

1) History - The First Century

When the Union Flag was raised over Possession Point on 26 January 1841, the population of Hong Kong Island was about 6,000, mostly Tanka fishermen and Hakka charcoal burners scattered in a few poor villages around the coast. Within a few months, the population soared. Into Hong Kong's fast-rising godowns and spreading quays poured many merchants eager to do business in the new mart that had so suddenly sprung up across the Pearl River from the familiar settlement of Macau. Ships carrying many flags anchored in the harbour. Trade boomed, and with it the infant town. It was not long before grog shops, gambling dens, opium parlours and houses of ill repute sprang up among the bustling commercial premises along the praya.

Two months after the British landed, the law and order situation was critical. Pirates were active in the waters surrounding Hong Kong,¹ and there was no organised police force to cope with the situation.²

On 30 April 1841, Captain Charles Elliot, who as British plenipotentiary had seized Hong Kong, appointed Captain William Caine of the 26th of Foot (Cameronians) Regiment as Chief Magistrate, responsible for managing the Police, the magistrates' court and the gaol. His 1,400 pounds budget was meant to cover salaries for himself and a 32-man force, pay for a prison and clerks.

By 1844, the law and order situation had not greatly improved. Private watchmen who patrolled the narrow streets with lanterns, banging gongs to frighten away evil spirits and wrongdoers, were less than totally successful.

On 1 May 1844, the first Police Ordinance was passed³ and the government gazette officially established the Colonial Police Force. Although there had been some sort of haphazardly organised force for three years, it was this law that founded the police in Hong Kong as a distinct, disciplined body. The

¹ Hamilton, S., *Watching over Hong Kong: Private policing 1841-1941*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 93.

² Hamilton, S., *Watching over Hong Kong: Private policing 1841-1941*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 15.

³ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 17.

notion of a professional, paid law enforcement organisation was novel. The Metropolitan Police in London had been formed a mere 12 years earlier.

The infant Hong Kong Police Force was chaotic, disorganised and made up of largely suspect individuals, Chinese, European and Indians. Less than a year after the law establishing the Police was passed, Charles May arrived on 28th February 1845 to take command⁴ as Captain Superintendent and brought about an immense influence on the way Hong Kong was policed. Using the Irish Constabulary as his model, Charles May forged a 171-strong force, built stations at Central, Aberdeen and far-off Stanley, and attempted to recruit constables of better quality.

Charles May introduced improvements in conditions of service, including pay, pensions and quarters, but still had difficulty in recruiting and the quality of recruits was generally unsatisfactory. By 1849, the Force was well short of its establishment, although the population had increased to 20,000 and almost doubled again in the years following the Taiping Rebellion in China, when thousands flocked to Hong Kong.

It was a relief that the Force was later able to expand greatly with the growing prosperity of Hong Kong, with several police stations built in the 1850s and 1860s, including:⁵

No. 1 Police Station at Percival Street (1853);

No. 2 Police Station at Wan Chai Road junction with Johnston Road (1868);

No. 3 Police Station at Queen's Road East (1847);

No. 4 Police Station close to the former Victoria Barracks, east of the former Naval Dockyard (1863);

No. 5 Police Station at Queen's Road Central junction with Wellington Street (1857);

No. 6 Police Station on Victoria Peak (1869);

No. 7 Police Station at Queen's Road West junction with Pokfulam Road (1858);

⁴ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 18.

⁵ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 30 and p. 193.

No. 8 Police Station at Station Street⁶ (1870); and
No. 9 Police Station at Caine Road (1853).

In 1862, the first 'floating police station' for the Water Police (renamed as Marine Police in 1948) was moored in the harbour and the barque *John Adams* was commissioned for use as Water Police Headquarters in 1868. In 1884, a new Water Police Station at Tsim Sha Tsui was opened after *John Adams* had already been in use for 16 years. In the mid-1870s, a new building programme was put in place, entailing the construction of police stations at Yau Ma Tei, Hung Hom and Shau Kei Wan.⁷

Charles May served as Captain Superintendent of Police until he was promoted to Police Magistrate in 1862 when he handed over the Police Force to William Quin. In his 17 years, Charles May had created a workable police organisation that had faced pirates, triads and criminals, bringing some degree of stability and safety to the fast growing city.

Life, however, was still dangerous. By 1862, Hong Kong's population had reached 120,000 and Britain had obtained the tip of the Kowloon peninsula. It was hazardous to walk in the streets at night and even in their homes, residents rightly feared burglars. The Force was stringently reorganised with taut discipline imposed. Veterans were imported from the Bombay Native Infantry and there was a universal pay rise to boost morale and performance. In 1867, the Force numbered almost 600, of which nearly two-thirds were Indians.

In July 1866, Walter Deane, William Quin's successor, was gazetted as Captain Superintendent of Police. Being one of the few British officials who could speak Cantonese, Deane considered that there should be more bilingual police and every member of the Force was expected to learn one additional

⁶ The first No. 8 Police Station was located in Station Street, Tai Ping Shan District, which gave the street its name. In use from 1870, the station had to be moved to the nearby Hospital Road during re-development of the Tai Ping Shan District in the late 1890s, immediately after the bubonic plague epidemics. It was demolished in 1925. A new No. 8 Police Station at High Street was inaugurated in 1928 and then demolished in 1934. The fourth No. 8 Police Station was built on the same site and was completed in late 1935. It housed Crime Hong Kong Island Regional Headquarters before it is, as at now, used as the David Trench Rehabilitation Centre.

⁷ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 59.

language other than his own.⁸ A police language school was then set up in October 1869 when the Master in Charge, Edward Willcocks, ran the school in the evenings for European, Indian and Chinese members of the Police Force and the Gaol staff. Attendance was at first voluntary but by 1872 it became compulsory for all officers stationed in Central District, or within easy walking distance to Central Barracks, where the school was established.

By the 1870s, the Force had been regenerated and was working effectively. The corruption and incompetence had been purged. More Chinese had been recruited and a contingent of sturdy Scots was imported from the Edinburgh Police. Crime dropped significantly; 384 people had been convicted of highway robbery in 1866, an alarming figure that dwindled to 24 in 1876. Murder and piracy also dropped.

That respite was a rare one in an era of turbulence. The Tai Ping rebellion shuddered through China between 1851 and 1864, with its furious ramifications shaking Hong Kong. Triads, in a pattern that was to become familiar in times of peril, used political upheaval for their criminal benefit.

In 1893, there was an appointment that was to have extensive ramifications. Francis May, aged 33, one of a string of Irishmen who headed the Force in its first half-century, took command. Francis May's leadership and dedication to serving Hong Kong was first displayed when he led the police in handling the plague which ravaged Tai Ping Shan in 1894, "personally supervising the distasteful and dangerous task of burying the dead, evacuating the living and demolishing affected buildings."⁹ May not only ran the police; but he also headed the fire services, ran the prison, sat on the forerunner of the Urban Council and served as an active Legislative Councillor. He eventually became the Governor of Hong Kong. Throughout his career, he kept a close interest in the Force he had previously helped reform and strengthen.

In June 1898 Britain leased the New Territories (NT) from China for 99 years. The most prominent settlements in NT included Ping Shan, Sheung Shui and Sha Tau Kok; along with Tai Po, Sai Kung and Tai O. These places

⁸ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 52.

⁹ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 86.

experienced the first permanent police stations built in the NT between 1899 and 1902.¹⁰ New police stations were built along local settlements, on higher and defensive ground with an establishment of 20-40 police officers. Tai Po Station was the first one completed in 1899.¹¹ To meet these new policing needs, an additional 300 officers were recruited.¹²

Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, more piracy and banditry activities occurred. Cheung Chau Police Station was raided by pirates in 1912 with three Indian constables killed, firearms and about \$1,000 in land rents and harbour dues stolen. Following the attack, a new Cheung Chau Police Station was built that is still in use today.¹³ Another incident was the attack on 'Tai On', a river steamer of 438 tons in 1914, resulting in the death of over 200 people, either by shooting, fire or drowning. The Tai On incident was "the worst case of piracy to have occurred in the Pearl River Delta" and the government enacted the new Piracy Prevention Ordinance in the same year.¹⁴

The 20th century arrived with hopes. Trade was growing constantly. The dreadful plague of the 1890s took thousands of lives and the police played a heroic role. Schools, hospitals and banks flourished. In China, momentous changes were looming which, as had happened before and so often since, were to hit Hong Kong like a typhoon.

The upsurge of nationalism that led to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty and formation of the Republic of China caused turmoil. Warlord armies roamed

¹⁰ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 194.

¹¹ Some of the police stations built at that time are still in existence. For examples: (a) old Tai Po Police Station was vacated by the Force in 2007 and developed by 'Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden'; (b) old Sheung Shui Police Station was replaced in 1978 and subsequently used as a 'Junior Police Call' club house since 2006; (c) old Ping Shan Police Station is now run by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department as 'Ping Shan Tang Clan Gallery'; and (d) old Tai O Police Station has been revitalised as a small hotel in 2012.

¹² Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 96.

¹³ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 101.

¹⁴ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 103-104.

over the land and the turbulence caused waves of new settlers to swarm over the Shenzhen River. There were strikes and boycotts that caused great civic unrest in Hong Kong. The police, as always, bore the brunt of keeping the peace in an era of upheaval.

During World War I, many expatriate officers had left to join the military. Ten died on the Western Front, many others never returned to Hong Kong. It was during that period that civilians entered the Force with 352 men sworn in as Special Constables in the Special Police Reserve. It comprised three companies, Britons and Indians in one, Chinese in a second, and a third made up of Portuguese. They were a valuable backup to the hard-pressed regular force and the start of a noble tradition of service.

To bolster the ranks, recruits were drawn from far away, and signed on at the port of Wei Hai Wei in Shandong Province. Their sturdy presence was welcome. Politically-inspired strife caused tension throughout Hong Kong; a situation made worse by threats to harm workers who refused to join strikes. A special police squad was formed to guard those who wished to work. Even at sea, there was trouble; so daring were pirates and hijackers of ships that a special squad, made up largely of White Russians, was stationed on coastal vessels to prevent piracy.

The immediate post-war years brought an increase in violent crimes and labour troubles, culminating in the Seamen's Strike of 1922 and the General Strike three years later. In March 1923 the Criminal Investigation Department was established and its officers played a major part in handling the General Strike with the formation of the Labour Protection Bureau, which dealt with those who sought to intimidate workers. Support of strike action soon began to wane when the strikers saw that the police were able to act effectively to prevent intimidation.

The 1920s and 1930s, Hong Kong had undergone rapid social and political changes and the Force continued to keep pace with these changes. Population increased steadily. During the General Strike, the Special Police Reserve, disbanded after the war, was reformed with both Chinese and non-Chinese contingents in order to maintain social stability. Two years later, it was reconstituted on a more permanent basis and named the Police Reserve; the forerunner of the present Auxiliary Police. In 1927, the first Emergency

Unit was formed to operate on the Hong Kong Island to deal with minor disturbances, serious crimes and natural disasters. New police stations were built at Yau Ma Tei, Mong Kok, Sha Tin, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, Upper Levels, Wan Chai and Ta Kwu Ling.¹⁵

In 1934, Thomas Henry King took charge of the Police Force as Inspector-General of Police and became the first Commissioner of Police when the title changed in 1938. He was credited with forming the Criminal Investigation Department and became its first Director in 1923. King was to oversee the Force in the troubled years leading to the World War II.

Throughout the 1930s, there had been anti-Japanese feeling among the Chinese population resulting in outbreaks of civil disorder. The worst one took place on 23 September 1931 when the Japanese occupied Manchuria. Anti-Japanese feelings among the Chinese population heightened and a series of public order incidents happened throughout Hong Kong. The “July 7 Incident” in 1937 marked the Imperial Japanese Army’s full scale invasion of China and the beginning of the Chinese People’s resistance against Japanese aggression. Full-scale fighting between China and Japan began and eventually Hong Kong was ravaged by the overwhelming Japanese forces in 1941.¹⁶

John Pennefather-Evans became the new Commissioner of Police in April 1941, just in time to witness the Japanese invasion. When the Japanese invaders came over the Hong Kong border in December 1941, chaos prevailed. As Allied soldiers and Hong Kong Volunteers fought the enemy, police struggled to keep the peace among panic-stricken residents, to curb looting and protect the public. The Police Headquarters at Central Police Station came under artillery fire and was bombed, resulting in a number of casualties and considerable damage, forcing all personnel to be evacuated to the Gloucester Hotel, which was already packed with refugees. Four officers were killed in an engagement with the Japanese in Quarry Bay when fighting in support of British and Indian troops, while two others died when fighting on

¹⁵ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 195.

¹⁶ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 128.

other parts of the island.¹⁷ A total of 87 regular or reserve police officers died during the Japanese invasion.

After 18 days of fierce fighting against the Japanese invaders, the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong began when the Governor, Sir Mark Young, surrendered on 25th December 1941. Expatriates were rounded up to spend dreary years in internment, or to face a sudden or slow death, while Chinese and Indian officers were allowed to remain in the occupied Hong Kong. Many local policemen managed to leave Hong Kong and escaped to the unoccupied parts of China, while some worked for the Japanese civil authorities during the occupation. Some disappeared, never to be heard of again, their fates unknown. Japan finally surrendered unconditionally on 15th August 1945.

¹⁷ Crisswell, C. and Watson, M., *The Royal Hong Kong Police, 1841-1945*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 175.



No. 1 Police Station at Percival Street (built in 1853)(demolished)



Wan Chai Police Station in use since 1932



The third generation (left block) and second generation (right block) of No. 7 Police Station in Western District, taken in 1952



The Barrack Block of Central Police Station in the 1950s

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