

“A Lawless City”

The Irish capital in the early years of the nineteenth century was a congested city of less than 250,000 people who lived where they worked, in every street and back alley; the hackney carmen and sedan chair carriers providing the only means of public transport. A lawless city, as the recently appointed Commissioners of the DMP reported in 1838.

Criminals “had usurped a control over a considerable portion of their fellow citizens, and had enforced obedience to their capricious and despotic regulations by the most sanguinary means; and from want of a sufficient force to suppress those outrages the system had been allowed to grow up and spread itself so as to seriously injure the merchantile interest of the city. Public houses which may be considered the hotbeds of crime and vice were not subjected to proper control, and the laws and municipal regulations which were instituted to maintain decency, order and cleanliness had become a dead letter.”



Helmet plate of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, 19th century, Timothy O'Neill, from artefacts in the Garda Museum.

The protection of the lives and property of the citizens was the responsibility of a police force of sorts, about 850 untrained constables and watchmen under local magistrates who had a vague police supervisory role. The administration of justice was in the hands of these magistrates whom Daniel O'Connell in the House of Commons castigated as “violent political partisans.”

In 1835, Thomas Drummond was appointed Under-Secretary in the Dublin Castle administration. He made police reform his first priority, and the following year parliament at Westminster passed an “Act for improving the police in the District of Dublin Metropolis”.

On the first day of January 1838 the first 800 members of the DMP appeared on duty for the first time. Later in the week the new police, quaintly dressed in uniform top hats and frock coats, paraded in the gardens of Dublin Castle for inspection by the Lord Lieutenant and presented, as reported in the Dublin Evening Post “altogether. . . a very uniform as well as a very efficient appearance.”

