



SOUTH WALES POLICE
MUSEUM

The History of Police Uniform



The History of Policing in Wales

The History of Police Uniform

The uniform of the British bobby has evolved not only with changing fashion trends, but also with the developing needs of officers.

In the beginning, police dressed in the style of a gentleman about town. Shortly afterwards, the police uniform reflected the military style of the day, firstly inspired by the French, and then the German fashion after 1870.

After World War I, the military styles changed, but the police did not follow their trend-setters. They kept their style of dress until the 1950s when it was made more comfortable, and the basic uniform has changed very little since.

The First Uniform of the Glamorgan Constabulary

The first officers in the Glamorgan Constabulary adopted the style of dress worn by London's Metropolitan Police.

This consisted of a top hat, often called a 'stovepipe' or 'chimney pot hat', a swallow tailed coat, navy blue winter trousers or white summer trousers, and wellington boots.

Officers concealed their decorated truncheons (featuring the Royal coat of arms and the words 'Glamorganshire Constable') in the tails of their coat, along with their rattle and handcuffs.

This style of uniform resembled the dress of the Victorian gentleman. A non-military style was chosen to deter critics from comparing the new police to soldiers, although the chosen uniform was similar to the dress of the Bow Street Patrol.

On 22nd November 1841, the new Glamorgan Constabulary paraded for the first time in their new uniform. Their coats were pilot-blue, so they were soon referred to as the 'Blues' by the local press. The letter 'G' for Glamorgan and the officer's number was embroidered on their collars in silver thread, surrounded by a double-line of silver embroidery.

They also wore a leather girdle or belt around their waist to hold their cutlass scabbards, rolled capes and lanterns.



PC 67 Ephraim Watkins of Bridgend in 1856, with his metal reinforced hat.

Every officer was issued with a pair of boots and shoes each.

An armlet finished off the uniform, which officers were told to wear whenever they were on duty - policemen were instructed to wear uniform at all times except when in bed!

In 1830, a blue and white striped armlet was introduced because the public were complaining about seeing police gossiping on duty.

Officers were also given oilskin capes for wet weather and were allowed to carry umbrellas on duty.

For additional protection, officers were issued with a 4-inch high leather stock to wear around their necks to prevent them being strangled by a cord!

Despite the best efforts of Sir Robert Peel and Chief



PC 95 James James of the Glamorganshire Constabulary, pictured in 1860 wearing the new style frock coat and carrying a curly brimmed helmet.

Constables to make the new police acceptable to the public, lots of nicknames were coined, often linked to the uniform.

In addition to 'Bobbies' and 'Peelers' (which were clearly aimed at Sir Robert Peel himself), other nicknames included 'the Blue Army', 'Blue Locusts' and the 'Raw Lobsters'.

Children recited the rhyme:

"There goes a bobby in his black shiny hat
And his belly full of fat"

The uniform remained roughly the same for the next 20 years. There were changes in the height and construction of the top hat; its side stays of cane and steel reinforcement was extremely heavy to wear.

Influence of the Military

By the 1860s, the police were becoming an accepted and welcome part of everyday life.

The general public who resisted a military style force 30 years earlier were now clamouring for military efficiency in the police.

This desire, combined with the increasing number of ex-soldiers becoming Chief Constables, resulted in army-style administration and strict discipline.

The British army copied aspects of the French, and then German uniforms, and this became reflected in the style of police dress.

In 1864, the unpopular top hat was replaced with a helmet. These helmets had a comb extending from the crown and down the back, like the old fireman's helmet. The British army began to wear helmets in a bid to emulate the powerful Prussian army, and coincidentally the top hat was no longer fashionable amongst the general public.

The swallow-tailed coat was replaced by the longer frock coat in 1856.

Captain Napier reported that the frock coat had led to the "greater comfort and convenience of the men", as the swallow-tailed coat was not suitable for bad weather.



Dress of the Senior Ranks

Senior officers stood out because of the high-quality of their uniform.

For example, the collar and cuffs of their frock-coats were heavily braided with silver lace.

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, senior officers were considered an elite group and dressed accordingly.

Their uniform design was reminiscent of the armed forces and made a personal statement about their position in society.

Chief Constable Joseph Jones for example (Chief Constable of the Glamorgan Constabulary from 1936 – 1952) chose to wear a bicorne hat. The head-dress



Superintendent Cole of the Glamorganshire Constabulary (1897-1911). His uniform owes much to contemporary German and British fashions.



Influenced by the German Pickelhaube. Loosely translated the word means "pick cap" in reference to the spike/pick on the top.

is naval in origin and illustrates the love of imaginatively designed items of personal uniform.

Chief Constable Jones's bicorne hat and the tin hat box he kept it in are now on display in the South Wales Police Museum.

By the end of the 20th century, senior uniforms included the necessary distinctions but had lost the flamboyant decoration.

The Kepi and the Pickelhaube

Senior officers stood out because of the high-quality of their uniform.

Lower ranks in the Glamorgan Constabulary were issued with helmets for special or ceremonial occasions, and French-style pillbox forage caps (modelled on the French Army Kepi) for normal duty.

In 1870, the French Army was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War by the German Army.

As a result, the German style of dress became more fashionable and this is reflected in the changes to the British army and police uniform.

The British army adopted the spiked German helmet, or 'pickelhaube', in 1878. A helmet inspired by this



Modern South Wales Police Officers uniform

design was worn by Cardiff Borough Police until the mid-1930s.

This style of helmet was the inspiration for the helmet worn by officers today.

Modern Uniform

By the time World War I broke out in 1914, the principal British police uniform had become a copy of the ceremonial ‘full dress’ worn by the British Army.

During the summer, and in the police station, officers wore a lightweight version of uniform, which was a copy of the army’s ‘undress’.

After World War II however, the British army abandoned ‘full dress’ and adopted a formal style of dress based on their battle dress.

As a result, the police couldn’t follow the army’s fashion lead anymore, so continued to wear pre-WWI fashion.

In the 1950s, the police tunic was redesigned with an open neck to make it more comfortable.

Nowadays, officers still wear tunics for special occasions such as crown court appearances and ceremonial duty, but on the beat, their uniform is much more practical, and specialist officers such as the Mounted Section and Public Support Units have uniforms that are fit for their individual tours of duty.

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