

# **A Work-Life History of Policemen in Victorian and Edwardian England\***

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## **Introduction**

British policemen in the Victorian period are usually presented in historical literature either as true protectors of law and order or as the heavy hand of capitalism. Little attention has been paid to the policeman as a worker and to the police authorities as employers.

Evidence related to the British police in that period makes it clear that the police labour force was drawn principally from the ranks of the semi-skilled and unskilled and that it faced similar problems as other workers.<sup>1</sup> Like other workers, policemen fought to improve their economic circumstances and their life chances and in the process even resorted to strikes and open resistance. Attempts were made by officers to introduce unions into the police force and at one point (1890) meetings were held between some policemen and members of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation, who tried to influence them to use more radical means in their struggle. Other evidence reveals widespread undercurrents of discontent and insubordination within the various forces, expressed in rhetoric common to other working class groups.

While some policemen managed to ascend the police hierarchy and become senior officers with high wages, position of power, prestige and a respectable standing in the community at large, thereby crossing the boundary that divided the middle from the working class, the majority of officers (between 20% and 25% at the turn of the twentieth century) never rose beyond the rank of constable and had to do with low wages, hard physical work, and no supervisory status. Thus, despite the pivotal role they played enforcing the attempts by the elite to suppress popular culture and curtail independent political and industrial action by working people, police officers belonged to the very same social class whose life they tried to transform and mould.

Yet, policemen were distinguished from most other workers, not only because they represented the interests of the social and political elite and thus incurred the animosity of their classmates,<sup>2</sup> and not only because they shared a common sub-culture, but also because they laboured under the same pattern of employment. While this pattern was by no means dominant in the world of work in Victorian Britain, it applied to a significant number of workers in the country. It was a new form of paternalism which, combined with bureaucratic structures and new managerial concepts, was widely adopted by the public services.

Briefly, the new paternalism was based, as in the past, on vertical relations of mutual obligations between employer and employee. Superordinates provided for their subordinates in return for deference and the acceptance of a strict regime of discipline and management intervention in their life after work. However, the traditional face-to-face personal control of the landed elite was replaced by a supposedly disinterested bureaucracy determined to pursue efficient standards of administration and rationalize the work process.

\* This paper does not address the last sentence of the abstract, i.e., a comparison with other public service, to be discussed at the 2002 conference.

In contrast to the majority of British employers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who tended to follow labour policies that relied on the mechanism of the labour market, the police adopted a systematic long-term strategy which was to become more current in British work organisations after the First World War. The recruitment of workers and conditions of service were regulated by standardized bureaucratic principles rather than by market forces. Selection was determined by merit and examinations. Training and promotion were internal and relatively structured. Most significantly, management adopted path-breaking welfare schemes relieving every employee from the burdens of the ordinary contingencies of life, such as old age, sickness and unemployment, and offered him the chance to develop a career. After-hours leisure was also provided.

The basic argument of this article is that a crucial impetus behind such an employment system was the desire to stabilise the workforce and ensure the continuity of employment for senior officers as well as for ordinary policemen. The police in Britain, and especially the largest force, belonged to a category of employers whose work depended on long-term relations between management and employees. This necessity impacted greatly on their policies and on relations within the hierarchy. Because of the need for a permanent workforce, police employees, composed mainly of working-class men, were offered conditions of service denied to most other workers in Britain. While bureaucratic paternalists were also motivated by the desire to gain the compliance of employees, and to reform many of their habits, no less important was the aim of attaining their life-long commitment and loyalty.

A pioneer of this employment system was the Metropolitan Police of London, established in 1829 as the first professional police force in the country. As the century wore on, other employers, such as the provincial police forces, the postal service, railway companies and various departments in the civil service, became increasingly dependent on long-term employment. Each organisation adopted its own set of policies to entice workers to stay on the job, derived from its own specific needs. Yet the shared aim of a stable workforce ascertained that the policies adopted by each were akin to those pursued by the Metropolitan Police. Moreover, the Metropolitan Police had a direct influence on the formulation of the new paternalism. The employment system created by the Metropolitan Police served as a model for police forces all over the country and was often studied and used as a point of reference by other bureaucratic employers. While it would be difficult to establish a clear-cut cause-and-effect relationship between steadiness of employment and work conditions, existing evidence suggests that bureaucratic paternalism contributed to and even accelerated the process of job stabilisation that characterised the last few decades of the nineteenth century.

This paper uses the example of the Metropolitan Police to gain further insight into the development of long-term employment among British workers. In analysing this institution, the perspectives of an employer and those of his employees who opted for permanency at work will be illuminated. On the one hand, the paper seeks to understand the motivation underlying the desire for a stable workforce and to survey the policies that were generated as a result. On the other, it proposes to delve into the driving force of workers who proved themselves long-term employees. Why was a stable workforce important for employers such as the Metropolitan Police, and what

were they willing to offer in order to attain this aim? What kind of socioeconomic background accounts for the survival of certain workers despite hardships, and what made workers with such a background decide that durability of employment suited their interests and life circumstances?

Since only long-term employees were able to take advantage of the promotion system inside the Metropolitan Police, a portrait of officers who managed to climb the ladder through the ranks will shed more light on the social groups who benefited from stability of employment. Investigating the Metropolitan Police is revealing not only because they were pacesetters of the system of bureaucratic paternalism, and conceivably influenced the formation of such policies outside the police, but also because they produced a wealth of both impressionistic and quantitative data about the manpower situation in the force, which are rarely available for other work groups. Particularly revealing are the service records of recruits to the Metropolitan Police between 1889 and 1909, a rare data set that survived intact from the Victorian and Edwardian periods.<sup>3</sup> These valuable records were compiled as abridged personal and work histories of recruits and include information about socioeconomic background, cause and date of leaving the service, and the ranks attained in the course of an officer's career. A statistical analysis of such raw data provides a profile of a stable employee and of a promoted officer and specifies how long it took the latter to ascend the ladder. Other empirical evidence relating to the Metropolitan Police allows us to determine whether the acute turnover situation which marked the force in the early years abated, and hence to judge the degree of success of policies pursued by the administration. Together, the two perspectives - of the authorities and of the policemen - afford a glimpse into employment strategies of public employers and indicate possible links between personal variables on the one hand and job allegiance and social mobility on the other. Ultimately, on the assumption that the shift to permanent employment during the nineteenth century constituted a major turning point in the world of work, this paper aims at illuminating the role and meaning of continuity of employment for those who administered the work organisations as well as for those who were in subordinate positions in them during this crucial period.

### **The Problem of Labour Turnover**

The nineteenth century labour market was characterised by frequent mobility in and out of workplaces. Most employers relied on the almost continuous supply of labour, hiring and firing at will, while many workers drifted from job to job. Mobility occurred between and within occupations. Rural workers penetrated the urban markets and migratory craftsmen moved into industrial plants. Some had to change jobs because they belonged to a deteriorating industry, while others, such as construction workers, were susceptible to seasonal fluctuations in their trade.<sup>4</sup>

Workers often chose whatever came along. Faced with unemployment, craftsmen and skilled workers occasionally found themselves plunged into the ranks of unskilled casual labour. Other workers wandered from place to place voluntarily. For some, tramping was a way of life. As Samuel Raphael depicts so aptly, "tens of thousands of navvies followed in the track of Victorian 'improvement' and the great public works, a class of men 'very fond of change', and forever on the move, especially the more skilled among them".<sup>5</sup> Gypsies and showmen were "born and bred to a roving life".<sup>6</sup> Many such drifters went back to an old employer as soon as work resumed or was available again, but a large number shifted to new employment.

All employers obviously depended on "the positive commitment of at least a section of their workforce", but a growing number of work organisations required the

stability of a substantial core.<sup>7</sup> The Metropolitan Police were among the few work organisations which did not differentiate between permanent and temporary workers and in principle offered security of employment to all workers who toed the line. In scanning the rhetoric of senior officers, it becomes evident that the early departure of employees was a major concern for the authorities throughout the period. Frequent references were made to the undesirability of high turnover, and policies were often justified by their expected beneficial effects on the stability of the workforce.

Paradoxically, during the first few decades, the Metropolitan Police dismissed massive numbers of employees for the flimsiest transgression of the rules, thereby exacerbating a high turnover rate that also resulted from extensive voluntary withdrawals due to onerous conditions of service. Officers also left when found unfit for service because of failing health or deteriorating physical condition. Basically, however, the police forces all over the country aimed at keeping the competent and physically fit officers, and gradually amended their penal policies, substantially reducing the number of dismissals. If in the period between 29 September 1830 and 31 December 1831, 1,586 officers were dismissed as compared to 736 who resigned voluntarily, this proportion was reversed, resulting in 2,609 dismissals and 7,567 resignations during the decade starting in 1856.<sup>8</sup> The aim of low turnover took precedence over other priorities.

The Metropolitan Police had good reasons to be guided by this strategy, for turnover was costly. Firstly, the need to replace those who left incurred expenses. While police service was open to every young man regardless of social background, each recruit had to go through a relatively long selection procedure in which special officers examined his reading and writing ability, wrote down his personal details and carefully checked his credentials and the credentials of those who recommended him, even if this entailed long journeys. Surgeons were specially employed to ensure the physical fitness of candidates. Second, the great majority of recruits entered police service with no professional preparation for the job, and the administration was obliged to equip them with the skills necessary to perform police work. Upon entry, every recruit passed through a short period of formal training followed by informal instruction by experienced officers on the job. In addition to training expenses, which included wages for trainees, the police had to sustain the cost of reduced productivity of the newcomers as well as that of the veteran officers who taught them the ins and outs of the job during the long period of informal training. Not surprisingly, the police leadership wanted to secure a return on their investment. Funded by local rates and government grants, they were under constant pressure from the central government to keep costs to a minimum, a pressure that intensified in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of labour stability, however, went beyond the question of financial costs for the authorities. The police were expected to provide continuous and coordinated service, which depended on the permanent presence of employees. High turnover not only had a bad effect on the morale of those who stayed, but also disrupted the daily routine. Moreover, cumulative experience was essential for efficient performance. Senior officers estimated that it took over two years for a constable to learn his duties.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the untimely withdrawal of experienced officers who had already mastered police skills was particularly damaging.<sup>11</sup> For all these reasons, from the outset, the police authorities were aware of the need to persuade workers to remain in service. Other public services were guided by similar calculations.

Arguably, the stability of employees was even more imperative for the Metropolitan Police than for other employers, owing to the special relationship of the

force to the state. This body was the only police force in Britain directly answerable to the central government. All the other forces were locally controlled, even though they became subject increasingly to central supervision and funding. The Metropolitan Police represented state interests and personified its power. The force fulfilled various state functions, including suppressing elements defined as enemies by the state, and transmitted values considered essential to the preservation of the social order. The commitment of employees to their workplace was therefore of utmost importance for the authorities.

Moreover, not only was policing an occupation with high public visibility, but the Metropolitan Police, more than other work organisations, were under public scrutiny through the annual reports they presented to parliament, evidence they gave to parliamentary committees and extensive coverage by the press. Criticism of the force was in effect criticism of state power. It was thus vital for state officials to present the Metropolitan Police not only as an efficient force but also as a stable and reliable institution faithfully adhering to the rule of law and serving the needs of the entire population. More broadly, this aim accorded with growing demands for a loyal and politically neutral civil service and, towards the end of the century, for the state to be an exemplary employer.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Policies of Labour Retention**

The strategy of labour retention had overall and consistent support among police policy makers. Moreover, they were united in the belief that the use of the "stick" should be accompanied by material advantage. Incentives were essential in order to counterbalance the harsh disciplinary regime and daily routine. Ordinary policemen patrolled long beats "by day and by night, in fair weather and foul, when the pavement is hot and glaring, and when it is muffled up in snow or coated with ice".<sup>13</sup> They were also exposed to physical danger from the community. Positive incentives were a managerial device to make it worthwhile for the men to serve the interests of the Metropolitan Police and to regard themselves as career policemen.<sup>14</sup> A system of economic compensation was built up over the years, the product of a long process in which disparate ideas, pressures and constraints played a part.

First and foremost, the sheer necessity to guarantee continuity of service prompted the police to provide their employees with a regular income. Steady income, though always low for those at the bottom of the hierarchy, was granted irrespective of effort or performance. No subcontractors were used. Slack periods of job scarcity did not undermine the policy of secure employment. Experience and promotion entailed a rising rate of pay.

Moreover, while most employers in Britain focused on wages as the sole means of payment for work hours, the Metropolitan Police, alongside other bureaucratic paternalists, devised a set of incentives based on both monetary and non-material rewards. Apart from steady pay, police officers enjoyed continuity of earnings in times of distress, such as sickness, accident, retirement or death. If the policeman fell sick, he was given free medical care, some sick pay and occasionally sick leave. For injuries received in the actual performance of duty, a lump sum or even a pension for life may have been granted. Widows and children of policemen killed while on duty often received special allowances.<sup>15</sup> Funeral expenses of officers were also covered. Above all, pension upon retirement was considered the bonus that justified staying on. As early as 1839, the London police awarded some kind of pension to employees who were found unfit for service by a strict medical examination. Those with over 15 years' service but under the age of sixty were paid fifteen-fiftieths of their pay for a

term of five years unless the commissioner recommended a longer period.<sup>16</sup> After thirty years' service or at age sixty the pension was for life and equaled thirty-fiftieths of the pay, or a longer proportion in cases of extraordinary merit or good conduct. In 1890, pensions became compulsory under the Police Act of that year. The prevalent conviction among top management was that pensions "would induce men to join the service", "remain in the force" and be efficient.<sup>17</sup> As a large-scale bureaucratic institution, the Metropolitan Police had the manpower and the financial resources to undertake this complex reward structure.

Another way of motivating employees to stay in service was by granting them benefits in kind, such as the periodic supply of uniform, boots and coal. Married officers received a lodging allowance and the unmarried were housed in special section houses, usually attached to police stations. While some officers regarded this residential arrangement as "forced imprisonment", others enjoyed the company of their colleagues and the convivial atmosphere created by communal living.<sup>18</sup>

No doubt, some policy makers were impelled by the desire to meet the aspirations of the officers for adequate terms of employment. It is equally certain, however, that the predominant motive for the paternalist policies was the intention to fulfill management's interests, callously if necessary. The authorities clearly wanted officers to work with a sense of positive commitment, but they also had other considerations in mind. The system of incentives was meant not only to make the workers appreciate the job security and welfare schemes offered by the police, but also to generate a disincentive to leave. The very same privileges, or rather the prospect of losing them, were intended to serve as a deterrent to premature withdrawal. Moreover, benefits, notably pensions, also operated as negative sanctions. Officers who contemplated departure (or insubordination) knew that they would be penalized. Both dismissal and voluntary resignation entailed the forfeiture of all the money officers contributed to the superannuation and other funds. Medical care, too, assimilated an instrumental rather than a humanitarian motive, as it was meant to reduce absenteeism and ensure continuity of performance of tasks.

In the same vein, the authorities were determined to manage the system of incentives with the least cost. The officers themselves financed or helped to finance many of the benefits. Each officer contributed 2½% of his pay towards the pension fund, which was also supported by stoppages of the men's pay during sickness, fines imposed by the authorities on the men for misconduct, the sale of policemen's old uniforms and payments from institutions that used police services.<sup>19</sup> Officers also contributed towards the upkeep of various recreational facilities.<sup>20</sup> In addition, saving was attained by encouraging officers to engage in self-help ventures and by soliciting the financial support of philanthropists and other leaders of the community. One example in the late nineteenth century was Henry Whiting, who donated large sums of money towards various police causes, such as a reward fund for officers who distinguished themselves by an act of bravery and a fund for the relief of officers in financial distress.<sup>21</sup> The participation of officers in provident societies and saving schemes, often run by themselves, eased the financial burden on the authorities and created a more rewarding work environment.

Notably, monetary benefits in excess of pay were not considered a right but a privilege and were therefore not always granted. Decisions concerning disability, for example, depended on a certificate from the commissioner that the officer had served "with zeal and fidelity", creating ample room for discretion and personal bias.<sup>22</sup> Decisions in favour of an officer could be reversed by the secretary of state. Even pensions, perhaps the ultimate prize in the reward package, were not obligatory until

the Pension Act of 1890. Policemen complained that "no sooner is a police constable morally entitled to a pension by long service than he is subjected to a system of espionage".<sup>23</sup>

For decades, the advantages offered by the Metropolitan Police failed to prevent the voluntary withdrawal of masses of officers, and the outflow of officers continued uninterruptedly. One officer observed in 1866 that "so rapid are the changes that during the last six or seven years more than double the strength of the force has joined and left, and there are plenty more now ready to go as soon as anything else better turns up".<sup>24</sup> Often it was "the promising men who leave, the men whose services are worth a day's pay; the zealous and deserving".<sup>25</sup> The system of material compensation instigated by the paternalist authorities in the early decades was apparently not attractive enough to dispose officers to stay. The "carrot" policies were conceded only reluctantly and usually fell short of meeting the policemen's expectations. Although the majority of metropolitan policemen came from a semi-skilled or unskilled background, and thus faced limited opportunities in the labour market, many of them refused to put up with the combination of low wages, long hours, physically and emotionally demanding work and strict discipline, especially in view of the uncertainty of welfare provision. As a result of discretionary latitude and the high rate of voluntary departure, less than 14% of all recruits to the Metropolitan Police until 1860 were granted a pension upon retirement.<sup>26</sup> This predicament was particularly severe for veteran policemen, who over the years had invested large sums in the pension fund. Many officers in any case regarded their contribution to the pension fund "more as a tax than a benefit".<sup>27</sup> In view of the many cases of loss of pension, this privilege came to be seen as "humbug" and "a complete farce".<sup>28</sup> Consequently, some men left as soon as they found a less strenuous job.

From about the mid-1870s, however, even though the Metropolitan Police steadily increased the size of the workforce, the rate of turnover showed an almost continuous decline. It dropped to a single-digit percentage after 1876, maintaining an average rate of 5.7% during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Other indices confirm the stabilisation of the force. In the mid-1870s, the average and median lengths of service of leavers were 7.7 and 3.3 years, respectively. On the eve of the First World War, the figures reached 17.1 and 25.5 years, respectively. This reveals a dramatic shift in the pattern of turnover from a situation where over half the recruits left during the first four years of service to one in which a large proportion of the workforce contributed its experience to the fullest. The authorities, however, were even then dissatisfied with the withdrawal rate. Hosts of young policemen still left the force every year to look for other employment, a situation that disrupted work in the police and caused extra expense. Nonetheless, the survival rate continued rising and the composition of the force gradually shifted to a corps of experienced policemen.

Although the change in the behaviour of workers may have been the result of external or private circumstances unrelated to the reality of work in the Metropolitan Police, a close analysis of the data reveals that the stabilisation of the workforce occurred in tandem with improvements in the conditions of service. After years of high turnover rates, the authorities finally realised that labour stability and better work performance necessitated further amelioration of the paternalist system. Changes in top management brought forward people who undertook this task. While the tight grip of the supervisors on constables was not significantly relaxed, grudgingly and at a slow pace, the authorities gradually widened the range of incentives and rendered the provision of welfare less discretionary. The greater the guarantee of benefits, the more the policemen had to lose by departure.

Against the general background of the democratisation of the political process, and greater labour militancy both inside and outside the police, the authorities also set out to placate and regularize labour by subtler means.<sup>30</sup> From the 1870s onwards, the police leadership in London (and elsewhere) devised various types of recreational activities for their workers. They set up sports clubs, football, cricket and swimming teams, orchestras, choirs and performing groups. They designed special venues at the workplace for games such as billiards, chess, cards and dominoes, and invested in libraries and reading rooms stocked with books of a high moral standard. They also organised family outings, dinners and athletic competitions and instituted elaborate award ceremonies. A careful reading of the pronouncements of senior officers regarding the reasons for the investment of money and energy in leisure provision reveals that work-related leisure was intended not only to compensate policemen for the harsh conditions of service and reform their habits, but also supply them with reasons to stay.<sup>31</sup> Enterprises such as an orphanage for the children of deceased officers and a convalescent home for officers, initiated and subsidized by private benefactors, also made the Metropolitan Police a more attractive place of employment. With time, the feeling that the security of employment and social protection was illusory was abated. A growing number of officers now acted on the premise that they could gain a lot by staying.

### **The Men Who Chose the Police as a Career**

To appreciate the value of regular employment for workers in the period under review, it is instructive to identify the social groups who chose policing in London as a lifetime career. Findings based on the service records of recruits during 1889-1909 show unequivocally that the stable policeman was likely to come from the lower echelons of the social and occupational scale.<sup>32</sup> An examination of the prior occupations of policemen reveals that the lower the occupational grade of the recruit, the greater his inclination to stay in the force. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers, i.e., from social classes 5 and 4, had similar lengths of service on the force: about 15% of the recruits from each category served two years or less, while around 52% reached the 25-year mark, which allowed officers to retire with a pension. Skilled recruits, white-collar workers and small retailers (social class 3) showed a greater propensity to leave. Over 17% of those belonging to this grade served two years or less, while 47% completed a full term of service (25 years). Moving up the occupational scale to professionals, small employers and farmers (social class 2), the data show that 28% left during the first two years and only 41% reached retirement after 25 years' service.

These findings must reflect the priorities of workers at the time to some extent. Many of the unskilled and semi-skilled recruits had been part of the vast army of casual labour that periodically went for months with no source of income, under the fearful threat of going, or returning, to the workhouse. They were therefore disinclined to leave a job that offered them permanent employment. Moreover, the new job was better paid, constituted a significant rise in social status and offered extensive benefits which they were unlikely to get as unskilled or even semi-skilled workers. Skilled workers who contended with casualisation or low wage rates also tended to remain in the force and become veteran policemen. Although engineers, who were paid well and whose position in the labour market was relatively secure, served on average only 12.5 years, skilled workers who were not as fortunate, such as bricklayers and house painters, served 18.6 and 19.4 years, respectively (the mean length of service of the entire force was 17 years). By comparison, clerks and small traders each served 15 years on average. While the encroachment of big business and



shifts in the demand for labour at the turn of the century drove some small-scale employers, traders, craftsmen and white-collar workers to seek job security in police work, these workers, who bordered on the lower middle class, proved less willing to endure employment that threatened their autonomy and which could not guarantee higher status and financial rewards.

A large proportion of the recruits (40%) had previous public-service experience in such bodies as the armed forces (army, Royal Navy and marines), the Volunteer Corps, the Militia and provincial police forces. Surprisingly, whether tallied together or separately, they showed a significant tendency to leave the Metropolitan Police prematurely. Presumably, their military, or quasi-military training and discipline did not necessarily make them physically and mentally suited to police life. (An exception was the record of officers with former service in the Volunteer Corps, whose turnover rate was lower than that of the average officer). The military background of recruits and the increase in earnings and status entailed by police enlistment may have rendered the Metropolitan Police an obvious choice for them, but it did not necessarily keep them there. Perhaps their behaviour reveals their reservations about the disciplinary regime and lack of independence governing the work process in both the armed forces and in the police. This is suggested by two findings: One, that most soldiers remained in the army for only the minimum period of service of six years, and two, that the longer they had served in the armed forces, the better they adjusted to police life.

Interestingly, ex-servicemen who opted for other employment before joining the Metropolitan Police tended to serve longer than those who made the police their first choice of employment following military service. Having had a closer and longer look at the labour market, and hence a better understanding of its relevance to their employment situation, these ex-servicemen, when finally deciding to join the police, probably had serious intentions of staying. A possible explanation for the inclination of former policemen towards short-term service is that most of them (80%) came from the provincial forces, where work was less demanding than in the Metropolitan Police.

The geographical origin of officers was also a significant factor associated with the propensity to stay or leave. Former rural workers had a record of constancy. While 14% of recruits from rural areas left by the end of two years service, 17% of Londoners served as little, and as many as 21% of officers who came from other urban areas served for an equivalent period. This pattern was repeated in an examination of the percentage of officers who completed a full term of office of 25 years. 53% from non-urban regions served over 24 years, almost 50% of the Londoners served as long, and only 44% of those who came from other urban areas lasted as long. A similar finding is revealed by studying the records of officers from East Anglia, a low-income rural area, and of agricultural labourers or gardeners from all parts of Britain. In addition to gains in wages, status, security, housing and social benefits, officers from an agricultural background showed a higher survival capacity than the average officer, possibly due to their superior physical ability to cope with the hardships and health hazards of police work.

The service records also show that family considerations were paramount in determining an officer's commitment to his work. Married men were less inclined to leave prematurely. While 17% of the unmarried recruits left the service within the first two years, less than 14% of the married policemen left as early. The discrepancy was even greater in the case of policemen with children.

### **Advancement in the Ranks**

An important incentive offered by the Metropolitan Police to their employees in order to convince them to stay was the chance of advancing in the ranks, a prospect available to only a small proportion of the working class then.<sup>33</sup> Police officers were time and again promised that "when ability as an officer is displayed it surely leads to notice and advancement".<sup>34</sup> This promise, combined with employment security and other welfare provisions, may be regarded as part of a wider strategy pioneered by the police and adopted by other large bureaucracies to guarantee the allegiance and commitment of the workers to their employers. The police career structure was designed in such a way that only officers who filled the desire of the authorities for long-term employment could ascend the hierarchy of command and gain better conditions of service. Except for the early years, when the need to create an immediate supervisory hierarchy forced the authorities to recruit men directly into senior ranks, there was no outside recruitment to supervisory positions. Only the very top ranks, who constituted less than 1% of the workforce, were nominated to their position. All promoted officers had to start from the bottom of the hierarchy and gradually make their way up through the ranks, depending on merit, experience and vacancy.

The career line consisted of a graded hierarchy leading from the entry position of constable through sergeant, inspector and chief inspector to superintendent (or related ranks in the detective system) followed by retirement on a pension. A vast gap in rewards existed between constable, or even sergeant, and superintendent. For example, whereas a constable's pay at the turn of the century began at 25s.6d. a week and rose by annual increments of 1s. a week to a maximum of 33s.6d, the annual wage of superintendents was over 400.<sup>35</sup> Since no rank could be skipped, the longer an officer worked for the police the better were his chances of advancing significantly and reaching the more rewarding ranks. Persistence thus offered ordinary workers the rare opportunity to develop a career and cross the class boundary into the middle class proper. Survival was essential for ambitious officers in yet another way. Police training and experience did not equip the policeman with skills that served as a springboard for a career outside the police. Metropolitan officers could attain mobility when they opted to work in provincial forces, but otherwise, veteran policemen with social aspirations had little choice but to stay in service in the Metropolitan Police. Thus, incessant effort and employment stability were indispensable traits for officers who wanted to pursue a career.

The expectation to develop a career was not as prevalent in the nineteenth century as it became in the next century. Many workers neither aspired nor expected to experience social mobility. The same was true for police officers. For the many common labourers among them, joining the police rank and file in itself meant a rise in skill level, economic rewards and status. Yet memoirs of police officers make it clear that a proportion of the workforce hoped to be counted among the promoted officers.<sup>36</sup> This hope must have influenced their motivation to stick to their job. Who were the social groups whose job immobility won them promotion? What was the rate and speed of social mobility inside the Metropolitan Police? A statistical analysis of the service records of officers between 1889 and 1909 illuminates the extent of mobility and the links between personal variables and career mobility in the force.<sup>37</sup>

By definition, the supervisory officers were long-term employees, yet their term in office was considerably longer than the constable's. Promoted officers served 24.8 years on average in contrast to constables, who served 15.2 years. Patterns of turnover amongst those who served five years and more reveal that 83% of the promoted

officers reached a full term of service compared to 59% of those not promoted.<sup>38</sup> However, only a small number of recruits actually managed to ascend the ladder of promotion. Excluding those who served less than five years, the proportion of promoted officers from amongst all recruits to the Metropolitan Police between 1889 and 1909 amounted to under 25% of the force. Evidently, the majority of officers had to endure the arduous work of routine patrolling throughout their entire service in the London police.

A comparison between officers who served at least five years but never rose above the rank of constable and those who were promoted reveals that non-manual workers had a markedly high rate of promotion: 40% as compared with 23% of the manual workers. This difference indicates that experience in hard physical work was not conducive to advancement in the police hierarchy. No doubt, better education, literacy and the exercise of mental skills in former occupations helped non-manual workers write reports and pass the examinations essential for promotion. An analysis of the rate of promotion of each of the groupings composing the non-manual contingency inside the Metropolitan Police confirms that men belonging to the lower middle class tended to be upwardly mobile: 35% of recruits comprising social class 2 (retailers, small businessmen, professionals and farmers) were promoted, as were other retailers in the sample who are usually classified lower down the scale, namely, shopkeepers, grocers and shop assistants. The percentage of clerks who achieved promotion was as high as 65%, by far the most successful occupational group. Evidently, the tendency to long service did not correspond to the likelihood of being promoted: once clerks opted for permanency at work, they knew how to ascend the hierarchy.

Further investigation shows that the proportion of skilled and semi-skilled workers who were promoted was about 24%, the same as the mean rate of promotion. Unskilled workers had the poorest chances of social ascent, about 5% below the average. Clearly, recruits with a higher social status and level of education had better prospects of promotion. By selecting supervisory strata from amongst the more educated officers, the authorities reconciled the policy of promotion from below with growing professional demands in the force.

Although no significant difference existed between the rate of promotion of men who had had public service experience (23%) and those who did not (25%), experience in certain public services could help policemen attain upward career mobility. Ex-soldiers tended not to be promoted (19%) in contrast to ex-Royal Navy men and ex-marines, whose rate of promotion exceeded the average (31% and 27%, respectively). Former policemen (including railway and colonial policemen) and former employees of the railways and the post office also showed a noticeable tendency to be promoted (30%, 29% and 31%, respectively). All this suggests that experience in certain public services could help policemen attain upward career mobility. By contrast, policemen with previous service in the Volunteer Corps and the Militia had a promotion rate below the average (22% and 19%). Perhaps the fact that middle class enrolment to the Volunteer Corps gradually gave way to recruitment from the working class, and increasingly from the ranks of the unskilled, accounts for this phenomenon.

A comparison between natives of London and policemen born elsewhere reveals that Londoners had better chances of being promoted (28% against just under 23%). By contrast, policemen who came from rural areas had a promotion rate of only 22%, and the agricultural labourers amongst them only 19%. Farmers, however, showed a relatively high degree of success (27%). Men from provincial cities were underrepresented among officers who achieved promotion (20%).

An analysis of the ethnic origins of recruits reveals that among the non-English groups, the Irish showed an impressive tendency to achieve upward mobility (31%) while the Scots and the Welsh tended to remain in subordinate positions (14% and 11%, respectively). Promotion was also age-related. The younger the recruit was when he enlisted, the greater his chances of upward mobility.

The pyramid-like structure of the police hierarchy made it virtually certain that all but a few of any cohort would find their upward progress blocked at some point. The results of an analysis of the entire promoted population by alternate years reveal that most promoted officers (about 68%) never managed to rise above the rank of sergeant (ordinary, section or station sergeants, or their equivalents among the clerical staff). Just over 19% (394 officers in the sample) stopped at the rank of ordinary inspector, and a further 8.7% (176 officers) did not rise above sub-divisional or divisional inspector. Only 3.5% (70 officers) reached the rank of chief inspector, of which half (1.7% of all promoted officers) continued on to the level of superintendent. Two recruits managed to transcend the cutoff point beyond which officers were usually appointed from outside the force: one officer attained the rank of chief constable and the other the rank of deputy assistant commissioner. The former was a gardener and a native and resident of North Wales before joining the Metropolitan Police, who rose through the ranks of the Criminal Investigation Department. The latter was a clerk and a Londoner by birth and residence, who had served in the army for eight years and then made his way up in the regular police. (Notably, most of these promotions took place after 1914.)

The time that it took to move up the ranks varied considerably, but on the whole, promotion was a slow process. Although constables were not allowed to rise before they completed five years of service, the majority had to wait longer before attaining their first promotion – an average of nine years. Thus, officers were unlikely to be promoted for the first time well before the age of thirty. It took an average of 17.5 years of service altogether to attain the rank of inspector, and another seven years to become a chief inspector. The rank of superintendent was generally attained only after an average of 28.5 years of service.

## **Conclusion**

Instilling commitment in the force was a slow process, but however gradual, it ultimately changed the whole police culture. Research is still needed to fully assess the impact of stabilisation on the police. Meanwhile, an overview of police journals, in which policemen expressed their inner feelings and discussed their work as well as their private lives, reveals some of the results. As far as is possible to generalize, the more time policemen stayed together in the same workplace, the greater was their attachment to each other. With time, an esprit de corps developed, abetted by the odd work hours and the inability of policemen to conduct their social life in harmony with the habits of other working-class groups. As a result, policemen and their families were impelled to spend their leisure time together. The sizeable provision of recreational activities by the police after work hours brought them even closer together.<sup>39</sup> The many police dinners, sports days and excursions, in which the policemen's families participated, strengthened the bond not only among the men but among their families as well. A sense of community was gradually created, which involved heightened solidarity with the specific place of work and with the occupation as a whole.

Growing identification with work through perseverance, however, was not incompatible with hostility to management or with industrial struggles. Discontent

was still rife among officers, but increasingly they expressed their protest not by departure but within the organisation. In fact, the job immobility of an increasing number of officers may have helped them to organise protest and develop better methods of struggle.<sup>40</sup> A survey of police employment policies suggests that management eventually responded to such pressure. While it is impossible to gauge the level of satisfaction of policemen in Victorian and Edwardian times, a reasonable conclusion is that it rose steadily, though not linearly, despite an undercurrent of discontent with various employment conditions.

The knowledge that they could advance must have persuaded at least some policemen to endure the harsher aspects of the paternalist system. From this perspective, the policy worked. As for the employees, perseverance in the Metropolitan Police certainly benefited those who experienced upward mobility. While promotion was not contingent upon seniority but upon merit, standardised examinations and the weight given to the opinion of senior officers, length of service was the a priori requirement to begin to climb the ladder and attain social and economic mobility. However, few policemen managed to gain entry into the middle class through ascendance in the Metropolitan Police. The advancement that working-class employees of the police could realistically expect was attaining the rank of sergeant, whose work, social status and economic reward were not drastically different from those of ordinary constables on street duty, except that the rank was supervisory, it allowed for some authority and it paid wages that provided a relatively decent standard of living.

The reality of promotion was apparently no different from that in other large-scale organisations, whether in central or local government, the post office or large private corporations like the railways, where "the best to be hoped for was promotion to a modest senior clerkship or office manager".<sup>41</sup> Yet, as in other public services, even though the supervisory grades tended to be filled up by employees from the lower middle class, and workers from the less privileged levels in society had little chance of rising to the top, employees from an unskilled or semi-skilled (or rural) background sometimes did manage to reach high positions of authority. Officers with a background of manual labour advanced more slowly and had fewer chances of promotion than those from the lower middle class, yet they still constituted 71% and 57% of all chief inspectors and superintendents, respectively.<sup>42</sup> Among the 35 recorded superintendents in the sample, three had been gardeners, two porters, one a house servant, one a farm servant and one a labourer. Such access to positions near the top evoked the biting observation of a contemporary that in education, training and potential ability the British superintendent was "distinctly inferior to his brother officer in Vienna".<sup>43</sup> However, the privileged minority of superintendents with an unskilled past were living proof of the possibility that a policeman could substantially change his socioeconomic situation if he persisted in his employment with the force.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For instance, of the 100 candidates for service in the Metropolitan Police in 1867, 52 were labourers, 8 belonged to the mechanic and artisan class, and the rest were

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servants, discharged soldiers, railway porters, etc. (Police Service Advertiser, 11 May 1867, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> James D. Young, Socialism and the English Working Class (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> These service records can be found in the Public Records Office, London, MEPO 4/361-477.

<sup>4</sup> Peter N. Stearns, Lives of Labour (London: Croom Helm, 1975), pp. 22, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Samuel, "Comers and Goers", in H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (eds.), The Victorian City (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), vol. 1, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Trevor Lummis, The Labour Aristocracy. 1851-1914 (Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1994), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Select Committee on the Metropolitan Police, Parliamentary Papers (henceforth PP), 1834, vol. 16, p. 31; Police Service Advertiser, 20 April 1867, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary Debates, vol. 325, 24 April 1888, col. 316; R.M. Morris, "The Metropolitan Police Receiver in the XIXth Century", The Police Journal, vol. 47, 1 (January 1974), p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, PP, 1875, vol. XIII, p. 589.

<sup>11</sup> Police Service Advertiser, 1 June 1867, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Anna A. W. Ramsay, Sir Robert Peel (London: Constable, 1971), p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> "London Police Duty", Leisure Hour, vol. 28 (26 April 1879), p. 278.

<sup>14</sup> Select Committee on the Metropolitan Police, PP, 1834, vol. 16, pp. 18, 418.

<sup>15</sup> Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, PP, 1877, vol. 15, p. 159;

Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, PP, 1875, vol. 13, p. 574.

<sup>16</sup> Police Service Advertiser, 24 March 1866, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, PP, 1875, vol. 13, pp. 376-77, 383, 498, 569, 581.

<sup>18</sup> Police Review, 22 February 1901, p. 91; A. Wynter, "The Police and the Thieves", Quarterly Review, vol. 99 (June 1856), p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> "Metropolitan Police, and What is paid for Them", Chambers's Journal 2 July 1864, p. 424.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Police Chronicle (formerly the Police Service Advertiser), 11 August 1888, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> For a portrait of Henry Whiting and his supportive activities, see Police Review, 6 July, 1894, pp. 319, 320; 13 July 1894, pp. 328, 329; 20 July 1894, p. 340.

<sup>22</sup> Police Service Advertiser, 24 March 1866, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 February 1866, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 August 1866, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 May 1872, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, PP, 1877, vol. 15, pp. 159, 240.

<sup>27</sup> Police Service Advertiser, 9 March 1867, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 August 1866, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> The figures are taken from the annual reports of the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to the House of Commons, published in the Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>30</sup> "Extracts from Reports by District and Divisional Superintendents", Annual Report of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to the House of Commons, PP, 1883, vol. 31, p. 369. For detailed descriptions of the strikes in the Metropolitan Police in

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1872 and 1890, see Gerald W. Reynolds and Anthony Judge, The Night the Police Went on Strike (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 202-25.

<sup>31</sup> Police Service Advertiser, 23 February 1872, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> The present study is based on a sample of 20 per cent of the total annual enrolment between 1889 and 1909, taken at two-yearly intervals. The data consists of 2,252 cases.

<sup>33</sup> Select Committee on the Metropolitan Police, PP, 1834, vol. 16, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> "Extracts from Reports by District and Divisional Superintendents", Annual Report of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to the House of Commons, PP, 1884, vol. 42, p. 367.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley Savill, The Police Service of England and Wales (London: John Kempster, Police Review Office, 1901), pp. 273-74.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Jerome Caminada, Twenty-Five Years of Detective Life (London: John Heywood, 1895), vol. 2, p. 29; H.M. Howgrave-Graham, Light and Shade at Scotland Yard (London: John Murray, 1948), p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> The analysis of promotion is based on two samples. The first, used earlier in this paper for constructing the portrait of a stable policeman, is based on 20% of all recruits during these years randomly drawn every second year. This set provides a comparison between promoted officers and those who remained constables. The second concentrates on the officers who moved up to a supervisory position. It comprises all officers promoted during the years of the first sample (2,058 cases), so as to ensure a sample large enough to include all ranks and to provide a sufficient number of cases. This latter sample helps in identifying factors associated with promotion and with the pace of promotion.

<sup>38</sup> Since constables were not eligible to be promoted before they served five years, the sample on which the delineation of a promoted officer is based excludes officers who left the force earlier.

<sup>39</sup> Police Review, 3 July 1893, p. 318.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Times, 2-10 July 1890 and Police Review, 14 June 1901, p. 283.

<sup>41</sup> Harold Perkin, The Rise of Professional Society (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989), p. 98. See also Andrew Miles, "How Open was Nineteenth-Century British Society? Social Mobility and Equality of Opportunity, 1839-1914", in Andrew Miles and David Vincent (eds.), Building European Society. Occupational Change and Social Mobility in Europe. 1840-1940 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 34-35.

<sup>42</sup> For examples of an impressive rise from hard manual labour to supervisory positions in the Metropolitan Police, see portraits of Inspectors George Downie and Richard Webb in Police Review, 12 January 1900, p. 18, and 9 February 1900, p. 66, respectively.

<sup>43</sup> Raymond Fosdick, European Police Systems (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969. First published 1915), p. 195. Also see Nevil Macready, Annals of an Active Life (London: Hutchinson, 1924), vol. 1, p. 308.