# Combatting crime

Having a police force to deal with crime might seem like the most sensible thing in the world, but it took us a surprisingly long time to figure that out. Back in the 1500s, there were no police at all. Everyone was expected to police each other.

Some people, like the Parish Constables, had to take on unpaid law enforcement positions alongside their day jobs, much to their resentment. Then there were the Watchmen, who patrolled the streets at night. In 1663, Charles II made them mandatory in every town, so people started calling them 'Charlies'.

They were sometimes old and unmotivated, and often found asleep, or down the pub!

With few improvements, this kind of haphazard, semi-official law enforcement continued until 1749, when brothers, John and Henry Fielding got government funding to set up the Bow Street Runners. Not actual runners...

They were a team of six men, each armed with handcuffs, a pistol and a stick. They got a salary, and a commission per criminal caught.

Over the decades, the Bow Street Runners grew to a team of 68 men, inspiring the government to set up the Metropolitan Police in London in 1829, with 3,200 men working full time. They proved very effective, and police were soon rolled out across the country.

But what were the public attitudes to the police? Well, some people, especially in working class areas, resented the interference, and didn't want to pay higher taxes for the police.

But the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 was still fresh in the public's mind. There they'd witnessed first-hand what happens when the army responds to violent uprisings – lots of civilians get killed – so most people concluded that a police force was a better alternative. Gradually, the police became an accepted part of British society.

By the 1900s, technology was vastly improving police work, with telegraph communication, fingerprinting and crime-scene photography.

Advances in transport were also a big factor. Police had started on foot, and had slowly progressed to horses, bikes, cars and riot vans.

Just a century later, the police force today has been transformed by technology, with infrared-equipped helicopter, CCTV, metal detectors and DNA sampling.

Things have also improved in terms of diversity. Today, police come from different ethnic and social backgrounds, and there's a better mix of men and women.

We also now have specialist units, such as the CID, anti-terrorism and dog-handling.

A far cry from the local neighbourhood Watchman, who, 500 years later, is probably still down the pub.