

Guardians of Travel

Robert C. Davison tells us about the British Transport Police History Group



Since 2009, the British Transport Police History Group (BTP HG) has been helping to preserve the history and artefacts of the railway, dock and canal forces in Great Britain and Ireland. This includes their successors, the British Transport Commission Police (formed 1949) and the present-day British Transport Police (BTP), which provides a police service for the railway, the London Underground and some of the tramway systems of England, Wales and Scotland. BTP is the successor to myriad police forces dating from the early days of railways, docks and canals, and its progression can be compared with a family tree.

The History Group is run by a committee but because the membership is so scattered it's not possible to hold regular meetings. Members are kept updated with what's happening through an email list and a monthly newsletter, *History Lines*, which contains articles and photographs. We have an archive in London where artefacts, documents and photographs are stored, but this is on police premises and not available to the public. The BTP HG was fortunate in being able to call on the work of one of our members who, while a serving BTP officer, had accumulated a vast amount of information and

Treasured archives

Newspaper archive items are a constant delight and, particularly from the early days of railways, show a very pro-active attitude and diversity of responsibilities on the part of the RDC police. One gem from 1903 noted the funeral of Robert Sedgwick at Stockton-on-Tees, mentioning that his father, Joseph Sedgwick, was the first



John Metcalfe of the Stockton and Darlington Railway Police. Original painting held by the NRM Art Collection

railway policeman on the Stockton and Darlington Railway – and probably the first in the world!

There is a painting (c1846) of John Metcalfe, Stockton and Darlington Railway policeman, in the National Railway Museum in York that gives an idea of the uniform worn at the time. John Metcalfe would have been a colleague of Joseph Sedgwick.



SERGEANT ALLINSON of the North Eastern Railway Police at Hull Docks with police dog Jim in 1908.

artefacts. He has lectured widely on the history of the BTP and also produced an excellent PowerPoint presentation on the subject.

With the construction of railways in the 1830s, special constables were employed to maintain order on the sites and, once a railway was up and running, railway constables controlled the passage of trains on these new lines. As signalling systems developed, the role of the constables passed from traffic control to more normal police duties on the stations and depots of the railway companies. The canal companies, which predated the railways, also had their constables who carried out security duties. When the first Underground line was built in London, constables were employed, and as the systems developed and expanded, so did the necessity for police services.

The HG has coined a generic term for police officers of the various undertakings: the Railway, Dock and Canal police are referred to as 'RDC police'. It's a useful and short acronym! The RDC police were innovatory in policing practice and were among the first to employ women

officers. They were also the first to introduce police dogs.

Over the decades, railway and canal companies amalgamated, and many of the railway companies developed dock facilities for goods and passenger traffic, thereby increasing the responsibilities of their police forces. In London, tram and omnibus companies employed police and it has recently come to light that Ryde Pier on the Isle of Wight had a small police establishment. With the amalgamation of railway companies in 1923, the 'big four' were created – the Great Western Railway, London Midland & Scottish Railway, London & North Eastern Railway and Southern Railway.

The Honours and Awards section on the BTP HG website provides a fascinating insight into the activities of officers over the decades and ranges from appointments as Serving Brothers of the Order of St John of Jerusalem to gallantry awards. To take just one example, and one that emphasizes the changed nature of RDC policing, there is the award of the British Empire Medal (BEM) to PC Robert (Jock) Cameron in 1948 for preventing the theft of £4,000 worth of whisky from a bonded store at Burton-on-Trent in Staffordshire. This sort of traffic is no longer carried by the railways, and bonded stores and a police establishment at Burton-on-Trent are a thing of the past!

The group's website also gives details of a number of projects that members are currently working on and these cover a wide variety of subjects. The HG has a huge database called the Nominal Roll, which contains personal information on RDC police officers accumulated from the early nineteenth century onwards. This is constantly being added to and is a very useful genealogical tool. Whilst we cannot engage in detailed genealogical research, we welcome requests and information from the general public. We regularly liaise with other police history groups and the many railway history societies.

Membership

Although membership of the BTP History Group is aimed at serving and retired BTP officers and staff, anyone with a special interest in our work can become a



BTP POLICEWOMEN at Cardiff Docks in July 1958 for the royal visit of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh in the Royal Yacht *Britannia*. Showing off their radios, left to right: PW Minnie Kenefick, PW Doris Cooper, PW Elizabeth Bean, PW Margery Cooke and PW Joan Shillam. Collection of Les 'Nobby' Clarke



An LNER policeman escorts Kindertransport children off the boat at Parkeston Quay.

Can you help?

Over the decades, the RDC police have been involved in numerous momentous and noteworthy events. Particularly poignant is the fascinating story about Fred Freund recounted in Issue No. 43 of *Your Family History* magazine (*Discover Your History's* predecessor), which brought home what a harrowing time was had by the children of the Kindertransport (the mission to rescue predominantly Jewish children from Europe leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War). By amazing synchronicity, a colleague in the HG had come across photographs of the London & North Eastern Railway Police based at Parkeston Quay, Harwich, in Essex, supervising the arrival of the first Jewish children there in 1938. The children were taken from the ships to the trains for onward resettlement throughout the UK. The photograph above shows a smiling officer escorting children down the gangplank and perhaps gave rise to the quotation subsequently used in a book on the subject by Barry Turner called ... *And The Policeman Smiled* (Bloomsbury, 1990). We have not been able to identify the officer in the photograph on the book cover (similar to the one above) and wonder if anyone reading this article might be able to assist.

- If you can also help identify the policeman in the photograph above please contact the BTP HG through their website or write to the Secretary of BTP HG, Bill Rogerson MBE, 30 Lon Gardener, Valley, Holyhead, Isle of Anglesey LL65 3DN.

member by invitation. There is a one-off joining fee of £12 and, in addition to the monthly *History Lines*, the HG produces a glossy yearbook issued to its members. This gives an overview of the past year's activities and contains articles of historical interest.

If any of your ancestors were members of RDC police forces we would like to hear from you.

Robert C. Davison, of Co Down, is the Police & Railway Society Liaison Officer (Ireland) for BTP HG and Project Officer for the 'Railway Police in Ireland'.

Contact

Please visit the BTP HG website for more detailed information:
www.btpg.org.uk