

3.5 Case study: The reforms of Robert Peel

Learning outcomes

- Understand the main penal reforms led by Robert Peel.
- Know about the main changes in policing introduced by Robert Peel.

Robert Peel was prime minister from 1834 to 1835 and later from 1841 to 1846. During his earlier political career, Robert Peel had held a number of government posts and became home secretary in 1822. As home secretary, he was responsible for bringing in a wide range of changes to criminal law and for reforming prisons. Some historians claim that Peel should be seen as the 'father of modern policing' as he set up the Metropolitan Police Force, which became the model for other police forces across the country.

Robert Peel was a particularly effective politician. His key strengths were:

- he was well-informed and open to new ideas – for example, after Elizabeth Fry spoke to parliament about conditions in British prisons, Robert Peel took on board many of her suggestions in his work on penal reform
- he was skilful at seeing bills through parliament – carefully managing the reactions of other MPs
- he made the most of his senior positions as home secretary, and then prime minister, to implement his reforming ideas.

Peel's penal* reforms in the 1820s

Peel advocated a system aimed at preventing crimes and reforming criminals, rather than focusing on punishments as a deterrent. He reformed the penal code by reducing the number of crimes punishable by death by 100, and many minor crimes were punished more proportionately* as a result.

Peel also reformed prisons. He had some sympathy with 19th-century prison reformers like Elizabeth Fry. He also wanted to use the law more effectively, by bringing in a more logical and organised system of punishment, in which the same crime was always punished in the same way.

Peel persuaded parliament to pass the 1823 Gaols Act. This said that:

- prisoners should receive regular visits from prison chaplains
- gaolers should be paid (so they would not need to make money from prisoners)
- female prisoners should be watched over by female warders
- prisoners were not to be held in chains or irons.

The measures brought some improvement but had limited effect, as there were no paid inspectors to ensure the new laws were put into practice. There was no official prison inspectorate until the 1853 Prison Act was passed.

Key terms

Penal*

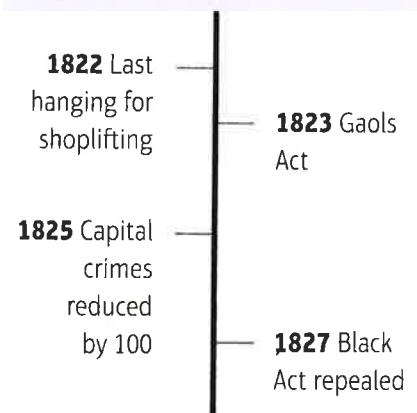
Involving punishment.

Proportionately*

In a fair and balanced way. A proportionate punishment would be harsher for a serious crime and less harsh for a minor crime.

Timeline

Peel's penal code reforms, 1822–27



Extend your knowledge

Policing the City of London

Peel was careful in the way that he constructed the Metropolitan Police bill. Police were not to have authority over the 'square mile' of the rich and influential City of London. The City was determined to preserve its independence and had blocked previous attempts at unifying London's policing. The Mayor and Corporation of the City of London refused to be part of the wider centralised force. Even in the 21st century, the City of London still has its own, independent police.

Source A

From a letter sent by Home Secretary Robert Peel to the new police commissioners in July 1829.

Hierarchy and pay structure

Superintendents – A yearly Salary of £200 each.

Inspectors – A yearly Salary of £100 each.

Sergeants – A daily pay of three shillings and sixpence each.

Police Constables – A daily pay of three shillings each.

The pay of the Sergeants and Constables will be subject to certain deductions, which may be hereafter directed.

I am Gentlemen, your most obedient humble Servant,

Robert Peel

Metropolitan Police Force formed, 1829

Robert Peel was already thinking about the policing of London in 1822, when he set up a parliamentary committee to look into the issue.

From 1826, there was an economic downturn. This led to unemployment and poverty, which resulted in a crime wave and rioting, and the army had to be called in to restore order.

Peel thought it would be better to have a centralised system for keeping the peace that did not rely on lethal weapons. He wanted a system that would ensure similar standards of policing were provided all across London. Some wealthy London parishes had good numbers of trained watchmen, while some poorer areas had very inadequate policing.

The first Metropolitan Police officers were appointed in September 1829.

What did the job involve?

All men of good character are invited to apply to become
METROPOLITAN POLICE OFFICERS

Duties
 Prevention of crime and disorder
 Carry out foot patrols (7-10 miles per day)

Character
 Law abiding with no criminal record
 Willing to use force (only when necessary)

Requirements
 At least 5' 7" tall
 Fit and in good health
 Available to start September 1829

Uniform & equipment provided*
 Blue tail coat and top hat
 Truncheon
 Handcuffs
 Wooden rattle (to raise alarm of crimes and misdemeanours)
 *cost deducted from your pay

Men employed in manual labour will find the rates of pay superior to their current employment

Figure 3.4 A job description for the new role of Metropolitan Police officer.

Activities



- Using the table below, and information from this section, write a list summarising new features of the Metropolitan Police compared with the old night watch system.
- Write a paragraph summarising which features of the Metropolitan Police were carried over from the watch.

Night watch	Police
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for lighting lamps in the street Help with various public services like administering street cleaning Expected to call out the time Tasked with watching out for fires and raising the alarm Prevent crime by patrolling the streets Expected to capture criminals caught in the act 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organised in a military-style hierarchy Employed full-time with weekly pay funded through increased public taxation Centrally organised, under one clear authority for London, answerable to the home secretary Headquarters set up at Scotland Yard Standardised training for all officers 2,000 new recruits

Criticisms of the new police force

The new police officers faced a hostile attitude from the public and the press. Cartoons portrayed them, to some extent fairly, as poorly-trained, recruited from dubious backgrounds and having immoral tendencies. Early on, 2,800 recruits were signed up, but only 600 were retained for a year or more.

The most serious concerns people had about the new police force centred on fears of oppression. They thought the police would limit their individual liberties and worried that the police would be a military-style presence on the streets. They were also worried about French-style policing being introduced in Britain, as Paris had a notoriously repressive centralised police force. Some people were also concerned about the increased costs imposed on tax-payers for the new service.

Source B

Letter of complaint about a London policeman's conduct, written in April 1830.

Gentlemen,

We are all so deeply interested in the good management and efficiency of the New Police, that I feel myself reluctantly bound to inform you of the misconduct of the Superintendent in this division of Brixton by being on duty on Tuesday night in a state of intoxication.

Source C

A cartoon, titled 'Reviewing the blue devils, alias the raw lobsters, alias the bludgeon men', published in 1833. It illustrates some common criticisms of police recruits. The captions read:

Please, Sir, may I go backwards.

Dam the varmint, ever since I've been in the force they have stuck to me as close as my police coat.

I say, you Po-lice man, get a little farther off.

By Jasus, I wish your honor would give us a few throats to cut for we have had enough of breaking heads.

Oh! My eye, you do that again now.

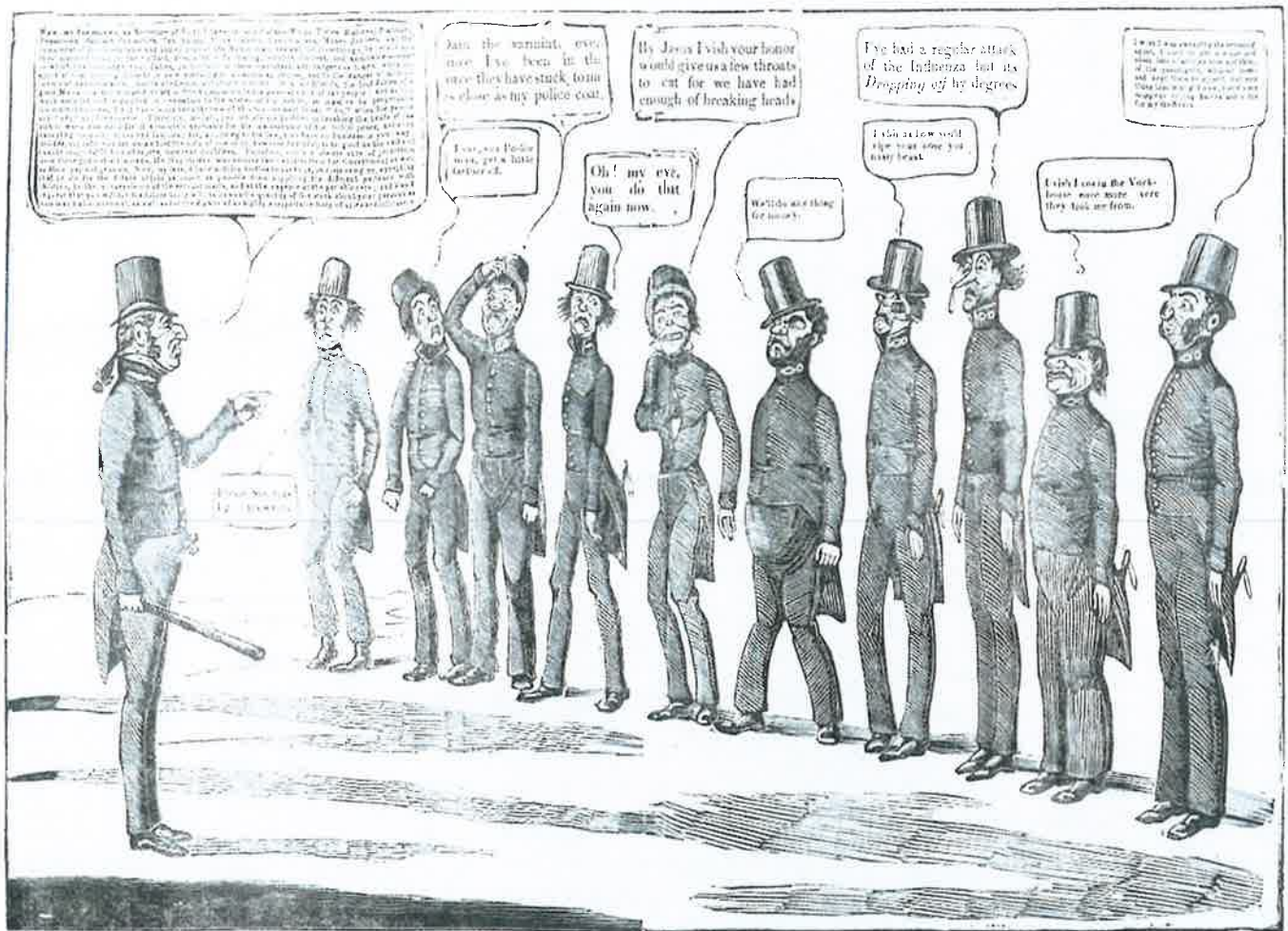
We'll do anything for money.

I've had a regular attack of the Influenza but its *dropping of by degrees*.

I vish as how you'd vipe your nose you nasty beast.

I vish I vos in the Vork-House once more vere they took me from.

I wish I was sweeping the crossing again, I used to get a wiper and other bits of articles now and then, of the passengers...



REVIEWING THE BLUE DEVILS, ALIAS THE RAW LOBSTERS, ALIAS THE BLUDGEON MEN.

Peel's attempts to reduce opposition to the police

Peel and his police commissioners understood the public concern about the introduction of the Metropolitan Police. The commissioners drew up and issued clear guidelines to all new police recruits. The principles included the following, which still provide the foundations for the modern policing in Britain today.

Activities ?

- 1 Match the following statements to Peel's nine principles in Figure 3.5.
 - a Effective policing is judged by the absence of crime
 - b Force is the last resort of a police officer
 - c Police should not overstep their authority
 - d Police are citizens in uniform
 - e Police should be role models representing the public
 - f Policing has to be by consent of the public not the government
 - g Policing must focus on maintaining law and order
 - h Police must be objective and professional
 - i Police need to foster public co-operation to be effective
- 2 Which of these principles would have been most reassuring to those who criticised the new police force?
- 3 Which of these principles would have been the most difficult to achieve?

1. The basic mission for which the police exist is to prevent crime and disorder.

2. The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions.

3. Police must secure the willing co-operation of the public in voluntary observance of the law to be able to secure and maintain the respect of the public.

4. The degree of co-operation of the public that can be secured diminishes proportionately to the necessity of the use of physical force.

5. Police seek and preserve public favour not by catering to the public opinion but by constantly demonstrating absolute impartial service to the law.

6. Police use physical force to the extent necessary to secure observance of the law or to restore order only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient.

7. Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.

8. Police should always direct their action strictly towards their functions and never appear to usurp the powers of the judiciary.

9. The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with it.

Figure 3.5 A summary of advice given to new Metropolitan Police recruits.

Interpretations – was Peel a 'great humanitarian'?

Historians have offered a range of interpretations concerning Peel's motives for penal reforms. Some argue that he was at least partly driven by humanitarian motives, while others argue that he was concerned with setting up a punishment system that was more rational and effective, but not necessarily more humane. Interpretations 1 and 2 highlight these different positions, and the arguments about the impact of his reforms.

Interpretation 1

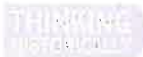
From *Sir Robert Peel: the Life and Legacy* by Richard Gaunt, published in 2010.

Peel's criminal law reforms were not designed to result in less punishment but in its more precise and efficient application. It follows from this that there would be no immediate down-turn in capital executions... He may not have been a 'great hangman', but nor was he 'a great humanitarian'.

Interpretation 2

From *Victorian England, Portrait of an Age* by G.M. Young, published in 1936.

His frigid efficiency covered an almost passionate concern for the welfare of the people.



Change and continuity (4a)

Significance

Look at Interpretation 1 and Interpretation 2 above.

- 1 In what ways does Gaunt think that Peel's ideas about efficiency might be significant?
- 2 How significant does Gaunt seem to think that Peel's penal reforms might be in the short and long term?
- 3 Compare this to Young. What significance does he ascribe to Peel's humanitarian motives?
- 4 Why do you think these views might differ?

Summary

- Robert Peel held a number of ministerial roles and became home secretary in 1822.
- During the 1820s, he brought in wide-ranging changes to criminal law and prison reforms.
- He had some sympathy with the arguments of 19th-century reformers, and also wanted to use the law more effectively and introduce a new penal code.
- In 1829, he introduced the first professional police force, which initially faced a hostile attitude from the public and the media.

Checkpoint

Strengthen

- S1** Name two criticisms that people made about Peel's police force.
- S2** Describe the uniform and equipment issued to the first Metropolitan Police officers.
- S3** Write out two of Peel's policing principles (from Figure 3.5) and then explain what they mean in your own words.

Challenge

- C1** Describe three differences between the work of a Metropolitan Police officer and a night watchman.
- C2** Write a short paragraph to explain why Peel is sometimes called the 'father of modern policing'.

How confident are you about your answers to these questions? Reread this section, then try answering them again.