

# The Cultural Construction of the Police

# 1

This chapter considers how a very particular cultural representation of the British police was established prior to and in many respects anticipated sociological analysis of the policing. Today, the police constable, or 'bobby on the beat' can be found in virtually every tourist gift shop in London in a bewildering number of formats: postcards, key rings, puppets, dolls, teddy bears, coffee mugs, T-shirts all carry this instantly recognizable image of the English police. An avuncular 'bobby' has even featured on the front page of brochures for holidays in London. No other European capital carries such an array of police-based tourist trinkets. We must look to North America for comparable merchandising of the police officer. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) registered its initials as a trademark in August 1998 in an attempt to halt the proliferation of cheap 'tacky' imitations of the force's badge and other symbols that the Commissioner of the LAPD believed created confusion and threatened 'to dilute the authority of LAPD officers' (*Guardian*, 6 August 1998). In 1997 the Royal Canadian Mounted Police took similar action in relation to 'Mountie' merchandise proclaiming that every souvenir company wishing to use the instantly recognizable 'redcoat' image would have to clear copyright approval with a special licensing body. The Canadian government supported fully the new regulatory framework on the grounds that the 'Mountie' was not just an important police image but in certain respects the most expressive self-image of the Canadian nation. The process of public relations management was completed with the Disney Corporation acquisition of the licensing rights to all products bearing the image of the 'Mountie' (Gittings, 1998), generating accusations that the Canadian government was supporting the 'Disney-fication' of policing. And post 9/11, the image of the NYPD has been culturally and commercially revalued as illustrated by a new

wave of heroic representations on sale. A general point to note, therefore, is that, within certain societies, the police officer can acquire a representative status that stands at the very centre of the popular cultural imagination (Ericson, 1989; Loader and Mulcahy, 2003).

What is truly significant is that the English 'bobby' has been culturally constituted through a set of popular cultural storylines which underscore his essential 'difference' from the police officers of other countries (McLaughlin and Murji, 1998). Numerous publications continue to assert that he is the finest police officer in the world: a faithful, incorruptible public servant who is unwavering in his commitment to the community; part of the 'thin blue line' that marks out an orderly society from a disorderly one; unarmed because he works with broad-based public consent and respect but 'armed' with prestige and street wisdom rather than power (Radzinowicz, 1955; Critchley, 1967; Ascoli, 1979). This 'exceptionalist' discourse has also exercised a powerful hold over police scholarship.

As we shall see in later chapters, sociological interest in the UK police force in its own right was to come later. For now, we need to look at how the police were depicted in contemporary press, fiction, film and TV in order to throw light on how the 'bobby' came to be such an important icon of 'Englishness'. To date most discussion of the origins of the positive image of the English 'bobby' reproduces the discourse of the 'native genius' of far-sighted reformers who created him and the unique constitutional settlement and bureaucratic processes that legitimated the police mandate in England. According to this perspective, the English not only laid down a unique policing model but devised a constitutional framework within which policing, civil liberties and social order could not just be reconciled but interwoven as an exemplary form of liberal democratic citizenship. This chapter seeks to complement and complicate this 'national feeling for policing' perspective by focusing on the intersecting popular cultural practices that re-imagined the police constable from being the most un-English of ideas into a multi-dimensional icon of English national identity.

This chapter does not propose to re-tell and re-argue the history of the British police. Suffice to say that a considerable amount of political work had to take place in order for 'the police' (this most 'un-English') of institutions to be first of all sheltered from popular resentment and hostility and gradually transformed into one which could be ideologically celebrated as the epitome of Englishness (Critchley, 1967; Ascoli, 1979; Gatrell, 1990; Emsley, 1991; Reynolds, 1998). Newman (1987) argues that in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century we witness systematic efforts to constitute a mythological 'Englishness'. The quintessential characteristics and values of 'Englishness' materialized in a variety of political, cultural and institutional settings. The English character was seen to be marked by robust common sense; a sense of fair play and humour; decency; self-restraint; pragmatism; a sense of duty; chivalry; an individualism bordering on eccentricity;

under-statement; and team spirit. Moreover, the English were seen as *patriots* rather than nationalists – patriotism being defined as an unconscious individual predilection and nationalism a consciously expressed collective sentiment (Colls and Dodd, 1986). What is interesting is that Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have detailed how quintessential markers of 'Englishness' were initially denounced and rejected as unacceptable departures from 'English' practice and custom. The police provide us with one of the most striking examples of this process of cultural metamorphosis. As we shall see, initial public responses to the 'bobby' did not envisage him as a defining representation of the English character.

### **The cultural construction of the English police constable**

It is hard to convey the depth of resistance to the idea of 'police' in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Available evidence suggests that, because of public sensitivities, considerable attention was paid to the image and styling, demeanour and status of the new police before they finally joined the parish watch (the 'Charlies') on the streets of central London at 6 p.m. Tuesday, 29 September 1829 (Lyman, 1964; Miller, 1977; Palmer, 1988; Hay and Snyder, 1989; Reynolds, 1989; Beattie, 2001; Harris, 2004). As Clive Emsley notes because of the English antipathy to a standing army quartered at home, Metropolitan Police constables did not, in any way, look continental or military. They were dressed in:

top hats, uniforms of blue, swallow-tail coats with the minimum of decoration, in contrast to the short scarlet tunics with colour facings and piping of the British infantry; the constable's weaponry was limited to a wooden truncheon, though cutlasses were available for emergencies and for patrolling dangerous beats, and inspectors and above could carry pocket pistols. (Emsley, 1991, p. 25)

The new force's officially defined mandate was crime prevention, and constables were given written instructions stressing the need to be civil and obliging to people of every rank, and to respect private property at all times. The force was headed not by a government minister but by two independent commissioners. Even though the 'new police' were drawn from the 'ordinary classes', they faced considerable derision, public hostility and violent resistance to this most 'un-English' of innovations from many different sectors. Well-attended public meetings, placards, posters and petitions demanded the abolition of the 'robin redbreasts', 'crushers', 'bluebottles', 'bobbies', 'coppers', 'raw lobsters' and 'Peelers'. The middle classes protested against having to pay for a public service that both lowered the tone of their neighbourhoods and they did not believe would succeed. The working class objected to the clampdown on leisure pursuits and the unprecedented regulation of public space. London parishes took issue with central government control while police magistrates

complained about their loss of power. Political radicals and nascent trade unions objected to the introduction of an 'alien' force of *gendarmerie*, spies and uniformed troublemakers. (see Storch, 1975; Reynolds, 1998) The press, both popular and otherwise, highlighted controversial police actions, with *The Times* commenting that the new police was an instrument 'for the purposes of the arbitrary aggression upon the liberties of the people' (*The Times*, 10 January 1842).

Indeed, such was the depth of public animosity that at the conclusion of the inquest into the murder of PC Robert Culley during a political riot in Clerkenwell on 12 May 1833, the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of 'justifiable homicide' (see Thurston, 1967). The jurors concluded 'that no Riot Act was read nor any proclamation advising the people to disperse; that the Government did not take proper precautions to prevent the meeting assembling; and that the conduct of the Police was ferocious, brutal and unprovoked by the people' (quoted in Gould and Waldren, 1986, p. 14). The jurors were feted as public heroes – indeed, a coin was minted to commemorate 'this glorious victory for English liberty'.

There was further public outcry when the police began to expand: for instance, when the Metropolitan Police established a detective department in 1842 and when new police were introduced into other cities in the course of the nineteenth century. In certain parts of the country the new police were forced physically from the streets (see Storch, 1975, 1976; Philips and Storch, 1999).

### **'One of us': popular cultural representations of the new police**

The foregoing is not meant to serve as a definitive survey of the public controversy surrounding the introduction of the new police. However, it does suggest that a considerable amount of very basic *cultural* as well as political work would have to take place in order for this most 'un-English' of institutions to be first of all sheltered from popular resentment and gradually transformed into one which could be celebrated as 'a very *English* institution ... and the envy of less fortunate people – a reassuring symbol of all being well and tranquil in the world' (Ascoli, 1979, p. 3). Three key measures were needed in order to achieve this.

First, the new police required sustained political patronage and judicial protection. A pattern became established where the authorities refused to investigate allegations of police violence, corruption or malpractice or established commissions and inquiries which either supported the police version of reality or opted for a 'rotten apple' theory to explain acts of deviance and asserted on every possible occasion that the English police was the finest in the world. The judiciary passed exemplary sentences on those who dared to attack or obstruct a constable carrying out his duty.

Second, as historians have established, the police had no choice but to negotiate often 'unspoken' contracts with various social groups. For example, police constables learned to 'turn a blind eye', as far as possible, to middle-class indiscretions and to respond as quickly as possible to their demands. In turn, the urban middle classes began to see the advantages of a routinized and predictable police presence. Political commentators noted with barely disguised relief how the Metropolitan Police handled the great Chartist demonstration in London 1848 and compared this with the mob violence that had engulfed other European capitals (Emsley, 1991). The new police were also forced, because of lack of organizational resources, to reach settlements with elements of the working class. Critical concessions included institutionalizing contacts with informal social control systems and leaving working-class neighbourhoods to police and order themselves (Storch, 1975; Humphries, 1981; White 1986). In certain parts of London, for example, there was virtually no police presence. The real site of struggle was control of movement of the disreputable working class on the main thoroughfares and public squares. The working class also came to realize that not only were the police not going to be abolished but that their presence could be useful in 'sorting out' local disputes. Evidence of this gradual transformation in attitudes can be found in the murder of PC Frederick Atkins on 22 September 1881, which resulted in unprecedented positive press coverage and public sympathy for the police (Gould and Waldren, 1986).

Third, and equally important I would argue to the stabilization of the new institution, was the rapid incorporation of the police constable into Victorian popular culture where he became a normalized presence. Popular cultural representations personalized the general and the abstract, concentrating not on the organization but on the character of the individual constable (Kift, 1986). The formal establishment of the Metropolitan Police detective department in 1842 attracted widespread attention in the popular press and was crucial to both the development of the English detective novel and eventually the myth of Scotland Yard. Prior to this, as Julian Symons has pointed out, crime stories had tended to bestow criminals (operating outside the law and on their own terms) with heroic status. Charles Dickens' public support for the new detective force is very significant - extolling its worth stood in contrast with his barely hidden disdain for virtually every other public official (Collins, 1964; Welsh, 1971; Ousby, 1976; Haining, 1996). The 'Penny Dreadfuls' and 'Yellow Back' novels also provided Victorian readers, of all classes, with exciting stories which foregrounded the deeds of fictional Scotland Yard detectives. The detective novels barely mentioned the uniformed police constable. Even then, the detective is not portrayed as 'all powerful' and needs a cast of other characters to help him do his job. (Symons, 1992).

Dickens' Inspector Bucket of *Bleak House* (1853) was the first fictional English police detective and was based on Inspector Fielding of Scotland Yard. There was also the Night Inspector in *Our Mutual Friend* and his detective

stories in *Household Words*. Dickens also left an unfinished detective novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). For him, the exploits of the new detectives and their villainous foes and rivals were the repository of the most exciting tales of the city. (The detectives also provided the author with safe passage when he wanted to visit London's notorious rookeries.) Not surprisingly, the reader's understanding of the criminal underworld and police work was constructed through Dickens' detective based perspective.

The first full-length English language detective novel, Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), introduced Victorian England to Sergeant Cuff, who was based on the Scotland Yard detective Jonathan Whicher. In the introduction to a 1998 reprint of *The Moonstone* Trodd argues that Sergeant Cuff's presence 'has all the social and moral ambiguity surrounding the new detective force appearing to those around him as thief taker, spy, domestic servant and public guardian'. Indeed, Collins positioned his detective very carefully: Sergeant Cuff is neither the main protagonist nor the narrator. He is professionally competent but socially unacceptable to the novel's upper class characters. The local police are represented as socially acceptable but incompetent. The author's intention may have been to accommodate middle-class fears of creating a too effective police force that does not know 'its place'. Sergeant Cuff is also bestowed with an eccentricity that is intended to emphasize that he is not just a crime fighter but quintessentially English. He has an interest in gardens and is an ardent admirer of the virtues of the English rose. Importantly, Sergeant Cuff does not solve the crime, thus reassuring readers that the new detective police were fallible and needed to rely on the help of others. (Ashley, 1951)

Marginalization of the public detective took place during the golden age of detective novels. The police detective and uniformed officer are, for example, quite clearly subordinate to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's amateur but master sleuth Sherlock Holmes, the most enduring representations of 'English' detective genius (see Kayman, 1992; Miller, 1981).

However, the uniformed rank and file constable had also acquired his own cultural patrons. *Punch* magazine, established in 1841, was resolutely pro-police and can be seen to have played a pivotal role in popularizing and traditionalizing 'the bobby'. This was done by smothering him in representations of 'Englishness' and constituting him as the embodiment of the national temperament, periodically reminding readers that his creator, Robert Peel, was the epitome of English genius.<sup>1</sup> By 1925, a commentator on police affairs could note: 'if fear of the police is, in England, less acute than it might be and there is culpability in the matter, Mr Punch's artists are to blame ... since the days of Leech, whose policemen wore top hats, *Punch* has been busy in delineating the Force with kindness ... geniality and tolerance' (Pulling, 1964).

Crucially, *Punch* took the uniformed constable out of his urban origins and imagined him quintessentially as the avuncular 'village bobby', comparing him favourably with his continental counterparts. *Punch* even managed the tricky public transition when it was decided to replace the constable's top hat

with a Prussian style helmet in the late nineteenth century. Emsley (1992) has documented how in this time period popular ballads, street songs and later music hall routines poked fun at the constable and highlighted his liking for tea, beer, cozy resting places, and kitchen maids. And of course Gilbert and Sullivan produced a comic portrayal of the constable in the *Pirates of Penzance* and provided popular culture with the instantly recognizable refrain: 'A Policeman's Lot is not a Happy One' (see Disher, 1955; Pulling, 1952).

The serious press in this period also published editorials which began to extol the unique virtues of the English police. It is also worth noting that the first official history of the organization, written by Lee in 1901, celebrated the uniqueness of a very English institution, tracing the lineage of the constable back to Anglo-Saxon concepts of mutual pledging, collective security and common law (Lee, 1901). The book extolled the genius of Sir Robert Peel and the first two commissioners and exaggerated the faults of the old system. It was stressed that the police of England, unlike other police forces, were *of the people* and supported *by the people*. Lee also emphasized the unique orderly nature of English society that made the success of the new police a foregone conclusion, completely ignoring the extent and nature of local hostility and opposition. This text is significant because subsequent popular studies of the police uncritically reproduced Lee's Whiggish version of history.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that popular resentment of the police endured well into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ford and Harrison (1983) unearthed a remarkable photograph of the effigy of a much-disliked village policeman, PC Rover, about to be burnt at the Stebbing, Essex 'Guy Fox' bonfire of 1880. The front-line public order role played by the police in the social and economic conflict which characterized 1918-1940 de-stabilized their relations with virtually all sections of the working class. During the 1930s, violent confrontations with the police were endemic in certain parts of the country. Moreover, revelations of police corruption, public scandals over the use of 'stop-and-search' powers and the police role in the enforcement of the new Road Traffic Act of 1930 threatened to rupture carefully cultivated relationships with the middle classes.

There were also, however, forces intensifying the by now 'traditional' representation of the English 'bobby'. Unqualified political support was forthcoming from the governments of the day and the police also found new political backers in the form of the parliamentary Labour party who were desperate to prove their acceptability and credibility. Virtually all shades of upper- and middle-class opinion mobilized behind the police in the aftermath of the shoot-out with anarchists in Tottenham in January 1909 and the Sidney Street Siege, Stepney in 1911 (Rumbelow, 1988), with many joining the special constabulary during the 1926 General Strike. BBC radio broadcasts and cinema newsreels edited incidents of police violence heavily and went to remarkable lengths to cast the police as 'the thin blue line' or caught in the middle of extremists. During the General Strike the media were responsible

for disseminating one of the defining images of a benign police force – police officers playing football with strikers (see Emsley, 1991, p. 169)

By now the police were also in a position to produce and disseminate their own self-authenticating narratives. We see this in:

- 1 Ex-police officers wrote a series of autobiographies/memoirs and popular histories which were overwhelmingly positive in orientation (see, for example, Dilnot, 1930; Adam 1931; Cornish 1935; Tomlin, 1936; Gollomb, 1938). Each publication built uncritically upon the previous one and effectively reproduced the same Whiggish storylines, all of which steeped ‘the bobby’ in ‘Englishness’. They asserted that the English had found the secret to effective law enforcement because England was governed through ‘common law’ rather than the Napoleonic Code. Indeed, some of the more extreme narratives attributed the success of the British police to the racial characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons: the English had a ‘flair’ for law and order in the same way as the French had a natural flair for criminality and cooking! Police officers also gave advice to the generation of authors responsible for the ‘golden age’ of detective novels.
- 2 The centenary anniversary of the founding of the Metropolitan Police was marked by the publication of its first official history (Moynan, 1929) and numerous newspaper articles detailing the origins and uniqueness of ‘the bobby’. Official acknowledgement of the event was forthcoming in the form of an inspection by the Prince of Wales in Hyde Park. This was vital in the further traditionalizing of the force and the inception of organizational traditions.
- 3 The formation of the Police Federation in 1929 as the negotiating body for rank and file officers was also significant. From the outset, the federation concerned itself with policing its past and projecting a *particular representation* of the English police officer. In doing this, the federation constructed an historical narrative that idealized the identity of constable by reproducing the ‘best’ of the popular cultural representations, available histories, and political statements which emphasized that England had the finest police force in the world.
- 4 In 1929 – the same year as a Royal Commission into policing was established – Scotland Yard appointed a full-time press office to brief crime reporters and Home Affairs correspondents. In the same year, in an unprecedented move, PC Harry Daley gave a series of talks on the radio on the life of an ‘ordinary copper’ (Emsley, 1991). This was reinforced by the emergence of what became known as a Reithian conception of the historical uniqueness of the British policing system (see Reeth, 1938; 1943):

The new cinema was, not surprisingly, a key site of struggle in representations of the police. The forces of law and order undoubtedly benefited from the hand-in-glove relationship between the British film industry and national institutions and the fact that strict censorship ‘ensured that British crime films kept a respectable distance from the sordid realities of the underworld. No

reference to drugs or prostitution was permitted, scenes inside prison were forbidden, depiction of criminals carrying out crime in a realistic way was discouraged' (Richards, 2001) Nonetheless, there were unflattering depictions. In 2005 the BBC broadcast restored versions of films made by Sagar Mitchell and James Keynon, the pioneers of British commercial cinema. The reels included incredible documentary footage of late Victorian and early Edwardian Manchester police officers and comedies which featured constables being made fun of by youths. To the annoyance of some police officers, American Mack Sennett's ever popular slapstick *Keystone Kops* was joined by English films such as *Blue Bottles* (1928), *Ask a Policeman* (1939) and *It's That Man Again* (1942) which continued to reproduce the 'good-hearted-but-dim-witted' comic celluloid representations of 'the bobby':

Although the old type of policeman has gone, the public are not allowed to believe it, because in the most recent films, in stage plays, and more especially on the radio, the policeman is always portrayed as a kind of 'country yokel', with no brains, a Somerset accent, and a most horrible lack of manner or common sense. In the modern detective novels and plays the private detective always clears up the crime in less time than a 'copper' can fill his pipe. There are frequently unjust and mean jibes at the police, but no retaliatory measures are taken ... the policemen get far too much criticism and too little praise. (Aytee, 1942)

As a result, between 1829 and 1939, on the various stages of popular culture the uniformed English police constable was actualized via a whole series of characteristics, many of which were unflattering. As was noted previously, popular culture portrayed 'the bobby' as an incompetent, harmless, benign, good natured, deferential individual, partial to a drink and a pretty girl's smile. His counterpart – the village constable – was illustrated in even less flattering terms. However, in the long run, as Emsley argues, these 'indulgent' popular cultural representations humanized and individualized officers and one suspects went a considerable way to deflating popular suspicion and resentment. They also reaffirmed that the English could laugh at themselves, would not stand for pomposity in its public officials and had nothing to fear from a police officer.

The second part of this chapter will analyse how the Ealing Studio film *The Blue Lamp*, ruptured pre-war representations and re-assembled, in the form of PC George Dixon, the iconic depiction of the English 'bobby' on the beat. This film would have a immense impact on popular perceptions of the police giving rise to the spin off BBC television series *Dixon of Dock Green* which consolidated the representation of the 'Iconic PC' that would become a enduring part of English culture. And as we shall see in the next chapter, this representation would also provide the crucially important context for the first sociological studies of the British police.

## The iconic police constable: the cultural construction of PC George Dixon

In the immediate post-war period, English national identity underwent an unprecedented crisis, lurching between a sense of embittered anti-climax because daily life was burdened by rationing, austerity and bureaucratic red tape; a sense of deep loss, yearning for the past and fear of the future; and self-deception and illusions of grandeur in the form of dream-like forecasts of the coming of a 'New Jerusalem' (Hopkins, 1964).

Nothing exemplified the national identity crisis more than the output of the English film studios. During the Second World War, they had played a crucial role in defining and communicating the essential characteristics of the 'English' way of life that people were being asked to defend (Furhammer and Isaksson, 1971; Hodgkinson and Sheratsky, 1982; Richards and Aldgate, 1983; Hurd, 1984; Taylor, 1987; Coultras, 1989; Landy, 1991; Chapman, 1998). In the decade after the war, many of the studios, in an attempt to hold the national audience that had flocked in their millions to the cinema during the war years, produced self-authenticating celebrations of 'the people as collective hero' as well as broadening connotations of national identity (Richards, 1997). A 'traditional' look was adopted in order to make a spate of post-war films look like films made during the war years, 'deliberately obscuring the passage of time, and continuing to visually merge the documentary and fictional traditions that was a notable feature of 1939-1945' (Ramsden, 1987). The nostalgia present in some of these films is heart-rendering with pre-war 'England' becoming an 'imagined community' of long, hot summer days, village greens, quiet meadows and cricket matches.

In the same historical moment, English society felt itself under siege from a violent crime wave and unchecked juvenile delinquency (Mannheim, 1946; Taylor, 1981; Morris, 1989; Thomas, 2003). Mark Benney, the *Daily Mirror's* crime reporter, captured the unfolding crime crisis in the following terms:

The crime wave for which the police have been preparing ever since the end of hostilities is breaking upon us. Armed robberies of the most violent and vicious kind feature daily in the newspapers. Even the pettiest crimes are, it seems, conducted with a loaded revolver to hand. And well-planned robberies, reminiscent of the heyday of Chicago gangsterdom, have relieved Londoners of £60,000 worth of jewellery in the past week alone. Holdups of cinemas, post offices and railway booking offices have already become so commonplace that the newspapers scarcely bother to report them. To deal with the situation the police are being forced to adopt methods more akin to riot breaking than crime detection. (Quoted in Murphy, 1993, p. 89)

The consensus was that the war had created the conditions in which criminality could flourish. There was also a very real concern that post-war youngsters would be much more prone to delinquency and anti-social behaviour

than previous generations (Hodgkin, 1948; Smithies, 1982; Hebdige, 1988; Davis, 1990). Particular attention was paid to the supposedly corrupting influence of a spate of popular Hollywood gangster and homemade 'Spiv movies' which flourished between 1945 and 1950. The former were a cause for concern because of their heightened 'ripped-from-the-headlines' realism and the blurring of the boundaries between villain and hero (Clay, 1998; Doherty, 1988; Mumby 1999; Arthur, 2001; Spicer, 2002). Low-budget, commercially viable British 'riff-raff realist' movies were also criticized for their representation of that most transgressive of characters, the Spiv:

... the grinning 'Spivs', the 'wide boys', the barrow boys and the 'wheelers' gradually endeared themselves to the general public. The archetypal 'Spiv' wore yellow shoes, a wide lapelled suit and a wide tie, and sported a shifty little trilby pulled rakishly over the forehead. He symbolised a flashy flaunting of authority and petty regulations – especially towards the end of the war when people were long tired of self-denial and the many wartime restrictions ... (Minns, 1980, p. 160; see also Sarto, 1949; Deacon, 1980; Hughes, 1986; Wollen, 1998; Clay, 1998)

Film critics and social commentators condemned Spiv films for the casting of charismatic actors as violent, 'Americanized' hero-villains; the glamorizing of sordid, petty criminal lifestyles and the depiction of the police not just as comic but as cynical and corrupt. Alongside moves to censor the Spiv film were demands that British film studios redress the balance by producing socially responsible and morally uplifting films which would condemn criminality and delinquency, project positive role models for the nation's youth and mobilise public support for the forces of law and order (Murphy, 1999). It was in the context of an intensifying moral panic about the wave of real and celluloid 'gangsterism' and delinquency supposedly sweeping the country that Ealing Studios began work on *The Blue Lamp*. It is not surprising that the film would relate in complex ways to both the stylistic shifts in the crime film genre and the social turmoil of the immediate post-war era.

All those involved in the production of *The Blue Lamp* were conscious of their social responsibilities. It made perfect sense, Ealing Studios was capable of realizing such a cultural project. The studio's instantly recognizable 'national narrative' studio style, which finally came together during the 1940s and first half of the 1950s, combined conventional cinematic structures with 1930s' documentary realism. Ealing's high-quality films had good entertainment value, included a degree of escapism and, despite the fact that the studio operated under the control of the Ministry of Information, 'softened' the visually and emotionally excessive propagandistic elements. However, there could be no doubt that the films produced by Ealing Studios were 'rooted in the soil' and sensibilities of the nation' (Balcon, 1969; see also Kaedish, 1984; Harper, 1994; Richards, 1997; Drazin, 1998).

The inspiration for the film lay with the murder of Police Constable Nathaniel Edgar on 13 February 1948. He was the first Metropolitan Police officer to be murdered after the war and the hunt for his killer and the funeral dominated the front pages of the popular newspapers. An army deserter, Donald George Thomas, aged 22, was found guilty of the murder but because the death penalty had been suspended was committed to penal servitude for life (Christoph, 1962). Sydney Box, a Gainsborough film producer, assigned Jan Read, Gainsborough's script editor, and Ted Willis to work up a script specifically recounted from the point of view of police officers (Aldgate and Richards, 1999). As part of his initial research Willis immersed himself in the everyday routines of police work, thus anticipating the methodology that sociologists of the police would use. Willis spent a considerable amount of time in the company of an Inspector Mott, an 'old time copper' who became the inspiration for the central police character of the proposed screenplay. Scotland Yard was assured that Ealing Studios' heroic dramatization of the English police constable would shatter the one-dimensional comic depictions of the constable prevalent in pre-war films. Willis noted that he was only too aware that:

Up to that time the British policeman had usually been portrayed as a bumbling simpleton who habitually licked the stub of a pencil, was respectful to the Squire and left the investigation and solution of serious crime to brilliant educated amateurs like Sherlock Holmes and Lord Peter Wimsey. (1991, p. 70)

Completion of the screenplay coincided with the unexpected closure of Gainsborough Studios. Michael Balcon, the head of Ealing Studios picked up the script and to the disappointment of Read and Willis it was handed on to T.E.B Clarke for refinement. The choice of Clarke, Ealing's most influential post-war script writer, to work on the film was significant because it 'suggests the importance attached to finding a screenwriter who was politically reliable. As an ex-War Reserve Constable, Clarke fitted the bill admirably' (Chibnall, 1997). Clarke's inside knowledge of the police meant that his re-drafting of the script deepened the already police-centred perspective. The producer-director team was Michael Relph and Basil Dearden, whose films consistently tried 'to grasp the totality of England as a unity, a family structure: local solidarity and mutual responsibility writ large' (Barr, 1980, p. 83).

Careful attention was paid to choosing a cast that would be instantly recognizable to the film-going public. Jack Warner, the former East End vaudeville star, was the obvious choice to play PC George Dixon since he had appeared as the personification of working-class paternal values in several films. It was assumed that audiences would instantly side with 'his warm, natural humour and common sense' (Clarke, 1974, p. 158). Another music hall star, Gladys Hensen, was cast to play his wife. Jimmy Hanley, who played the typical boy next door or friend to the hero in a series of films, was cast as the new recruit PC Andy Mitchell. Dirk Bogard, hitherto a romantic lead, was given his first 'heavy' role as Tom Riley, the embodiment of a new generation of reckless

young criminals threatening the nation. Basil Dearden was in no doubt about Bogard's role telling the actor that he need 'a weedy type' to play 'the snivelling little killer. Neurotic, conceited, gets the rope in the end.' (Bogard, 1978, p. 128). In its narrative construction, particularly after the British Board of Film Censors had finished editing the script, the role of hero would be shifted from the 'Spiv' to the police constable (Robertson, 1985; Aldgate, 1992).

During shooting, the film-makers were provided with unparalleled Metropolitan Police co-operation, advice and facilities. In fact, the actors were tutored by senior Scotland Yard detectives and police officers also appeared as extras. Jack Warner notes how there were probably more real policemen than actors in *The Blue Lamp*. In addition, the production crew was provided with unique day and night access to locations across London and to the inside of police stations. The hard-edged streets of Paddington, Ladbroke Grove, Maida Vale and the White City provided a suitably urban backdrop.

Ealing's publicity campaign for the film even used noir style posters and realist straplines to suggest that *The Blue Lamp* was a frenetic crime thriller movie: 'The battle with the post-war gun man blazes to life on the British screen for the first time'; 'The unending battle of the city streets'; 'Scotland Yard in action as death stalks the streets'; 'The street is their 'no-man's' land'; 'Scotland Yard at grips with post-war crime'; 'The greatest murder hunt the screen has ever shown'; 'Secrets of Scotland Yard on the screens for the first time'; '999- and the hunt is on'; 'Through fear he shot a policeman. Through fear he was betrayed'; 'The inside story of Britain's crime wave'.

An action-packed opening sequence does not disappoint viewers. It starts with the police pursuing criminals in a high-speed car chase through the bomb-damaged streets of London. The car driven by the hoodlums crashes and they shoot an innocent shopkeeper as they attempt to flee the crime scene. Aldgate and Richards (1998) argue that audiences would have been immediately reminded of the gunning-down of a passer-by in central London while he was trying to stop a burglary on the Tottenham Court Road in 1947. The urgent realism is heightened by the flashing of 'crime wave' newspaper headlines across the screen: 'Murder in the streets; father of six killed by gunman'; '70mph police chase ends in crash'; 'Stolen car strikes woman in West End crash'; '2 women fight bandits in London street'; 'Bank gunman found dying'; 'Double murder tests by CID'; 'Gunman holds up shop girl'.

The narrator informs the viewer that:

To this man until today, the crime wave was nothing but a newspaper headline. What stands between the ordinary public and this outbreak of crime? What protection has the man in the street against this armed threat to life and property? At the Old Bailey, Mr Justice Fidmore in passing sentence for a crime of robbery with violence gave this plain answer: 'This is perhaps another illustration of the disaster caused by insufficient numbers of police. I have no doubt that one of the best preventives of crime is the regular uniformed police officer on the beat'.



Figure 1.1a PC George Dixons

The voiceover continues: 'Veterans like George Dixon with 25 years service and now PC693 attached to Paddington Green and young men like Andy Mitchell who has just completed his training'.

### **PC George Dixon of Dark green**

Moving on from pre-war representations, a range of meaning is constructed around the figure of PC George Dixon. He is portrayed as an uncomplicated, down to earth, seen-it-all London 'bobby' who knows his 'manor' inside out and who is called upon to police the everyday rather than serious crime. Because of his devotion to 'the job' he enjoys the respect of senior officers and all sections of the locality, including the petty criminal elements. The film's press book explains that:

He is representative of all policemen throughout the country, steady going, tolerant, unarmed, carrying out a multitude of duties. He directs traffic, helps kiddies across the road, moves on the barrow boys, keeps an eye on property.

When crimes take place his investigations are soon taken over by Scotland Yard, but there is always the danger of armed thugs, planned hold-ups, smash and grab raids.

As one of his last responsibilities before retirement, a reluctant PC Dixon is given the role of 'puppy walking' Probationary Constable 814D Andy Mitchell and familiarizing him with the manor in which he will be working. We see them intersecting and interacting with a complex range of human behaviour and predicaments. Drama is clearly not the stuff of 'welfare policing'. The many supporting characters who populate the film are used to show that the White working class community's attitude to the police ranges from respect through to wariness and resentment. Dixon gradually takes a protective interest in the young constable and their relationship unfolds as a model of father-son closeness. The audience is familiarized with not just the day and night routines of working the street and the ebb and flow of local crime and disorder but also with the informal 'canteen culture' and the warm and humorous home life of George Dixon. The basis of the relationship between him and 'Ma' Dixon is companionship and the shared experience of public service and the war. His off-duty character is fleshed out via his devotional tending to his plants and flowers, which of course is reminiscent of Sergeant Cuff. The probationary constable, who is not a Londoner, is offered lodgings and he quickly becomes a replacement son. As Barr notes:

What Mitchell has been absorbed into is a family. First a literal one: he finds lodgings with Dixon and his wife, and comes to fill the place of their son of the same age who has been killed in the war. Second, a professional family: the close community of the police station in Paddington, characterised by convivial institutions; canteen, darts team, choir; and by bantering but loyal relationships within a hierarchy. Third, the nation as a family, which may have its tensions and rows but whose members share common standards and loyalties; in a crisis, the police can call upon a general respect and will to co-operate. This sense of national family ... is built very profoundly into the structure of the film. (1980, p. 84)

In time-honoured Ealing fashion, *The Blue Lamp's* many sub-plots present the audience with the world of ordinary people in the neighbourhood, workplace and the family. As various commentators have noted, the film spells out the moral basis of this imaginary community: restraint, self-sacrifice and emotional understatement. Social stability is reproduced through a web of intimate, differentiated relationships generated by the bonding routines of work, family and communal off-duty activities. This critical context highlights the need for young men to be absorbed into traditional work relationships where they can learn to understand the importance of duty, obligation and responsibility. This commendable 'in-built' world of the cultural values and 'structures of feeling' of 'old' London is contrasted starkly with the representation of

young children running wild in bomb-scarred neighbourhoods, over-crowded, dilapidated tenement blocks and gangs of youths congregating in the garish 'wild' West End. The narrative repeatedly invokes newspaper discourses about dangerous young tearaways and violent criminals on the road to ruin, a police force stretched to the limits, fractured post-war communities and the influence of London's 'square mile of vice' (see Tietjen, 1956; Kohn, 1992).

#### The criminal threat

Dirk Bogard's character, Tom Riley and his sidekick 'Spud' are constructed to exemplify a very different youthful masculinity to that of the respectable PC Mitchell. The voiceover tells us that:

These restless and ill-adjusted youngsters have produced a type of delinquent partly responsible for the post-war increase in crime. Some are content with pilfering and petty theft, others with more bravado graduate to more serious offences.

We then get the first glimpse of the Spiv-like Riley and Spud lighting cigarettes in Piccadilly Circus before making their way to a dimly lit snooker hall to seek the support of the local crime boss. The voiceover now informs us that they are:

Youths with brain enough to plan and organise criminal adventures but who lack the code, experience and self-discipline of the professional thief, which sets them as 'a class apart'. All the more dangerous because of their immaturity. Young men such as these two present a new problem to the police. Men, as yet, without records or whose natural cunning or ruthless use of violence has so far kept them out of trouble.

As the film progresses, the characters of Tom Riley, Spud and Riley's girlfriend, Diana Lewis, offer the audience a view of what happens when traditional forms of informal social control break down and repressed desires are allowed to play out in an unregulated manner. The film implies that the excess of individualism and hedonism of these wayward youths is threatening the very fabric of the fabled Ealing Studio's version of the community and indeed the nation. The criminal machinations of Riley and Spud and the suggested sexual relationship between Riley and Lewis in their dingy bedsit magnify the permissiveness threat they represent to the social order.

Tom Riley is portrayed as a threatening, immature young man (with no stable family home or settled class or community context) acting out scenes from his favourite gangster movies. He is also outside London's ordinary, decent professional criminal community whose ethos is depicted as 'dishonest but decent, shady but entirely predictable. They stick to their accepted territory: the billiard hall, the dog track, like a stamp to a letter, adopting a deferential manner to the police, and even assisting them when mutual codes are

violated' (Chibnall, 1997, p. 140). In one scene, Mr Randall, the crime boss, rejects Riley's attempt to involve them in their plans: 'What happens if you get done? You little layabouts are all the same. You'd scream your 'ead off. Then the bogeys get on to me. Stick to gas meters sonny'.

All Tom Riley has to depend on is a 'flashy' materially oriented West End emergent youth subculture that despises broader communal bonds and looks on the code of London's traditional criminal fraternity and the police with disdain. The relationship between the conscience-free, arrogant Riley and the 'hysterical' peroxide blonde Diana Lewis is tension ridden with an ever-present petulance and petty jealousies. When the camera first alights on 17-year-old Diana she is walking through a crowded neon-lit London street, jazz playing in the background. The voiceover tells the audience that she is 'a young girl showing the effects of a childhood spent in a broken home and demoralised by war'. Her desire for self-esteem and a more exciting life leads her to declare to a female police officer that she would kill herself rather than go back to the dismal, brutal home environment that she has run away from. As the film progresses, we see that Diana Lewis is obsessively attracted to the good looks and edgy attitude of Riley and the bright lights of the West End.

#### The murder of PC Dixon

Tom Riley's do-whatever-it-takes-to-prove-yourself graduation from petty crime to armed robbery and murder develops its own terrible momentum. His willingness to use violence is made clear early on in the film when he 'coshes' a police officer who has disturbed their first big robbery. The emotionally charged 'moment of truth' in *The Blue Lamp* originates roughly halfway through the film when PC George Dixon confronts Tom Riley as he attempts to flee from the scene of an armed robbery of the Coliseum picture house that has gone dreadfully wrong. This pivotal scene is stretched out to make sure the audience witnesses just how vulnerable the unarmed police officer is when faced with this new generation of gun-toting young criminals. Dixon tells Riley not to be a fool and to drop the revolver.

*Tom Riley:* Get back!

*PC Dixon:* Drop that and don't be a fool. Drop it, I say!

*Riley:* I'll drop you!

*Dixon walks forward despite Riley's panic.*

*Tom Riley:* Get back! This thing works. Get back! Get back, I say! Get back!

Then, in an unprecedented moment in English cinema, the masked teenage gunman panics and fires two shots at point-blank range into PC Dixon. For the first time an audience has been allowed to bear witness to a close-up cold-blooded shooting of a uniformed police officer. The drama of this violent



Figure 1.1b Riley confronting Dixon

interruption contrasts sharply with the banality of the setting: PC Dixon on his night beat just after informing his colleagues that he has decided to postpone his retirement and a couple squabbling in the foyer of the Coliseum picture house. The audience is forced at this moment to recognize that this film, in line with the conventions of *film noir*, is not going to have a conventional happy ending. Dixon will not survive the operation to save his life. Riley's desperate eyes convey a terrible truth: his cowardly act has shattered the hopes of a consensual post-war social democratic order and Generational relationships. Jack Warner was clearly aware of the potential impact this moment of self-sacrifice would have on audiences: 'I realized that the murder of the policeman, far from eliminating him, really gave him a martyr's crown as a man never to be forgotten and that any audience would readily understand the spirit of the film and the message it conveyed'. (Warner, 1975, p. 54; Warner, 1979)

One of the most poignant moments in the film comes when PC Andy Mitchell has to tell 'Ma' Dixon that her husband has died in the hospital. She is getting ready to go the hospital with a bunch of George Dixon's flowers from the garden when she realizes 'he's dead'. She puts the flowers in water before breaking down and crying on Mitchell's shoulder. PC Mitchell swears to her that they will apprehend the killer. Her dignified response allows the audience to understand the enormity of the crime of murdering an unarmed bobby on the beat.

### The restoration of social order

The gunning-down of PC Dixon transforms the film into a classic 'police hunt down violent criminals' crime movie. We witness the behind-the-scene assembling of the Scotland Yard operation to catch 'the bastard that shot George Dixon'. There will be no escape for the juvenile Spiv-turned-cop killer. Justice will prevail because Scotland Yard CID – the world's most professional crime-fighting machine – has been mobilized. In addition, even the most anti-police sections of the community are shocked by the murder of a 'copper'. A street trader who we have already seen Dixon moving along declares to PC Mitchell that although he does not have much time for coppers he does not approve of shooting them. This theme is exemplified by the detectives' encounter with Queenie, the tough little street urchin who has found the murder weapon. Initially she refuses to co-operate telling them that her dad has warned her against talking to coppers. The conversation gradually moves to a more focused question:

*Detective:* Do you know what a murderer is?

*Queenie:* Someone who gets hanged.

*Detective:* That's it. We think you can help us catch one. We want you to show us where you found that revolver. Will you take us there?

After Queenie shows them the canal where she found the revolver she asks 'will you be able to hang him now?' The detective quietly replies 'We'll see Queenie. We'll see'.

His growing realization that the police are closing in leads Tom Riley to go voluntarily to the police station in an attempt to clear his name. However, his over-confident attitude and contradictory answers arouse the suspicions of the detectives who interview him. He survives a hastily convened ID parade but is tailed. He finds Diana in Spud's lodgings and when she refuses to accompany him he tries to strangle her. A detective bursts through the door with Diana screaming 'He shot that copper. He was the one that killed him. Tom Riley killed him'. He steals a car, and in an extended car chase, that echoes the films opening scenes radio-controlled squad cars block every possible escape route. Eventually the stolen Buick crashes, Spud is badly injured or dead and Riley flees on foot across the railway tracks with PC Mitchell in pursuit.

In a remarkable sequence filmed at London's White City greyhound stadium, a desperate Riley thinks he has found anonymity and safety among 30,000 milling race fans. However, he is isolated and captured as a result of the co-operation between the stadium management, the gangsters (who control the betting) and the police. The cornered cop killer pulls a gun on advancing police officers but is pushed to the ground as the crowd rushes to leave the stadium. P.C. Mitchel removes the revolver from Riley. The film does not tell the audience what happens to Riley after his capture. For Medhurst (1986,

p. 300), it may seem odd that a film so concerned with criminal justice fails to include a concluding trial scene with Riley being sentenced to death, 'but the punishment has already been dealt out, in far more iconographically powerful terms, as the stadium crowd close in on the individual transgressor'. In classic Durkheimian terms, the film thus re-creates the fabled moral boundaries of the communal order. The penultimate scene shows footage of Andy Mitchell, now a veteran police officer, walking George Dixon's old beat giving advice to a member of the public. The film closes with a shot of the 'the blue lamp', the symbol of law and order, hanging outside Paddington police station. The final message would seem to be that you can murder a human being but not a sacred social institution.

### **Critical perspectives on the *The Blue Lamp***

Precise audience reception of *The Blue Lamp* is impossible to measure in any systematic manner, not least because it is now difficult to separate the film from its own mythology and because we do not have available evidence. We do know that the film was a box office success, and won the Best British Film of the Year award, with *Motion Picture Herald* voting Jack Warner Top British Male Actor for 1950. However, we do not have evidence of how younger members of the audience responded to what was in effect a film that had been scripted to exploit the public fears and anxieties about materialistic, sexually active juvenile delinquents. Certain film historians cannot believe that Ealing Studios expected the nation's youth to side with the 'drab, bland and neutered' character of PC Andy Mitchell over the 'compelling, thrilling and above all erotic' character of Tom Riley, played by Dirk Bogard (Medhurst, 1986, p. 347).

We need to keep in mind that Bogard was at the forefront of redefining English male roles in the post-war British cinema and his star quality and good looks gave him 'heart throb' status in the 1950s (Coldsteem, 2004). Despite the best efforts of the Ealing Studios, the Metropolitan Police and the British Board of Film Censors, Bogard's dramatization of Riley's pent-up rage and murderous desires renders him a much more noirish, glamorous villain than may have been intended. Morley (1999, p. 40) comments that his cocky performance destabilizes the heroic centre of the film because he manages to communicate 'the sexiness of evil'. An extended scene in which Riley shows a very frightened Diana Lewis how he is going to use the newly acquired revolver he is playing with to get what he wants intimated the link between sexuality and the thrill of violence.

*Diana Lewis:* Do you ever get scared?

*Tom Riley:* Yeah, course I do. It's a kind of excitement.

*Diana Lewis:* You mean you like it?

*Tom Riley:* It makes you think quicker. You're all keyed up and afterwards you feel terrific like ...

The scene ends with the one wildly passionate embrace in the film. Bogard was in effect allowed by Ealing Studios for box office reasons to play one of the first British examples of the street-smart, violent young criminal already on view in Hollywood. And of course in his attitude he anticipates the Teddy Boys, the first fully-fledged English youth subculture of the post war period (Rock and Cohen, 1976).

Police reaction to the film was positive. Sir Harold Scott, then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, approved of the final product, describing it as 'a faithful picture of the policeman's life and work ... [and] a valuable means of spreading a knowledge of the efficiency and high traditions of the Metropolitan Police' (Scott, 1957, p. 100). Indeed, after the film's premier, the Metropolitan Police presented Jack Warner with a casket and scroll.

Across a broad range of political leanings, the press (though not all as we shall see below) responded well to the film – it was welcomed by *The Star* 'as an overdue apology for that flat-footed squad of 'What's all this 'ere?' semi-comic policemen who have plodded through so many British films' (*Star*, 20 January 1950). *The Times* (20 January 1950) congratulated the film-makers on their 'sincerity' and 'realism': 'it is not only foreigners who find the English policeman wonderful, and in composing this tribute to him, the Ealing Studio are giving conscious expression to a general sentiment. The tribute is a handsome one'. *The Daily Worker* (21 January 1950) informed its readers that 'We have been told so often that our policemen are wonderful that it is not surprising that someone should have made a film to prove it once and for all'. *Cine Weekly* (12 January 1950) lauded the film as a 'gripping and intensely human "crime does not pay" melodrama' which is 'a worthy and eloquent tribute to our policemen'. On the other side of the Atlantic, *The New York Times* (9 January 1951) described it as 'a warm and affectionate tribute'.

However, some contemporary reviews winced at the one-sidedness of the film and criticized the sentimental representation of the police and its overall nostalgic orientation. The *Spectator* (20 January 1950), for example, described the film as a 'sincere if slightly sentimental' homage to 'that portion of our police force which wears a helmet, tells us the time, and accuses us of being an obstruction: the constable, in fact ... the production encourages us in our belief that all policemen or courteous, incorruptible nannies'. Some film critics argued that the film's limitations were symptomatic of the failure of British films to get to grips with their subjects. *The Times* (20 January 1950) film reviewer noted that:

When the camera shifts to the persons of Police Constable Dixon and Police Constable Mitchell there is no longer the certainty of reality accurately observed and accurately presented. There is the indefinable feel of the theatrical back-cloth behind their words and actions. Mr Jack Warner and Mr Jimmy Hanley do all that can be done, but the sense that the policemen they are acting are not policemen as they really are but policemen as *an indulgent tradition* has chosen to think they are will not be banished

*Film Monthly* (Jan/Feb 1950) and *Sight and Sound* (Enley, 1950) were scathing in their views on the tired, hackneyed nature of the Warner/Hanley partnership. Reviewers also noted that the film's ideological celebration of the Metropolitan Police compromised the very possibility of realism as did the lament for the national unity and community spirit exhibited during the Second World War.

### **Conclusion: the long shadow of the iconic police constable**

This chapter has analysed the many ingredients that went into the popular cultural making and remaking of the English 'bobby', and he was ideologically nurtured with great care. The on-screen murder of PC George Dixon represented the final step in the English 'bobby's' transformation into an idealized representation of Englishness. The cultural project inaugurated by the Ealing Studios was concluded on 9 July 1955 when 58-year-old Jack Warner was miraculously resurrected as PC George Dixon in the BBC TV series *Dixon of Dock Green*. Ted Willis and Jan Read had retained the stage rights for the film script and a version of the film was subsequently staged at theatres in Oxford and Blackpool before playing at the London Hippodrome between November 1952 and March 1953. Willis took responsibility for scripting an initial six-episode television series that would afford audiences the happy ending that he had deprived them of in *The Blue Lamp*. The new police drama was commissioned to replace *Fabian of Scotland Yard*. Every Saturday evening the programme opened with the theme music and PC Dixon's warm-hearted 'Evening, all'. The nation was presented with an overwhelmingly benign view of police work and police-community relations in 'Dock Green'. The early shows ended with Dixon walking down the steps of the fictional East End police station – 'within earshot of Bow Bells and hard by Old Father Thames' – summing up the solved case under the 'blue lamp'. He would salute the audience and stroll out of shot whistling the old music hall song 'Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner'. Because Jack Warner felt that PC Dixon should be representative of 'the bobby' on the beat of any English town or city, rather than the nation's capital, the theme tune was subsequently changed to 'An ordinary copper', one of the BBC's classic signature tunes (see Clarke, 1983; Sydney-Smith, 2002; Cooke, 2003)

Certain television critics and social commentators were shocked that the BBC could have chosen to revive what one described as the sentimental 'reassuring, never, never, world of "hearts of gold" coppers and "cor blimey crooks"' (see Vahimaji, 1994, p. 48). However, the comforting representations and reassuring moral epilogues established an intimate rapport between viewers at a time when television was still something of a novelty. By 1961 it was the second most popular programme on television with an audience of almost 14 million viewers (Willis, 1964). By this time viewers could also purchase 'Dixon of Dock Green: My Life by George Dixon' which provided background information on

his East End childhood and why he joined the police. Willis and Graham, 1964; also Edwards, 1974). Dixon, who was finally promoted to sergeant in 1964, policed his 'Dock Green' manor until May 1976 and by this time 'Evening, all' had become a national catchphrase. The success of the new breed of 'realist' police officers in *Z Cars*, *Softly, Softly*, *The Sweeney* and the first wave of US cop shows did force the programme makers to update the programme's storylines and characters. And, as we shall see in Chapter 4, subsequent film-makers and television companies would use frantic, restless camera work to present 'celluloid cops' in deconstructed forms and expressions that were a far cry from *The Blue Lamp* and *Dixon of Dock Green*.

Ealing Studios and the BBC produced, in the form of PC George Dixon, the authoritative black-and-white image of the 'bobby on the beat', providing the cultural parameters within which post-war English policing would be understood and debated. In June 1981 14 officers from the Metropolitan Police and Kent constabulary formed a guard of honour at Jack Warner's funeral with Assistant Deputy Commissioner George Rushbank noting that the force had a 'warm affection' for the actor immortalized as *Dixon of Dock Green*: 'he was our kind of policeman'. A wreath in the shape of a 'Blue Lamp' had been placed on top of the coffin. The BBC broadcast on episode of *Dixon of Dock green* was broadcast as a tribute. Nonetheless, in that same year television cameras were transmitting images of London police officers using dustbin lids and milk crates to shield themselves from rioters hurling stones and petrol bombs and police vehicles speeding through burning neighbourhoods. How policing had moved 'from Dixon to Brixton' was the pressing question that a bewildered British establishment had to face.

The Dixonian myth-fantasy continues to haunt contemporary debates about policing. As we shall see in later chapters, calls for the modernisation of policing to meet the challenges of twenty-first-century global criminality are routinely accompanied by the declaration that it is time to exorcise once and for all the 'once upon a time' myth of a 'Dixonian' policing model. In 1997, for example, a *Police Review* article-'Dispelling the Dixon myth' - concluded that 'as we head towards a new century, we owe it to the old boy to cut him adrift and consign him to his place in history'. (Hicks, 1977) However, when politicians and commentators seek to summon forth a lost 'golden age' of 'Englishness' marked by national unity, cultural cohesion, neighbourliness and law and order they now reach - intuitively it seems - for pre-1960s images' of county cricket grounds, village greens, red telephone boxes, rose-trellised gardens, warm beer and of course PC George Dixon pounding his beat. 'Dixonian' is now routinely evoked as a form of shorthand to define the traditional values of the English police.

And what is truly remarkable is that we continue to hear calls to bring back 'Dixon of Dock Green'. In 1999, Malcolm McLaren, the Svengali of contemporary British youth culture, promised voters that if he was elected Lord Mayor of London, a hologram of a postmodernized PC George Dixon would

flash over the city to reassure law-abiding Londoners and criminal elements that they were being watched over! Sir John Stevens, the then Metropolitan Police Commissioner, conceded in February 2003 that the force had made a terrible mistake in removing bobbies from the beat. Newspapers carried the story under 'It's time to bring back Dixon' headlines with the obligatory photograph of PC George Dixon. In June 2005, 50 years after BBC television launched 'Dixon of Dock Green' and 55 years after *The Blue Lamp* PC George Dixon was even back in a series of Radio 4 plays based on the original TV scripts. Newspapers enthusiastically greeted the news with 'Dixon returns to Dock Green' type headlines. Later in the year, a news item on Paddington Green police station produced the following letter in 'The Job', the staff newspaper of the Metropolitan Police:

I was very pleased to read the article about the Blue Lamp at Paddington Green police station. It brought back memories of my first station, the old Paddington Green. I must have gone under the lamp many times. In 1947 I was posted there as a probationer. During the making of *The Blue Lamp*, we were told to co-operate with the film company as the Commissioner thought the film would be good propaganda for the service. I do not agree with the comment that the film showed an idealistic view of British policing. Maybe I look back through rose tinted glasses, but I saw it as a true reflection of the situation at Paddington, maybe with a few embellishments for entertainment purposes.

On my first two days out on the street, I was shown around the ground by a PC with about 20 years service. Like several other senior PCs at the station he could have been Dixon. Everyone had great respect for him, even the villains, and he knew all of them in the area ... . He was a marvellous policeman and taught me how to be a practical policeman. I know the enthusiasm, camaraderie and team spirit at this busy station kept me in the job in those early days. May the lamp continue to shine for the next 140 years as a symbol of law and order. Yours sincerely, John Solway.

Hence, despite all attempts to modernize and professionalize policing, the core British police identity remains profoundly dependent on a fictional haunting image of the 'bobby on the beat' projected by Ealing Studios in 1950. In Chapter 2 we will see how the first British sociological study of the police by Michael Banton reinforced the idealistic cultural image of the 'bobby' by defining the British police as a sacred national institution.

Finally, a reflection within a reflection about the transformations engulfing English society between the making of *The Blue Lamp* and the screening of *Dixon of Dock Green*. By 1952, according to contemporary newspapers, 'young toughs' and 'cosh boys' were stalking London's streets and alleyways. A climax was reached on the evening of 2 November 1952 when PC Sidney George Miles was killed during an exchange of gun fire between Metropolitan Police officers and one of the two young burglars who were attempting to break into

a warehouse. The youths were Christopher Craig aged 16 (who was armed with a revolver) and Derek Bentley aged 19. Sensationalist headlines in the next morning's newspapers declared that a Chicago-style gun battle had raged on the streets of south London. As with PC Edgar's murder four years earlier, this shooting stoked public anxiety about the threat posed by violent crime to British society (Selwyn, 1988). Craig, because he was under the legal age for hanging, was sentenced to life imprisonment. The mentally subnormal Derek Bentley was executed on 29 January 1953 for inciting Craig to free the fatal shot by shouting 'Let him have it, Chris'. Yallop noted at the time that this expediently demonstrated the government's 'termination to solve the problem of juvenile crime, particularly crimes of violence, once and for all. The Executive felt that Bentley's death would encourage the youth of this country to think twice before they went out armed with revolvers, knuckle dusters, coshs, knives, razors and chains ... His death in fact, was a categorical statement of intent to all delinquents, 'if this death does not encourage you to mend your ways, then take care; you may be next to hang' (Yallop, 1971, p. 96). Derek Bentley had become the scapegoat for a whole generation.

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### Note

1. It is worth noting that the constable had already been constructed as a comic character by William Shakespeare. We have Anthony Dull in *Love Labour's Lost*; Elbow in *Measure for Measure* and most famous of all Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. See J.A. Roberts 'Laughter and the law: Shakespeare's comic constables' in E.C.Viano and J.H. Reiman (eds) *The Police in Society* (Lexington, MA, D.C. Heath, 1974).