

Urban Policing in Early Victorian England, 1835-86: a reappraisal

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Thirty years have now elapsed since the publication of Jenifer Hart's seminal study of early Victorian policing.¹ Subsequently, the historical debate on the development of policing in the towns and cities of early Victorian England has focused largely on three inter-related themes, namely the circumstances which prompted the advent of the 'new police', the levels of efficiency which the reformed forces attained, and the degree of public acceptability which they received. Police historians have been divided on these issues. Some, including Charles Reith, Sir Leon Radzinowicz, T. Critchley, and J.J. Tobias, have viewed provincial police reform largely in terms of the Benthamite march of progress, whereby the unreformed system was swept away by a centralised and efficient system for the prevention and detection of crime which owed much to the Metropolitan model established by Peel in 1829 and which soon received a general measure of public support and co-operation.² Others, including Robert Storch, David Philips and Tony Donajgrodzki, have argued that police reform was but one strand in the extension of control over working-class society and that the priorities, organisation and methods of

¹ J. Hart, 'The Reform of the Borough Police, 1835-56', *E[nglish] H[istorical] R[evue]*, 1955, cxx, 411-27; see also J. Hart, 'The County and Borough Police Act, 1856', *Public Administration*, 1956, 34.

² See, for example, C. Reith, *A New Study of Police History* (London, 1956); L. Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750* (4 vols, London, 1948-68); T.A. Critchley, *A History of Police in England and Wales, 1900-1966* (London, 1967); J.J. Tobias, *Crime and Industrial Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1967). For an interesting overview, see C.D. Robinson, 'Ideology as History: a look at the way some English police historians look at the police', *Police Studies*, 1979, Vol 2, no. 2.

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the 'new police' fuelled popular hostility.³ These models of police history, the one involving consensus, the other conflict, have their limitations, as recent studies indicate.⁴ Moreover, the debate has tended to concentrate on the development of policing in London and the great industrial centres of early Victorian England, whilst comparative studies of the process of police reform in contrasting urban communities — including those Victorian cities barely touched by the Industrial Revolution — have been distinctly lacking. This paper seeks to contribute to the debate by attempting such an analysis, with particular reference to the development of policing in Wolverhampton, York and Exeter between 1835 and 1856.⁵

During the early nineteenth century Wolverhampton emerged as a commercial and manufacturing centre second only to Birmingham within the West Midlands region, a town whose bounds contained a profusion of mines, manufactories, foundries and semi-domestic workshops. The town was largely a product of the Industrial Revolution in the Black Country, and the rapid growth of industry and the sharp increase in the size of the urban population from 12,565 in 1801 to 60,860 in 1861 exacerbated and magnified many traditional social ills, contributed to the polarisation of class divisions, and imposed considerable strains on the machinery of local government. Prior to 1848, when the town obtained a Charter of Incorporation under the terms of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, the administration of Wolverhampton rested largely with the Wolverhampton Improvement Commissioners, first appointed in 1777. Early Victorian Wolverhampton was in many respects a volatile and unstable community: by 1851 almost half the population — which included a significant Irish minority — had been born outside the town. During the early Victorian period the authorities sought to come to terms with the new social and economic forces which were shaping the future of Wolverhampton, and the prevention of crime and the maintenance of law and order were central to the stabilisation of this expanding urban-industrial community and the establishment of control over the working-class populace.⁶

³ See, for example, R.D. Storch, 'The Plague of the Blue Locusts: Police reform and popular resistance in Northern England, 1840-57', *International Review of Social History*, 1975, xx, 61-90; D. Philips, *Crime and Authority in Victorian England* (London, 1977); A. Donajgradzki, *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977).

⁴ These include Victor Bailey (ed), *Policing and Punishment in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1981); C. Emsley, *Policing and its Context, 1750-1870* (London, 1983); D.J.V. Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community and Police in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1982), pp. 1-32.

⁵ The material contained in this paper is drawn largely from two extended studies: Roger Swift, 'Crime, Law and Order in two English Towns during the early Nineteenth Century: the experience of Exeter and Wolverhampton, 1815-1856' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1981), chapters 4 and 9; Roger Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York, 1835-56* (forthcoming Borthwick Papers, University of York, 1988).

⁶ There is no adequate social history of Victorian Wolverhampton: for further details see Swift, *Thesis*, chapter 6.

Prior to 1837 the responsibility for policing Wolverhampton rested with two parish constables and their deputies, elected annually at the Courts Leet and directed by the Staffordshire County Magistrates, and a night watch of 12 men, first appointed in 1814 and controlled by the improvement commissioners. When breakdowns of public order occurred the normal recourse was for military assistance, as in 1835 when there were serious riots during a by-election held in the town. These amateur and largely inadequate methods of law enforcement came under increasing attack during the early 1830s when middle-class demands for police reform reflected growing anxiety on three issues: the increase in serious crimes against property, notably larceny, burglary and breaking and entering; an increase in assaults, often in conjunction with the activities of footpads and pickpockets; the general lawlessness which characterised the streets of Wolverhampton both by day and night.⁷ Many contemporaries ascribed this state of affairs to the activities of 'thimble-riggers', migratory criminals who were attracted to the town by the paucity of its policing arrangements and who 'having no other means of support than those of the worst description are daily and hourly by their artificers plundering and robbing the unwary'.⁸ It was alleged that there were more than 100 such characters living openly in the town, and the evidence from Wolverhampton lends some support to the later views of the Constabulary Commissioners of 1839 that much provincial crime was the work of migratory criminals.⁹ Under these circumstances, a question which recurred in the columns of the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* was 'Where are the Constables?', and in June 1837 the improvement commissioners reviewed policing arrangements, accepted that the existing system was 'an evil of great magnitude', and established a unified force of 12 'policemen' under the direction of the Watch and Street Keeper's Committee, with Richard Castle, a former sergeant in the Metropolitan Police, as superintendent. Dressed in blue tail-coats, chimney-pot hats and white gloves — a style evidently borrowed from the London police — and equipped with staves and handcuffs, the first appearance of the new force must have contrasted sharply with that of its predecessor even if, in terms of personnel at least, the changeover was rather cosmetic. Castle's force remained in charge of policing arrangements in Wolverhampton until the advent of the 'new police' in 1843, and there is some evidence to suggest that this 'police' force achieved a measure of middle-class confidence during this period.¹⁰

Unlike Wolverhampton, the cathedral city of York possessed only an indirect contact with the realities of the new industrial age. Once the capital of the North, and a major social and administrative centre, York lay at the heart of a vast and prosperous region, and the early Victorian period was essentially one of transition whereby the city continued to live off past traditions yet also sought new roles. Population growth was slow, rising

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-80.

⁸ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 16 January 1835.

⁹ *First Report of the Constabulary Commissioners*, P.P., 1839, p. 181.

¹⁰ For further details, see Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 385-88.

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from 26,260 in 1831 to 40,433 in 1861, and the bulk of the population was engaged in service and retail trades barely touched by the Industrial Revolution, whilst small handicraft enterprises, located in semi-domestic workshops, catered for the needs of the local gentry and neighbouring rural communities. The absence of a factory system or, indeed, of many large manufactories, meant that class-distinctions were less polarised in York than in the rapidly-expanding industrial towns of the West Riding, thus the class-segregated districts of the industrial towns were absent from the city. The relative decline of York was arrested by the advent of the railways: with the opening of the York and North Midland Railway in 1839 and under the influence of George Hudson, York became a major regional rail centre and, despite fluctuations in trade and commerce during the 'Hungry Forties', the local economy was revitalised and the city's role as a social and administrative centre was enhanced. At heart, however, early Victorian York was conservative, parochial and paternalistic: municipal reform heralded a period of Tory hegemony in local government until the fall of Hudson in 1850, and working-class radical and trade-unionist activity made little headway.¹¹

Prior to the Municipal Corporations Act the policing of York was vested in three separate authorities. First, there was a principal police officer, William Pardoe, who was responsible to the York Corporation for policing arrangements in York and the Ainsty (the immediate rural hinterland), assisted by two constables. Second, a force of between 50 and 60 parish constables, appointed by the magistrates and sworn in at the Wardmote Court each Easter, was responsible for the policing of the city by day. The Municipal Commissioners reported in 1835 that because York contained so many parishes and the powers of constables were restricted to their own parishes, policing arrangements were 'productive of much inconvenience', and it was stated in 1836 that the parochial constabulary was 'almost entirely inefficient'.¹² Third, a city patrol, formed in 1825 under the terms of the York Improvement Act and responsible to the City Commissioners, provided a police force by night. This patrol, which comprised a captain, Daniel Smith, and eight constables, was provided with a lock-up or police station in St Andrewgate. When disorder threatened, the magistrates supplemented these peace-keeping forces with special constables and, occasionally, with the military. York was generally held to be an orderly city where crimes of great magnitude were comparatively rare, but during the early 1830s respectable citizens expressed growing dissatisfaction with policing arrangements and pointed to the inadequacies of the system. There was little co-ordination of policing between the Corporation, the City Commissioners, and the Parish Vestries. Pardoe and his assistants were overburdened by a multiplicity of judicial and administrative

¹¹ For the social history of Victorian York, see especially A.J. Peacock, 'York in the age of Reform' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 1974); C. Feinstein (ed), *York, 1831-1981* (York, 1981); W.A. Armstrong, *Stability and Change in an English County Town: a social study of York, 1801-1851* (Cambridge, 1974).

¹² *First Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations in England and Wales: Report on the City of York*, P.P., 1835, pp. 1735-66.

functions in addition to their policing duties. Moreover, in consequence of the inactivity and inefficiency of the parish constables, York was inadequately policed by day whilst the city patrol was too small a body to effectively police a city of 30,000 souls by night. Indeed, in April 1836 it was stated that 'The numerous robberies which have been effected or attempted during the winter months have occasioned much dissatisfaction to be expressed by the inhabitants that sufficient protection is not afforded them. The increase in common beggars and the prevalence of petty nuisances and offences committed in the streets and places of public resort call loudly for correction and prevention.'¹³

Like York, Victorian Exeter was an ancient cathedral city serving a vast rural hinterland. Unlike its northern counterpart, however, early Victorian Exeter was virtually bypassed by the great social and economic forces of the age, remaining as 'a social and cultural survival from pre-Industrial England'.¹⁴ During the early nineteenth century this once-rich city faced economic decline and growing problems in regard to poverty and distress which were reflected in the serious food riots which occurred in the city in 1847 and 1854.¹⁵ Virtually untouched by the Industrial Revolution, Exeter supported a large class of unearned income receivers who stimulated the demand for service and retail trades, and its economic base lay in agricultural crafts and trades, serving a rural environment, in the building trades, which satisfied the demand for private residences from professional and retired persons, in the coaching and hostelry trades, and in domestic service. Population growth was almost insignificant, reflecting the economic decline of the city, and rose from 28,242 in 1831 to only 33,738 in 1861. Indeed, early Victorian Exeter was an anachronism in an age of progress: an ordered, deferential and conservative city, administered by a Tory council for much of the period, which retained its peculiarly rural and provincial identity and maintained its traditional role as a social and residential centre for the upper and middle classes; a city representative of the world of Trollope, moulded by a rural environment and the traditions of the country house and rectory.¹⁶

During the early 1830s policing arrangements in Exeter were similar to those of York. First, there were a number of law officers appointed by and responsible to the Exeter Corporation, including the swordbearer, four sergeants at mace, and six staff-bearers whose posts were largely ceremonial although they were also sworn in as constables and were required to serve warrants and summonses. Second, a force of 26 parishes constables, supplemented by auxiliary constables who included officers attached to the Corporation of the Poor, the Mendicity Society, and the City Gaol, was responsible for the daily policing of the city. Third, a night watch of 24 men, first appointed in 1830 and responsible to the City commissioners, was deployed to patrol the city between dawn and dusk.

¹³ Y[ork] C[ity] A[rchives], Y[ork] W[atch] C[ommittee] M[inutes], 1836-56, 11 May 1836.

¹⁴ Robert Newton, *Victorian Exeter* (Leicester, 1967), p. 19.

¹⁵ For further details, see Roger Swift, 'Food Riots in Mid-Victorian Exeter, 1847-67', *Southern History*, 1980, ii, 101-127.

¹⁶ Newton, *Victorian Exeter*, p. xxi.

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This force was divided into two patrols, each consisting of a captain, two inspectors and eight watchmen, which exercised policing functions on alternate nights. There was little co-ordination between the various policing agencies yet there is little evidence to suggest that contemporaries were either unduly concerned with the condition of the city's streets or were dissatisfied with policing arrangements. Indeed, the Exeter Recorder, Thomas Stevens, frequently made reference to the prevalence of 'morality and good order' in the city during the early 1830s, noting that there had been 'a great improvement in the quiet order of our streets since the establishment of a night police',¹⁷ whilst in 1835 the Municipal Commissioners expressed their general satisfaction with policing arrangements, stating that the parish constables provided 'a sufficient force for the ordinary purposes of police'.¹⁸

The evidence from Wolverhampton, York and Exeter endorses the generally-accepted view of Sidney and Beatrice Webb that the unreformed system of policing in urban society during the early nineteenth century rested in the hands of a variety of local government agencies, ranging from magistrates and parish vestries to improvement commissioners and the unreformed corporations.¹⁹ It is clear that there was little co-ordination between these bodies on a local level, yet it is also clear that levels of 'police' efficiency varied from one community to the next, depending on local needs. Literary and statistical evidence suggests that the problem of crime and public disorder was most pronounced in Wolverhampton, where the inadequacies of traditional mechanisms for maintaining law and order were readily acknowledged. In the more orderly environs of York, where serious crime was at a relatively low level during the period, criticism of the unreformed system represented a response to 'the condition of the streets' question. In contrast policing arrangements in Exeter, where there was no marked upsurge in either serious or petty crime during the early 1830s, were widely perceived to be adequate to the needs of the city.²⁰

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The coming of the 'new police' to Wolverhampton was a direct corollary of the County Police Act of 1839 which empowered the county justices to establish a paid, uniformed police force for all or part of their county. In 1839 the Staffordshire magistrates decided to adopt the Act for the southern division of Offlow South, where working-class political and industrial agitation was giving cause for concern. These arrangements initially excluded Wolverhampton, but in September 1842, against the backdrop of the Midland Miner's strike, Chartist activity, and popular disorders in the Potteries and the Black Country, the county magistrates decided to apply the 1839 Act to the whole of Staffordshire. This decision witnessed the advent of the 'new police' in Wolverhampton, although the

¹⁷ *Western Times*, 22 October 1830.

¹⁸ *Municipal Corporations in England and Wales: Report on the City of Exeter*, P.P., 1835, Appendix, part I, p. 491.

¹⁹ S. and B. Webb, *The Parish and the County* (1906, reprinted F. Cass, 1963), pp. 64-8.

²⁰ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 136-141.

town had not provided a setting for popular disorders. In January 1843 Richard Castle's 'police' force was dismantled and a county force of 27 men under the command of Gilbert Hogg, the Deputy-Chief Constable of the Staffordshire Police, was stationed in Wolverhampton, which henceforth became the headquarters for policing arrangements in the Mining District.²¹ This force remained in the town until 1848 when Wolverhampton obtained a Charter of Incorporation and the newly-elected borough council resolved to establish a borough police force. The changeover took time to effect but by November 1848 a new force of 23 men was established under the command of Gilbert Hogg, the incumbent, who selected suitable recruits from the county police.²² The process of police reform was completed in 1857 when Wolverhampton was brought under the terms of the County and Borough Police Act of 1856. In February 1856 the Wolverhampton Watch Committee had submitted a petition in support of Grey's Police Bill to Parliament, an action which had been prompted by the prospect of the Treasury Grant, which provided one-quarter of the costs of pay and clothing of all forces certified efficient by HM Inspectors of Constabulary. In April 1857 the Wolverhampton Borough Police force, which now numbered 55 men, was inspected by General Cartwright, who expressed his general satisfaction with policing arrangements.²³

In contrast, police reform in early Victorian York was the product of municipal reform in 1835. In April 1836 the newly-elected city council appointed a watch committee to effect the reorganisation of the York police. However, although it was accepted that a more efficient police force was required, the issue of police reform was the setting for party conflict between Liberals and Tories in the council and it took six months for the shape of the new force to be determined. A Metropolitan policeman, Inspector Stuart, was engaged to advise on the reorganisation, concluding that a force of between 20 and 24 policemen was necessary, but the council disregarded his advice, opting on financial grounds for a force of 12 men, which in practice comprised the old city patrol under the command of William Pardoe. Hence the 'new police' represented consolidation rather than innovation, and the changeover was cosmetic. Nevertheless, this force, with modifications, was responsible for the policing of York until 1858. York was zealous of its privileges as a municipal borough and vehemently opposed the centralising tendencies of the period, including Palmerston's unsuccessful Police Bill of 1854 and Grey's Bill of 1856, and in the aftermath of the 1856 Police Act the city resolved not to apply for certification. Nevertheless, the police force, which now totalled 27 men, was twice inspected by Colonel James Woodford — in 1856 and 1857 — and was deemed to be 'inefficient' on both occasions. However, in 1858 the city council finally decided to apply for the Treasury Grant and, following a further reorganisation of policing

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 389-92.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 405-7.

²³ Wolverhampton Central Library, W[olverhampton] W[atch] C[ommittee] M[inutes], 1853-60, 20 April 1857.

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arrangements, certification was confirmed in December, when York was brought under the terms of the 1856 Act.²⁴

As in York, police reform in Exeter was a direct corollary of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. In January 1836 the Exeter Watch Committee established a borough police force of 30 men, which included ten supernumary policemen. However, as in York, the changeover was cosmetic for the 'new police' force was divided into a day police of ten men, namely the staff bearers and sergeants at mace who had constituted the constabulary under the old regime, and a night police, also of ten men, which was largely composed of the watchmen who had previously served in the night patrol. Moreover, Hugh Cuming, who had been swordbearer under the old corporation, was appointed superintendent of the new force, albeit amidst charges of Tory jobbery. In essence, the 'new police' were simply the old police in disguise. This system, described by the Radical *Western Times* as 'a sort of Dogberry Watch',²⁵ remained in force until June 1847 when the city council, in response to the inability of the Exeter police to control the food riots which broke out in May, and in face of growing middle-class disquiet over policing arrangements, resolved to effect further reform of the police. Hugh Cuming was dismissed and replaced by David Steel, the Superintendent of the Barnstaple police, and the Exeter force was reorganised. The city subsequently opposed both Palmerston's and Grey's Police Bills, and in 1856 Exeter resolved not to apply for the Treasury Grant in order to retain local control of policing, despite the fact that Captain Willis, HM Inspector of Constabulary, certified the Exeter police as efficient. Thus Exeter was able to maintain a degree of independence in policing matters.²⁶

The 'new police' brought a vigorous style of policing to early Victorian Wolverhampton and their advent represented a radical break with policing traditions in the town. The county police force was organised on paramilitary lines. The Chief Constable, John Hatton, had previously served in the Royal Irish Constabulary, serving mainly in his native County Wicklow where he had been active in the suppression of agrarian disorders, and had also served as Chief Constable of the East Suffolk Constabulary. Gilbert Hogg, his deputy and fellow Irishman, had a distinguished military career before serving with the Manchester City Police. Both men were strong disciplinarians who emphasised the importance of regular inspections and drill, including sword drill with cutlasses, and who sought to recruit policemen with previous military or police experience, a significant development at a time of political and industrial unrest in the Black Country. Between 1843 and 1856 Hatton and Hogg were provided with a clear mandate from the county magistrates and, after 1848, from the Wolverhampton borough council and magistracy, to suppress popular disorders, to monitor closely all large public gatherings, to keep an eye on known criminals and their associates, and to

²⁴ YWCM, 8 December 1858.

²⁵ *Western Times*, 12 May 1847.

²⁶ For further details, see Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 184-85.

crack down on street crime, particularly in regard to those less-serious offences such as drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, assaults, vagrancy and breaches of by-laws which contributed to the disorderly nature of Wolverhampton's streets and constituted a public eyesore. The scale of the onslaught was novel. The police entered into the heart of working-class communities and their attack on popular cultural and leisure activities, which had been largely ignored by the unreformed force, initially provoked popular antipathy, particularly in the Stafford Street Irish district, where Hogg maintained an intensive police presence. It is clear that the authorities regarded the working-class populace as a volatile community which required vigorous policing, and continuity of police leadership and ideology was a vital ingredient in this process: significantly, when Gilbert Hogg was appointed Chief Constable of the Staffordshire County Police in 1857 he was succeeded in Wolverhampton by Captain Henry Segrave, of the 8th Regiment, Colchester.²⁷

Developments were less radical in York. The chief priority of the city council, watch committee and magistracy was 'the condition of the streets'. In October 1836 the police were specifically directed to monitor public houses and beershops and under the leadership of William Pardoe the police were mainly concerned with drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, vagrancy and public nuisances. Moreover, during the early 1840s, when York was influenced by Sabbatarians, sabbath-breaking was added to the list of petty offences which merited public concern. In essence, however, Pardoe continued traditional police practices.²⁸ A more positive approach to policing was initially adopted by Robert Chalk, a former Metropolitan policeman, who succeeded Pardoe in 1841. Chalk sought to develop a preventive rather than a detective police force in York, which in practice involved the close surveillance of the activities and haunts of known criminals and their associates and suspicious persons. To this end, Chalk produced an impressive series of statistical returns in 1842 which listed all criminals, prostitutes, reputed thieves, and 'persons with no visible means of gaining an honest livelihood' known by the police to be residing in York.²⁹ Chalk also endeavoured to more effectively police large gatherings, including York's fairs, markets, and race meetings, in order to minimise the activities of pickpockets and petty thieves, and by the early 1850s police surveillance techniques had been strengthened by the appointment of plain-clothed detectives. However, there is much evidence to suggest that, after a promising start, Chalk became complacent and disillusioned in consequence of the repeated failure of the city council to effect meaningful increases in the size of the York police force, and in face of a vitriolic and highly personalised campaign against him (as an 'outsider') in the columns of the *York Herald*. Moreover, the multiplicity of non-policing functions which Chalk also undertook — and which made

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 393-400, 418-19.

²⁸ Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York*, pp. 15-16.

²⁹ YCA, Watch Committee Papers/320/1-321/1, B/7/1: A Return of the Reputed Thieves in York; A Return of the Persons in York who have no visible means of gaining an Honest Livelihood; A Return of the House of Ill-Fame in York, all dated January 1842.

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him a wealthy man — weakened his leadership and contributed to the inefficiency which Woodford noted in 1857.³⁰ Clearly, the policing of early Victorian York was far less vigorous than in Wolverhampton. One simple index of this is provided in the treatment by the York police of the disorderly Irish communities in Bedern, Walmgate and Hungate, for although the police attempted to quell street disorders and domestic disputes in these districts — sometimes with the assistance of special constables — there is no evidence to suggest that these districts were intensively policed on the Wolverhampton model.³¹

As in York, the priorities of the Exeter council, watch committee and magistracy lay primarily with 'the condition of the streets', although it is clear that the reformed police were not provided with a clear mandate in 1836. In part this was a problem of leadership, since Hugh Cuming was complacent and inefficient, continuing traditional police practices. Indeed, under his leadership, the Exeter police force was the target of a prolonged campaign for police reform conducted by the *Western Times*, whose radical editor, Thomas Latimer, was moved to comment in August 1842 that

It is well know that notorious thieves come and settle here, as far as we have observed, without sufficiently being placed under the surveillance of the police...if a stranger thief comes into town he is treated with proper consideration. If he be what is professionally termed 'a cracksman' he is left undisturbed by the visits of the police till some ten or a dozen parties be stripped of their silver spoons and forks...if he lodge at the Rhinoceros or the Vulture or any other 'flash' house, his landlady is desired not to inform him that 'the beaks' will do themselves the honour of a morning call shortly; and when, in due course of etiquette, they do call, they are very much surprised to find that he is not at home.³²

Statistical evidence suggests that the chief targets of the Exeter police were drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, assaults, and breaches of by-laws, although vagrancy and prostitution merited public concern at certain times. However, a more comprehensive mandate was provided by Superintendent David Steel from 1847. Steel introduced greater discipline, established a more selective recruitment policy, and monitored more closely the haunts of known criminals and their associates. The Exeter police were also required to police more effectively public meetings, notably fairs and markets. Thus, under the leadership of Steel, there was a more positive move towards the preventive principle in Exeter. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the Exeter police, like their counterparts in York, were employed to exert a new form of discipline over working-class society at large. The vigorous police methods evident in Wolverhampton were largely absent from Exeter, although the use of the Exeter police to enforce the city council's prohibition of the annual Fifth of

³⁰ Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York*, pp. 15-16, 40-44.

³¹ See especially, Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prejudice: a study of Irish immigrants in York, 1840-1875* (Cork, 1982), chapter 9, pp. 132-54.

³² *Western Times*, 20 August 1842.

November celebrations in the city — which undermined popular custom — resulted in ugly clashes between the police and the public during the 1840s and 1850s.³³

1. Ratio of police: population, 1836-56

	1836			1856		
	Population	Police	Ratio	Population	Police	Ratio
Wolverhampton	30,000	12	1:2,500	55,000	55	1:1,00
York	27,000	12	1:2,250	38,000	27	1:1,407
Exeter	30,000	30	1:1,000	32,000	30	1:1,066

3. Turnover in manpower, 1836-56

	Wolverhampton (1854-7 only)	York* (1836-56)	Exeter (1836-56)
Appointments	135	150	192
Departures	109	113	161
Dismissals	33	42	100
Drunkennes	8	21	53
Neglect of duty, etc	25	21	47
Resigned	74	58	52
Retired/Died	2	4	9

* York figures exclude 9 unrecorded departures.

Source: Wolverhampton Central Library, Watch Committee Minutes, 1853-58; York City Archives, Watch Committee Minutes, 1836-56; Devon County Record Office, Exeter Watch Committee Minutes, 1836-56.

3. The cost of policing, 1838-56

	1838			1856		
	Annual Expense	Total Police	Weekly unit cost	Annual Expense	Total Police	Weekly unit cost
Wolverhampton	£680	12	£1.08	£3,346	55	£1.16
York	£795	12	£1.27	£1,809	27	£1.28
Exeter	£1,368	30	£0.87	£1,563	30	£1.00

Between 1843 and 1848, as David Philips has shown, the Staffordshire police force encountered innumerable initial difficulties in developing a suitable organisational framework in Wolverhampton, including police indiscipline, a high turnover in manpower, and financial irregularities.³⁴ Nevertheless, when the borough force was established in 1848 a basic framework, encompassing rules and regulations, duty rotas, wages, and codes of discipline, was inherited from the county and the borough council was, in fact, keen to recruit experienced county policemen who had previously served in Wolverhampton. However, the desire of the Liberal council to manage policing in an economical manner — within an annual budget of £1,400 — created some organisational problems. Increases in

³³ For further details, see Roger Swift, 'Guy Fawkes Celebrations in Victorian Exeter', *History Today*, November 1981, pp. 5-9.

³⁴ D. Philips, *Crime and Authority*, pp. 64-82.

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manpower were only sanctioned with reluctance, although the council appears to have been more willing to expend monies on the police than its counterparts in York and Exeter. The new force initially comprised 23 men, a smaller number than had been deployed by the county, and in 1849 it was alleged that Wolverhampton possessed the smallest force in England, relative to the size of the populace. However, substantial additions were sanctioned in 1854 and 1856, largely due to the desire of the council to qualify for the Treasury Grant. Table 1 shows that the ratio of police to population rose from 1:2,000 in 1848 (when the force contained 23 men) to 1:1,000 in 1856 (when the force contained 55 policemen), enabling police beats to be extended and duties to be redefined. The cost of additional appointments was partly defrayed by income from fees and fines, and by the payment of poor wages to policemen on the lower grades. Indeed, low pay was a perennial source of police dissatisfaction, prompting several petitions for wage increases, and made it difficult for the authorities to attract suitable recruits to the service. The Watch Committee Minutes suggest that the majority of recruits were local men, drawn from the ranks of the semi-skilled and the unskilled. Police pay barely improved between 1848 and 1856, with police constables' salaries averaging between 16 shillings per week for new recruits (class 6) and 21 shillings for experienced men (class 1), albeit when, according to George Barnsby, the basic minimum weekly wage necessary for a family of four was 25 shillings.³⁵ Poor pay, coupled with the onerous duties which policemen were expected to perform, contributed to high turnovers in manpower. The Watch Committee Minutes indicate (see table 2) that between 1854 and 1857 there were 135 appointments to the force and 109 departures. Of the latter, 74 policemen (nearly 60 per cent of all departures) resigned and 33 (30 per cent) were dismissed, primarily for neglect of duty and absence from beats. However, these figures suggest that whilst turnover rates were still high, they were at a lower level than those evident in the county force during the 1840s and departures were most marked at the lowest ranks, suggesting that the Wolverhampton force was a more stable and experienced body by the 1850s. Moreover, the relatively low level of dismissals, particularly for drunkenness — which had been rife in the county police — bears testimony to improving police discipline during the 1850s. Continuity of leadership was a vital ingredient in this process. In essence, however, the spadework had been done during the 1840s and by mid-century, under municipal control, the Wolverhampton police had been moulded into a more professional organisation. These improvements were achieved at a relatively low cost: although police expenditure rose from £1,400 in 1848 to £3,346 in 1856, the actual unit cost per policeman barely increased (see table 3) and the council was able to finance improvements to the police station in Garrick Street and to obtain branch stations in Stafford Street and Berry Street. Cartwright was clearly impressed with policing

³⁵ G. Barnsby, 'The Standard of Living in the Black Country in the Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 1971, xxiv.

arrangements in Wolverhampton when he inspected the force in 1857, concluding that the police force was inferior to none in England.³⁶

An embryonic code of police rules and regulations was laid down in York between 1836 and 1856. General instructions, based on the Metropolitan model, and advocated by Inspector Stuart, were issued in October 1836, police beats and hours of duty were defined, and a disciplinary code was subsequently established and redefined in the light of experience. An admissions procedure was also codified: vacancies in the York police were advertised in the local press and applicants were required to submit a letter of application, supported by testimonials, to the superintendent. The Watch Committee Minutes suggest that most policemen were natives of York and its immediate rural hinterland, and had previously been employed in poorly-paid semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, although the city council cast its net more widely when seeking replacements in the higher echelons of the force, advertising in the provincial press for men with proven police experience.³⁷ However, the desire of both Tory and Liberal councils to practice strict economy in municipal affairs, including policing, seriously inhibited the organisation and development of the York police. Clothing and equipment was often inadequate, although the watch committee clawed back money by auctioning old police uniforms. The police station in Silver Street was in a permanent state of neglect, disrepair and insecurity, and Woodford reported in 1856 that 'it is in my opinion almost impossible to speak in terms too highly condemnatory of this station-house and cells'.³⁸ Police pay was kept at a relatively low level, ranging from 15 to 18 shillings per week for a constable in 1836 to between 17 and 20 shillings per week by 1856, which prompted police dissatisfaction and several unsuccessful petitions for pay increases. Although a police fund was established in 1841, the main beneficiaries were long-serving policemen who were sometimes provided with a gratuity on their retirement or when they left for policing posts elsewhere. Increases in manpower were only sanctioned with great reluctance by the council, even when the watch committee and the superintendent stressed the urgency of the situation, and the general preference was for the deployment of special constables to meet short-term demands. Thus the size of the force increased slowly, from 12 in 1836 to 27 in 1856. Although, as table 1 indicates, this represented an improved ratio of police to population, from 1:2,250 in 1836 to 1:1,027 in 1856, it was clear that by the early 1850s there had been a qualitative deterioration in the character of the York police, at a time when it might have reasonably been expected that the force was becoming a more professionally organised body. Shortages of manpower, onerous duties, low pay, and poor prospects for promotion contributed to low morale and indiscipline within the force, and to high turnover rates. The Watch Committee Minutes (see table 2) record 150 appointments to the York police force between 1836 and 1856, and 113 departures. Of the latter, 58 men resigned (51 per cent of all

³⁶ WWCM, 20 April 1857.

³⁷ Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York*, pp. 17-18.

³⁸ YWCM, 4 February 1857.

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departures) and 42 (37 per cent) were dismissed, of whom 21 (50 per cent of dismissals) were dismissed for drunkenness, although the *Minutes* suggest that only repeated drunkenness normally resulted in dismissal from the force — policemen were variously warned, fined, demoted or suspended before this final sanction was invoked. Resignations were clearly prompted by dissatisfaction with the service, although police records rarely specify the exact reasons why individual policemen resigned. However, in March 1855 Robert Chalk reported that of nine men who had resigned from the force during the previous six months, five had stated that they 'did not like the service', two left to join the Durham County Constabulary, one became a butcher, and another a storeman.³⁹ Moreover, the fact that 51 departures from the York police (almost 50 per cent of all departures) occurred between 1850 and 1856 would seem to suggest that the police service was becoming an increasingly unattractive proposition in York. By November 1856, out of the 37 men inspected by James Woodford (which included 10 hastily-appointed supernumeraries), no fewer than 25 policemen had less than two years service in the force, including 14 with less than 12 months service. In practice, therefore, the constraints which 'strict economy' imposed on policing arrangements in the city made it difficult for Robert Chalk to effectively exercise the preventive principle in York. However, despite 'strict economy', the cost of policing rose from £795 in 1838 to £1,809 in 1856, as table 3 indicates, and the *York Herald* was quick to point out that despite increased expenditure the York police was both inadequate and inefficient, as Woodford's comments subsequently endorsed.⁴⁰

As in York, the early Victorian period witnessed the gradual and piecemeal emergence of an administrative and organisational framework for the policing of Exeter. Rules and regulations were laid down, beats were extended — and an admissions procedure was established, although it was not tightened up until the reforms of 1847. The Watch Committee *Minutes* suggest that most police recruits were local men, and of the 61 appointments which recorded previous occupations, 24 men described themselves as 'labourers' whilst the remainder represented a cross-section of the city's trades and crafts. The development of the Exeter police force was seriously inhibited by the distinction between day and night police. The day police operated from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and the night police from 10 p.m. to 4 p.m., leaving the city unprotected for seven hours each day. Moreover, the members of the day police continued to exercise many of the non-policing functions which they had undertaken under the unreformed corporation, whilst the night police, as part-time employees, combined their duties as watchmen with their trades and businesses. In 1837 Mr Snell, a Liberal councillor, put forward a scheme for police reform which owed much to policing arrangements in neighbouring Plymouth and which concluded that 'it is desirable as soon as possible to rearrange the day and night police by consolidating their duties and forming one regular

³⁹ YCA. /B/17/Reports to the Watch Committee, A Return of Men who have left the York City Police Force, 31 March 1855.

⁴⁰ *York Herald*, 17 February 1855.

force',⁴¹ but the council rejected the proposals in the interests of economy. Not until 1847 were the two forces consolidated as part of the general reorganisation which occurred in that year: thereafter, constables worked by day or night according to their duty rota.

The financial constraints imposed by the Exeter Corporation also inhibited the development of policing. Strict economy was applied to the provision of police uniforms and equipment, and the Metropolitan dress was not adopted until 1847. Police wages remained low for much of the period, ranging from 17 shillings per week for a constable in 1836 to between 16 and 18 shillings per week by 1856. Police petitions for pay rises were rejected in 1853, 1854, and 1855, and police accounts indicate that expenditure actually fell between 1850 and 1856, lying well within the budget of £1,625 set in 1847, whilst the average unit cost of a policeman per week was lower than in Wolverhampton and York, as table 3 indicates. Financial constraints virtually prohibited increases in manpower, and the full complement of the force ranged from between 27 and 30 men throughout the period. They also contributed to low police morale, indiscipline and high turnovers of manpower. The Watch Committee Minutes record 192 appointments to the Exeter police between 1836 and 1856, and 161 departures (see table 2). Of the latter, 52 men resigned (32 per cent of all departures), whilst 100 men were dismissed (62 per cent). Drunkenness, which was endemic in the Exeter police, was the prime cause of dismissal (53 cases or 53 per cent of all dismissals), followed by neglect of duty, absence from beats, and insubordination. Moreover, 116 of all departures from the force occurred between 1836 and 1847, which would suggest that David Steel's more positive leadership was yielding results by the 1850s when more effective organisation and discipline was creating a more stable and professional force. Indeed, the direction of policing increasingly lay in the hands of experienced policemen: in 1856, 12 of the 30 men in the force possessed at least seven years experience in Exeter, and it would appear that, after a slow start, Exeter was moving towards the professional standards later laid down by the inspectorate.

* * *

It is notoriously difficult to assess the levels of police efficiency during the early Victorian period, as recent studies have shown.⁴² Much of the evidence is fragmentary, and quantitative and qualitative sources have their limitations and are open to interpretation. Moreover, the 'dark figure' of crime — the gap between actual crime and recorded crime — is often impossible to ascertain. However, contemporaries tended to assess levels of police efficiency in terms of the numbers of persons committed

⁴¹ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 146-47.

⁴² See, for example, V.A.C. Gatrell and T.B. Hadden, 'Criminal Statistics and their Interpretation' in E.A. Wrigley (ed), *Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 336-431; E.C. Midwinter, *Law and Order in Early Victorian Lancashire* (Borthwick Papers, 34, University of York, 1968), pp. 33-39; David Jones, 'The New Police, Crime and People in England and Wales, 1829-1888', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1983, xxxiii, 151-68; Emsley, *Policing and its Context*, pp. 115-47.

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and convicted at the petty sessions, quarter sessions, and assizes and in relation to more subjective criteria, which included their perceptions of the general performance of the police and the degree to which their communities appeared to be more or less orderly, and an analysis of this kind of evidence provides some insights into levels of police efficiency in Wolverhampton, York and Exeter during the period.

The chief impact of the 'new police' on the statistics of crime in Wolverhampton lay in the fact that they brought an enormous amount of crime to light. In 1838, prior to police reform, there were 1,132 prosecutions in the town; by the 1850s, however, the annual number of prosecutions had soared, averaging over 2,000 per annum during the period 1850-56. A closer analysis of these statistics indicates that almost 90 per cent of these prosecutions were for petty offences such as drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, assaults, petty thefts, vagrancy and public nuisances — offences related to the 'condition of the streets' question to which the 'new police' had been specifically directed.⁴³ These offences were easier for the police to monitor and detect than were serious crimes. Nevertheless, the Wolverhampton police appear to have achieved a measure of success in tackling more serious offences: between 1835 and 1856, 3,395 persons were indicted at the quarter sessions and assizes — an average of 154 indictable committals per annum — and it is clear that the upswing in committals corresponded with the advent of the 'new police' and also that the conviction rate showed a marked improvement during the same period.⁴⁴ The bulk of indictable committals (almost 90 per cent) comprised offences against property, notably larceny, although it is also clear that by the mid-1850s there had been a relative decline in committals for violent property crimes, notably burglary and housebreaking, which the watch committee and Gilbert Hogg ascribed to the growing police presence in Wolverhampton.⁴⁵ However, 'police efficiency' is a relative concept and it appears that even in 1856 there was a considerable gap between the number of serious crimes known to have been committed in Wolverhampton and the number which were brought to justice: the Watch Committee Minutes show that of 264 serious offences reported to the police between 1 July and 31 December 1856, only 54 had been brought to justice. These included 90 larcenies from dwelling houses (7 cases detected); 31 cases of burglary and housebreaking (11 detections); 41 thefts from the person (18 detections); 28 cases of shoplifting (3 detections); 38 larcenies from yards and outbuildings (4 detections).⁴⁶ It is possible, of course, that the relative inability of the police to detect many such crimes was both cause and consequence of their overwhelming

⁴³ For further details, see Swift, *Thesis*, chapter 7, 'Crime in Wolverhampton, 1815-56', pp. 239-321.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 411-13.

⁴⁶ WWC.M. 31 December 1857.

concern with petty offences, which were easier to detect and enabled the police to more effectively project an image of efficiency, thereby acquiring a greater degree of support from 'respectable' opinion. Finally, it does seem that the Wolverhampton police achieved considerable success in their drive towards greater degree of public order in the town (which had been one of their initial mandates) and, as David Philips has shown,⁴⁷ by mid-century the force was becoming increasingly adept at containing and controlling less-serious popular disorders. However, when riot threatened it was still found necessary to enlist military support.⁴⁸

4. Ratio of police: prosecutions, 1850

	Total no. Prosecutions	Size of Police force	Ratio police: prosecutions	Ratio prosecutions per head pop.
Wolverhampton	2,338	30	1:80	1:21
York	532	20	1:26	1:68
Exeter	577	30	1:19	1:57

Source: Watch Committee Minutes, Wolverhampton, York & Exeter.

5. The statistics of serious crime, 1835-56

	Total number Indictable Committals	Annual average Indictable Committals
Wolverhampton	3,395	154
York	1,357	61
Exeter	1,628	74

Source: Staffs. County Record Office, Quarter Sessions & Assize Calendars, 1835-56; York City Archives, Quarter Sessions Minute Books, 1835-56; Devon County Record Office. Quarter Sessions & Assize Calendars. 1835-56.

The evidence from York suggests that the reformed police force was less efficient than its counterpart in Wolverhampton. For much of the period the two forces were of comparable size yet although the York police brought an increasing amount of crime to light the annual prosecution rate was substantially lower in York than in Wolverhampton. Between 1835 and 1856 the number of committals at York Quarter Sessions and Assizes totalled 1,357, an average annual committal rate of 61. Of these more serious offences, 92 per cent of committals were for larceny, notably shoplifting, thefts from dwelling-houses, and larceny from the person.⁴⁹ As in Wolverhampton, committals for serious crimes represented a small proportion of all prosecutions although the total number of persons prosecuted annually at the York Petty Sessions was much lower than in Wolverhampton, including 586 prosecutions in 1842 and 532 in 1850 (see tables 4 and 5). Nevertheless, most prosecutions were for drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, assaults, vagrancy and public nuisances.⁵⁰ It is clear

⁴⁷ D. Philips, 'Riots and Public Order in the Black Country, 1835-1860' in J. Stevenson and R. Quinault (eds), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), p. 142.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Roger Swift, 'Anti-Catholicism and Irish Disturbances: Public Order in mid-Victorian Wolverhampton', *Midland History*, 1984, ix, 87-108.

⁴⁹ Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York*, pp. 38-44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, table III, p. 57.

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that the rapid turnover of police manpower and the reluctance of the city council to sanction meaningful increases to the force made it correspondingly more difficult for the 'new police' to effectively exercise the preventive principle in York. In 1855 the *York Herald* stated 'It is notorious that there are gangs of thieves in the city who have been amongst us for a considerable time, who are continually committing robberies, and who are well known, yet the police do not apprehend them'.⁵¹ Police detection rates also left much to be desired: of 17 persons apprehended for larceny in January 1855 only five had been apprehended by the York police, whilst six persons had been recognised and arrested by their prosecutors, four had been apprehended by vigilant citizens on the basis of descriptions issued by the press, and two had been detained by non-York policemen. Indeed, as the *Herald* observed 'although it cannot be expected that detections will take place in every instance, they ought at least to bear some comparison with the number of depredations committed and the number of apprehensions in other towns'.⁵² Moreover, the frequent deployment of special constables in York and the considerable public support provided to two local associations for the prosecution of felons in the city underscored the fundamental weakness and inefficiency of the local police which James Woodford noted in 1856.⁵³ Paradoxically, however, visitors to mid-Victorian York — including judges and magistrates — made frequent reference to the general good order which prevailed, and it is possible that this owed more to education, religion, philanthropy and paternalism in the city than to the presence of the 'new police'.⁵⁴

The Exeter police brought a great deal of crime to light during the period. Committals for serious crimes totalled 1,628 between 1835 and 1856, an average annual committal rate of 74, and showed a general increase, peaking in 1847 when there was considerable distress in the city. Over 80 per cent of indictable committals were for offences against property, notably larceny (which represented 72 per cent of all indictable committals).⁵⁵ As in Wolverhampton and York, committals for serious crimes represented a small proportion of all offences initially examined by the magistrates: between 1847 and 1850, for example, the average number of prosecutions per annum was 707 (higher than York but lower than Wolverhampton, see table 4). Most of these less-serious offences related to 'street crime' — drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, vagrancy and assaults.⁵⁶ Overall, it appears that police efficiency improved with the reforms of 1847: the Watch Committee Minutes, the reports of the superintendent, and the absence of serious criticisms of the police in the

⁵¹ *York Herald*, 17 February 1855.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ These self-help organisations were the City of York Association for the Prosecution of Felons and Cheats (1800-61) and the Association for the Protection of Property in York and its Neighbourhood (1842-49).

⁵⁴ See Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York*, p. 53.

⁵⁵ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 43-59.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-119.

press all bear testimony to a greater degree of security and public order by mid-century. Indeed, in January 1851 David Steel reported that 'there has been a decided improvement in the force, the men having now become better acquainted with their duties perform them with greater confidence, zeal, discretion and forbearance', adding in March 1853 that 'the utmost vigilance on the part of the police has been required to prevent burglaries and other robberies; in proof that we have been successful, it is more than two years since a burglary was committed in Exeter'.⁵⁷ Indeed, the statistics do point to a relative decline in violent crime in Exeter during the early 1850s.⁵⁸ However, whilst the Exeter police appear to have been reasonably effective in dealing with 'the condition of the streets', it was found wanting when it came to the policing of large-scale disorders. In 1847 and 1854 the military were required to quell serious food riots in the city, whilst smaller-scale disorders which accompanied the Fifth of November celebrations in Exeter were only contained by the combined efforts of police and special constables.⁵⁹ Indeed, it is possible that the very presence of a military barracks in Exeter (as also in York) discouraged the local police from developing crowd-control techniques because military support was accessible (despite Home Office pronouncements to the contrary) when serious breakdowns of public order occurred.

David Jones has recently suggested that 'amongst the propertied classes there was, from at least the 1830s, a general appreciation of the idea and value of a reformed police force. The vital questions were these: who was to control it, and who was to finance it?'⁶⁰ In essence, the evidence from Wolverhampton, York and Exeter endorses this view: between 1835 and 1856 the overwhelming desire of the middle-classes and their locally-elected representatives was for local control of policing and for 'strict economy' in the management of the reformed forces.

In Wolverhampton, the decision of the Staffordshire magistrates to apply the 1839 Police Act to the whole county elicited hostile responses from public meetings held in the town in November 1842. The root of 'respectable' opposition lay primarily in the desire of the Improvement Commissioners, largely Tory, and the ratepayers at large, who were more decidedly Liberal, to retain local control of policing. As one commissioner stated, 'if it [the Act] was introduced here, they would have no authority over them'.⁶¹ Moreover, it was held that the 'new police' were 'unconstitutional', representing an unwarranted attack on the traditions and liberties of the community. Another source of antipathy lay in the popular belief that police reform was unnecessary, since the town already possessed a reformed force (Castle's 'police') whilst others argued that the establishment of a county force would necessitate an increased rate of 4d in the £1.⁶² Once the county force had been established in 1843, examples of

⁵⁷ EWCM, 4 January 1851, 5 May 1853.

⁵⁸ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 51-3.

⁵⁹ Swift, *History Today*, 1981, pp. 5-9.

⁶⁰ Jones, *TRHS*, 1983, p. 163.

⁶¹ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 2 November 1842.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 9 November 1842.

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inefficiency, misconduct and unprofessional behaviour by the 'new police' added fuel to the more ingrained prejudices, and the period 1843-47 witnessed a growing realisation on the part of the propertied classes that the only way in which local control of policing could be reasserted was through incorporation, since borough status would enable Wolverhampton to establish its own police force.⁶³ The popular view was put at a public meeting in July 1844 when, in urging incorporation, John Lewis, an improvement commissioner, stated that the old police had been both cheap and efficient whereas the 'new police' was 'unconstitutional, a bastard sort of thing, half civil and half military, and exceedingly useless as at present managed'.⁶⁴ Henceforth police reform was an important ingredient in the predominantly Liberal campaign for Incorporation, mirroring developments in other industrial and commercial centres, including Liverpool, Bradford, Sheffield and Birmingham.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it is also clear that middle-class concern did not extend to dissatisfaction with the fundamental ideology and *modus operandi* of the county police in Wolverhampton. Indeed, the acceptability of 'new police' strategies was evinced by the appointment of Gilbert Hogg and other ex-county policemen to the new borough force in 1848, thereby ensuring continuity of police practice and procedure. Thereafter, with local control of policing reasserted, middle-class criticism of policing arrangements in Wolverhampton was largely confined to periodic concern at the cost of policing.

Similar responses were in evidence in York. Although many respectable citizens had acknowledged the need for police reform in 1835, the watch committee proposal that a large police force be established under the superintendence of a London policeman elicited a hostile response from the parishes in 1836, and vestry meetings resulted in the submission of memorials hostile to police reform to the city council. These memorials reflected contemporary fears about the 'new police'. First, as the petition from St Helen, Stonegate, indicated, it was held that the proposals would impose a fearful burden on the rates and it was estimated that police reorganisation would cost £1,500 per annum as against the existing expense of £580. Second, and despite weighty evidence to the contrary, it was argued that the existing force was adequate. Third, the idea of a uniformed police force was regarded as unconstitutional, one memorial claiming that 'an immediate additional police, dressed in a semi-military uniform, would be hurtful to the city and would lead to street quarrels'.⁶⁶ Finally, it was argued that the supervision of the proposed force by a Metropolitan officer marked a breach with local traditions and smacked of 'centralising' tendencies, and the *York Courant* demanded that 'the specimen coat of a

⁶³ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 390-404.

⁶⁴ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 3 July 1844.

⁶⁵ For further details, see especially D. Fraser, *Power and Authority in the Victorian City* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 54-8, 141-42, 88-9; for Liverpool, see W.R. Cockcroft, 'The Liverpool Police Force, 1836-1902' in S. Peter Bell (ed), *Victorian Lancashire* (Newton Abbot, 1974), pp. 150-51; for Bradford, see A. Elliott, 'The Incorporation of Bradford', *Northern History*, 1979, xv, 156-75.

London policeman remain quietly in its trunk until the possessor of it may want it to appear in at a fancy ball'.⁶⁶ This campaign, which Tories attributed to the activities of the Liberal *York Courant*, was effective in that the city council subsequently opted for a small force of 12 men commanded by the existing chief constable and Inspector Stuart's role was relegated to that of an adviser (whose recommendations were largely ignored). Thereafter, middle-class concern was largely focused on the cost of municipal policing, with a strong emphasis on 'strict economy'. However, when local control of policing was threatened in 1854 by Palmerston's unsuccessful Police Bill and in 1856 by Grey's proposals, York emerged as the leader of provincial opposition to police reform. During these campaigns many of the arguments voiced in 1836 resurfaced and the *York Herald* and *Yorkshire Gazette* found themselves supporting a common cause. Hostility to Grey's Bill was rooted in the fear that local control of policing would be replaced by centralised and external supervision: the *Tory Gazette* regarded the proposals as 'a base attempt upon the liberty of the subject and the privilege of local government',⁶⁷ whilst the *Liberal Herald* claimed that 'to surrender up the control of the police to the executive government would be an act of folly which every lover of constitutional liberty ought to do all in his power to prevent', adding that the proposed Inspectorate would 'manufacture secret and *ex parte* reports according to prearranged instruction' for the purpose of assisting centralisation.⁶⁸ However, by 1858, when many of these fears appeared groundless, the city council's desire for cheap government was instrumental in effecting a change of heart and York successfully applied for the Treasury Grant.

In 1835 police reform was not a contentious issue amongst the propertied citizens of Exeter. Unlike Wolverhampton and, to a lesser extent, York, the early 1830s had not witnessed a significant upsurge in crime and there was no crisis of confidence in policing arrangements. Thus the changeover from the old to the new police was almost indistinct and local control of policing was maintained. However, during the late 1830s and early 1840s there was growing middle-class concern over 'rising crime' and, in particular, over the disorderly state of the streets. Clearly, local control of policing was not working as well as the inhabitants expected and the *Liberal Western Times* spearheaded a campaign for reform, blaming the Tory council for the shortcomings of the system of policing. In 1843 the *Western Luminary* stated 'Whoever it was who gave Exeter the nickname of "thieves paradise" was certainly not far from the mark... We are not at all inclined to attribute the greater number of plate robberies which have been committed in the city to strangers or occasional visitors [a Tory claim]. On the contrary, we believe that they have been perpetrated by "native artists", by a set of worthy scoundrels not more than 20 or 22 years of age, who have grown up in vice and villainy among ourselves, who have

⁶⁶ *York Courant*, 25 August 1836.

⁶⁷ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 9 February 1856.

⁶⁸ *York Herald*, 16 February 1856.

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graduated in infamy in our own streets and in our own gaol, and have acquired all the skill and dexterity of practised London thieves... These young men, if we had anything like an efficient system of police, should be under strict and constant surveillance.⁶⁹ Such criticisms eventually prompted the police reforms of 1847, yet it is evident that policing was also a matter of civic pride in Exeter, where provincial rivalries with Plymouth played their part in the reform process. As in York, the desire for local control and cheap government was paramount and when these were apparently threatened in 1854 the city council submitted a petition opposing Palmerston's Police Bill to Parliament. The petitioners claimed that the proposals represented 'an unwarranted interference with the privileges of boroughs and are subversive of the independence and right of self government, and will place the entire control of the whole police of the Kingdom in the hands of Her Majesty's Home Secretary'.⁷⁰ Similar views were expressed in 1856, when Exeter resolved not to apply for the Treasury Grant, thereby maintaining a degree of independence in policing.

In assessing popular attitudes to the 'new police', the term 'working class' is not particularly helpful: the working classes were by no means an homogeneous social stratum and their reactions to the police were as complex as the composition of the working classes themselves. Indeed, as Wilbur Miller has suggested, the broadest gulf lay between the 'respectable' and 'rougher' elements of working-class society,⁷¹ and whilst the latter may well have regarded the police with loathing it is possible — as the evidence from Wolverhampton, York and Exeter would appear to indicate — that the former found certain police functions acceptable; the increased surveillance of working-class districts protected the property of the 'respectable' working man and monitored his more disorderly neighbours, whilst the 'service function' of the police was of benefit to workers and their families and may have made the police role more acceptable. Moreover, it is also clear, certainly by the 1850s, that working people provided much of the information which led to police summonses and prosecutions.⁷² Nevertheless, the evidence from Wolverhampton, York and Exeter suggests that popular responses to the 'new police' varied not only within the 'working classes' but also from one community to the next.

Popular antipathy to the police presence in Wolverhampton had two main roots. First, it was widely held during the 1840s that the county police constituted an alien force, controlled by the representatives of property, whose vigorous practices represented an intrusion into working-class districts not previously kept under regular surveillance. Second, it was held that the 'new police' were biased against the working classes, a belief which in part derived from police interference in a variety of popular leisure and recreational activities: in the 1840s, in response to pressures from local

⁶⁹ *Western Luminary*, 19 December 1843.

⁷⁰ EWCM, 17 May 1854.

⁷¹ Wilbur R. Miller, *Cops and Bobbies: Police Authority in New York and London, 1830-1870* (Chicago and London, 1973), p. 120.

⁷² Jones, *TRHS*, 1983, p. 166.

manufacturers, clergymen, and professional persons, the county police not only interfered with Wolverhampton's thriving pub culture but also sought to curb blood sports such as cock-fighting, bull-baiting, dog-fighting and prize-fighting, and to monitor closely other forms of popular entertainment, 'moving on' street musicians, entertainers and 'fancy fairs'.⁷³ As such, the 'new police' entered into the heart of working-class communities, exerting an authority which went beyond traditional concepts of policing. Popular hostility was reflected in an upsurge in assaults on the police, failures to assist the police, and attempted rescues from the police during the 1840s in particular. Clashes between the police and the public were particularly evident in the 'rougher' working-class districts such as Salop Street, where the police encountered some violent opposition from a group of local prize-fighters and their associates, known locally as 'Nobby Clark's Gang',⁷⁴ and Stafford Street, where the intensive police presence elicited hostile responses from the local Irish. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the Wolverhampton Irish bore the brunt of the police attack on the 'dangerous classes' in the town during the 1840s and 1850s.⁷⁵ Indeed, Gilbert Hogg reported in 1849 that he had 'been compelled to have as many as 20 men parading the streets with cutlasses to assert the supremacy of the law' in the Irish district, adding that the local lodging-houses 'pour forth their inmates in almost incredible numbers, attacking a single policeman or two with great ferocity and savageness, but being equally expert in beating a retreat when faced by a sufficient force to repel their lawless proceedings'.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, tensions between the police and the public did not culminate in the kind of anti-police disorders which occurred in the industrial districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire during the same period. In part this may be explained by the 'service functions' which the borough force developed under the leadership of Gilbert Hogg after 1848: the enforcement of sanitary regulations to prevent disease, the inspection of lodging houses, the regulation of weights and measures, and police attendance at fires and accidents were all of benefit to the respectable workingman and may well have contributed to a gradual, if grudging, acceptance of the police. Moreover, by the 1850s, the political and economic context within which the 'new police' had been introduced into Wolverhampton had changed: fear of working-class political and industrial agitation was no longer in the forefront of the minds of the authorities, and the police were increasingly perceived by many working people more as a force for the prevention and detection of crime than simply an agent in the suppression of working-class political and industrial protest. It is also possible that by the mid-1850s the bulk of the working-

⁷³ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 394-97.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁷⁵ See Roger Swift, 'Crime and Ethnicity: the Irish in early Victorian Wolverhampton', *West Midlands Studies*, 1980, xiii, 1-5.

⁷⁶ *Report of the General Board of Health on the Sanitary Condition of Wolverhampton* [Rawlinson Report], P.P., 1849, Evidence of Gilbert Hogg, pp. 28-30. For a detailed survey of Irish disorders in Wolverhampton, see my chapter 'Another Stafford Street Row: Law, Order and the Irish Presence in mid-Victorian Wolverhampton' in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in the Victorian City* (London, 1985), pp. 179-206.

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class populace was more accustomed to the police presence and was more ready to accept the new norms of social discipline which the 'new police' had sought, by vigorous policing, to establish. This said, the criminal statistics suggest that prosecutions for assaults on the police were still high during the 1850s (although lower than during the 1840s), and remained so during the 1860s and 1870s, only tailing off towards the end of the century,⁷⁷ which would appear to suggest that popular acceptance of the police was a gradual and relative process.

In York, where police methods were less vigorous than those employed in Wolverhampton, there is little evidence of major tensions between the police and the populace. York was a less volatile and more orderly city than many of its industrial counterparts and neither required nor received vigorous policing, whilst the almost invisible transition from the 'old' police to the 'new' may also have served to reduce popular opposition to the force. Indeed, there were only 11 indictments for serious assaults on the police between 1835 and 1856, whilst the annual rate of less-serious assaults was relatively low, including 14 in 1842 (which included four cases of obstruction) and 34 in 1850.⁷⁸ The police Occurrence Books and contemporary newspaper reports suggest that policemen were most prone to assault when attempting to apprehend suspicious persons and known criminals, and that they were most frequently obstructed when attempting to evict persons from public houses for drinking after time, sometimes with the active support of publicans. Attempted rescues from the police were particularly evident in those areas inhabited by the Irish, including Bedern, Walmgate and Hungate, where police attempts to monitor drinking habits or to quell domestic disputes frequently resulted in obstruction, assaults and more general street disorders, although there is little evidence that the York Irish were intensively policed on the Wolverhampton model. Even so, as Frances Finnegan has shown, the Irish figure disproportionately in the statistics of petty crime in York, notably for drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, and casual violence.⁷⁹ Apart from clashes between the police and the York Irish, which had a character of their own, communal violence against the police was rare. One exception to this occurred during a by-election in 1848 when the Chartist Henry Vincent stood as a candidate. The city authorities had been expecting trouble and had taken the precaution of swearing in a large number of special constables, but ugly scenes accompanied polling and several policemen were badly injured. Although the authorities subsequently blamed Chartists from the West Riding for the violence, the evidence would appear to suggest that the police had suffered primarily because they had tried to separate a Tory mob and Vincent's supporters, although it is always possible that there was an 'anti-police' element in the disorders and that some of the 'rougher' elements took the opportunity to settle old scores with the police.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ See David Woods, 'Community Violence' in J. Benson (ed), *The Working Class in England, 1875-1914* (London, 1985), pp. 165-205.

⁷⁸ Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York*, pp. 46-8.

⁷⁹ Finnegan, *Poverty and Prejudice*, pp. 132-54.

⁸⁰ For further details, see A.J. Peacock, 'Chartism in York', *York History*, 1976, pp. 142-43.

However, in general, the evidence points to an acceptance of the 'new police' by the bulk of working-class citizens of York. The police 'service function' may well have assisted this process: police records show that the York police rescued would-be suicides, attended fires, concerts and social functions, and assisted at local cricket matches; moreover, shortages of manpower meant that in practice the force was forced to adopt a relatively low profile, thereby minimising the degree of popular hostility from the public at large.

Popular hostility to the 'new police' in Exeter was, as in York, at a relatively low level in comparison with Wolverhampton. As in York, the Exeter working classes were not faced with a radical break in policing traditions, notably between 1836 and 1847, and there is little evidence of acute tensions between police and public in a city which possessed a relatively small working-class populace and where class distinctions were less polarised than in the industrial towns of the Midlands and the North. This is in part reflected in the level of assaults on the police during the period: between 1836 and 1856 there were 28 committals at the Exeter Quarter Sessions for serious assaults on the police, whilst annual prosecution rates at the Petty Sessions for assaulting and obstructing the police were generally low, including 35 prosecutions in 1849, 20 in 1856 and only 12 in 1857.⁸¹ Working-class tolerance of the police may well have been compounded by the general inefficiency of the force during the 1840s when the lack of police vigilance hardly impinged on the everyday life of working people, although it is clear that during the early Victorian period as a whole the Exeter police encountered some difficulties in policing the 'rough' and poverty-ridden Westgate quarter, where food-rioting was initiated in both 1847 and 1854, and where lone policemen were particularly vulnerable to assault. There is also some evidence of clashes between the Exeter police and soldiers from the local barracks, often in public houses and beershops where police intervention was resented. However, the most serious clashes between the police and the populace attended the annual Fifth of November celebrations in Exeter in the late 1840s and early 1850s, when the city council sought to regulate and control — and ultimately to prohibit — the customary celebration of the festivities in Cathedral Close. In practice, this resulted in open conflict between the police (and particularly the reformed police of 1847, who were anxious to assert their newly-defined authority in the city) and 'Young Exeter', who sought to defend a time-honoured custom. There is also evidence to suggest that the Exeter 'roughs' took advantage of the celebrations to get their own back on the police: in 1843 a party of 70 men, wearing masks and armed with bludgeons, marched on the police station, shouting in defiance of the police, and several policemen were injured in the scuffles which ensued; in 1847 a near-riot occurred when the police attempted to prevent tar-barrels from leaving the Close — cries of 'Down with the bloody Peelites' were heard, and several men were arrested for assaults on the police; in 1852, 17 policemen received serious injuries in attempting to

⁸¹ Swift, *Thesis*, pp. 181-82.

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prohibit the traditional bonfire.⁸² Although these disorders contained an 'anti-police' element, their root cause lay in the attempts of the city council to undermine popular custom, and popular resistance continued throughout the 1850s and 1860s. On the whole, the evidence tends to suggest that by mid-century the Exeter police had acquired a measure of public acceptability in the city.

In the context of the wider debate on the nature of police reform in urban society during the early Victorian period, the evidence from Wolverhampton, York and Exeter is not without significance. First, though the evidence from these contrasting urban communities would appear to endorse Jenifer Hart's general thesis that 'in most boroughs the reform of the police was gradual...and the level of efficiency was still low in the 1850s',⁸³ it is clear that the scope and scale of reform varied enormously from one community to the next. Whilst a variety of local constraints inhibited the development of provincial policing during this formative period, it would appear that it was in industrial and manufacturing centres, like Wolverhampton, where the greatest progress was made: in contrast, the pace of reform was relatively slow in York and Exeter, leaving much to be desired by mid-century. Second, the experiences of Wolverhampton, York and Exeter suggest that the process of police reform and the character of urban policing needs to be placed within the existing structure of local government, since it was local rather than national considerations which underlay the organisation, role, and *modus operandi* of the 'new police' on the local level, and also within the socio-economic characteristics of the communities themselves.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, it is also clear that there was a greater degree of continuity in local approaches to policing than historians have been willing to acknowledge. This was particularly true of developments in York and Exeter, where the changeover from the 'old' to the 'new' police was cosmetic, and where traditional law enforcement agents, including parish constables, special constables and local self-help associations continued to function throughout the period. Yet even in Wolverhampton there is some evidence to suggest that the parish constable was not entirely redundant as a result of the advent of the 'new police',⁸⁵ which almost begs the counter-factual question of what form would urban police reform have taken without state intervention between 1835 and 1836? Third, it is clear that there were real fears about the coming of the 'new police' on a local level, although the nature of local opposition, whilst giving shape to the character of local policing, varied from one community to the next, although the desire for 'local control' appears to have exerted a predominant influence. Nevertheless, the reformed forces were gradually, if grudgingly, accepted by the populace at large, although it appears that

⁸² *Western Times*, 11 November 1843, 13 November 1847, 6 November 1852.

⁸³ Hart, *EHR*, 1955, pp. 420-21.

⁸⁴ A similar observation has been made by B. Weinberger, 'The Police and the Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Warwickshire' in V. Bailey (ed), *Policing and Punishment*, pp. 88-9.

⁸⁵ See, for example, D. Philips, *Crime and Authority*, pp. 64-82.

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relations between the police and the public were more complex and fluid than historians have been sometimes willing to concede and were influenced by a number of local circumstances which varied in both time and place. Indeed, the evidence would appear to suggest that whilst the social-control interpretation of borough policing is certainly a tenable one in the context of developments in the great urban-industrial towns of early Victorian England, including Wolverhampton, it is perhaps a less-persuasive hypothesis when applied to those more 'traditional' urban communities, like York and Exeter. Finally, although Wolverhampton, York and Exeter clearly shared some common problems in seeking to establish more efficient police forces between 1835 and 1856, the evidence would appear to endorse Victor Bailey's assertion that 'the social reality which the historian is increasingly uncovering suggests the myopia of highlighting any one set of interests and events to explain the rise of the new police'.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Bailey, *Policing and Punishment*, p. 13.