



Sir Robert Mark

On the 100th anniversary of his birth, Tony Moore takes a brief look back at the career of Sir Robert Mark

The BBC referred to him as *one of the great reforming administrators of his time* (1 October 2010); the *Independent* as *arguably the most important individual to emerge from 20th century British policing* (5 October 2010); and the *Guardian* as *probably the most accomplished post-war commissioner* (1 October 2010)

Born in Manchester on 13 March 1917, Sir Robert Mark came to the Metropolitan Police after rising to the rank of chief superintendent in the Manchester Police and spending 10 years as chief constable of Leicester. The Second World War, during which he was commissioned into the Royal Armoured Corps, interrupted his police career for five years. His term as chief constable of Leicester is, perhaps, best remembered for famously establishing a traffic warden corps and introducing the fixed penalty system

He was appointed an Assistant Commissioner in the Metropolitan Police, then under the command of Sir Joseph Simpson, in March 1967, taking over responsibility for D Department, which included personnel, training, communications, buildings and dogs. Describing Scotland Yard, then based in the Norman Shaw building, as *a giant mausoleum without....any functional advantages*, (Mark:79) he quickly found, from the Commissioner down, that he was an unwelcome addition to the senior echelons of the Metropolitan Police. Two years later, shortly after he had taken over responsibility for B Department (Traffic), Sir Joseph died in office, and he was appointed Deputy Commissioner, a position he occupied for four years under the command of Sir John Waldron. He subsequently described it as *four of the most unpleasant years of my life*. He had no power over the four assistant commissioners (who, at the

time of his appointment, were, like the commissioner, all products of Trenchard's pre-war Hendon College scheme), except in matters of discipline or in the absence of the commissioner. Even in matters of discipline, if it related to crime he could be over-ridden by the assistant commissioner (crime). (Mark:95-96)

Shortly after taking up the post of Deputy Commissioner, the *Times* newspaper revealed details of corruption in the Criminal Investigation Department which it alleged was *merely the tip of an iceberg*. (Mark:107). It led to the disclosure of other corrupt activities until, finally just before Mark became Commissioner in April 1972, the *People* newspaper revealed that the commander of the Flying Squad and his wife had holidayed abroad with a known Soho pornographer and his partner. It was the trigger for Mark to ruthlessly root out corrupt police officers *without undermining the confidence of the honest and dedicated detectives*. He placed detectives serving on divisions under the command of the uniformed divisional commanders, gave his deputy commissioner the responsibility for investigating all complaints against police officers, including allegations of crime, through a new A.10 Branch, and transferred responsibility for dealing with pornography to the uniformed branch. Once done, he received a brief hand-written note from Home Secretary Callaghan which read *Dear Commissioner, Quick, Decisive, & Right! All I hoped you would do. Congratulations!* (Mark:126-137)

Mark also had to deal with an increase in IRA terrorist activity, and led the Metropolitan Police in its response to two sieges, at Spaghetti House and Balcombe Street. In 1974, following the riot in Red Lion Square in which a student from Warwick University died, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins ordered an inquiry. Mark subsequently described the decision as the actions of *a weak, minority government ...hanging on to office by its eyelashes unable to run the risk of offending its extreme left in case it should bring it down*. (Mark:167) He was an outspoken critic of the criminal justice system in England and created a furore

amongst the legal profession when, in his Dimbleby memorial lecture in November 1973, he accused a minority of defence lawyers of telling deliberate lies on behalf of their clients, *producing, off the peg, the same kind of defence for different clients*, and concocting defences *far beyond the intellectual capacity of the accused*. (Mark:154-155)

His premature resignation was prompted by a disagreement with Home Secretary Roy Jenkins over the 1976 Police Act which was designed to provide an independent police complaints body. Mark considered it would undermine police discipline and obstruct the effective investigation of criminal offences committed by police officers.(Mark:195-216)

Biography: Mark, Sir Robert (1978). *In the office of constable*. London: Collins