

Were the police to blame for being unable to solve the murders of Jack the Ripper?

“Jack the Ripper” was a murderer destined to remain unsolved by the police. It is important to emphasise that the police’s failure to arrest and prosecute a suspect for the Whitechapel murders does not mean that they did not work hard to capture the killer. They worked hard and explored all leads but their techniques were limited.

Problems with the New Metropolitan Police Force

Before forensic science, the only way to prove someone committed a murder was to catch them in the act, or get the suspect to confess. The Whitechapel Murders happened during this period of time. Police presence was increased dramatically around Whitechapel at the height of the murders and police quite often stumbled across the ‘ripper’ victims whilst they were still warm. But unless the ‘Ripper’ was literally caught red-handed then the police had little chance of solving the case.

Double Trouble

Not one but two police forces carried out investigations of the ‘Ripper’ murders. The Metropolitan Police based at Scotland Yard, was responsible for crimes committed in all the boroughs of London except the City of London itself. The one square mile in the heart of London had its own police force. When Eddowes was killed, it was in their territory and this meant that they were the Ripper case. It is believed that most of the two forces worked well together, but there is evidence that the serial killer did not. Did their failure to co-operate during the ‘Ripper’ investigation mean that a killer walked free? Most sources do not think so. The police force for failing to solve the Jack the Ripper mystery, rightly pointing out that solving serial murders is still a hard task even with today’s science and technology.

Forensic Evidence

Apart from autopsies and taking statements from people who might have seen something there was not much that the Metropolitan police force could do. Forensic evidence was not available at the time. The fact that the murders occurred at night when the police still believed that taking a photograph of the victim’s eyes after death would show the image of the murderer. Today, police who are hunting a serial killer use DNA fingerprinting to match the evidence with the killer. In 1888 police could not even manage a satisfactory artist’s impression of the Whitechapel murderer.

Lack of a Reward

It was common for the police to offer a reward to the general population for any information that they could offer about serious crimes. This was not the case with the Ripper murders. The attitude of the people at the time was that the police were incompetent. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Charles Warren, was only good for policing crowds and keeping order rather than real detective work. Warren was criticised for not offering a reward in the hope that an accomplice would come forwards against the Ripper. In fact, Warren had no objections for a reward being offered and it was his superior, Henry Matthews, the Home Secretary who refused the offer of a reward.

Abuse of Evidence

One of the splits between the leadership of the two forces was over graffiti found in Goulston Street on the night of the “double event”. A piece of Eddowes’ apron, which the Ripper used to wipe off his knife, was found by a constable near a doorway that had a chalked message over the door. This message, “The Jews are the men that will not be blamed for nothing”, may have been written by the Ripper and the City police officers wanted to photograph it. Warren felt that leaving it until it was light enough to be photographed might cause riots against the Jews living in Whitechapel whom the English residents believed were responsible for the murders.

In the end the police never charged any suspect with the murders committed by the Ripper which shows they did not have a sufficient amount of evidence that would gain a verdict of guilty in criminal court. This had more to do with the limitations of the police work at the time and nothing to do with the amount of effort put into the investigation.

Homework Questions: Answer the following in your exercise book, writing in full sentences where necessary

1. Make a list of the problems that the police had during the Ripper murders?
2. Which of these problems do you consider to be the most important and why?
3. What modern day techniques and police facilities may have helped catch the Ripper if the police in 1888 had access to them?