

# The Race Course Police

By JEFF COWDELL and PETER KENNISON

**Horseracing is the second largest spectator sport, and has been a very popular pastime with many horse racing courses originating since 1750, when the Jockey Club was formed.**

Gatwick Racecourse in Surrey opened in October 1891 as part of the National Hunt season, and shut down in 1940 at the start of the Second World War. The course, which was established beside the London to Brighton railway line, boasted a dedicated station with its own sidings for horses. The course now forms part of Gatwick airport.

On race days, large numbers of people flocked to Gatwick on one of the 26 trains that stopped there travelling from London.

There has perennially been a problem with the policing of fairs and racecourses all around the country. Many of the spectators were honest racegoers, however their number also included thieves, pickpockets and fraudsters. When gambling, alcohol and large numbers of people gather in one place there is potential for disorder. The Metropolitan Police were traditionally in attendance at many of the racecourses, including Epsom, Ascot, Brighton, Sandown Park etc, even though it was inside the Surrey Constabulary area and well beyond its London border. The Metropolitan Police were present

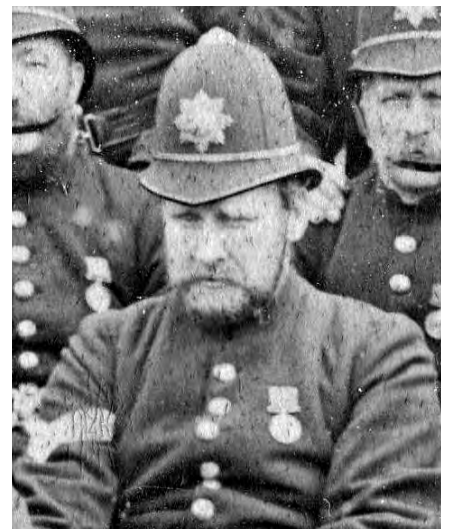
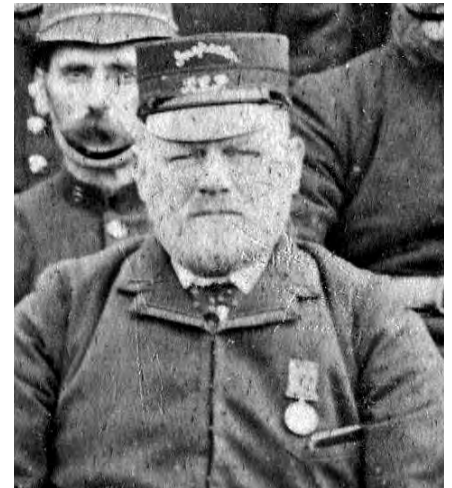
at those races attended by Royalty, especially Edward VII. They also policed the Lingfield racecourse as well, situated ten miles from the Gatwick course.

The Metropolitan Police officers present were always on the lookout for those intent on criminal enterprise, picking out known villains for special attention. When the Metropolitan Police declined to send any officers for the October 1893 meeting at Lingfield the race organisers feared problems. The Met were sending police officers on special duties; numbers were depleted because of strike duty, and they could not honour their previous commitments. The coal strikes were not over by the time the Gatwick meetings came to be decided so the Race organisers took matters into their own hands, and set about establishing a Race Course Police of their own.

A private Special Police Force was formed consisting of pensioners from the Metropolitan and City Police Pensioners Employment Association (MCPPEA).

The Association was based at the Queen's Hall, James Street, and had been formed in 1888 with the object of finding employment, temporary or permanent, for Metropolitan and City Police pensioners. Their patrons were

the Home Secretary, Police Commissioners for London, Members of Parliament and Justices of the Peace.



*Race Course Police officers  
Top: An Inspector  
Bottom: A Sergeant*

In 1893, 780 had paid subscriptions to what in effect was an employment

agency where potential employers could find a reliable, honest hard-working man for a position of trust. Retiring police officers under 55 years of age from London and the City of London with a good character could apply to join the association via a small quarterly subscription, and were retained on the books until employment was found.

That year, 350 men had been found work as vergers, watchmen, hall porters, caretakers, messengers, turnstile men,<sup>1</sup> gardeners, grooms, attendants and timekeepers.<sup>2</sup> These men formed part of a reserve of officers who, when pensioned, were allowed to retain their uniforms in case they were needed for special occasions.

The object of the MCPPEA went beyond just finding work for the pensioners who retired relatively early. It was about finding the right sort of responsible work not onerous, but employing the skills that had been learnt over the years as a policeman.

Each policeman received 7 shillings a day when they were in attendance at race events, although some had other responsibilities such as gatekeepers or work in the stable yard, which earned them more, at £1 7s 6d a day.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, both the Gatwick Race Course Company and the Lingfield equivalent employed police pensioners from this organisation. The Race Course Police were available for any duty at any racecourse.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1895 season, there was trouble at Lingfield when some of the Race Course Police were assaulted.

When groups of drunken men caused serious disturbances at race meetings, the Race Course Police needed to be on hand to intervene and protect the innocent law-abiding race goer.

Under the instructions of Col. Brewster, who was Lingfield

Staff Manager and Jockey Club Representative, one such officer was Austin Porter (who had retired from the Metropolitan Police in 1886). He gave evidence of violence and damage by one Thomas Smith, who he knew, and others towards himself and Walter Coborn, Thomas Reid and other private constables.

Smith had been arrested when a group of men started throwing glass bottles and tumblers at the officers, but later on, by the station, a group of over 100 so-called roughs created a disturbance with further damage, where Smith was again involved, along with a man called Gartell.

Hewitt, another constable, was badly injured with a 4-inch scalp wound inflicted by another man. At Surrey Assizes, Smith was acquitted and Gartell convicted.

There was evidence that plain clothes detectives, probably from the MCPPEA, were organised by Col. Brewster at Lingfield<sup>5</sup> and Folkestone racecourses. Other courses such as Bath and Salisbury wished to employ the police after disturbances which had occurred at their race events.

Col. Brewster could dismiss any of his police for misconduct and also any of the gatekeepers.<sup>6</sup>

At Lingfield in 1898, anticipating trouble the Gatwick Race Course Company decided to employ a particularly large contingent of police, where Scotland Yard detectives patrolled the London end and all the stations on the London to Brighton line in order to ward off objectionable people.<sup>7</sup> Inside the racecourses at Lewes, Gatwick, Lingfield and Brighton, the Race Course Police performed their duty.

Whilst the new police groups were being formed they could not allow the same buttons, numerals, helmet and cap badges to be worn, as this group did not represent the Metropolitan

or City of London Police. They were semi-official, with the equivalent powers of a constable that were needed to police a gathering of racegoers.

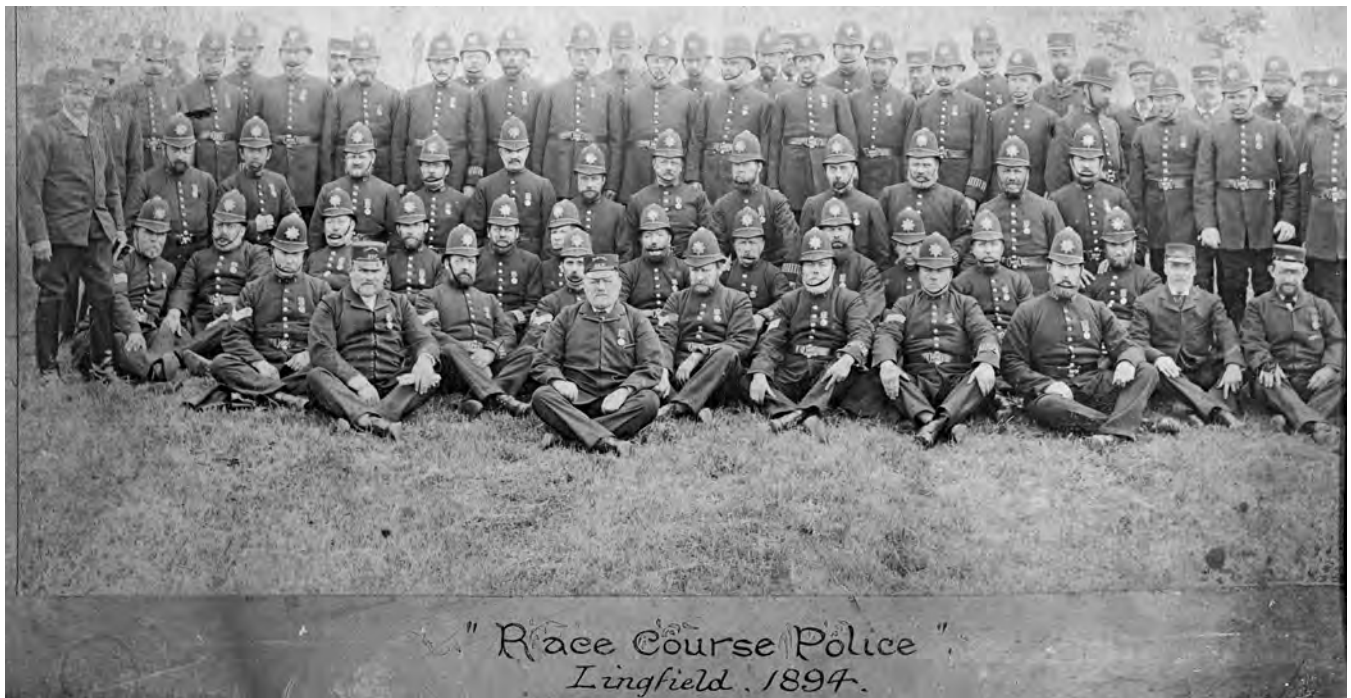
Yet these men were engaged simply to observe and look out for trouble; to recognise and deal with known pickpockets and villains.



*Race Course Police  
helmet plate and button*

The badge chosen to be used on their helmets for sergeants and constables was a Metropolitan Police style eight-pointed star with separate circle centre bearing the title Race Course Police, and within the centre a collar number; in the example shown below '179'. The blackened metal<sup>8</sup> badge did not have the crown or garter inner circle, as Royal permission would have been required.

A rare original photograph captioned "Race Course Police, Lingfield, 1894", shown on the opposite page, presents over seventy police officers, most of them wearing



helmets but some wearing kepis. They are wearing Metropolitan Police style uniforms with the eight-pointed star pattern helmet plate. Those wearing kepis have the letters R.C.P in script, two with the letters Inspector above.

All of the men are mature in age and most are wearing the 1887 Jubilee Medal, only awarded to members of the Metropolitan Police and City of London forces for duty at the Royal event. Except for the inspectors, all the remainder are identifiable by a collar number each side of their uniform as well. The police officers were also equipped with their truncheons, which they had used on a number of occasions.<sup>9</sup>

The photograph shows the constables and sergeants wearing a duty armband as was the norm, however none have been issued with a whistle and chain. The sergeants' stripes do not conform to the normal pattern issue for Metropolitan or City of London Police, and were unusually only worn on one sleeve of the tunic.

Newspaper archives reveal that these police were employed by Each Race Course Company up and down

the country, and were presumably sworn in as special constables. The Employment Association, and indeed the Race Course Police, ceased to exist after 1907 and both fell into obscurity.

- 1 *The Police Review and Parade Gossip*, 10th April 1893, p170
- 2 *Uxbridge & W. Drayton Gazette*, 10th March 1888
- 3 *Surrey Mirror*, 5th October 1906
- 4 *The Police Review and Parade Gossip*, 11th December 1893, p591
- 5 *Surrey Mirror*, 4th August 1899
- 6 *Sporting Life*, 4th October 1906
- 7 *Morning Post*, 13th September 1898
- 8 This badge is shown with the kind permission of Graham Stevens of the Police Insignia Collectors Association (PICA), its current owner.
- 9 *Croydon Chronicle and East Surrey Advertiser*, 29th July 1899



JEFF COWDELL is a retired Staffordshire Police officer and long-standing member of the Police Insignia Collectors Association of Great Britain. He joined Staffordshire County Police in 1963, being posted to the Brierley Hill district. Since then he has served at Tamworth, Lichfield, Cannock and Rugeley as a Rural Beat officer and later Motor Traffic Patrol officer. He retired after 35 years in 1998. Through his interest

in police history and police badges of office Jeff has collected police cap and helmet plate badges since 1964. The knowledge gained through collecting has enabled him to offer advice to other enthusiasts and also to co-write *Policing the Potteries and Special Constabulary Insignia of England and Wales*.

PETER KENNISON joined the Metropolitan Police in 1970 and after initial training was posted to Islington Police Station. He transferred to Hackney Police station on promotion to sergeant in 1977 and in 1981 became an instructor at the Metropolitan Police Training School. On promotion to Inspector in 1984 he transferred to Limehouse Division, also later serving at Complaints Investigation Branch as Staff Officer to Commanders Three Area. He saw service at Edmonton and Barkingside before he retired in 1996. Peter has a keen interest in Police History and Criminology, having obtained an OU degree in Social Sciences, MA Criminology (1995) and a PhD (2001) at Middlesex University. He became a university lecturer at Middlesex University where he has co-written three books of London Police Station History between 1998 and 2014. He has also co-written two further publications entitled *Child Abuse* (2008) and *Shooting to Kill* (2010). His latest research has focussed on policing before the Metropolitan Police (1749-1839), and a resulting book *Policing from Bow Street: Principal Officers, Runners and The Patrole* is forthcoming.