

NOTES OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY MEETING HELD ON 26 APRIL 2022

Present: 23 members of the SHS + 1 guest. (Margaret Davies re-joined; welcome back).

Apologies: Pam Baker, Celia Baly, Nora Blagburn, Maggie Moorhouse and Jean Vaughan.

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone to the meeting. Many thanks to those who had already contributed to the Jubilee book of memories. Other entries were welcome but please provide as soon as possible please. Thanks to Jane, Sarah and Ruth for providing refreshments.

Sheila then welcomed Roger Peel of the Peel Society to speak on ***'Peel and the Police: from Charlie to Bobby'***. A former policeman with Birmingham City Police (later West Midlands Police), Roger is a volunteer based at Middleton Hall, in Tamworth, which holds the Peel Museum.

'Charlies' were formed during the reign of Charles II and were groups of volunteers recruited to protect the public, forerunners of 'Bobby's'. Sir Robert Peel is for ever associated with the police but in fact there were 7 Robert Peels, all but one being a Sir. Robert was the seventh of a group who had very varied careers/fortunes. Sir Robert became an MP for the Rock of Cashel, Tipperary, in 1809 aged 21. His father (a wealthy Lancashire cotton mill owner and also MP for Tamworth) bought him a seat in Ireland but he never went to his constituency. Despite that in 1822 he became Home Secretary for Ireland, recommended by the Duke of Wellington. There was serious discrimination in Ireland and Catholics could not sit in Parliament despite having been promised the right in the Act of Union. Eventually, as Home Secretary of England, he pushed the Catholic Emancipation Bill through parliament and also introduced several reforms of the British Criminal System and changes he made to the penal law meant c100 fewer crimes punished by death. Social reforms were to be a feature of his period of office then, and later when he became prime minister, but a particular interest in law and order was sparked by the riots at Peterloo in 1819.

The first 'Peelers' were set up in Ireland, initially known as 'County Forces'. In England, there were also 'Bow Street Runners' who, un-uniformed, went out and arrested people on behalf of magistrates. There were also 'Bow Street Patrols', mounted, and known as 'Redbreasts' on account of their red waistcoats). In 1822 the idea of having a police force was rejected by a parliamentary committee who asserted that such a force would 'interfere with people's liberty'. However, in 1829 the Metropolitan Police was formed, but only in London. Peel did not want any military personnel recruited as they were trained to kill, which he did not want.

Roger described various types of uniform worn and equipment used at the time. Cutlasses and truncheons were a constant feature. Tall 'Stovepipe' hats could be used to carry lunches too! Bizarrely, white trousers were worn. By 1884, 900 revolvers were allowed for night duty. Rules for police at the Old Scotland Yard included not talking to prostitutes, not

frequenting pubs (drink was a problem amongst police), cultivating informants and not associating with known criminals.

In 1839, the County Police Act decreed that Justices of the Peace in England and Wales would set up their own police forces but this did not become compulsory for some time. Over time, long after Peel's death in 1850, the 'bobby on the beat' became a familiar sight.

Eventually, in 1918, women were recruited by the Met. Initially, they had no power of arrest and in case of trouble had to blow a whistle to summon men to their aid! In an advertising campaign in 1918, the Metropolitan Commission declared there should be no 'blighted middle aged fanatics' or 'vinegary spinsters' amongst the recruits! These recruits had to be aged between 25 and 38, unmarried or widowed. 'Hefty girls wanted' declared one slogan!

Evelyn Miles was a counter-example to this. She was recruited as the first woman constable by Birmingham City police in 1917 aged 50, replacing her ill husband. She was promoted to sergeant and served until she retired at 72. Women did not have the power of arrest until 1933. There have since been several senior women police officers, most notably Dame Cressida Dick (recently removed from office – badly treated in Roger's view).

In 1979 the first woman dog handler was appointed. Previously it had been expected that a handler would have a wife at home to look after the puppies.

Today, both sexes are armed and police officers and their work have changed dramatically since the days of Sir Robert Peel.

When white motor cycles, panda cars (1967), and so on became commonly used this dramatically reduced the opportunities of knowing communities, chatting to shopkeepers etc. and picking up useful information.

Roger's talk was laced with numerous photographs plus general and personal anecdotes which contributed to a lively session. A former member of the Vice Squad he spoke of how, contrary to earlier edicts, it had become useful to act on behalf of prostitutes (he preferred to call them sex workers) and to cultivate informants who might help with arrests.

His talk gave rise to numerous questions, after which Sheila gave a vote of thanks.

MSW/28/4/22