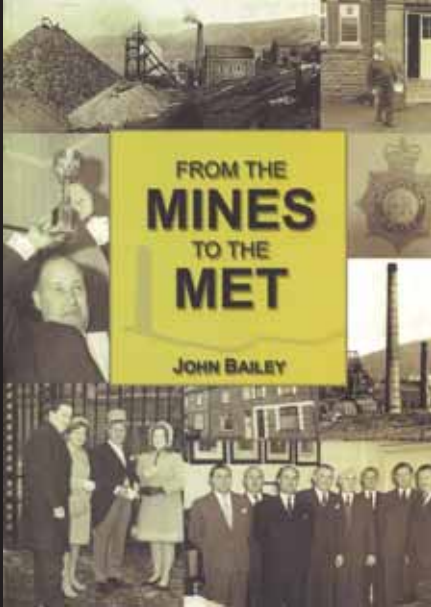


The Way We Were



Tony Judge reviews 'From the Mines to the Met'

The weekly classes for Metropolitan probationer constables in G Division in the autumn of 1936 included two young men from hugely different backgrounds. Stanley Peck had been educated at public school and university. He was an outstanding athlete, who was about to enter the new Hendon Police College under Lord Trenchard's accelerated promotion scheme. He would become a highly regarded chief constable of Staffordshire and HMI. He is remembered for his strong belief in the value of police dogs.

The second young man was John Bailey. He grew up in an impoverished family in a Welsh mining village, one of nine siblings. His father, an ex-miner, had been invalided out of the army in World War One. The family depended on the meagre earnings of an elder brother, a miner. John passed the examination for the local grammar school, but

there was no way of letting him go to it. When he reached his 14th birthday, he started work down the mine, giving the few shillings he earned to his mother. He was 19 when he realised his ambition to be a policeman.

Thirty years later, he became a Chief Superintendent and one of the elite top detectives in the so-called "Murder Squad". In his engaging autobiography; *From the mines to the Met* (£7.99) he paints a vivid picture of what it was like to be an East End copper in peace and wartime.

In those days, Londoners knew that the Bobbies patrolled on foot, and at night ensured that all businesses and premises were safely locked up. Their sole protection was a light (concealed) truncheon and a whistle.

As John puts it, uniformed foot patrol deterred crimes rather than solved them.

Not all the more experienced PCs who showed him round the beats in his early days were paragons of virtue. He would often be told to "wait here a minute" whilst the mentor disappeared, emerging some time later with a "distinct whiff of the barmaid's apron." Reprehensible, of course, but how much useful local intelligence was gathered in such surroundings?

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John's Dalston beat included Ridley Road, with its outdoor market. The street's name has passed into Britain's social history as the scene of pitched battles between Sir Oswald Mosley's Jew-baiting thugs and their bitter opponents. The police were literally the pigs in the middle. Normally, John's biggest problem was the

rubbish left by market traders. One day, when his requests for the street to be cleaned-up were ignored, he issued 14 summonses, much to the annoyance of the station inspector.

On the day that Britain declared war in 1939 John was sent with another officer to see what the staff of a German hospital had been up to. The birds had, quite literally, flown. Not only were they back in Germany, but the homing pigeons they had kept in a locked attic had all been released, having served the Third Reich well in transmitting secret information.

John gives graphic descriptions of how eastenders bore the horrors of the blitz. His station at City Road was destroyed and baby twins in an upstairs flat were killed. He writes movingly of taking his close comrade to a hospital to identify his dead wife.

There were also moments of black humour, as when a shocked air raid warden rang the station to say there was a land mine in his lavatory, and was told to "pull the bloody chain".

John Bailey MBE died aged 90 in 2004. The book ends with an appreciation written by members of his family, which includes his son Stuart, who also rose to be a member of the Murder Squad.

From the Mines to the Met is available from Police Pensioners Housing Association: 1 Tarrant Street Arundel West Sussex BN18 9AZ Proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to the PPHA.