



Fig. 1
2020 Watchman's
Sentry Box, Norfolk
Crescent, Bath.
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The Watchman's Sentry Box (Watch Box) Norfolk Crescent, Bath

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Introduction

1 The Watchman's Sentry Box (or Watch Box) in Norfolk Crescent was built circa 1810 (Fig. 1). It is protected by a Grade II* Historic England listing where it is described as a "very rare survival of this building type, revealing a high level of architectural finish"¹. It is reported to have been restored in 1896² and 1965, during the 1890s and in 1965³. It was last restored in 2012 by the Bath World Heritage Enhancement Fund (WHEF), as the first project undertaken when the Fund was formed.⁴ A further restoration is now proposed by the Fund. Recognizing that few people will know about or understand why these boxes were important in Georgian England, the WHEF commissioned this paper. The brief was to explore the history and use of Watch Boxes generally and particularly in the City of Bath. This research data will support publicity that may be generated following the current restoration.

The Development of the Watchman in History

2 Early concepts of policing in Britain were based on ancient laws which relied heavily on subjects having a responsibility, adjusted for rank and wealth, to assist in maintaining law and order. Gradual regulation saw the creation of the office of Sheriff in the ninth century with responsibility for mobilising the citizenry to suppress lawlessness and defend the country. The 1181 Assize of Arms created an obligation on all freemen to possess and bear arms in the service of the King.

3 The system developed further in the thirteenth century when new Ordinances introduced provisions for further maintaining order including the roles of Constables, Watchmen and Beadles. These roles were often interchangeable. In some places they would be answerable to the Sheriff but in others they could be autonomous. In medieval times in France and in England the Constables were traditionally high-ranking army officers with a role in maintaining martial law. The new Constables were drawn from the upper and middle strata of society and could include tradesmen and farmers.⁵ Unpaid and untrained, they carried out policing duties on a rota, keeping order with powers to arrest and punish criminals. They also had a role in summoning men to arms, quelling breaches of the peace and delivering offenders to the Sheriff. The purpose of the Watchman – a paid position – was primarily to deter criminal activity, with a secondary role in ensuring public safety by raising alarms. Beadles were paid Ward functionaries, organising and upholding discipline. The role still exists today in the City of London where Ward Beadles and Livery Company Beadles have uniformed roles which are largely ceremonial.

4 The modifications to the then existing system were eventually incorporated into a collection of regulations under the Statute of Winchester in 1285, that became the primary legislation regulating policing from the period after the Norman Conquest until the nineteenth century. Administrative divisions of the country were given collective responsibility to ensure that law and order were maintained. A system of 'watch and ward' also came into being whereby householders were required to maintain the peace in their parishes and the duties of the night (watch) and daytime (ward) were defined with the numbers of Watchmen specified according to the size of the community.⁶ Other measures supported Constables and Watchmen in their ability to keep the peace – for example town gates were to remain closed from dusk to dawn.

5 In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Watch evolved further (in 1663 Charles II funded a force of paid Watchmen to patrol the streets in all towns and cities) although it was still a matter of local initiative as to the efficiency of the local force. The blurring of the boundary between the definition of Watchman and Constable also remained. Town authority local Improvement Acts in the eighteenth century often included provision for paid Watchmen or Constables to patrol at night and Constables or Beadles to patrol by day at public expense through the rating (or local tax) system. Rural areas had to rely on more informal arrangements, and it became clear to people in power that provision across the country was inadequate to the scale of the growing problem of crime that came in the wake of industrialization.⁷ Tighter law enforcement was demanded, and the situation evolved through legislative 'Improvement Acts' into development of the police service we know today. In 1737 an Act of Parliament was passed to better regulate the City of London Night Watch. Henry Fielding established the Bow Street Runners in 1749 and between 1754 and 1780 his half brother, Sir John Fielding, reorganised the 'Runners' into a local force operating from what we would now call a police station. The Metropolitan Police Service was founded in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel (and nicknamed 'Peelers'). It took until the County and Borough Police Act of 1856 for policing to become a requirement throughout England and Wales so, in parts of the country, the Watchman role continued well into the nineteenth century.



The Role of the Watchman

6 A Watchman was therefore a forerunner of today's police constable specifically tasked with providing a night-time presence on the streets to deter criminal activity and reassurance to the populace about their safety. Various Watch Acts in the 1700s established an annual wage for Watchmen, their hours of duty, and ordered them to be at their posts every night. The men generally gathered at a Watch House at nine o'clock in winter and ten o'clock in summer where the Ward Beadle called the roll. Armed with a staff (which replaced the earlier halberds), a lantern, and later a clapper to signal another watchman for help, they took their positions at Watch Boxes or anywhere they had a good view of a street. Their locations were printed and posted in public areas to notify citizens. Watchmen often worked in pairs, patrolling their beat, calling the time and announcing the weather. They came off duty in the morning at seven in winter and five the rest of the year. An offender arrested by a Watchman would spend the night in the Watch House. In the morning, the Constable would take the offender to a magistrate.⁸

7 As any male citizen (with exceptions) could be co-opted to serve as Constables or Watchmen many sought to avoid the duty by paying a fine or hiring a deputy – often elderly men or ex-soldiers who needed the money. The system was not designed to attract the brightest and best. By the eighteenth century the service had come into disrepute and was known for corruption, incompetence and drunkenness. A mock advertisement of 1821 summed up the malaise: *“Wanted, a hundred thousand men for London watchmen. None need apply for this lucrative situation without being the age of sixty, seventy, eighty or ninety years; blind with one eye and seeing very little with the other; crippled in one or both legs; deaf as a post; with an asthmatical cough that tears them to pieces; whose speed will keep pace with a snail, and the strength of whose arm would not be able to arrest an old washerwoman of fourscore returned from a hard day's fag at the washtub...”*⁹

Watchmen in Bath

8 Most documentary evidence about Watchmen relates to London and there is little specifically about Bath. Like every other walled city in the country however Bath certainly had a City Watch and it is likely that it was based on the thirteenth century system of 'Watch and Ward'. Bath became a city of pleasure-seeking seasonal visitors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The city avoided the negative aspects of industrialization, but increasing urbanization brought poverty, unsanitary conditions, and increased crime. The national Improvement Acts benefitted Bath with better roads, street-lighting, and regulation of the Watch. The formation of an efficient Police Force was not deemed a priority. There were six national Improvement Acts between 1757 and 1825 but, because they were based on parish boundaries, Bath ended up with three separate forces: Walcot, City and Bathwick. Co-operation between them was poor and, coupled with the already inadequate Watch and Ward system, crime flourished. It was not until 1835 following further national Improvement legislation that Bath's Watch Committee organized and maintained a single police force incorporating Lyncombe and Widcombe into the original three areas, with a force strength in 1836 of 147 Officers.¹⁰ The Box in Norfolk Crescent would probably have become redundant at this stage because the old Watch system was abolished.



The Watch Box, Norfolk Crescent (West Side), Bath

9 Watch Boxes increased in number nationally during Queen Anne's reign (1702 – 1714). Made of timber or stone, there is no way to know how prevalent they were in Bath. It is thought that three remain – two outside the Holburne Museum (formerly the Sydney Tavern and Gardens in the eighteenth century) and the one in Norfolk Crescent that is the main subject of this paper. All three are fabricated from Bath stone. The Holburne ones resemble a soldier's sentry box built into the ex-hotel's boundary wall whereas the one in Norfolk Crescent is free-standing which makes it unusual and a rare survivor. The Norfolk Crescent Watch Box is currently owned by Bath and North East Somerset Council. The Holburne boxes belong to the Museum estate.

10 The formation of a crescent of nineteen houses originally called Norfolk Place and named for Nelson's home county, was an important feature of the late eighteenth century development of the Kingsmead area. The land was leased in 1792 to Richard Bowsher, an attorney, whose associates were James Broom and Thomas King. Following a national financial crisis only nine houses had been built by 1810 and a tontine subscription was opened to fund the rest. The architect's name is not recorded but the elevational treatment suggests either John Palmer (he had previously worked with Broom and King in the building of St James's Square) or John Pinch.¹¹ The joinery and ironwork certainly indicate that the building was finished by Pinch, a bankrupt at the time whose affairs were in Bowsher's hands.¹²

11 The Crescent was very fashionable when built although the area has suffered from industrialisation since. It is not therefore unusual that it might feature a Watch Box as an amenity, yet a Watch Box's survival is unusual, right across the country. The Box is dated to c.1810 by Historic England where its online entry describes it as being set into a corner of triangular green to the west of Norfolk Crescent. It faces north towards the street and is open to the approaches to the Crescent. The map at Fig. 2 illustrates the location. It is comprised of a small, plain, cylinder-like construction using limestone ashlar to the sides and roof.¹³ There are four pilasters to the moulded capitals carrying entablature and eight plain, raised paterae to the frieze and moulded cornice below a flat, conical dome with two steps. No bases are visible but may be concealed by a rise in the pavement and the ground level. There is a worn plank door with strap hinges.¹⁴ Neil Jackson speculates that the Box could be an early interpretation of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens (Fig. 3).¹⁵ Versions of this Classical Monument became a popular feature in Georgian Britain, with Calton Hill in Edinburgh providing one of the most famous examples.



Fig. 2
Map of Norfolk Crescent and the Watchman's Box.
Map of Georgian Bath published 2011 by Location Maps Ltd. for WHEF, supported by Bath & NE Somerset Council and Bath Preservation Trust



Fig. 3
The Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, Athens.
wikimedia.org

12 It is not clear from written sources whether a door to the Norfolk Crescent Box was originally there or added after its initial construction and use. Certainly, the door has changed over time. Photographs c.1905 (Fig. 4) and c.1930 (Fig. 5) show it with a door that is different to the plank door that exists now. The latter first appears in the 1960s. These photographs also show that this Watch Box was integral to a railings and low wall enclosure scheme surrounding the communal garden outside Norfolk Crescent. Other photographs, not included here, show the railings partially removed in 1945 and completely removed by 1965. Many Georgian railings were removed for ‘munitions’ during WWII, although the poor grade iron content made them useless for the purpose and they were scrapped or sent abroad.

13 Bath suffered greatly from Luftwaffe bombing in WWII. In April 1942 three Baedeker Raids were made on the city. These were named after the German guide books which directed tourists to noteworthy buildings, sights and attractions in European cities. Over 19,000 buildings were damaged in the Bath raids, of which c.1,100 were seriously damaged or destroyed. Fortunately the Norfolk Crescent Watch Box was unscathed.¹⁶

14 The two presumed Watch Boxes at the Holburne Museum do not appear to have ever had doors. The Historic England listing for them advises that they were constructed c.1840 when the pleasure gardens around the tavern underwent a period of enhancement and alteration. They share, with the box in Norfolk Crescent, a high level of quality in their architectural style, materials, and craftsmanship. However, they were built late in the history of Watch Boxes and well after the creation of a single police force in Bath. For this reason, it is reasonable to speculate that their purpose was ornamental. Their Grade II* listing notes that they “complement the strong group value and axial formality of the overall composition of the Sydney Tavern site, its flanking walls and the buildings they face in Great Pulteney Street and Sydney Place.”¹⁷ This could suggest that their purpose was aesthetic or perhaps they were simply for site-specific security at the tavern? The Norfolk Crescent Watch Box used to have a sign over the door clearly stating it was the only remaining one in Bath (Fig. 6).¹⁸



Fig. 4
1905 with a different design door to the one currently in place. Image courtesy of Bath Record Office: Archives and Local Studies



Fig. 5
The Norfolk Crescent Box c.1930. Signage removed. Image courtesy of Bath Record Office: Archives and Local Studies



Fig. 6
Sign over the door c.1974. Image courtesy of Bath Record Office: Archives and Local Studies

How were Watch Boxes used?

15 The signage on the Box has changed over time in response to the restorations and development of the local area. A sign on the side c.1900 (Fig. 7) from the “Proprietor” refers to the use of the Shrubbery or park behind. The sign over the door c.1905 (Fig. 4) advertises that it was restored by the ‘Urban Sanitary Authority’ in 1896 and threatens prosecution to people causing damage to or trespassing in the box by the authority of P H Moger, Clerk to the Council.¹⁹ The current sign simply states, “Watchman’s Sentry Box c 1810, Grade II, Restored 2012”. It is not known why the sign says Grade II when the Historic England listing clearly states Grade II*. It may be because the listing terminology changed in 1970, eliminating Grade III (the non-statutory grade) entirely and moving most Grade II up to the new Grade of II*.

16 A hand-coloured etching dated 1820 by George Cruikshank (Fig. 8) ‘Tom getting the best of a Charley’ shows a wooden Watch Box in London with a hatched door.²⁰ The image is contemporary with the period when they were in use and proves that doors were a standard feature. A Watchman is inside the box with a lantern and his colleague is outside with his own lantern, rattle and staff, both are older men. The print corroborates the information about the role of the Watchman in paragraph 6 above. It seems that the Watch-House was the base from which the local Watch was organised and where felons were temporarily held whereas the Watch Box provided shelter for individual Watchmen between their regular patrols. A similar system existed in the United States with an additional purpose for Watch Boxes from the 1750s in helping to light the streets.²¹ The American boxes also had hooks inside (for hanging oil and wicks) and sometimes a small stove and a rudimentary time keeping system to aid the role of the Watch in calling the time. It is possible that they were based on UK practice in this respect too. Recent investigation of the interior of the Norfolk Crescent Watch Box has shown holes in the walls where it seems likely a shelf was hung.

17 The design of the American Watch Boxes was like that of the Police Boxes that first appeared in the UK in the 1890s.²² These could be said to have evolved from the original Watch Boxes in use before the nineteenth century reforms and the founding of the modern police service. The design of Police Boxes was standardised in the UK from the 1930s. They contained telephones, but they also served as mini police stations where meals and shelter could be taken, and detainees held until transport was available – much like their forerunners.



Fig. 7
The ‘Notice from the Proprietor’ on the side is difficult to read but refers to the “Residents of Norfolk Crescent and Norfolk Place”, the “playing of cricket” and “Trees, Shrubs and Grass”. C.1900

Image courtesy of Bath Record Office: Archives and Local Studies



Fig. 8
Sketch by George Cruikshank,
1820

The Hub of the Circus, Marco, J,
Planning Services, Bath and North
East Somerset Council, 2004, p 17,
figure 15.

Mary Evans Picture Library.

Conclusion

- 18** The Norfolk Crescent Watch Box is a rare and important structure. It became redundant within 50 years of construction, yet it has stood for over 200 years as a modest emblem of Bath's (and indeed the whole country's) social, policing, architectural and cultural history.

References

- 1 Watchman's Box, Norfolk Crescent
historicengland.org.uk
- 2 City Watchman's Sentry Box at Norfolk Crescent, Bath c1905
bathintime.co.uk
- 3 Watchman's Sentry Box, Norfolk Crescent, Bath, September 1965
bathintime.co.uk
- 4 The conservation programme of work on the Norfolk Crescent Watch Box in 2011-12 was one of the first projects undertaken and funded by Bath World Heritage Enhancement Fund (at a cost of £7,260). The work was project-managed by Matt Culverwell of Bath & North East Somerset Council's Property Services department. The stonework was cleaned, repaired using lime mortar and new Bath stone where necessary from the Limpley Stoke Base Bed, and finished with a lime shelter coat. A new oak ledged door and frame was installed to replicate the existing one, re-using the original ironmongery apart from one new strap hinge which was fabricated to match. The bronze plaque attached to the door was sand-cast by NovaCast of Melksham and fitted by Lawrence Tindall.
- 5 *Early Modern England, A Social history 1550 – 1760*, Sharpe J A, Hodder, 1997, p 92
- 6 Watch and Ward
oxfordreference.com
- 7 Watchmen and Constables
parliament.uk
Watch books were also used as records. Some exist in Bath's city archives. They show that the Watch in Bath was also responsible for ensuring the streets were properly lit for safety and that people were fined for repeated failure to light up outside their houses where they had that responsibility. These books are a rare survival and warrant future research.
- 8 *St. Marylebone: Local Police Reform in London, 1755-1829*, Reynolds E,
in *The Historian*, Vol 51, No 3, pp 446-466, Taylor & Francis Ltd, accessed online via jstor.org
- 9 *The London Encyclopedia*, Weinreb B, Hibbert C, Keay J, Keay J, Pan Macmillan, 2010, p649
- 10 *Bath City Police 1836 – 1967*, accessed via british-police-history.uk
- 11 *Nineteenth Century Bath, Architects and Architecture*, Jackson, N, Ashgrove Press, 1991, p25
- 12 *The Georgian Buildings of Bath*, Ison W, Kingsmead Press, 1980, pp180-1
- 13 The height of the box is 10'0" (3048mm). The circumference at door height is 15'0" (4572mm) from which the diameter has been calculated as 4'9" (1455mm). The door measures 2'0" wide and 6'0" high (610mm x 1829mm). It is perhaps not surprising that a freestanding stone structure of this nature should be built to such precise imperial external measurements, given the era and the quality of workmanship.
- 14 Official List Entry
historicengland.co.uk
- 15 *Nineteenth Century Bath, Architects and Architecture*, Jackson, N, Ashgrove Press, 1991, p25, figure 16, p 24
- 16 *The Bombardment of Bath*, Designed, Printed and Published for The Bath and Wilts Chronicle and Herald
by The Media Press Ltd, Westgate Street, Bath 1942.
- 17 Official List Entry
historicengland.co.uk
The Official List Entry for the Holburne Watch Boxes on the Historic England website contains images.
- 18 It is unclear why the sign over the door in Fig. 6 refers to the box being erected in 1793.
The Historic England listing refers to it being c.1810.
- 19 bathintime.co.uk. The 1900 photograph is from an 1895-1902 glass negative in the collection at Bath Library.
- 20 *The Hub of the Circus*, Marco, J, Planning Services, Bath and North East Somerset Council, 2004, p 17,
figure 15, *Sketch by George Cruikshank*, 1820. Mary Evans Picture Library. Watchmen were called
'Charleys' after the involvement of Charles II. Deliberate overturning of wooden boxes was not uncommon.
- 21 *The Watch Box*, Price, W, *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Autumn 1936), pp. 58-61
accessed online via JSTOR
- 22 <https://www.britishtelephones.com/police/boxes.pdf>



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