Although the word "police" was not to be used for many centuries, there is no doubt that the principle of policing can be traced to the reign of King Alfred the Great (871-901). Although he had considerable problems with the Danes, he not only encouraged his subjects to become educated (translating a number of books into English himself) but he also introduced the concept of 'The King's Peace'. His prime aim was a quiet and peaceful enjoyment of his kingship, and he was well aware of, indeed encouraged, the knock-on effect it had for the population as a whole. Acting on the dictum 'What ye will that other men should not do to you, that do ye not to other men', he compiled a series of flexible laws. Basically, in return for being allowed to reign and to expect their unswerving allegiance, he promised them peace and security.

This ideal was perfected by his great-grandson, Edgar (959-975) who divided the then unified country into shires. The basic unit consisted of ten families (a tything) and these were united in groups of ten to form hundreds. This division of the country into hundreds was to be used for administration purposes over many centuries. Indeed, Essex still referred to some 20 in the mid 1800s. Each tything had a tythingman who was pledged to give a surety for his peoples' good behaviour and who had to start the 'hue and cry' after any miscreant. This comprised all the able-bodied males over 12 arming themselves with whatever was to hand and pursuing the miscreant. This was known as the *posse comitatis* with "hue" coming from the Anglo-French 'to hear' and the "cries" were to keep in touch. Failure to join the "hue and cry without a very good reason was a publishable offence. The *posse comitatis* became more formalised over the years, with the starting age lowered to seven during the Middle Ages when the home weapon requirement became more formalised. Archery for all able-bodied males became compulsory (on Sundays) but it was disbanded in the 1660s when a standing army was raised for the first time. Each collection of one hundred was controlled by a hundredman who reported to the shire-reeve or sheriff. Although the death penalty was only imposed for murder or treason, the alternative being outlawry, the result (like the later transportation) was no better.

Whilst 1066 saw a major upheaval in the form of the Norman Conquest, William I saw no purpose in disturbing what was obviously working well and so merely centralised matters by making the shire-reeves, who had autonomy in Anglo-Saxon days, the local representatives of the King. He also introduced circuit justice with the 'Sheriff's Tourn' travelling the country each Michaelmas. These senior judges tried the most serious offences, administered justice and, more importantly, raised revenue for the Crown, with fines going to the exchequer.

Henry II, by the Assize of Clarendon (1166) revived the then obsolescent principle of the tythemen having to pledge their people's good
behaviour and, some 15 years later, the Assize of Arms required all males over 15 to keep arms at home (in accordance with their status) to assist in preserving the peace and arresting criminals. This gave rise to the new word, constable. Derived from the Roman-Frankish comes stabuli, it originally meant a military officer of the highest rank. Now they were merely the inspectors of these small arsenals.

The next major move was made by Richard I who, in 1195, appointed a number of knights as 'Conservators of the Peace'. Purely executive posts, they were placed above the local sheriffs and were the forerunners of the peace officers of later times. 1251 saw the first, casual mention of 'constables' and 'High Constables' in a writ of Henry III. These are believed to be the new titles of the tythingman and the hundred man.

The Statute of Westminster (1265) made it the duty of all men to police themselves, requiring two men in every hundred to be appointed as constables whose duty it was to inspect the local armament on a half-yearly basis. This was followed, in 1285, by the Statute of Winchester, under Edward I, which firmly established the office of constable. Appointed on an annual basis by the Lord of the Manor, the post of constable was compulsory and their duties expanded, even though they were paid very small fees and were expected to carry on their normal work.

In 1344 the conservator knights were given judicial functions, coupled with a decline in the importance of the sheriffs. Justices of the Peace were, effectively, created by a further statute of 1361 which required "every county in England" to assign "for the keeping of the peace, one lord, and with him, three or four of the most worthy men". Typical examples of these were Sir John Mountney 1376/7 (who gave his name to Mountnessing) and Sir John Gildesborough who was attacked during a minor riot at Brentwood on the 30th May 1381.

The number of justices was increased in 1390 to eight per county and each was paid four shillings per day's sitting. Limited to some 12 days a year, this amount ultimately led to bribery and corruption but, the original justices being men of substance, this took time to occur. Meanwhile more and more duties were heaped on them and they became, in essence, de facto county councils. Despite serious 'overload' this system lasted well into Tudor times. During the reign of Henry VIII the monasteries were disbanded, leading to a breakdown in much of the social and welfare structure and so, almost directly, to Queen Elizabeth I introducing the poor rate in 1601. This (like Pitt's 'temporary income tax' of 1798) is still with us in the form of the Council Tax, but was then merely an endeavour to sort the genuine poor and needy from the work-shy, supporting the first and whipping the latter.
By 1601 the justices had become so openly corrupt that an MP went on record describing them as 'basket justices'; this being a reference to the basket openly on display on their bench, soliciting 'contributions' from the litigants and so, presumably, biasing the verdict towards the greater contributor.

This was all part and parcel of the background to the civil war which, during the 'reign' of Cromwell, saw the attempt to organise a new commission of the peace failing miserably, leaving Cromwell only his army to rely on. Consequently, in 1655 the country was divided into 12 military districts, each under the command of a major-general with a law-enforcement body of some 6,400 mounted men. Obviously a military dictatorship, the sanctions it forced on the populace (such as no singing, dancing and very little in the way of 'beer and skittles'), coupled with a considerable element of political espionage, laid the foundations for much of the trouble that later reformers were to encounter.

Charles II introduced his 'Bellmen' in 1663. A thousand of them were raised under an Act of Common Council, with minimal pay. Their only effect was to call the hours of the night and the state of the weather - if they were awake! Known, derisively, as 'Charlies', they rapidly became a public joke.

The great fire of London in 1666 was a wake-up call that couldn’t be ignored. Sir Christopher Wren (as an MP) organised the licensing of public vehicles and the new office for this was sited in Scotland Yard. In 1673 magistrates were empowered to appoint regular constables direct, together with the ability to appoint additional, temporary, or 'special' constables in times of great need. Their position being consolidated by the 1831 Special Constable Act means that the 'Specials' predate many, if not all, other forces.

The 'Blood-Money' Act of 1692 did not help the cause of justice to any extent. Parliament provided some £40,000 to reward the captors of criminals. However, the sliding scale of awards was such that it encouraged people to ignore smaller crimes until the upper levels were reached (£50 for a highwayman but only £10 for a housebreaker, for example). This, together with the Tyburn ticket (getting a felon convicted of a capital offence exempted the holder from all parochial duties for life) led to a laisser-faire attitude and, of course, more corruption.

The Riot Act (1715) was the very first statute of George I and had to be read to the rioters by a magistrate who then had to find the military to enforce it. Last invoked in 1919, it was repealed...
as recently as 1967. A major step forward in 1748 was the appointment of Henry Fielding as a magistrate at number 4, Bow Street, London. Recruiting his brother and some seven or so men, he formed Mr. Fielding's Men, soon to be known as the Bow Street Runners. They can be described as the first detectives.

Fielding published a treatise, 'An Increase in Robbers', in 1751 which led to the founding of the post of public prosecutor and 1753 saw the creation of an integrated plan for the policing of London. This had to be paid for from the Secret Service funds - it was too politically sensitive to be openly acknowledged.

Fielding was followed by his brother John in 1755, but he had as little encouragement from the authorities. In 1770 a select committee met to consider policing in the Metropolis only to see their report quietly shelved. 1772 saw the publication of John Fielding's Quarterly Pursuit - a list of wanted criminals sent to all magistrates in the country. Made weekly, it became The Police Gazette.

The Gordon Riots occurred in 1780. Lasting seven days, no magistrate could be found to face the mob to read the Riot Act and eventually the King had to exercise his royal prerogative and order the troops out. This helped to crystallise the situation and in 1782 the first officially recognised Bow Street foot patrols took to the streets. Consisting of six to eight men under a 'captain', eight parties patrolled the outskirts up to four miles from Charing Cross. Paid out of public funds (captains received five shillings a night and men two shillings and sixpence) they were armed and were the first ever preventative patrol.

To this background, Pitt the Younger introduced his first police bill in 1785. Known as 'Pitt's Bill', it proposed the unification of the whole of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark and other areas into one police district with provision for the new arrangements to be paid for out of central funds.

Opposition from the City of London was immediate and vicious. The Lord Mayor and his Sheriffs described it as "a system of Police altogether new and arbitrary in the extreme" and Alderman Hammet also commented that "If a torch had been applied to the buildings (in the city) it could not have created more alarm!" Needless to say, the bill was withdrawn.

Patrick Colquhoun was appointed stipendiary magistrate at the new police office in Worship Street, subsequent to the Middlesex Justices Act (1792). A Glaswegian of some forty-seven years, he had been Lord Provost of Glasgow and he spent the next twenty-five years devoted to what he called the 'new science' of preventative police.

In 1796 Colquhoun published his preliminary findings as a paper entitled 'Treatise on the police of the Metropolis' which ran through seven editions in ten years. This dealt with the causes and effects of crime and included many statistics. Listing out the forces of law and order he started with some 3,044 men. Deducting the useless and criminally inclined, only 117 were left! His many suggestions (very similar to Pitt's) were adopted by the Police Finance Committee in 1798 but, again, they were quietly shelved by virtue of the opposition of The City.

The Napoleonic scares brought the posse comitatus back in the form of the Militia, whilst the return of large numbers of unemployed soldiers in 1815 with their looting and rioting gave rise to some successful police legislation.

Essex was, in 1839, amongst the first eight counties to take advantage of the County Police Act of that year. In 1843 it was stated that "half a dozen regular Essex Policemen would be equal to seventy parish constables".

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