

Why is the golden age of policing' such a potent myth in british society?

[Life](#)



The Golden Age of policing refers to a time when things were apparently better. We have all heard elders in our society talk of the good old days when none of today's atrocities happened: when the police did a better job, when there weren't as many criminals. However how true is the myth of the Golden Age? In order to examine this myth it is crucial to look at the police and their roles back in the 1940s and 50s and compare it to their roles today and also look at society and their view of the police.

There is lots of historical evidence available to us about the police and how it has formed since, in particular the 18th Century. This evidence is based on original documentation from the time and gives us an accurate account, however we can only interpret and construct the history, as there is nobody alive to tell us otherwise. The so-called Golden Age is within living memory and we only have to use the evidence, to tell us of the time, but we can also ask people who were there. These people can compare current policing to the Golden Age and in contrast an age of better times is created.

This works with other issues not only policing. Police roles in Britain remained fairly static from the early 19th Century to the 1960s. The police had four main functions, the first being Crime Prevention, to prevent crime before it began. Policing was visible and unmilitary. Crime Detection was a function that involved the apprehension and prosecution of criminals. It did not really involve detection, as this was a low priority function because there was paranoia about spies. Detection involved invisible policing in contrast to the visible policing of crime prevention.

The third function was that of Public Order, which dealt with rioting. This was a variable function as public order was stable within society. The last function was the service role. The service role was an important part of policing at the time as the police did many other jobs including tax collection, auxiliary firemen and licensee inspections. The police provided cheap labour for society and were a huge part of community life. The role of the police changed with the introduction of The Police Act 1964. The structure of the police also changed and the tripartite relationship was put in place, which is still seen today.

The main roles of the police have changed slightly and now include crime prevention, crime detection, the service role and a range of special units that have become more important than the public order role. Special units within the police include units such as the Drugs Squad, Fraud Squads and public order squads like riot control and armed police. It is said that these specialist units have had an influence in the decline of the service role. Officers do not spend as much time dealing with low level crime, as they are unable to solve this type of crime and so instead concentrate on high impact crime.

The police moved away from the service role as professionalism was introduced and a move was made from the amateur unskilled labourer to a professional employee who in turn was paid well. To join the police became a career. Policing today in comparison to the Golden Age is seen as distant and remote. Policing in modern times has become technological. The use of mobile phones and walkie-talkies has increased efficiency within the police.

The police drive round in cars and are hardly seen in some areas. Other areas do have a police presence but it is not always welcome.

The police are now more readily armed and use deadly force if needed. In recent years even this year innocent people have been shot and killed by the police. Policing has become bureaucratic and this has caused limited results. Policing has become ruled by administration and paperwork and sees police officers spending most of their time in police stations. In the 1940s and 50s policing was seen as very benevolent. They were members of a community who were well natured and well mannered, they lived within the locality and were seen as non-confrontational.

There was an apparent use of minimal force. They didn't carry arms and the local bobby was seen with nothing other than his truncheon. Society at the time was in a state of stability and the public order role of police was very minimal. Policing was seen as un-technological. They didn't have the use of cars or mobiles and the local bobby was visible walking or on a bike. Policing was something that was good. To examine this view we must first analyse people's attitudes at the time. During the Second World War people were used to figures of authority and they were used to discipline.

There was social cohesion, as people seemed to know their place in society. People didn't move about the country as they do today and it was usual to be born and die in the same area. Britain was in a state of economic stability, there was full employment and people seemed happy. The police as figures of authority were respected and put on a pedestal. A survey called Exploring the English Character, conducted by Geoffrey Gorer in 1955 found the public

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to think, " The police represent an ideal model of behaviour and character". (Reiner 1989) The policing of the time seems somewhat idyllic.

What is not mentioned is that for the police this era was not necessarily a good one. The job of policeman was not seen as a career at the time. It was a semi skilled job that had a very low wage and this did not get better until the 1970s. Police malpractice in the form of corruption was wide spread through out the force and there were a number of police scandals involving Chief Constables. (Emsley). The Chief Constable of Worcester was imprisoned for fraud and the Chief Constable for Cardigan was disciplined for not administering his force correctly.

The Chief Constable for Nottingham was suspended and later acquitted but damage had been done to the police already. (Wall) Recorded crime was on the increase and there were race riots in Nottingham. British society was becoming a consumer society and there was a huge increase in car ownership. This in turn gave the police new duties in traffic control. The police began to have anxieties about the public. (Reiner 2000) In 1960 this malpractice led to the Royal Commission on policing. It is worth noting that to have a Royal commission something must have been wrong in the first place.

The media have their own part to play in the representation of the police at the time. There was minimal media coverage and Dixon Of dock Green was the fictional policeman that covered the television screens. He was the perfect friendly local policeman that helped the community and was even kind to the local villains. Unlike today where our screens are inundated with

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police programmes from " The Bill" to the fly on the wall police documentaries where the police are portrayed in both good and bad lights. Today the police are seen more as Robocop than Dixon who would wade in with guns and bombs rather than a truncheon.

Today's police are constantly in the public eye and because of this the public are more aware of what actually goes on within the police. In conclusion the Golden Age is a myth in British society as there is little evidence that it was better. (Wilson) Policing in the 1950s was different from what it is today but that is expected of anything in life, it cannot stay the same. The Golden age was based on blind faith and ignorance of what policing involved at a harmonious time. In today's age we are confronted with growing concerns of crime from terrorism to drug trafficking which have not been seen in such large scales in this century.

Public attitudes to the police have changed and so have the attitudes of those that work in the police. Public confidence has declined due to the rising crime rates that have soared due to cultural, social and economic factors and the increase in reporting and scandals within the police, however the police are in a better state today than before. (Downes and Morgan in Maguire 2002). The Golden Age myth will continue and in fifty years time the Golden Age will be replaced with a new one that is constructed by law-abiding citizens of the police of today.