

A Certain Share of Low Cunning

A history of the Bow Street Runners,
1792–1839



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1792–1839

David J. Cox

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*Dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Robins (c.1755–1812)
whose unfortunate demise led indirectly to the writing
of this book, and in loving memory of my mother,
May Cox (1929–2009), who was an inspiration to me
throughout her life.*

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List of abbreviations

BL	British Library
CUP	Cambridge University Press
IUP	Irish University Press
OBP	Old Bailey Proceedings Online
OU	Open University
OUP	Oxford University Press
PP	Parliamentary Papers
TNA	The National Archives

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Acknowledgements

This book has its genesis in a serendipitous discovery in Dudley Archives and Local History Service back in 1999, when I came across a reference to Bow Street 'Runners' being utilised in a local murder investigation. This mention caught my attention as I mused on whether or not this use of a London-based body of men was unusual. Little did I realise that it was to be the start of ten years of research.

During that decade I received help, advice and encouragement from a great many people. I would firstly like to thank all of the staff of the many archives and record offices (unfortunately too numerous to mention individually) that I consulted during the researching of this book – all of whom gave me a great deal of help and often pointed me in the right direction. I especially extend my gratitude to the archivists and staff at Stafford Record Office and the William Salt Library, who were without exception courteous and helpful. Much of the original research was carried out at the British Library and the National Archives, and I would like to thank the staff at both venerable institutions for their unfailing help and advice. I also paid several visits to the Metropolitan Police Museum in Charlton, and would like to express my gratitude to Steve Earl and Ray Seal for their unrivalled enthusiasm and extensive knowledge of their collection.

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Chapter I

Introduction: revealing an 'Eleusinian mystery'

Introduction

The study of policing history has undergone a sea-change in recent years; no longer do we simply have 'traditional' teleological or linear accounts such as those offered by Reith or Howard, which largely ignored the centuries of policing history prior to the creation of the Metropolitan Police in 1829.¹ The subject has benefited from the attention of historians who hold a wide spectrum of views ranging from traditional and revisionist to pluralist.² This has led to a much wider understanding of the often complex issues involved in such research. Both macro- and micro-historical studies have been published, ranging from general overviews to histories of individual police forces, and while there has been an inevitable concentration on the situation within the metropolis, an increasing amount of research is now being focused on provincial policing.³

Within this panoply of studies, however, there is one aspect of pre-Metropolitan Police historiography that continues to be under-represented: the history of the small group of men stationed at Bow Street Police Office in the period 1748–1839.⁴ These men headed the force that is better known today as the Bow Street 'Runners'. This term is somewhat misleading, as it is often used to refer indiscriminately to all of the ranks based at Bow Street Police Office.⁵ The general term 'runner' as used when describing a messenger or minor member of an organisation dates back to at least the seventeenth century, but the first unambiguous reference to employees at Bow Street Police Office

as such was in 1755, when a defendant in a trial at the Old Bailey was described as 'a runner of Mr Fielding's office to carry persons backward and forward'.⁶

One of the first printed uses of the term 'runner' being specifically applied to Bow Street is credited to the Reverend Henry Bate, in the form of a poem printed 5 March 1785 in the *Morning Herald*, in which he penned the following lines after the artist Nathaniel Hone (who had coincidentally recently painted a portrait of Sir John Fielding) accused Sir Joshua Reynolds of plagiarism:

What's Raphael, Guido and the rest?
Poor dogs, Sir Joshua, at the best!
If no idea bright
They lose – without Hone's demi-devil
Like Bow Street runner – most uncivil
Bringing the theft to light.

Senior Bow Street personnel never referred to themselves as 'runners', considering the term to be derogatory and demeaning. Throughout this book the term 'runner' is therefore used only when it appears in quotations, with senior Bow Street personnel always being referred to as Principal Officers in order to avoid confusion with other ranks.

There has been very little published research into this small body of men, especially with regard to their activities outside the metropolis.⁷ Consequently, although the various other Bow Street forces are mentioned in passing, and the functioning of the Police Office from 1748 is examined in some detail, this book concentrates on the Principal Officers and especially on their work in the provinces of Britain in the period 1792–1839. A certain degree of comparison is also made with regard to their metropolitan employment during the same period. It provides a fresh insight into a previously under-researched area of policing history and will also hopefully help stimulate further research into pre-metropolitan policing, both in the capital and the provinces.

Much of the little that has been written on the subject of Bow Street Police Office has often relied on inaccurate interpretation of secondary sources, with little or no investigation of primary sources. This has resulted in a great deal of contradictory and often ill-informed opinion, illustrated by the coupled contradictory quotes below:

The Bow Street establishment originated from a number of shadowy figures, some of whom had criminal backgrounds and

who used their connections within the criminal underworld to act as semi-official officers of law-enforcement.⁸ They were men of unblemished character, proven fidelity and consummate bravery.⁹

The Bow Street 'Runners' [...] were the tiny seed out of which the Metropolitan Police was to grow.¹⁰ In essence, the Runners themselves were perhaps closer to being a private police force than the noble precursors to the Metropolitan Police.¹¹

In 1811 [...] Britain had no police force.¹² The Bow Street 'Runners' were a kind of national CID long before anyone thought of a metropolitan police force.¹³

Known to history as Bow Street Runners, they quickly proved their worth.¹⁴ We are not by any means devout believers in the old Bow Street Police. To say the truth, we think there was a vast amount of humbug about those worthies.¹⁵

The Bow Street 'Runners' more nearly resembled a disreputable private detective agency than a branch of a modern police force.¹⁶ The demeanour of the Bow-street officers was, without exception, such as might be expected from men who knew their duty, and had the full power to perform it.¹⁷

It is clear from the above examples that a great variety of opinion has been aired about the formation, use and effectiveness of the Principal Officers; indeed, it has been remarked that 'writing about them is almost as fantastic a task as writing about the Eleusinian mysteries'.¹⁸

This book aims to remove much of the mystery from this area of policing history. It separates myth from reality and fact from fiction with regard to many aspects of the history of the Principal Officers, and is especially concerned with their involvement in provincially originated crime, with a considerable degree of comparison being made between their activities in London and the provinces. Previous accounts concerning the activities of Bow Street have concentrated almost exclusively on events within the metropolis, the corollary of this being the misleading impression that the main, if not sole, focus of the Principal Officers' work was within the capital.

In an attempt to give a more balanced and less London-centric view of the work of the Bow Street Police Office, the book provides a detailed analytical account of the various roles and activities of the Principal Officers with specific regard to cases originating in the provinces in the years 1792–1839, thereby placing the Principal Officers firmly within the wider context of provincial law enforcement of the period. It also demonstrates the differences between the Principal Officers and the less senior personnel employed by Bow Street Police Office, and discusses their particular roles within the organisation.

Through detailed analysis of both qualitative and quantitative research data, it argues that the use of Bow Street personnel in provincially instigated cases was much more common than has been assumed by many historians. It also demonstrates that the range of activities carried out by Bow Street personnel while employed on such cases was far more complex than may be gleaned from the majority of books and articles concerning early-nineteenth-century provincial policing, which often do little more than touch on the subject.

The Principal Officers, memorably (though somewhat inaccurately) described by Leon Radzinowicz as ‘a closely knit caste of speculators in the detection of crime’, are throughout the course of the book clearly differentiated from the various other forces based at Bow Street, while many previously unknown aspects of their careers are investigated through a selective survey of provincially instigated cases in which they were employed.¹⁹

The book examines a wide range of primary documents in order to extrapolate contemporary views on Bow Street from a variety of sources. It also debates, through the use of contemporary sources that reflected ‘popular’ and private opinions of Bow Street Police Office, the changing nature of their reputation with both the general public and those in positions of authority, and discusses what effect such changes had with regard to their employment on provincially instigated cases.

It also provides a clear distinction between the Principal Officers and their less senior colleagues, clearly and precisely delineating who the Principal Officers were during any given year in the period 1792–1839 by providing a unique and accurate service record (see Appendix 1) of all Principal Officers between 1792 and 1839, with their respective years of employment and length of service as Principal Officers. Previous accounts of the activities of the Bow Street forces have invariably conflated or confused Principal Officers with other less senior Bow Street personnel such as Patrol Constables, and this has led to considerable misinformation being promulgated about

their respective roles.²⁰ The confusion over the term 'Runner' has also meant that the Principal Officers have been accused of being involved in several corruption scandals that in fact should be laid at the door of less senior personnel.²¹ The specific nature of the work of the Principal Officers has been ignored or underrated by many police historians, through a combination of confusion with the work of the various less senior Bow Street patrols and an often surprisingly unchallenging acceptance of several contemporary and later critics' viewpoints.²²

It also places the provincial operations of the Bow Street Office and its senior personnel within in the wider context of pre-Metropolitan Police history. The research on which this book is based, although by no means a comprehensive survey of all provincially originated cases, goes some way to filling the lacuna, with over 600 cases involving Principal Officers being recorded and analysed with regard to the types of case in which they were involved; who employed them and why; how the Officers operated, including their interaction with local law-enforcement bodies; and how they were perceived by those who utilised their services.

The book concludes with a discussion on the legacy of the Principal Officers with regard to subsequent developments within policing. Bow Street Police Office and its personnel have long been regarded by many historians as little more than a discrete and often inconsequential footnote to the history of policing, leading to a partial and incomplete understanding of their work. This viewpoint is challenged in the book, which argues that in several ways the utilisation of Principal Officers in provincially instigated cases paved the way for important subsequent developments in policing, especially with regard to detective practices.

Geographical boundaries

The book treats mainland Britain, together with its small outlying islands such as the Shetlands, as one geographical entity (although England, Scotland and Wales are often referred to individually). Ireland (including what is now Northern Ireland) is for practical purposes treated as a separate country. Although Ireland became part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain following the Act of Union in 1801, in many ways it continued to be administered in a discrete manner – in particular its policing was uniquely complex and militaristic in nature, in many ways following a continental

model, and consequently this aspect of its history is considerably different from that of mainland Britain.²³ The scope of this history is beyond the boundaries of this book, and consequently any cases that emanated from Ireland are listed as originating abroad.

The geographical area of the metropolis is defined for the purposes of this book as a radius of seven miles from Charing Cross, thereby corresponding with the area placed under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police at the creation of the force in 1829. The boundaries of metropolitan London obviously expanded considerably during the period under discussion, but cases from the period 1792–1839 that occurred within the above boundary are not specifically discussed with regard to provincial cases. It is recognised that this boundary is performe somewhat arbitrary in nature, but a reasonable and coherent limit needed to be created. The City of London is also excluded from the geographical area under discussion, as it had its own law-enforcement agencies. Throughout the period under discussion (and beyond) the City was regarded in this respect as separate from the rest of the metropolis, and as such lies outside the remit of the book.²⁴

Sources

A comprehensive range of primary and secondary material has been referred to in order to gain an understanding of the types and location of cases originating in the provinces in which Principal Officers were involved (see the Bibliography for a complete listing of primary and secondary sources). The primary sources in particular are widely scattered and fragmentary, with many of the records apparently being destroyed both during the Gordon Riots in 1780 and in the move to the new Bow Street building in 1881.²⁵ This research is therefore based primarily (but by no means exclusively) on provincial and metropolitan newspaper reports of cases involving Principal Officers. These reports provided a framework from which to undertake further quantitative and qualitative discussions.

The role of newspapers in the reporting of crime

Both provincial and metropolitan newspapers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries devoted a considerable amount of their

typeface to criminal matters. In London, metropolitan newspapers regularly reported on the proceedings of the Old Bailey and the other courts within the metropolis, while provincial papers often devoted several columns in each issue to important national or local trials. Provincial papers were not above unshamefacedly 'lifting' accounts of interesting criminal cases directly from the London weeklies, often not even crediting the source. Similarly, *The Times* was quite happy to reprint verbatim accounts of criminal activity from numerous provincial papers, usually, but not always, acknowledging the source. Then, as now, as Jeremy Black remarks, 'crime was a major draw in the press'.²⁶ Provincial papers in particular also carried numerous advertisements of rewards offered by victims or relatives of victims after a crime had been perpetrated, and these contained often quite detailed descriptions of the suspected offender(s).²⁷

Despite the continuing growth of publication of newspapers, it must be borne in mind that due to their relatively high cost they were not readily available to the majority of the public. Many newspapers including *The Times* and provincial papers such as the *Staffordshire Advertiser* cost between 4d and 7d in the period under discussion, and were consequently too expensive for general consumption. Recent studies into newspaper circulation in a slightly earlier period (1771) suggest that 'well-established papers may normally have sold between one thousand and two thousand copies'.²⁸ The *Manchester Guardian* in its edition of 2 May 1823 proudly stated that it averaged certified weekly sales of 1,865. The extent to which provincial newspapers were circulated among the local populace is still not known precisely, but research by Ivan Asquith suggests that between 1.6 and 1.8 per cent of the adult population bought or read a weekly newspaper, daily newspapers being at this time almost unknown due to the limitations of transport and printing methods.²⁹ Current research suggests that around two-thirds of the English population were literate to varying degrees by the 1840s. This accords with one of the few statistical sources available from the period – see [Table 1.1](#) overleaf:

Reasons for reporting cases

Those cases that were reported reflected the perceived interests of the various publications' readerships; as Jeremy Black states: 'the press was largely read by upper and middle-class consumers', and consequently 'the press reflected the interests and views of the

Table 1.1 Convicts' literacy rates, 1838

Convicts unable to read or write	35.85%
Read and write imperfectly	52.08%
Read and write well	9.46%
Received superior instruction	0.43%
Unknown standard	2.18%

Source: Manchester Guardian, 25 April 1838

middling orders.³⁰ Cases that were considered of limited interest to the readership of the various publications may well therefore have been unreported in either national or local newspapers or journals. Conversely, cases involving high-profile and prominent people such as the aristocracy or well-known political figures often merited a considerable degree of attention. Sir Nathaniel Conant in his evidence to the 1816 Select Committee was of the opinion that serious offences, 'where they are of any importance, are universally known through the newspapers'.³¹

Then as now, sensational or particularly horrific cases often made headlines. Esther Snell's recent research into the crime reporting of the *Kentish Post* in the eighteenth century has suggested a high degree of editorial selectivity in the crimes reported, with particular emphasis placed on violent crime, which accounted for 67 per cent of such reports, and murder being the third most frequently reported crime.³² Such research suggests that even in local cases, newspapers only reported crimes that it was thought would interest their readerships. Cases occurring in other parts of the country would have had even less appeal to provincial readers (or newspaper editors), thus making it unlikely that local publications would report such instances.³³

Levels of under-reporting

The various newspapers consulted as primary sources for this book undoubtedly only contain references to a relatively small percentage of cases in which the Officers were involved.³⁴ Out of the fifty or more main newspaper sources consulted, *The Times* emerges as the most consistent chronicler of provincial Bow Street investigations, recording almost 200 of the 601 cases – just under one-third of the total number of recorded cases. Despite the recent availability of searchable online

nineteenth-century newspapers, which will undoubtedly transform research into this field, the role of newspapers in the publicising and detection of crime currently remains under-researched; this is especially the case with regard to provincial newspapers.³⁵ It is to be expected that many more future research publications will take full advantage of this technological advance. The exact degree of under-reporting of the activities of Principal Officers is impossible to ascertain, as the definitive total number of cases involving these individuals remains unknown.

However, some idea of the level of under-reporting of Bow Street's provincial activities can be demonstrated with regard to the specific crime of poaching, as some evidence survives to provide a very tentative projection.³⁶

Only nine such cases involving Principal Officers are reported in the utilised sources during the 48 year period.³⁷ By contrast, John Stafford, Chief Clerk at Bow Street, in his evidence to the 1823 Select Committee on Laws relating to Game, was specifically asked: 'In the course of your practice are many informations lodged in the office at Bow Street, for offences against the Game Laws?' He replied:

All the offences against the Game Laws, which are of an atrocious description, I think are generally reported to the public office in Bow Street, more especially in cases where the keepers have either been killed or dangerously wounded, and the assistance of an officer from Bow Street is required; the gentleman whose keeper has been assaulted, or some of the magistrates in the neighbourhood, generally send a report of the circumstances of the case where they require assistance from the office, and from such reports it is that I derive any knowledge I may possess with respect to these offences. I should think, [...] that perhaps the number of applications within the last two or three years, may have amounted to nearly twenty; they have been much more numerous of late years than they were formerly.³⁸

This statement, when compared to the recorded levels of provincial poaching cases, suggests that there was a considerable degree of under-reporting of criminal cases in general, as there is no reason to suppose that this low level was unique to poaching – especially as such a crime was seen as a particular threat to the stability and power of the ruling classes who constituted the majority of the readership of newspapers.³⁹

Development of *Hue & Cry*

From the time of the creation of the Principal Officers, the Fieldings were keen to publicise the Officers' existence in an attempt to increase the reporting and solving of crime (although, for obvious reasons, the Officers' individual identities were not widely circulated). Henry Fielding began the process with the short-lived *Covent Garden Journal*, which ran from 1752 to 1756, and his half-brother, John, continued with the publication of the *Public Advertiser* from late 1754, followed by the *Quarterly* and *Weekly Pursuit* in 1772.⁴⁰ On 3 December 1773 John published the first edition of *Fielding's General Preventive Plan or Public Hue & Cry*. The first edition claimed:

the front page of this newspaper is stuck up in the Market Place of every Corporate Town from Cornwall to Edinburgh, by order of the mayors and chief officers of such corporations and also in some conspicuous place of the Public Road, by the Magistrates of the counties at large to which it is sent.⁴¹

Promotion of Bow Street Police Office through the publication of *Hue & Cry*

Even Bow Street's own publication, *Hue & Cry*, contains a total of only 136 provincial cases (an average of *c.*3.5 cases per year of available publication).⁴² This relatively low level of cases seems at first to be somewhat surprising given the stated aims and objectives of the publication which are discussed below, but it must be remembered that for the majority of the period, the publication was simply a single sheet of paper folded once to provide four pages; only a limited amount of information could therefore be included within each issue.

The vast majority of *Hue & Cry* was given over to the advertisement of rewards for missing valuables and detailed descriptions of both goods and suspects rather than to accounts of the activities of the Principal Officers. Neither was *Hue & Cry* exclusively concerned with the provinces – much of the publication concerned itself with metropolitan crime, while the rear page was usually exclusively devoted to listing the names of Army and Navy deserters.⁴³ The publication also occasionally provided details of cases being investigated by the other London Police Offices.

The publication was often flagrant in the self-promotion of the Bow Street system of policing; for example, in 1809 it carried details of the robbery of the Whitehaven Bank, in which some £15,000 was stolen, remarking that the particular nature of the case 'renders it extremely difficult for any other than the Bow Street police to discover, explore and trace'.⁴⁴ The other constituents of the Bow Street police were also often praised for their effectiveness; in 1816 it referred to a case involving the Horse Patrol, 'whom scarcely any robber can escape', while in 1822 it reported that 'the Day Patrol lately established at Bow Street has already been of great service in clearing the streets of pick-pockets; the most experienced men of the Night Patrol having been appointed to this service'.⁴⁵

It is difficult to establish to what degree this self-promotion affected the choice of cases referred to in the publication. The other London Police Offices are occasionally represented in the newspaper, but to a much lesser extent than the activities of Bow Street, and there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no mention of failures or investigations into corruption involving Bow Street personnel.

There was increasing uncertainty among commentators on policing matters as to the practical effectiveness of *Hue & Cry* with regard to its use in crime detection. In 1825 *The Times* reported that during a case in which £500 was stolen, one of the barristers made reference to *Hue & Cry*, stating that:

The *Hue & Cry* is not sold like other newspapers. It is sent by order of the Home Office or Chief Police Office [...] – to the men of law in town or country it was scarcely known more than by name.⁴⁶

In a similar vein, Edwin Chadwick, no supporter of Bow Street, suggested in 1829 that the amount of cases referred to in each edition of the publication was a mere drop in the ocean of crime – he is quoted as saying that *Hue & Cry* 'served no other purpose than setting a man with a wooden leg to pursue a fox', and he was quite certain of the reason why:

It was perhaps from some vague conception of the utility of publicity in all matters of police, that the *Hue & Cry Gazette* [sic] was instituted chiefly for the purpose of advertising property stolen, and the escape of offenders for whose apprehension rewards were offered. [...] It is never seen by the public, nor can we learn that it is ever regularly seen by the officers of the several police establishments.⁴⁷

These views clearly contradict the advertised intent of the publication and, as it has been calculated that by the end of the period under discussion there was a total of over 3,000 magistrates in England and Wales who could all theoretically have received a copy of *Hue & Cry*, there appears to be a huge discrepancy between its stated aims and its practical impact.⁴⁸

However, Chadwick may deliberately have been somewhat overcritical of the publication in order to further his own objectives (which implicitly included the disbanding of the Bow Street policing system). Henry Goddard, one of the best-known Principal Officers, certainly mentions *Hue & Cry* as being of use in his *Memoirs*; he refers to it on several occasions when checking lists of stolen property (the publication often carried comprehensive and exhaustive details of such goods). The 1818 Select Committee *Report* also mentions it favourably in the context of dissemination of information, at least with regard to more serious offences:

Your Committee are of opinion that [...] the more enormous offences are at present rapidly published and circulated, by the diurnal press, the correspondence of magistrates, and the *Hue And Cry and Police Gazette*.⁴⁹

That the publication of serious crimes in *Hue & Cry* was still seen as a common strategy of provincial law-enforcement bodies in 1839 is exemplified in the evidence of Mr Sadler, High Constable of Stockport, to the 1839 Select Committee on the Constabulary Force in England and Wales. He was asked what measures he usually adopted when he received notice of a serious felony and replied that he instructed local searches and investigations to be carried out, including interviewing all known local fences and suspects, but, if these investigations were unforthcoming, he stated that 'it may be requisite to send to the *Hue & Cry* in London, and advertise and adopt any measures that may be expedient'.⁵⁰ Sadler's evidence suggests that even at the end of the period under discussion, advertising details of provincial felonies in *Hue & Cry* was still considered to be a worthwhile activity.

Whatever the perceived efficacy of *Hue & Cry*, it has certainly been under-utilised in the subsequent study of policing history. It is of significant interest not just for the activities of the various London Police Offices, but for the considerable amount of detail that it carries about the formative years of the Metropolitan Police, and the interaction between existing law-enforcement agencies and the newly created force.⁵¹

Limitations of sources

Although the book does provide a certain amount of quantitative analysis of the number and location of provincial and metropolitan investigations carried out by Principal Officers, at no times does it claim to be a comprehensive or definitive account of all such cases that involved Bow Street – rather it has been deliberately selective in its choice of sources. Quite apart from self-imposed selectivity due to practical reasons, there are also several inescapable limitations to the primary source material.⁵² There are, for example, very few extant copies of *Hue & Cry* available for the period between 1792 and 1801, and two of the main provincial papers consulted for the research, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Staffordshire Advertiser*, do not cover the whole chronological period.⁵³ Many of the printed primary sources consulted are predominantly London-centric, although several of the online newspaper titles available through the British Library Newspapers Online website were provincially produced. Similarly, the use of the Old Bailey Proceedings Online (OBP) as the main source for metropolitan cases has limitations in that it does not provide comprehensive coverage of the Principal Officers' activities within London, and has the further limitation that only investigations that led to a trial are included, as opposed to the sources utilised for provincial cases, which may have not proceeded to trial.⁵⁴

Consequently, the book demonstrates an awareness that an unequal bias exists within such sources in regard to the reporting of both provincially originating cases and metropolitan cases. Although this inevitably somewhat limits the degree of statistical evidence that can be gathered from the sources, it is demonstrated below that this does not negate their usefulness in providing numerous comparisons when studying the activities of the Principal Officers. Although extremely detailed in many respects, the OBP only deal with indictable cases that were thought too serious or complicated to be dealt with by magistrates. However, it will be seen below that the majority of the provincial cases involving Principal Officers did fall into this category in that they were felonies rather than misdemeanours, and that the OBP therefore provide (to a certain extent) a valid comparison with regard to types of offence and victim.

Origination of primary sources

The majority of the consulted primary sources other than newspapers were written or created by the ruling local or national elite, with only