

A GUARD FACT FILE - BOW STREET RUNNERS.

The Bow Street Runners – a short history.

The Bow Street Runners of London, England were formed in 1749 by **Henry Fielding**, a Bow Street Magistrate. His blind half-brother, **Sir John Fielding**, ‘the blind beak’ (beak being a slang term for a magistrate), took over the running of the Runners after Henry Fielding died in 1754. Initially, there were eight plain clothes runners. As time went by foot and mounted uniform runners were created. The Runners eventually had authority to travel anywhere in the United Kingdom in the pursuit of criminals. It wasn’t unknown for them to travel abroad. The foot and mounted patrols were known as ‘Robin Redbreasts’, on account of their red waistcoats. By the late 1810’s, early 1820’s the Runners were at their height of fame. The Runners badge of authority was a crown tipped baton.

The Runners successfully arrested the Cato Street conspirators in London on February 1820 after a fierce hand-to-hand fight. The conspirators known as the Spenceans planned to kill the British government of the day. Runners other duties included guarding Royalty, stopping duels and investigating thefts and other crimes. Robert Peel became Home Secretary in 1822. He opposed the Runners and fought to have them replaced by a new police force, the Metropolitan Police. (Policeman in the early days were known as ‘Peelers’). Peel finally achieved his aim in 1829. Although the plain clothed Runners remained separate from the Police they remained in existence until 1839. several of the Runners were famous in their day. These included **John Townsend**, who guarded Royalty and was an expert on highwaymen. Townsend started his career under Sir John Fielding and was still working as a runner in the 1820’s. **George Ruthven**, led a party of Runners into the building where the Cato Street conspirators were hiding. **Henry Goddard** joined the runners in the 1820’s and remained a Runner until they were disbanded. Goddard left behind a diary of this cases. Other runners included **William Ballard, John Sayer and Vickery**.

Note – the Spenceans were named after Thomas Spence, an English Radical and advocate of the common ownership of land. Spence was one of the leading revolutionaries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

