to send up 24 reinforcements on the morning train. On Thursday Captain Ridge was able to appear on the course with 34 men. At about seven p.m. there was a scuffle on the racecourse, which the police diagnosed as a "sort of sham fight" meant to provoke them. Ridge asked the crowd to disperse but was met by "a general shower of sticks and stones", which nearly unhorsed him. The police then charged, took three prisoners, commandeered an omnibus and made for the safety of Lancaster. The crowd followed "hooting and pelting with stones, and everything they could lay their hands on". At a quarry near Highfield the police were ambushed by an even larger crowd forcing them off the road and into the fields. They reformed on the road further along and successfully entered the city still holding their prisoners.<sup>2</sup>

The resistance to the introduction of the new police at Colne was the most prolonged and serious of all Victorian anti-police episodes. The events at Colne from April through August 1840 were not so much riots – by definition ephemeral phenomena – as a bitter war of attrition against the new police. In mid April 1840 sixteen constables and a superintendent Macleod were introduced to Colne. Colonel Constance, a military officer sent to deal with the violence of April, provided us with a most intelligent and sensitive description of the shock of initial contact between the lower classes of an old weaving community and a modern uniformed police:

"The lower orders of Colne are a particularly uncouthly set, and have hitherto been in entire possession of the place, occupying the streets, footpaths, and public places in groups at nearly all hours to the great inconvenience of the more respectable part of the inhabitants [...] who in moving about were obliged to thread their way [...] through the general obstruction. I consider this uncivilised and rude manner is more from habit than from any real intention to incommode or be uncivil – a want of civili-

<sup>1</sup> Lancaster Gazette, August 1, 1840.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; Preston Chronicle, August 15, 1840.

sation, a want of example in so old, and remote a place. The police in correcting an inconvenience of so long a standing, may do well at first to correct it gradually, and by quiet measures [...]. The ignorant will resist [...] if driven to it by harsh measures in introducing it.”<sup>1</sup>

Instead, the response of the police – total strangers to the district and including a substantial number of Scots – was the imposition of the “move-on system”. One newspaper reported that the Colne police had instituted “a regular system of thrashing and running the people”, and that they uniformly responded to the groans and jeers with which they were greeted in the streets with bludgeon attacks. Sir Charles Napier noted that police conduct was extremely offensive, one constable in particular having “prided himself on what he termed ‘slating them’, i.e. breaking their heads with his staff. The people in [...] Colne are said to be a rough and resolute set of men, and not likely to bear this sort of treatment.”<sup>2</sup>

By April 24, 1840 a flash-point was reached. During the afternoon small knots of men began to collect in different parts of town; by sundown a large crowd numbering several hundreds had congregated. The events of that evening showed evidence less of a “spontaneous” riot than of real tactical planning. Every lamp in Colne was put out. At about 9 p.m. the police formed up to clear the streets. One segment of the crowd pretended to flee ahead of them to the east. At length on a given signal this group turned “and in a disciplined manner” began to stone those policemen who had been lured away from the main body. The police, split into two bodies, were driven from the streets.<sup>3</sup> The press felt that the decision to mount a concerted offensive against the police was taken at a Chartist meeting during Easter week. This cannot be either substantiated or disproved. What lends some credence to the theory is the fact that the crowd displayed great discipline and employed sophisticated tactics which may well have been the result of

<sup>1</sup> Constance to Napier, April 28, 1840, HO 40.58.

<sup>2</sup> Leeds Times, May 2, 1840; Napier to Home Office, August 15, 1840, HO 40.58. The “move-on system” was so uniformly employed and constituted such a nuisance to the policed that it was duly noted in the broadside literature. See “Manchester’s An Altered Town” (probably Preston-printed in the early 1840s), in: *Curiosities Of Street Literature* (London, 1871). See account of a near riot in Leeds occasioned by the overzealous use of this device. The entire Marsh Lane district turned out at 1.00 a.m. to defend a group of men who had been chased away from a pub entrance by the police. A serious riot was only averted by the intervention of a middle-class witness who happened to be an overseer of the poor. Leeds Times, September 9, 1843.

<sup>3</sup> Based on accounts in Preston Chronicle, May 2, 1840, Blackburn Standard, April 29, 1840, and Leeds Times, May 2, 1840.

advance planning; Colne was not without a reputation for being a center of physical-force Chartism.

The following morning a fresh superintendent with twenty reinforcements was sent from Burnley. They found the town in "a state of the utmost alarm and excitement". The magistrates also requested the immediate despatch of troops. At about 9 p.m. a detachment of foot and some cavalry entered Colne, too late to prevent the police from being cleared from the streets once again. They were greeted cordially and with cheers. "These fellows", one man told a reporter, "know how to behave themselves, but the police don't."<sup>1</sup> Colonel Constance at Burnley reported to Colonel Wemyss that many people at Colne told him that they were "glad to see the soldiers but were determined not to have the police".<sup>2</sup> Constance accurately assessed the chief objective of the Colne riot: to permanently rid the town of the police ("expulsing them from that part of the country"). Constance kept his men in Colne for a few days in order to monitor a monster Chartist meeting planned for April 27th. The meeting took place without incident and the troops were withdrawn to Burnley on April 28th.

Upon their departure the Lancashire police authorities more than tripled the number of constables assigned to Colne. Rioting did not recur, and between May and the end of July the police reduced their manpower to the level established by their regulations.<sup>3</sup> During the last week in July anti-police activities began to revive. At night the windows of prominent anti-Chartists and supporters of the police were smashed and volleys of stones were launched at patrolling constables from housetops. One of the chief targets was a Mr Bolton, a solicitor and clerk to the local magistrates, a vociferous anti-Chartist and the man locally considered most responsible for the appearance of the new police at Colne.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leeds Times, May 2, 1840.

<sup>2</sup> The attitudes of the military officers were remarkably humane and perceptive. They had a certain sympathy for the miserable condition of the inhabitants of Colne and were quick to grasp that the behavior of the police was brutal and insensitive. Napier wrote to the Home Office: "I am quite certain that great forbearance on the part of the police is necessary not only at Colne but everywhere" (August 15, 1840, HO 40.58). On the relations between urban rioters and the army later on, see Marx's article on the London Sunday Trading Riots, Marx And Engels On Britain, op. cit., p. 445. Here too the crowds shouted "Long live the army! Down With The Police!" The army preserved a popular – and not completely unjustified – reputation for behaving with some rectitude in civil disturbances.

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn Standard, August 12, 1840.

<sup>4</sup> Bolton, Halstead and other figures in the Colne riots are treated fictionally in Robert Neill, *Song of Sunrise* (London, 1958); published as *The Mills of Colne* (New York, 1958) in the USA.

On Tuesday evening August 4th Bolton's house was surrounded by a mob which smashed his windows. A general attack was then launched against the police driving them from the streets. The following evening saw another pitched battle in the marketplace. On Thursday evening another assault was made on the police with military order and precision. Early in the evening a crowd armed with pistols, bludgeons, pokers and other weapons mustered on the outskirts of town. There seemed to be a commander who gave orders and directed the proceedings. At about 10 p.m. the streets suddenly became quiet and there was a "perfect lull". Soon hundreds of men marched into town "in regular order". A command was then given: "All cowards remain where you are, and the remainder march to attack the police". "Then", one report ran, "followed the most hideous yells, showers of stones, and the crashing of windows. The town next morning looked more like a besieged place than anything else." The police were once again routed and fled out of town in all directions. Once more as in April troops arrived on the scene from Burnley. Again they found Colne quiet. The military officers protested that there was nothing for them to do and immediately withdrew their men.<sup>1</sup>

The next day the "respectable inhabitants" called a meeting at the grammar school<sup>2</sup> to consider what could next be done to preserve both order and property, but when they assembled they found the room already occupied by an angry meeting of Chartists. Thoroughly frightened, a deputation led by a magistrate hurried to Burnley to plead again for military protection. Once more a detachment of foot and cavalry came over to invest the town and again the army found itself at a loss for something to do. In fact during the entire history of anti-police resistance in Colne no confrontation with the army ever took place. It was a prominent and intelligent part of the strategy of the resisters never to engage the army, but to wait until they had gone before dealing with the police. On Sunday evening, arguing that calm had prevailed for some days and that the troops required barracks, the army left again. This of course was the signal for the resurgence of anti-police activities.

On Monday the magistrates, sensing this, swore in seventy special constables drawn from among the "respectable inhabitants" and con-

<sup>1</sup> The army deliberately never sought confrontation with civilians at Colne. They refused to remain on the pretext that there were no barracks to accommodate them.

<sup>2</sup> The grammar school was of course a middle-class institution and almost certainly not the usual meeting place of local Chartists. There is little doubt that in August – whatever the situation in April – the local Chartist infrastructure played a considerable role.

vinced the police authorities to double the force in Colne. That evening the Riot Act was read several times and the police and specials paraded the town dispersing conclaves of civilians. Between 10 and 11 p.m. a large crowd rallied at a newly erected church east of Colne, armed themselves with long spear-like iron palisades left over from the construction of the church railings, and entered Colne from Keighley Road. The battle was joined in one of the main streets of Colne. The resisters were again described as marching "in military array, four abreast, each man carrying a bludgeon" or other weapon. In the struggle Joseph Halstead, a special constable and local millowner, was struck in the head with an iron palisade and killed. Yet again the police were swept from Colne and again troops from Burnley were called in only to find all calm. No doubt there would have been further anti-police eruptions but for the fact that Sir Charles Napier was finally ordered to have barracks built and establish a permanent military force at Colne. Ultimately the new police had to be installed in Colne by a resident military presence.<sup>1</sup>

There was a poignant sequel to the Colne police riots. The chief defendant in the murder of Halstead was a twenty-year old weaver, Richard Boothman. Boothman was tried at the assizes and sentenced to death in March 1841.<sup>2</sup> His sentence was later commuted to transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land. Boothman maintained to the end that he did not murder Halstead. He claimed he had never been a part of the crowd that night, had been arrested after just returning from a neighboring local feast and that he had been a victim of a case of mistaken identity. An attempt to reopen his case by his family in 1860 was unsuccessful, and he died still in exile in 1877 at the age of fifty seven.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> My account of the August riots based on reports in Leeds Times, August 15, 1840, Blackburn Standard, August 12, 1840, Preston Chronicle, August 15, 1840, and on the following despatches: Bolton to Home Office, August 7, 1840, HO 40.45; Wemyss to Home Office, August 11, 1840, HO 40.58; Napier to Home Office, August 15, 1840, HO 40.58.

<sup>2</sup> Boothman's family left a body of correspondence (Boothman Correspondence, Lancashire Record Office, DDX 537) preserved at Preston. His letters trace out the remainder of his life from his trial and sentence, to his transfer to the hulks to his death in the colonies. Boothman, though he maintained he had nothing to do with the mob, was no friend of the police. In a letter to his father from Lancaster Castle December 31, 1840, he wrote: "I find the conduct of the Colne police to be most ridiculous and brutal but it is nothing more or less than what we all know to be the case not only with you but in all places where they have got appointments." Boothman Correspondence, DDX 537/7.

<sup>3</sup> He left a rather respectable estate of £559 4/10d at his death. Boothman Estate, Last Will and Testament, *ibid.*, DDX 537/16.

To recapitulate thus far. The imposition of a modern police was opposed for a number of reasons and by different groups of people. Radicals argued against the police on the grounds that it constituted a break with the valuable English tradition of resistance to the concept of a standing army or in terms of the rhetoric of “ancient rights and liberties”. Middle-class people often objected on similar grounds as well as out of rate consciousness. Farmers and others living in rural areas often argued that police might be necessary in cities such as Manchester or Leeds, but the expense of keeping them in the countryside far outweighed their potential usefulness. In addition working-class radicals and Chartists feared that the state might use the police to enforce the New Poor Law, employ them to break strikes and interfere in trade disputes, or use them to repress or spy upon working-class political movements.

Once actually deployed in the streets the police offended the lower classes in very concrete ways. The look of the police, their dress, the fact that to many workers’ eyes their chief function was to merely walk about all day, gave rise to the accusation that government had saddled the country with well-paid idlers, “blue locusts” who devoured tax money and produced nothing of use in return. Most disturbing of all was the imposition of the hated “move-on system” as a standard item of police policy. The coming of the police also signalled a closer monitoring of working-class drinking patterns, the openings and closings of pubs and beerhouses, and an entirely novel and uncouth surveillance of the entire range of popular leisure activities: drinking, brutal sports, footracing, fairs, feasts and other fêtes. The police came as unwelcome spectators into the very nexus of urban neighborhood life.

When the phenomenon of resistance was discussed, especially in its most exacerbated form – the anti-police riot –, two main types of disturbance were discerned. These have been examined. One further question suggests itself at this point. All the incidents described so far occurred at a time of heightened political and social tension and economic distress. Were these eruptions simply a function of the heyday of Chartism or mere concomitants of a period of ferment? It may be of use here to analyze a “control” situation, observe what happened when the county police appeared in the West Riding during the relatively calm year 1857, and compare the pattern to Lancashire in 1839-40.

By the end of December 1856 the new West Riding police had been deployed into most districts not policed by the municipalities. The reaction was as immediate and in some cases as intense as in Lancashire sixteen years previous. The police instantly made themselves obnoxious



by mounting a concerted campaign against customary patterns of working-class recreation. By the end of December the roads on the outskirts of Wakefield, habitually “infested [...] with young men given to foot racing”, were being cleared by the new police. In the same area gambling on the public highway – a traditional Sunday morning activity of working-class youth – was severely repressed.<sup>1</sup> In future weeks and months incidents of a similar nature were frequently reported, often accompanied by affrays or attacks on the police.

The police imposed an increased and more efficient supervision of the pubs and beerhouses. In the West Riding, drinking places on the outskirts of large towns had been virtually immune to prosecution for keeping illegal hours. Out-townships of Leeds such as Pudsey or Armley were not policed by the borough and did not pay the Leeds police rate. Consequently they had long been favorite retreats of Leeds workers, who knew that they were unlikely to be turned out into the streets when others went to church or chapel. A detachment of West Riding police appeared suddenly in Pudsey in December 1856 and forced pubs to close during divine service. For this they were complimented by Edward Baines, who saw them “doing good in several ways – not least in the cause of morality”.<sup>2</sup> A similar situation existed on the outskirts of Huddersfield. Beershops in the out-townships had never regularly observed the Sunday closing times even under unusual severe pressure from the parochial constables. Now under a redoubled police surveillance they were forced to shut down during prohibited hours.<sup>3</sup> This generated great resentment in the drink trade and among their patrons in the district.

Almost immediately a rash of assaults on the new police was reported in the vicinity of Huddersfield. The offenders were treated with great severity by the magistrates. At Deighton in March 1856 fines totalling over £13 – an amount well beyond the means of working-class pocket-books – were imposed for the beating of two policemen.<sup>4</sup> Consider the case of Wibsey near Bradford. From January to July 1857 a state of open warfare existed between the local inhabitants and the new police. At the end of January there was a crackdown on cockfighting. A number of men were arrested and fined 5/- for cruelty to animals.<sup>5</sup> Beer-

<sup>1</sup> Leeds Times, December 27, 1856.

<sup>2</sup> Leeds Mercury, January 20, 1857.

<sup>3</sup> Leeds Mercury, February 10, 1857.

<sup>4</sup> Leeds Mercury, March 10, 1857. It is interesting to note that often fines for assaults on the police were paid by collections taken among friends and neighbors – an indicator of the strength of feeling against the police. Publicans and beer-house keepers were no doubt prominent contributors to these subscriptions.

<sup>5</sup> Leeds Mercury, January 24, 1857.

houses and pubs were closely watched, and gambling in the fields and on the roads was impeded. Relations between the police and the community deteriorated, culminating in the serious affair of Sergeant Briar.

Briar was known as “one of the most active officers of the West Riding Police” and was held chiefly responsible for most of the unpleasant changes which had occurred in Wibsey since the police arrived. In early May Briar was marked for elimination from the Wibsey scene. On some pretext he was enticed to a beershop owned by a Mrs Thornton. The latter accused him of an indecent assault. The magistrates would not entertain the charge and instead committed Mrs Thornton on a charge of perjury. At this the entire neighborhood erupted. On the evening of June 3, 1857 Briar was surrounded by a local crowd, beaten with sticks and deprived of his staff and clothes. Naked and nearly unconscious he was to be dragged the entire round of Wibsey beerhouses to be exhibited to the patrons. Three men were arrested in connection with this incident and fined £5 each. The fines “were immediately paid, the court was crowded by the inhabitants of the Wibsey district [...] and one of them boasted [...] that they could have raised ten times the amount”.<sup>1</sup> No doubt the Briar incident was part of a community vendetta against the new police most probably led by local beerhouse keepers and their patrons; in other words the majority of the male population of the district.

As in the case of Lancaster in 1840 the time of a local fête was often the occasion for dealing with the new police. Colliers from Thornhill and other mining communities near Wakefield traditionally had enjoyed unrestricted holiday at Middlestown Feast. In 1857 the West Riding police turned up in force to prevent the usual excesses. The miners “paraded the village in bodies, shouting and getting up sham fights for the purpose of provoking the police”.<sup>2</sup> The feast ended with a pitched battle between police and colliers. Those arrested were warned by the magistrates that before “the establishment of the rural police these practices [drinking and rowdiness] were winked at, but in future they would be prevented”.<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, they promised, the feast would be a closely monitored affair. Near Halifax an incident similar in nature to the one which sparked the Potteries riot of 1839 occurred. A row started in a beerhouse and the landlord ejected everyone into the road. When two policemen attempted to stop the

<sup>1</sup> Leeds Mercury, June 9, 1857.

<sup>2</sup> Leeds Times, June 6, 1857.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Cf. the account of a riot against police interference at Hunslet Feast in Leeds Times, August 19, 1843. It was noted that “great animosity appears to exist against the police at Hunslet”.

affair the whole neighborhood turned out of their houses to thrash the police.<sup>1</sup>

Often mobbings and assaults on the police were, on the surface at least, completely unprovoked.<sup>2</sup> The frequency of such incidents indicate that people reacted not only to what the police did but to their very presence in the community itself. All of the classical reasons for distrusting or detesting the police surfaced in Yorkshire in the late 1850s, most prominently the theme of the “blue locusts” or “idle drones”. One Halifax area beerhouse keeper called a particularly hated member of the force “an idle scroll [sic]”. Assailing the whole of the West Riding police, he remarked: “the were too idle to work, and such as himself had to keep them.”<sup>3</sup> One of the defendants at Lancaster in 1840 complained that “every morning before he got his breakfast the police took 10 per cent of it”.<sup>4</sup>

One must conclude from the example of Yorkshire in 1857 that the imposition of a modern, uniformed police called forth a bitter and often violent response, and that this reflex took place despite the general state of the economy or the level of political or social tension. The nature of the resistance – though perhaps not the intensity – in the West Riding followed a pattern generally similar to Lancashire in the more turbulent year 1840. The impression is left that once the police were successfully entrenched the open warfare of initial contact was replaced by a state one may characterize as armed truce. In many instances however the truce would be broken and more or less open warfare would resume for awhile. This might occur when over-diligent police supervision of customary patterns of popular leisure infuriated people, when the police openly protected or escorted blacklegs during strikes, or when it was felt that the police were behaving in a brutal or disrespectful manner. Police discourtesy or brutality, especially during a time of distress or unemployment, could generate a large riot reminiscent of Lancashire in the spring and summer of 1840.

It may be of use to briefly discuss one instance of the resumption of open warfare. At Lees near Oldham during the cotton famine a crowd, estimated at about 150, gathered on Saturday night January 23, 1864, threatening to kill a certain police constable Dermody. Dermody and

<sup>1</sup> Leeds Mercury, July 2, 1857.

<sup>2</sup> A representative incident from the Barnsley district: At 1.30 a.m. Constable Cherry and Sgt Hey were on duty at Skelmanthorpe when suddenly a large crowd materialized and pelted them with stones. Leeds Mercury, June 13, 1857. It may be that the provocation was given some time before, in which case this incident may have been in the nature of “squaring accounts”.

<sup>3</sup> Leeds Mercury, June 18, 1857.

<sup>4</sup> Lancaster Gazette, August 1, 1840.

another policeman with him were assaulted, the police office was besieged and considerable damage was done. Most of the individuals involved were unemployed workers. The immediate cause of the riot was the serving of summonses on nine factory workers for being drunk and disorderly. The underlying problem however was police intimidation and harassment. Relations between the police and working men, not friendly in "normal" times, worsened perceptively when the male population of a town was unemployed and in the streets and pubs both day and night. Under such circumstances the police were tempted to redouble the "move-on system" and indiscriminately break up casual assemblies of men in the streets or in front of beershops and pubs.

At the trial of the Lees rioters the court received a memorial drawn up by the vicar, the Rev. Mr Whittaker, stating that the assault on the police was "mainly attributable to the injudicious and offensive intolerance of [...] constable Dermody". The memorial sheds valuable light on the local background to this incident: "The other day a few men were returning from the working men's school, when they had occasion to stop in the road [...]. Police-constable Dermody instantly ordered them off. At the same moment a man [...] returning from the same place [...] stopped to see what was to do, when, without the slightest provocation, said officer took him by the back and pushed him violently along."<sup>2</sup> Whittaker's document concluded that the magistrates must take steps to remove Dermody or there could be no peace in the town. Dermody was not removed. The matter was referred to the Superintendent of Police, who was assured by "many of the respectable inhabitants of Lees" that Dermody was "more deserving of commendation than blame".<sup>2</sup> Similarly in Leeds anti-police eruptions, often quite violent but on a more restricted scale, continued to occur. One such episode, in which an entire neighborhood turned out to shield a resident from arrest, tied up nearly the entire Leeds force for a whole night in October 1848.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately a modern, efficient bureaucratic police imposed by the fiat of the state could not be driven out of the communities into which they had been implanted – as the Colne, Lancaster and Wibsey rioters had wished – any more than the new machinery could be gotten rid of a few decades earlier. In this respect they were perhaps quixotic efforts. More accurately, they seem quixotic in retrospect

<sup>1</sup> Oldham Standard, January 30, 1864. Like most policemen in Lancashire, Dermody was a stranger to the district with no local ties. Even worse he was an Irishman, a fact much emphasized by the crowd.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Leeds Times, October 14, 1848.

only. Even the magistrates of Lonsdale South (Lancaster) were under the impression that the police could be withdrawn in 1840, resolved that an effort be made to withdraw from the operation of the Act of Parliament, and appointed a committee to represent the matter at the annual sessions.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, at Lees in 1864, the main demand of both rioters and memorialists was not the abolition or withdrawal of the police, but the removal of an obnoxious policeman. By this date nobody considered the possibility of ridding a district of the police a realistic one. After initial attempts to remove the police proved fruitless, anti-police outbreaks took on more limited objectives: to preserve popular customs and recreations; to prevent police interference in labor disputes;<sup>2</sup> to protest police brutality; and to protect or rescue members of the community wanted or arrested. Anti-police violence did not disappear after the 1850s; it assumed a more restricted shape and became (like prostitution) a typical component of the undercurrent of everyday Victorian life.

Moderation in the frequency of large-scale anti-police eruptions in no way signified that the authorities had succeeded in obtaining the full moral assent of the community. On May 20, 1872 (to take a random example) the following exchange took place in a Leeds working-class street: "When spoken to [Holmes] placed himself in a fighting attitude [...] and said [...] if he did not leave the fold he would kick him out of it. The officer told him he was on his beat. Holme's wife then came up and [...] would not allow him to go around the fold saying *such like was not wanted there*."<sup>3</sup> Over thirty five years after the appearance of the Leeds Corporation Police, they were still regarded as unwelcome intruders in working-class neighborhoods, and were informed of the fact with some frequency.

The "first thing a policeman ought to know", an informant told Stephen Reynolds at the beginning of this century, "is when to let well alone".<sup>4</sup> Reynolds found as much resentment against being moved-on in the streets, being interfered with in family affairs and in the pub as the present writer discovered in Colne in 1840 or Lees in 1864.

<sup>1</sup> Lancaster Gazette, August 1, 1840.

<sup>2</sup> A typical example: The severe beating of a policeman was reported near Barnsley in December 1859. His current duty was acting as escort to scabs at the struck Wharnccliffe Silkstone Colliery. Those arrested for the assault were fined a total of £20, which was immediately paid by the usual subscription. Leeds Mercury, December 20, 1859. For the continuing police role in strike-breaking see R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum. Salford Life In The First Quarter Of The Century* (Manchester, 1971), p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Occurrence Book, Beeston Police Station (Leeds), entry May 20, 1872. My emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> S. Reynolds and B. & T. Woolley, *Seems So* (London, 1911), p. 91.

Flora Thompson's Candleford Green people still regarded the police in the 1870s and 1880s as "a potential enemy, set to spy on them by the authorities".<sup>1</sup> Nor could it have been otherwise. The police were charged "with the enforcement of a whole mass of petty enactments, which are little more than social regulations bearing almost entirely on working-class life. [...] In every direction, inside his own house as well as out, the working-man's habits and convenience are interfered with [...]. Whether or no he comes into collision with them is more a matter of good fortune than of law-abidingness [...] a working man may easily render himself liable to arrest [...] without in the least doing what is wrong in his own eyes or in the eyes of his neighbours."<sup>2</sup> "Nobody", wrote Robert Roberts of the same period, "in our Northern slum [...] ever spoke in fond regard, then or afterwards, of the policeman as a 'social worker' and 'handyman of the streets'. Like their children, delinquent or not, the poor in general looked upon him with fear and dislike. When one arrived on a 'social' visit they watched his passing with suspicion and his disappearance with relief. [...] The 'public' (meaning the middle and upper classes), we know well enough, held their 'bobby' in patronising 'affection and esteem', which he repaid with due respectfulness; but these sentiments were never shared by the undermass, nor in fact by the working class generally."<sup>3</sup>

If one of the functions of the new police was to act as a "domestic missionary", translating and mediating bourgeois values in working-class communities, they were notoriously unsuccessful in the task. Working-class culture persisted in possessing a flexibility and impermeability which conferred a degree of immunity upon its bearers. In class society, the fact of working-class alienation from the law was not so easily overcome, and the moral assent which the commissioners of 1839 hoped to obtain continued to be withheld into the twentieth century.

<sup>1</sup> F. Thompson, *Lark Rise To Candleford* (Oxford, 1954), p. 553.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds and Woolley, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77. The incident at Lees illustrates one of Roberts's points. There were two schools of thought regarding PC Dermody. To a large degree class determined one's opinion of his actions.