



The National Commissioner of Police



THE ICELANDIC POLICE

A historical sketch

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Editor: *Guðmundur Guðjónsson, Chief Superintendent*

LAW ENFORCEMENT IN TIMES PAST

Icelandic text compiled by: *Sólborg Una Pálsdóttir*
Supervised by: *Ólafur K. Ólafsson, District Commissioner*

FROM THE TIME OF THE WATCHMEN

Icelandic text compiled by: *Bicentenary committee of the National Commissioner's Office*
Professional guidance: *Lýður Björnsson*
Read over by: *Július Óli Einarsson*

THE POLICE TODAY

Icelandic text compiled by: *Bicentenary committee of the National Commissioner's Office*
Read over by: *Július Óli Einarsson*
Main photographer: *Július Sigurjónsson*

REYKJAVIK'S FIRST REAL POLICEMEN – Appendix

Icelandic text compiled by: *Bicentenary committee of the National Commissioner's Office*
Main photographer: *Július Sigurjónsson*

Translated by: *Jeffrey Cosser*
Design: *Auglýsingastofa Guðrúnar Önnu ehf.*
Cover photo: *Július Sigurjónsson*
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The Bicentenary Committee of the Office of the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police consists of: Guðmundur Guðjónsson, Chief Superintendent, Chairman, and Sævar Þ. Jóhannesson, Chief Inspector, both of the Office of the National Commissioner, and Friðrik G. Gunnarsson, Superintendent, Guðmundur Gígja, Chief Inspector, Jónas Magnússon, Detective Inspector (representing the National Association of Police Officers) and Óskar Bjartmarz, Constable (representing the Reykjavík Police Society), all of the Reykjavík Police.

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200 YEARS OF THE POLICE IN ICELAND

Foreword by the National Commissioner

It was 200 years ago this month that the first uniformed policeman was seen in Iceland, and the anniversary is being marked in various ways. Of course, law enforcement in Iceland goes back much further, as the regional administrative officers (the sheriffs, later district commissioners, assisted by the directors of the parishes) exercised what were essentially police functions from early times.

A commemorative coin and a special postage stamp have been issued to mark the bicentenary, and an exhibition has been mounted surveying the history of the police in Iceland. Local Police Commissioners and police officers all over the country are taking part in the celebrations in one way or another.



Photo: Ragnar Axelsson

This booklet presents a short account of the origins, development and structure of the Icelandic police, in words and pictures. Naturally, in the space available it is only possible to trace the main features.

I should like to send my best wishes to all the police commissioners and other members of the force on the occasion of this bicentenary, and also to thank all those involved for their contribution to the preparations for the celebrations.

Finally I should like to thank the Government of Iceland for its support.

April 2003

Haraldur Johannessen





LAW ENFORCEMENT IN TIMES PAST


It is now 200 years since the uniformed policeman made his appearance in Iceland. For today's citizen, it is difficult to imagine a society without the police to make sure that we obey the law. How, then, were law and order enforced before there were policemen, as we now know them?

A law enforcer sees to it that people obey the law. Having agreed to relinquish the right to use force and entrust it to the state, citizens must be able to trust the state not to abuse its monopoly on force. The legislative process is an important part in ensuring security under the law for the common man; people agree on what is permitted and what is not, and the state then ensures that they comply with the law. The state is normally divided into the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Today the executive includes the police, who monitor compliance with the law.

A community without an executive

During the Icelandic Commonwealth period (930–1262) there was no judicial system in the form we now know. The laws of Iceland were preserved in memory and recited by the lawspeaker at the annual meetings of the Althing. According to the historical work *Íslendingabók*, it was only in the year 1117 that it was decided at the Althing to commit the whole of the law to writing.¹

The Commonwealth was a society without a common executive or centralised power. In such a society, courts, law and punishment have a completely different meaning. From the earliest Icelandic law code, *Grágás*, it can be seen that no provision was made for corporal punishment according to a court judgement. Most punishments in *Grágás* took the form of fines; the most severe penalty was outlawry. An outlaw was expelled from society and could be slain legally. Citizens were expected to resolve their disputes themselves; if a man was slain, for example, then his family was expected to avenge him.²



The society of the Commonwealth period was also very much subject to unwritten laws. With no police, it was necessary to be able to trust in one's own strength, show courage and form alliances with powerful men. Honour was greatly prized, but it could only be achieved by following unwritten laws. Though society of this time respected manliness and heroism, it disapproved of attempts to command respect through long-drawn-out feuds and slayings. Peace was recognised as being in everybody's interest, since there was no way of predicting where the duty of revenge would strike next. The sagas contain many instances of people being executed, without trial, for theft or practising magic.³

Under the crown

In 1262-64 Iceland submitted to the Norwegian crown and made a special agreement with it, known as the Old Covenant. One of the provisions of the covenant was that the king was responsible for maintaining law and order in Iceland. Magnús Hákonarson the Lawmender, king of Norway 1263-80, gave Iceland a new law code, *Járnsíða*, in 1271. He aimed to harmonise the law throughout his kingdom, and succeeded in doing so in 1273. A revision of *Járnsíða* followed, and was presented to Iceland in 1280. Known as *Jónsbók*, it met with a cool reception at first but was approved at the Althing in 1281 without substantial modifications. The new laws introduced a new administrative system, under which agents of the crown were to ensure compliance with the law.⁴



Early law manuscripts. Photo: Árni Magnússon Institute.

Legal reforms were introduced at Iceland's request in the 13th and 14th century, and further amendments were made to the provisions applying to the church following the Reformation. New laws on marriage were enacted in the 16th century, and a section of special provisions on sexual conduct, *Stóridómur*, in 1564. A high court was established in Iceland in 1563. Apart from these changes, *Jónsbók* remained the main source of Icelandic law down to the 18th century.⁵

Before the Reformation, the church had a say in many legal cases, particularly those concerning sexual morality and marriage. Ecclesiastical law also applied in cases involving the church and the clergy. Corporal punishment played no part in ecclesiastical law: punishments consisted of fines, suspension from participation in the rites of the church, and excommunication.⁶

Law enforcement

The new law codes brought changes of various types. Executive power passed into the hands of royal officials, criminal cases were prosecuted by the crown and the duty of vengeance was abolished. If an individual was slain or wronged in any way, those responsible were to make amends to the person or to the crown and the relatives of the dead person. Corporal and capital punishment were introduced, both as a deterrent and also to rid society of criminals, both through execution and outlawry. These punishments were also intended to restore the honour of the victim or his family, and also to reduce the likelihood that they would take revenge themselves.⁷

In the 13th century, the crown's main administrative structure consisted of the court, the body of individuals who had sworn allegiance to the monarch and received power and privilege in return. In Iceland, the king appointed a *hirðstjóri*, or director of the court, who was the supreme lay official in the country. In the late 15th century, the *hirðstjóri* also bore the title "captain of Iceland," referring to his function as captain of the warships sent to defend the country. In the 14th century, the *hirðstjórar* exercised executive power in certain areas, and were "responsible for the government of

the country and the royal revenues and properties." They were also responsible for maintaining peace and defending the country.⁸

The main royal law enforcers were the sheriffs (*sýslumenn*). The term appears first in Iceland in an agreement with King Hákon the Old of Norway in 1263. The Old Covenant of 1264 included a provision stating that lawmen (*lögmen*) and sheriffs were to be Icelanders and of the families of those who yielded their chieftaincies (*goðorð*) when Iceland accepted the authority of the crown.⁹

Járnsíða does not mention *sýslumenn*; instead it uses the term *valdsmenn*. The word *sýslumaður* is used, however, in an amendment of 1280, and in *Jónsbók* the terms are used interchangeably; it seems likely that they refer to the same office.¹⁰

The number, jurisdiction and term of appointment of the sheriffs varied at first, but became more firmly defined in the 15th century. To begin with, they seem to have been appointed by the king himself, but for most of the period that *Jónsbók* was in force the appointments were made by the *hirðstjórar* or their equivalents. The Icelanders pressed their demand that the appointees should be Icelandic, but this was not always observed. The other condition, that they should be of the families of the old chieftains (*goðar*), became less

important as time passed; it had been set to make the *goðar* more amenable to relinquishing their powers.¹¹

Sheriffs were required to attend the Althing, appoint members of the constitutional court and sit in the court of justice if required to do so. They also collected fines. At meetings of the Althing at Þingvellir they gave reports on the crimes committed in their jurisdictions since the last assembly, and they held local assemblies on the way back from Þingvellir to report on the decisions taken there.¹²



Caught with the sheep he has stolen, a thief is brought before the sheriff. From the manuscript *Heynesbók*.
Photo: Árni Magnússon Institute.

Under *Jónsbók*, sheriffs were expected to arrest thieves and violent criminals, and amendments to the law reiterated their duty to detain criminals until their cases were heard. They were not expected to have a standing force to assist them when dealing with criminals, but were able to summon local farmers to help, which the farmers could not refuse to do.¹³

It was the role of the sheriffs to monitor trade, prevent illegal private enterprise and, in collaboration with the *hirðstjórar* and lawmen, to monitor the passage of foreign ships through Icelandic waters.¹⁴



Judges at work. From the manuscript *Reykjabók*.
Photo: Árni Magnússon Institute.

The sheriffs investigated legal cases brought before them. From records it can be seen that this work consisted largely of finding and questioning witnesses; testimony carried great weight as evidence. The sheriffs also made investigations on site, e.g. checking property boundaries and items washed ashore and even examining bodies to establish the cause of death.¹⁵

In many ways, the sheriffs of the *Jónsbók* period were the policemen of their day, and it is clear that law enforcement in Iceland goes back far more than 200 years. On the other hand, there are significant differences: as part of the executive, today's policemen have a far more restricted sphere of responsibility than the old sheriffs, whose work touched on all fields of state power. Also, many changes took place over the period, transforming the role of the sheriffs as the state assumed more and more power, and requirements regarding how they did their work must also have changed.



FROM THE TIME OF THE WATCHMEN

The factories of the Innréttingar

The year 1752 saw the beginning of an industrial project in Reykjavík launched by a company known as the *Innréttingar*. By the standards of the time this was a large venture, and it marks the starting point of significant urban development in Iceland. The project was led by Skúli Magnússon, the Governor of Iceland, and formed part of a programme of social improvement planned by Icelandic officials and the Danish authorities in accordance with economic theories on the Continent. It received substantial financial backing from the Danish government.¹

Opening of a prison on Arnarhóll

The famine years of 1751–58 were marked by a spate of theft and looting all over Iceland, for which many people were sentenced to forced labour in Copenhagen. Until they could be shipped out of the country, the sheriffs had to keep them in detention, which proved immensely expensive. In summer 1757 they sent a petition to the king asking for permission to hang

*Now housing the
Prime Minister's
offices, this building
on Arnarhóll in
Reykjavík was
Iceland's first prison.
Photo: Júlíus Óli
Einarsson.*



convicts instead of sending them abroad, since this would result in substantial savings. Although permission was refused, it seems that the sheriffs executed thieves in some cases.²

By royal decree a property tax was imposed on house-owners in 1759 to finance the building of a prison in Iceland and meet the cost of keeping prisoners in detention and sending them to Denmark. The crown also made a complementary contribution. It was also decided that convicts were to work building a prison in Reykjavík instead of suffering other punishment.

This painting of Reykjavík by Bishop Jón Helgason shows the Innréttingar factory buildings on Austurstræti. Árbæjarsafn.

One of the Innréttingar factory buildings, at Austurstræti 10, still exists. In recent years it has housed a restaurant. The watchful eyes of the forerunners of the modern police must have turned to it on many a long night nearly 250 years ago.

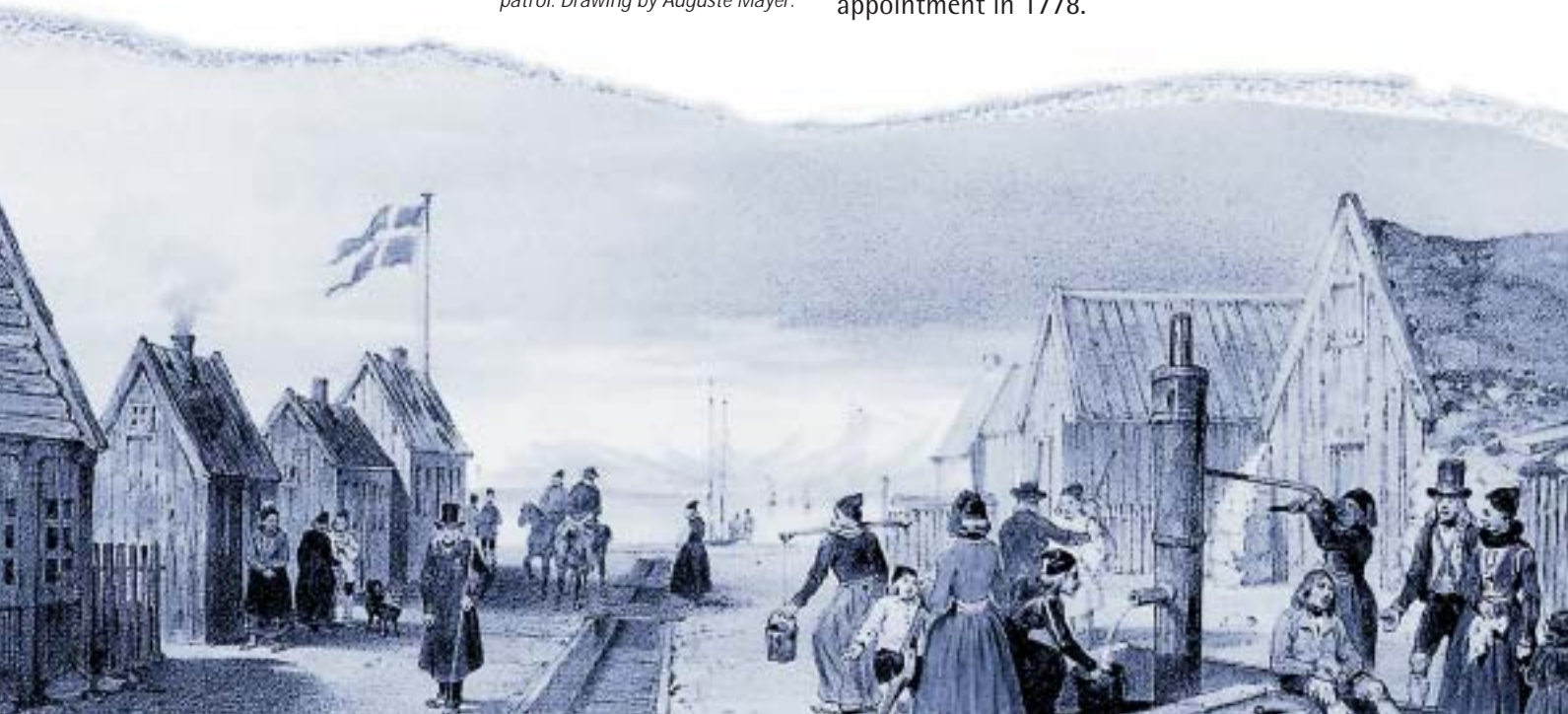


Work on quarrying stone and digging the foundations began in spring 1761 and the prison opened in 1764. That year there was also a fire in the *Innréttingar* factories.³

Looking north along Klúbbgata (now Aðalstræti) in 1836. The policeman Magnús Jónsson (left foreground) can be seen on patrol. Drawing by Auguste Mayer.

The earliest roots

It is probable that the factory fire and the opening of the prison were the main reasons why the *Innréttingar* hired watchmen: prisoners occasionally broke into houses in the village. The *Innréttingar* had a caretaker in 1766–67 whose duties were later covered by the watchmen. It is not certain when the watchmen were first established, but they were issued a letter of appointment in 1778.



The watchmen can be seen as the forerunners of the modern police, since in addition to patrolling the properties of the *Innréttingar* and raising the alarm in the event of a fire, they were expected to be on the lookout for any irregular or abnormal activities. They also sang verses to mark the hours, as was done elsewhere in Europe, both to confirm that everything was in order and to mark the passage of time.⁴

For their work, the watchmen were equipped with an hour-glass, a lantern and a long club with a spiked head known as the "morning star".⁵ This indicates clearly that they were expected to tackle and overpower felons if necessary.

Night patrols paid for by the *Innréttingar* were discontinued on 4 June 1791, but after a notorious thief escaped from prison in late September that year, some prominent citizens joined together to pay for patrols. They also complained to the regional governor about the neglect of law enforcement.⁶

The result was that the municipality of Reykjavík hired a watchman, the first municipal employee, on 10th November 1791.⁷

The "morning star" was still in use in 1848, as can be seen from this sketch of a watchman in Reykjavík made that year by a Dutch artist, Albertus van Beest.⁸ National Museum, Picture Archive.



THE ICELANDIC WATCHMEN'S VERSES

There were 12 Icelandic watchmen's verses. The first ten were translations by the Rev. Þorsteinn Sveinbjarnarson (1730–1814) of verses sung in Copenhagen; he composed the last two himself. Þorsteinn was for a time the chaplain of the prison on Arnarhóll in Reykjavík and minister of the *Innréttingar*. In the middle of winter, the period covered by the night watch in Reykjavík was two hours longer than in Copenhagen; thus two more verses were used in Iceland. The Icelandic verses are preserved in only one copy in the National and University Library. It was printed in the Hólar printing press in 1778.

Nine o'clock

*Darkness has come, dear Lord,
through Jesus' bloody wounds,
we beg Thou wilt wipe out
all our transgression and guilt.
Protect our king
and all people
throughout his land
from enemies' cruelty.*

Twelve o'clock

*Remember the Saviour was born
of the Virgin at the midnight hour,
comfort for a wide world
otherwise fallen.
Twelve o'clock strikes;
from the heart's depth,
commit yourselves, in word and deed,
to His power.*

Ten o'clock

*People of high and low estate
if you wish to know
the time of night,
now is the hour of rest.
Commit yourselves to God;
be cautious;
ensure your fires are safe.
The watch now strikes ten.*

One o'clock

*Lay thy yoke, dear Jesus,
on us to bear with patience
though the way be hard;
Thou art our Saviour.
It is now one o'clock.
Thy merciful hand
expunge our sins;
our burden will then be light.*

Eight o'clock

*Dusk wraps the earth
ending day's delay.
This reminds us
of death and the grave.
Light us, Christ, the way!
At all times
and at the end
to give us peaceful death in Thee.*

Eleven o'clock

*May the Eternal Father,
keep us, young and old.
May the blessed angel host
raise a fort around us!
He is our town's shield;
keep our houses,
Jesus, Son of God,
our property, spirit, soul and life.*

Two o'clock

*Loving infant Christ!
We sing your praises high,
Thou wished'st to be born,
Light of the World, in night's darkness.
Divinity's great spirit,
lighten our way, we look to Thee
and praise Thee for eternity!*

Three o'clock

*Now dark night pales,
clear day approaches.
Even so, God, let those depart
from us who plan evil deeds.
Our clock calls three;
give help and strength,
give us now Thy mercy,
our kindly Father.*

Five o'clock

*Jesus' great morning star!
We commit to your might
our king.
God guide and protect him.
Now the clock strikes five,
come, cheerful sun,
from heaven's seat,
and light our dark homes.*

Seven o'clock

*Arise for work
in Jesus' name! Seven
o'clock has come; take care!
Be quick;
When the Lord judges
all people
may He grant us the grace
to do right!⁹*

Four o'clock

*The eternal host of heaven
sings Thy praise, O Lord.
Thou wast watchman
of us men on earth.
The watch ends at last.
Praise God in peace,
the night is past;
make use of the time we have.*

Six o'clock

*God apportioned us in Iceland
the shortest day;
we also have the longest night,
a boon for the tired.
Here, therefore,
the watch lasts longer
than abroad;
now the clock strikes six.*



*Drawing by Ásgeir Júlíusson,
National Police College.*

Law and order in the early 19th century

At the end of 1802, Ludvig Erichsen was appointed regional Governor of the western region. Shortly before this he had told the financial authorities in Copenhagen that public administration in Iceland left much to be desired. He was commissioned to set forth his criticisms in a report on the monitoring of public bodies, law enforcement in Reykjavik and the application of decrees and official directives in Iceland. In his report, he said there was virtually no law

enforcement in Reykjavik; there was no fire brigade and the town watchman was drunk and disorderly. Crime was hardly ever reported or punished, and people settled their differences themselves. Indiscipline knew no bounds, and theft was on the increase.¹⁰

Drawing by Auguste Mayer, 1836.



The first real policemen

By royal decree, Reykjavík became a special jurisdiction on 15 April 1803. It acquired additional status with the appointment of a bailiff that same year. The bailiff, Rasmus Frydensberg, took over direction of the police, two Danes, Ole Biörn and Vilhelm Nolte, who had held minor positions in the Danish army. Nolte was a shoemaker; this qualification was important, as he was expected to practise his trade together with his police work. He took to drink immediately and was discharged the following year, to be replaced by another Dane, a tailor. The first Icelandic policeman was Jón Benjamínsson, who succeeded Ole Biörn in Reykjavík in 1814. He lasted one year. The next Icelandic policeman was Magnús Jónsson, who worked from 1826 to 1839. The last Danish police officer in Reykjavík worked from 1857 to 1859, after which the force was staffed completely by Icelanders.¹¹



Policing outside Reykjavík

A detailed directive was sent to the local parish directors in 1809, appointing them civil servants with additional powers. Amongst other things, they were to undertake police functions under the control of the sheriffs outside Reykjavík.¹²

In 1880 this arrangement was replaced by a regulation covering many aspects of police work, including investigation of crimes and supervision of criminals. The Althing passed a Police By-Laws Act, effective from 1891, after which police officers were engaged, gradually, in the population centres outside Reykjavík.¹³

In Akureyri, however, a policeman was engaged at an early date, probably in about 1820, when the town had a population of 50. He was a Dane, and the traders of the town were made to pay his wages. His duties included arresting drunks and preventing duck shooting on the fjord at weekends. Soon the traders began making difficulties about paying his wages, and the position was abolished. When the town received a free trading licence in 1854 the need for policing increased, as many more ships began to call there. The first night watchman was engaged that year, his wages being paid by public contribution. Work on a prison for Akureyri, mainly to detain drunken non-residents, began in 1865.¹⁴



A prison was built in Ísafjörður in 1874. It burned down in 1925, the sole prisoner at the time dying in the fire. Police by-laws took effect in Ísafjörður in 1894, and a policeman was engaged; in 1901 a night watchman's position was established. The night watchman was to function as a policeman during the night.¹⁵

Following growth of Hafnarfjörður in the wake of the establishment of fishing enterprises there, the bailiff's office engaged two policemen in 1908. In 1910 the number was reduced to one, and it was raised to three in 1917. From the outset, it was stated that they were expected to provide their own uniforms, and the council rejected an application for a clothing grant. The following year they decided to resign and were replaced by others.

Björn Arnason, a goldsmith, was the first policeman in Ísafjörður. He was employed from 1894 to 1906.

Photo: Björn Pálsson (1895). Ísafjörður Archives.

Shortly after that, the new policemen of Hafnarfjörður asked for a wage increase, at which the town council advertised their positions and engaged other men. This pattern repeated itself when new wage demands were presented.¹⁶

The 1915 by-laws for Siglufjörður made no provision for policemen except in the event of a fire, but that year the local council appointed three night watchmen.¹⁷

The first by-laws for Vestmannaeyjar, from 1915, stated that drunks who caused a disturbance or behaved indecently were to be detained until they sobered up and then be fined for a breach of the peace. In fact this was impossible to put into practice as there was no prison in the town. That year the town council agreed to engage a man to carry out police duties that winter. He was a night watchman.¹⁸

Growth of the Reykjavík force

In 1854 the Reykjavík Bailiff asked the National Governor to increase the number of policemen in the town, the main reason being increased ship traffic after Iceland was permitted to trade with all nations. He also proposed the establishment of a reserve force. The regular force was increased by one (to three) in 1855, cut down to two in



Knud Zimsen, Mayor of Reykjavík, directing traffic in 1925. The uniformed policeman in the picture is Erlingur Pálsson, Chief Superintendent. Photo: Loftur Guðmundsson. National Museum, Photo Department.

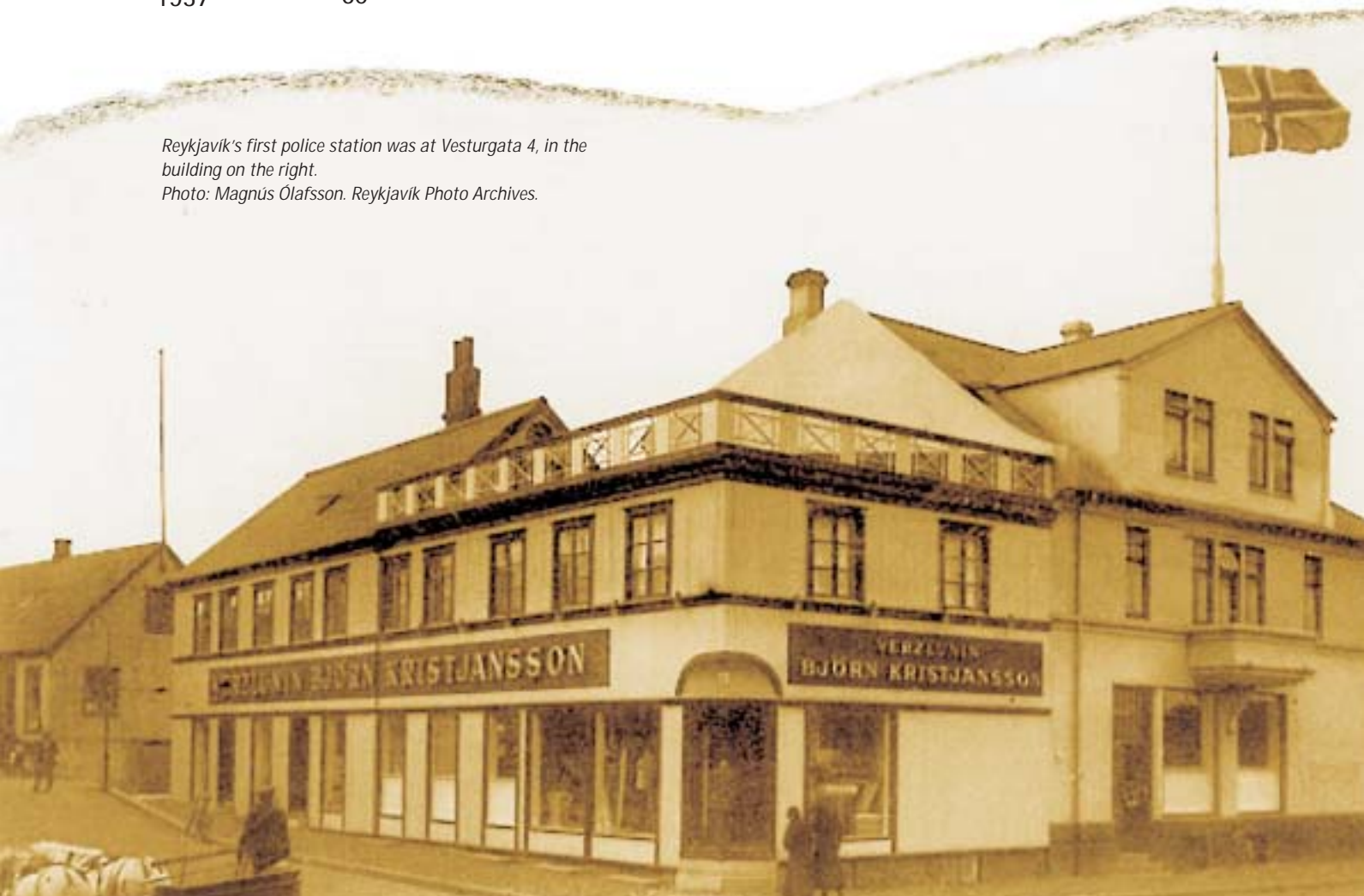
1874 and expanded to three again in 1905. One proposal aimed at more effective policing during this period was to make the police responsible for night patrols (they were employed only during the day), but this was not done. Instead, more night watchmen were appointed after 1860. After 1900, traders also engaged private night watchmen, which indicates that they were not satisfied with the public service.

The numbers of policemen in Reykjavik in the first decades of the 20th century were as follows:

Year	Number of policemen
1918	9
1929	15
1930	28
1933	41
1937	60

In 1923 the Reykjavik Police Station was open 24 hours a day for the first time. The mayor, Knud Zimsen, had urged the commissioner to take on a man who had proved a good supervisor of the municipal properties. At the request of the chief superintendent, the commissioner refused to do this unless he could take on two men, so making it possible to man the station round the clock.¹⁹

*Reykjavik's first police station was at Vesturgata 4, in the building on the right.
Photo: Magnús Ólafsson. Reykjavik Photo Archives.*



Prison used as Government House

In 1813 all prisoners in the prison on Arnarhóll were released because of a food shortage. When the building was made the headquarters of the National Governor in 1820, there were temporarily no prison facilities. Prison cells were later established in the High Court building on Austurstræti, a short distance away; they were uncomfortable, dark and unheated.²⁰

The abolition of the prison on Arnarhóll marked a great step backwards as regards penal practice, since flogging became the main form of punishment. It was generally seen as the most shameful punishment, and set a life-long stamp on those who suffered it. It was also felt to be disproportionately harsh for minor offences. Under the Criminal Code of 1869, imprisonment was established as the main form of punishment.²¹

A new prison, on Skólavörðustígur, was completed in 1873, marking a step forward in prison affairs in the country, and new attitudes concerning the purpose of imprisonment were also being voiced.²²

Constitutional reforms

In 1874 the King of Denmark approved a special constitution for Iceland. The most important provisions in the field of law and order included reforms regarding the right to private property and personal privacy, freedom of expression and various other civil rights, including the right to peaceful public gatherings. There was also a provision stating that an arrested person was to be brought before a judge as soon as possible and that the judge was to judge his case at the first opportunity, and within three days at the most.²³

The police as a bogey

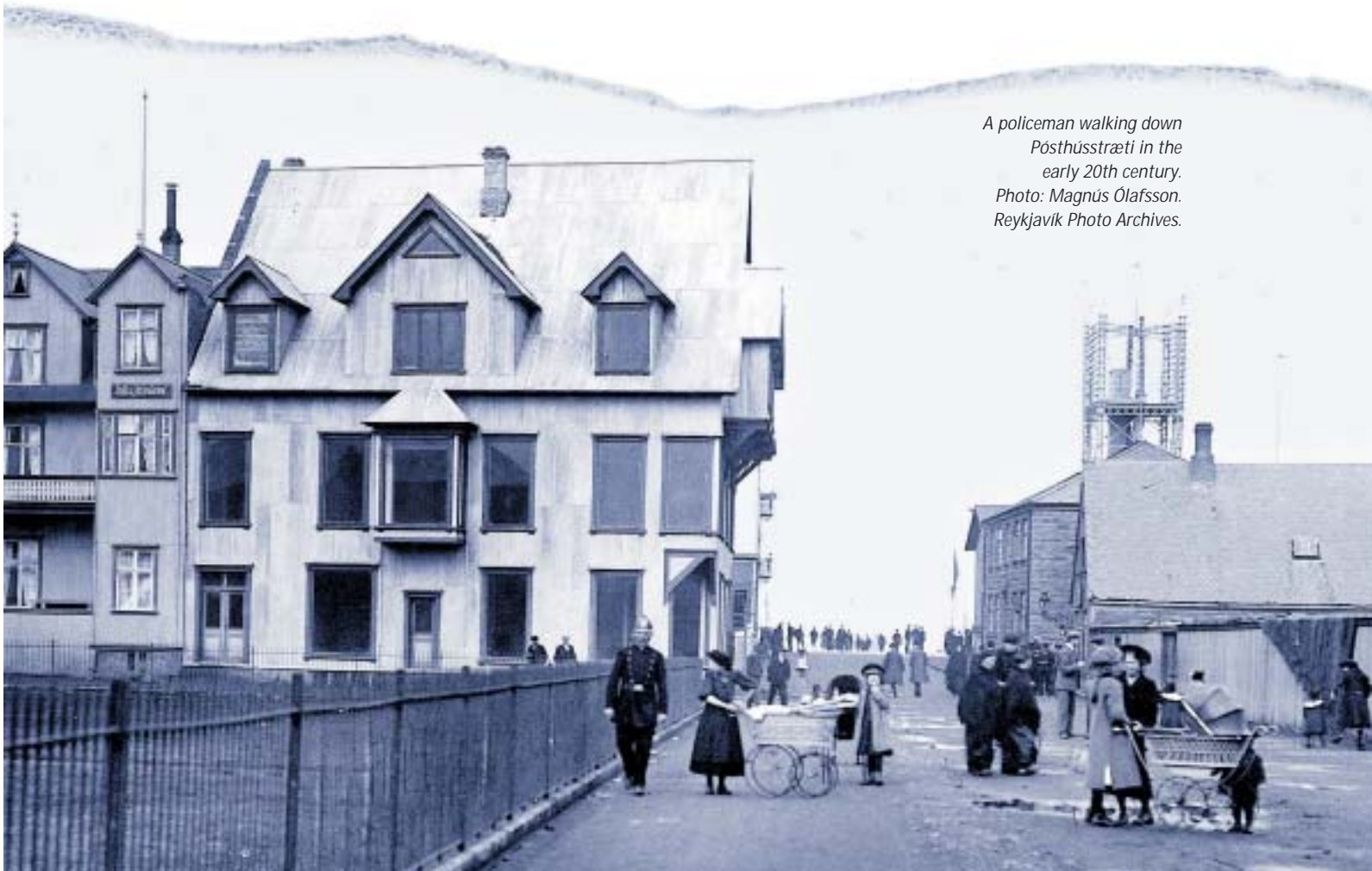
The 1891 By-Laws for the Town of Reykjavík contained the only traffic rules for the town until



*Traffic speed according to the by-laws.
Photo: National Museum, Photo Department.*

a Traffic Act was passed in 1914. The Act stipulated a maximum speed of 15 kph in built-up areas; the by-laws had restricted speed to 10 kph, which is equivalent to the leisurely trot of a horse.

The penalty provisions of the by-laws are interesting. The maximum penalty for an adult was a fine of 100 krónur. Children over 10 and under 15 could be punished by a maximum of 15 strokes with a cane or up to eight days' imprisonment for repeated offences or particularly unnatural deeds; this provision was in force until 1919. As the police were responsible for applying these punishments, it was common



*A policeman walking down
Pósthússtræti in the
early 20th century.
Photo: Magnús Ólafsson.
Reykjavik Photo Archives.*

for people to frighten children by saying the police would come and beat them. Many Icelanders of the older generation can still remember the police being used as a bogey in this way when they were children.²⁴

This may have even older roots: a royal decree for Iceland of 1746 commanded people to desist from the foolish practice of using the Yuletide elves and ghosts to scare their children.²⁵

The working environment

Sources show that the policeman's lot was not a happy one and that there was plenty of lawlessness to deal with. Disrespect of authority was rife. From an "advertisement" displayed in Ísafjörður in 1892, for example, it seems that the sheriff there was thrashed on the evening of 23 December "in full view of two valid witnesses, for his efforts in prosecuting Skúli Thoroddsen".²⁶

Policemen were engaged in Siglufjörður in the second decade of the 20th century. In 1919 a Norwegian died there in a scuffle between a group of Norwegians and the crew of a Danish patrol vessel who came ashore armed with rifles and bayonets; they saw that the local police were powerless to handle the situation. No charges were pressed: the bailiff ruled that as no Icelanders were involved, the case lay outside his jurisdiction.²⁷

A report from Vestmannaeyjar in 1919 describes how the police and their assistants were assaulted, and this was not for the first time, but the culprits were fined less than the equivalent of the cost of a bottle of black-market spirits. The police had few resources at their disposal. For example, the policeman in Vestmannaeyjar was reduced to having to lock prisoners in his own bedroom.²⁸

The police often had trouble transporting the people they arrested. In Reykjavík a hand-wagon was built for transporting drunks or others who could not walk, but the box was too small for most average-sized people, and the police often resorted to carrying them on their shoulders.²⁹



A cartoon showing members of the Good Templars' temperance movement disposing of stocks of alcoholic beverages on New Year's Eve 1915, when sales prohibition took effect.

Photo: National Museum, Photo Department.

No easy job

Today's policemen still have to deal with some of the tasks described above and many others besides.

Changing legislation and social conditions have always set their stamp on the work of the police. A good example of this was prohibition legislation, first the import ban on alcoholic drinks imposed in 1912, followed by a sales ban in 1915; these remained in force for the most part until 1935. In enforcing these, the police had to monitor people's

private lives more closely, including making searches of their homes. Another important task that fell to the Reykjavík police was to deal with lawlessness and mob violence that broke out on New Year's Eve from the 1920s to the 1960s, frequently posing a threat to life and property: fireworks were thrown at people, cars overturned, fires started and the police station stoned. It even happened that petrol was poured over policemen and an attempt was made to set them alight.³⁰

Violent rioting broke out in front of the parliament building on 30 March 1949 when the Althing was debating Iceland's entry into NATO. Police with batons and steel helmets dispersing the crowd with the aid of teargas. Photo: Ólafur K. Magnússon.



Iceland went through a difficult period in the Great Depression of the 1930s, with high unemployment following the fall of prices for its exports. Firms went bankrupt, poverty spread and many people went hungry.³¹

These conditions accentuated class divisions and polarised society into political groupings. Politics became inflamed by strong passions, and civil unrest was common, sometimes blossoming into street fights between crowds and the police in which policemen were injured. Fresh from the difficulties of the prohibition years, demonstrations and street fights, the police then had to face the upheavals of the war years, beginning with the British occupation in 1940.³²

Separation of Police and Customs in Reykjavík

On 1 January 1929, a separate Directorate of Customs was established, and the Reykjavík police no longer had to attend to customs inspections. Jón Hermannsson, Commissioner of Police, took over as Director of Customs, and a young man, Hermann Jónasson, who had been a deputy in the bailiff's office, became Commissioner of the Reykjavík Police.

After the change, the commissioner was in charge of the police force, the handling of criminal cases

and general police cases and their presentation before the courts. Various tasks that were not strictly police matters continued to be the responsibility of the police. As Commissioner of Police, and later as Prime Minister and Minister of Justice, Hermann Jónasson laid the foundations of the police system as it still is today. It was during his time that detailed rules were set covering the police, and many of them form the basis of the rules currently in force.³³



An American soldier and an Icelandic policeman directing traffic during the Second World War. Photo: US Army Photograph. Sævar Þ. Jóhannesson's photo collection.

Origin of the National Police

After violent rioting that broke out at an open meeting of the Reykjavik Town Council on 9 November 1932, a large part of the police force was out of action due to physical injuries. In response to the situation, a reserve force of 150 men was set up, even though no special provision for it had been made in law. The Icelandic Federation of Labour and the trade union Dagsbrún regarded the police, and particularly the reserve force, with suspicion, and this lack of trust, together with the violent clashes that took place between the labour movement and the reservists, was one of the main reasons why the Police Act of 1933 was passed, providing for participation by the state in the financing of police forces and defining the scope of law enforcement.³⁴

Prior to this, the extent of the state's involvement in police activities was to appoint and pay the commissioners of the various municipal police forces. The act included various provisions on the functions, rights and duties of the police. It also authorised the minister of justice to call out the reserve force in circumstances that called for additional security. The first steps were also taken towards establishing a Criminal Investigation Department in Reykjavik.

The Reykjavik Police vehicle fleet in the mid-20th century. Reykjavik Police Photo Archive.



It was soon found that it was difficult to move police forces between administrative areas. The Police Act was amended in 1940 to facilitate such moves; amongst other things, the minister was given greater powers to call up reservists and certain categories of policemen were obliged to be prepared to work in any part of the country if required. Provisions were included in the act for volunteer police forces to prevent drunken disorder breaking out at public meetings in small communities and villages. From the time that these amendments took effect, the general view was that policing needed even greater support and that the state should play a greater role in financing. The act was amended in 1972, with allowance made for the state to bear all the cost of general law enforcement in Iceland; thus, the police became civil servants, instead of local authority employees. Other provisions defined the role of the police for the first time, and laid down more clear rules on the command structure. Ever since this act was passed, there has only been one police force in Iceland: the National Police.³⁵

The State Criminal Investigation Police

Under legislation passed the previous year, the State Criminal Investigation Police began operations on 1 July 1977, taking over the investigation of criminal activities that had previously been under the control of the Reykjavík Criminal Court and the police commissioners of the Greater Reykjavík area. The SCIP was under a special Director.

The role of the SCIP was also to assist police commissioners and criminal courts all over the country in the investigation of criminal cases when they requested this and the Director of the SCIP and/or the Director of Public Prosecutions considered it necessary. The Director of Public Prosecutions could also entrust the SCIP with the investigation of individual cases anywhere in Iceland when this was considered necessary.

The SCIP could, at its own initiative, take over the investigation of cases outside the Greater Reykjavík area.³⁶



The first Icelandic police crest

The first design used as a police crest in Iceland was a hand with an eye in the palm. Its origin lies in the Middle East, going back to the time of the Old Testament or possibly earlier. Symbolising the presence of a divinity, the hand is a hand of judgement, help and protection and the eye is the all-seeing eye, ever watchful and protective. The symbols are known in Christian tradition; originally they were separate, the eye being first shown on the palm of the hand in the 14th century. At first the hand was vertical; later it was shown in the horizontal position as on the buttons of the uniforms of the Danish and Icelandic police.



Belt-buckle of the night watchman's uniform, 1906-12.

The hand and eye are the oldest symbol of the Icelandic police force, which derived all its uniform designs from the Copenhagen police. After the middle of the 19th century it was used in Iceland

as a crest on helmets and caps, and also on belt-buckles and uniform buttons. The Danish cap and helmet crest was abandoned in 1915, but the design on buttons is still in use. In the Icelandic police, an oval brass shield in the colours of the Icelandic flag was adopted as a cap crest. The shield was fixed horizontally on the caps, which at the time resembled French uniform caps. The shield was dropped in 1930 and replaced by the police star.³⁷

The Icelandic Police Star

New uniforms were adopted in 1930, with a new symbol, a six-pointed star, in the centre of which is a shield covering two crossed swords, with the police motto *MEÐ LÖGUM SKAL LAND BYGGJA* ("Law makes our land habitable").

The star was the idea of the Reykjavík Police Commissioner at the time, Hermann Jónasson, and was drawn on his instruction by the draughtsman Björn Björnsson.³⁸



*The Police Telecommunications Centre is run by the office of the National Commissioner in collaboration with the emergency service Neyðarlinan Ltd and the Police in Reykjavík, Kópavogur, Hafnarfjörður, Keflavík, Keflavík Airport and Selfoss. It is planned to have the centre serve police units in all parts of Iceland.
Photo: Júlíus Sigurjónsson.*

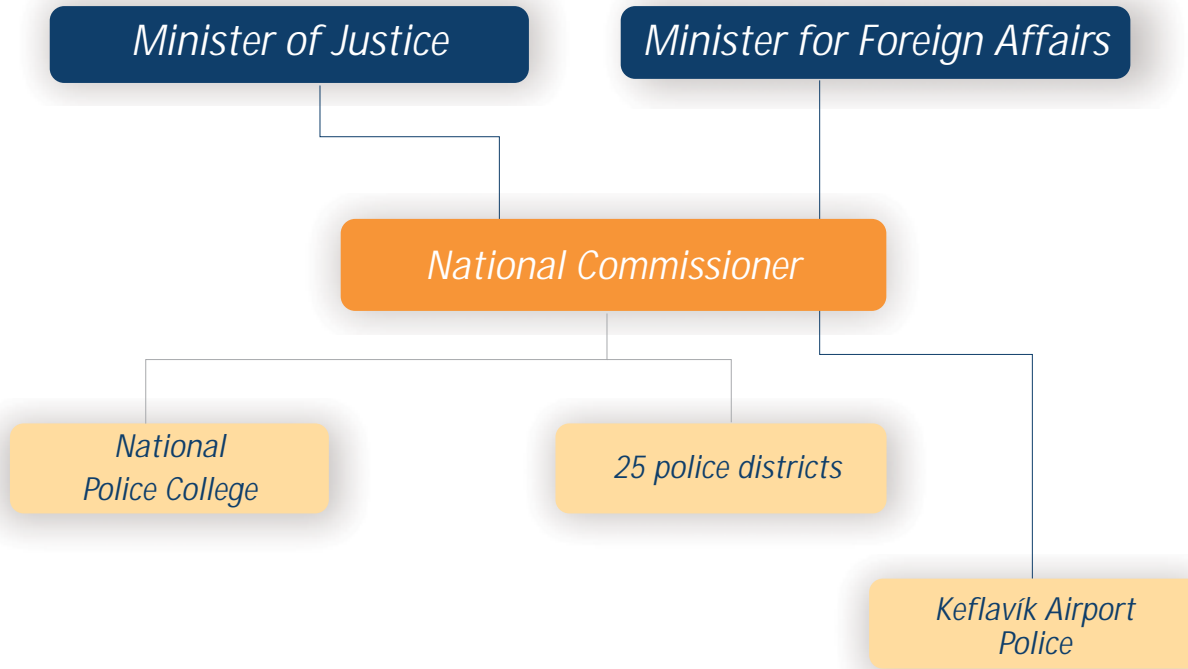




THE POLICE TODAY



STRUCTURE OF THE POLICE IN ICELAND





Legislative reforms

The Act No. 92/1989, which took effect on 1 July 1992, made fundamental changes in the structure of the judiciary and the executive at the local level. At the same time extensive changes were made in the legislation on the administration of justice, and work began on a complete revision of the administrative structure. The present Code of Criminal Procedure, No. 19/1991, came into effect at the same time, creating the present framework for the prosecution of crime.

A new Police Act took effect on 1 July 1997, replacing earlier legislation on the police and the State Criminal Investigation Police. The SCIP was abolished and most of its functions were transferred to the local police commissioners and the National Commissioner of Police. Clearer rules were also set regarding police work and policemen's rights and obligations.

The review of the Police Act also reflected changes introduced by the Code of Criminal Procedure in 1996. These were designed to speed up criminal investigations and raise efficiency by simplifying investigative procedures and entrusting prosecution to the police commissioners to a greater degree. As a result, prosecution in most of the cases previously handled by the Director of Public Prosecutions is now in the hands of the police commissioners.³⁹



Photo: Júlíus Sigurjónsson.

The Office of the National Commissioner

The new Police Act established the position of a National Commissioner of Police, who administers the police on behalf of the Minister of Justice and the Keflavík Airport Police on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The new office also took over important administrative functions in the field of justice.

Main functions of the National Commissioner

To relay the decisions of the supreme officers of the state that concern the police and bring them to the notice of the police commissioners, to take measures to ensure that these decisions are put into effect and to monitor compliance with them in the work of the police.

To provide the Minister of Justice with information on police matters of all types as the basis of decisions.

To submit proposals to the Minister of Justice on general instructions to the police commissioners.

To prepare and make proposals on streamlining, harmonisation, development and security in the work of the police.

To handle international liaison on law enforcement.

To assist and support police commissioners in their work.

To attend to matters which by their nature call for nationwide co-ordination or collaboration with police in another country.

To supervise or give instructions on the execution of individual police projects that require extensive preparation or the participation of police officers in more than one administrative area.

The National Commissioner is also required to undertake special tasks involving the operation of special police departments concerned with the investigation of tax and economic crimes and forensic studies and also the investigation of treason and activities against national security. The office also operates an International Department to handle liaison with other national authorities.⁴⁰

The National Commissioner directs the functions of the Civil Defence Agency on behalf of the minister of justice and in consultation with the Civil Defence Committee.

The role of the police

The police are the social institution that is responsible for maintaining law and order in the broadest sense of the word.

It is the role of the police to ensure public safety and guarantee the security of citizens under the law, to prevent crime and investigate crimes, to assist the public, to assist the authorities and to maintain peace and public order.⁴¹

Though it receives less attention than the more sensational and less positive parts of their work, the service and assistance role of the police accounts for a large part of their day-to-day duties.

Policemen are required to show vigilance in their work and be well aware of their duties and responsibilities. They are to demonstrate conscientiousness, impartiality, fairness and moderation. Though they are permitted to use force if necessary, they must take particular care not to use greater force than is necessary to overcome the resistance of a person suspected of having committed an offence.⁴²



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TOLERANCE



For their part, the general public are required to obey instructions given by the police, for example in connection with traffic control or to maintain public order.⁴³

The police are empowered to summon any adult person to assist them if necessary, and members of the public are obliged to assist them if they can do so without endangering their lives or those of their families, or their health, welfare or other substantial interests. Those who work with the police under their command automatically acquire the powers of the police and are entitled to the same protection as professional policemen.⁴⁴

In their professional capacity, the police are responsible to the citizens and the authorities. Consequently, they can only expect trust and respect for what they do if they carry out their duties in a spirit of public service, demonstrating honesty, impartially, fairness, consideration, loyalty, confidentiality and skill.

Staff and appointments

The police consist of the National Commissioner, the Deputy National Commissioner, the commissioners in each administrative district, the Deputy Commissioner in Reykjavík, the Director of the Police College, the legally-qualified deputies

of the commissioners, ordinary police constables, the prosecutors attached to the individual commissioners' offices, including that of the National Commissioner, and other employees.

The number of policemen in each administrative district is determined by the Minister of Justice, acting in consultation with the National Commissioner and on the recommendations received from the local commissioners. There are currently 693 approved full-time positions in the force nationwide.

The National Commissioner, the Deputy National Commissioner, the regional commissioners and the Deputy Commissioner in Reykjavík are appointed by the Minister of Justice, and must meet the same requirements as are made of district court judges, except for the minimum age requirement in the case of commissioners and the Deputy Commissioner in Reykjavík. The minister also appoints chief superintendents and superintendents. Other policemen are appointed by the National Commissioner. All those listed above are appointed for terms of five years at a time. All appointees must have completed training courses in the National Police College. Policemen are released from service when they reach the age of 65, or earlier, as determined by the Minister of Justice by means of regulations.⁴⁵



Education and training

The National Police College is an independent institution under the Minister of Justice, standing in the same relation to the National Commissioner as the regional commissioners' offices.

To qualify for admission to the college, applicants must be Icelandic citizens, aged between 20 and 35, in good mental and physical health, have completed two years of post-compulsory education or the equivalent, have good language skills, a driving licence, be able to swim, and have a clean criminal record. A special entrance examination is held, with the emphasis on knowledge of Icelandic and general physical stamina.

Trainee policemen receive an all-round introduction to police work in the General Department of the college, where they remain for three terms of training. During the first of these they receive no wages, but studies qualify for a grant from the Icelandic Student Loan Fund. The main subjects covered are Law (the legal system, criminal law, the Police Act, etc.), police skills, Icelandic and special subjects including psychology and ethics. Essential First Aid is also taught, and practical exercises and physical training account for a large part of the syllabus.

The teaching is based on particularly life-like methods and the practical assignments call for skill and resourcefulness as well as theoretical understanding. In their third term, trainees may be called in to reinforce the regular staff if it is faced with large and demanding tasks. In between the terms, trainees undergo practical training with the force.

In the Further Studies department of the college, policemen receive continuing education, further training and training in special fields.

The Police College is also a forum for studies of police work and it acts in an advisory capacity to the government on matters concerning the police.

Under the Police Act and regulations, the day-to-day running of the Police College is under the control of its director, assisted by two chief superintendents.⁴⁶



Command structure

The Minister of Justice is the supreme commander of the police in Iceland; the National Commissioner administers the police on the authorisation of the minister.⁴⁷

For police purposes, Iceland is divided into districts that correspond to the administrative districts of the executive, and the district commissioners are also commissioners of police; the exception to this is Reykjavík where there is a separate police commissioner. The commissioners see to the day-to-day command and administration of the police in their districts and are responsible for police functions there. They also direct search, rescue and salvage operations on land.⁴⁸

Policemen have police powers in all parts of the country. Their working districts are those in which they are appointed, but exceptions are made, for example when necessary to complete a project or investigation that spills over into another

district or necessitates travel through another district. The National Commissioner can also decide, following consultation with the commissioners involved, that members of a division in one district are to exercise police functions in another district on a temporary basis, and who is to be in command of them. Acting on proposals from the National Commissioner, the Minister of Justice may make provision for organised collaboration between local units in order to direct and execute particular policing operations and the transfer of manpower between units within a particular area in order to maintain law and order. The minister may also, at the instigation of the National Commissioner, entrust the local commissioners with the direction of individual policing operations outside their own districts, on a temporary basis, if there are good reasons for doing this in terms of local conditions.⁴⁹





Tasks and divisions

Nearly 2 of every 5 people in Iceland live in the district covered by the Reykjavik Police, so naturally it is also the largest police division in the country.

This makes a certain degree of specialisation in the force not only possible but necessary; thus, the Reykjavik Police has a Drug Squad, other specialised investigation departments, a Forensic Department, a Prevention and Education Department, a Traffic Department and a General Department. Some of the larger regional divisions elsewhere in the country also have special investigation departments.

Since the scope for specialisation in the smaller districts is very restricted, the day-to-day tasks of the individual policeman can vary widely from one district to another. In some places they have to cover the full range of duties.

Other specialised departments under the National Commissioner include a Police Telecommunications Centre, a Vehicle Fleet for all the district units, a Computer Department, a Traffic Department, a Special Task Force and an Alcohol Monitoring Department.

The Traffic Department is responsible for nationwide surveillance of traffic, assisting the

district units and attending to particular tasks concerning traffic control. The Special Task Force also operates in all parts of the country, and is trained to deal with particularly dangerous criminals. It should be stressed, however, that weapons are only used as a last resort if and when all other means to disarm those concerned, or to dissuade them from a dangerous course of action, have failed. To enable the Special Task Force to achieve results through gentler means, several of its members have received special training in negotiating techniques, and are called in when desperate and armed individuals have to be dealt with and human life may be in danger. The Special Task Force is also specially trained in riot control.


Criminal investigations

The term "police investigation" is used to refer to the actions taken by the police and the prosecuting authorities to establish whether or not punishable offences have been committed and if so, to identify suspects. Investigations are initiated when a complaint is made or an offence is reported; the police may uncover evidence independently or in some cases the offender may go to the police himself. The aim of an investigation is to gather all the evidence necessary for the prosecution to decide whether or not to issue an indictment and if so to prepare for legal action.



JEKLD

Investigation of the
Crime Scene



It is directed towards establishing the truth of the matter, and the police are therefore bound to take equal account of evidence that may support an acquittal and that which may lead to a conviction.⁵⁰

The Economic Crime Department of the Office of the National Commissioner is in charge of investigating serious violations of the provisions of the Criminal Code dealing with offences aimed at financial gain. It also handles the investigation of violations of certain specific statutes, e.g. the Tax Act, the Customs Act, and legislation on foreign exchange, pricing, securities brokerage and loans, environmental protection, safety at work and fisheries management. The department handles economic crimes, i.e. criminal acts committed from motives of financial gain on a systematic and regular basis in the course of otherwise lawful operations by legal persons or individuals.

The office of the National Commissioner assists with the investigation of serious crimes, providing advice and special services as required. The Director of Public Prosecutions is in overall command of police investigations and is obliged to monitor their progress.

A special committee, the ID Committee, is entrusted with the identification of deceased persons. It functions under the control of the the National

Commissioner, and consists of policemen, a forensic physician and a dentist.

Forensic investigations – general

The Forensic Laboratory of the office of the National Commissioner and the Forensic Department of the Reykjavík Police are the only ones of their kind in Iceland. The National Commissioner's office attends to comparative studies of evidence and provides guidance on site investigations, the gathering and handling of evidence, etc. The laboratory provides the police with investigative services and keeps fingerprint and photograph archives. The Forensic Department in Reykjavík undertakes general forensic investigations in the Reykjavík district and also assists other district divisions with site investigations.

In recent years police work has focussed increasingly on the gathering of on-site biosamples (e.g. blood, semen and saliva) that are sent to a laboratory for DNA profiling. Results of such profiling will then be stored in a special DNA database which it is planned to set up in the National Commissioner's Forensic Laboratory. Many criminal cases have already been solved using DNA profiling. Developments in computer technology have also led to great advances in forensic studies, including fingerprinting.





Crime prevention and community policing

The police work with the social and health services and the schools, as appropriate, and inform them of matters in which their involvement is needed.⁵¹

One of the tasks of the National Commissioner is to gather and process data on crimes and offenders that can be used in criminological studies; this data is available to the district forces and is of value in police work. Databases covering fingerprints, photographs, criminal records and other matters are kept in a centralised register. The crime databases cover offenders and individual offences, and also statistical data.⁵²


Early in 2003, the office of the National Commissioner and the National Centre for Educational Materials published materials for the police to use in preventive campaigns in kindergartens and schools and for distribution to parents. These were prepared in consultation with the district commissioners, the Police College, many other public bodies and other relevant parties, and are intended to co-ordinate efforts in this area and make them more effective.

The background to this was that in autumn 2001, the National Commissioner appointed a working group of policemen who had been involved in

preventive work to review the extant materials with a view to making them available to police throughout the country for teaching and publicity purposes. The main aim was to harmonise all the available material and it was decided in particular to concentrate on publicity for children and teenagers. The group based the new materials on Norwegian publications that the National Commissioner had received permission to use, adapting them where necessary and making additions.

In Reykjavík there are special "community policemen", based in the neighbourhood police stations, who make special efforts to get to know the needs and features of the local community and establish close contact with the people there, particularly the young people. This they do by visiting the schools. They monitor the crime patterns and general life of the local community and take part in the work of the local residents' associations. All this is aimed at uniting the local people in dealing with problems that have arisen. The community policemen also investigate cases involving minors and assist the police investigation departments with their work: familiarity and acceptance in the community can often play a key role here.





Community policemen deal with problems involving young people in their areas, talk about these problems in the schools and work to resolve them in collaboration with the schools, professional social workers and parents.⁵³

All over the country, the police attend to preventive work through special campaigns and awareness-raising measures. In some of the district units this work is the responsibility of particular police staff.

International police work

Iceland's police take part in international police collaboration, and are affiliated to international organisations such as Interpol, Europol and the Nordic customs and policing scheme PTN.

The Schengen Scheme

Since 25 March 2001 Iceland has been involved with fourteen other European states in the Schengen Scheme, under which identification checks at the common borders of these states were abolished, while border control was tightened on the perimeter of the area in an attempt to combat international crime. One of the pillars of this scheme is a central database containing information on stolen items, e.g. cars, firearms and identification documents, and information

on wanted and missing persons, persons who are to be denied entry into the Schengen Area, persons sought as witnesses in court cases and persons on whom judgements are to be served. The database is open to the police and to the Immigration Agency for use in cases they are handling. It has made all data transfer much easier and facilitated co-operation between the authorities throughout the Schengen states. Each of the member states has established a domestic central office, known as a SIRENE office, where data is checked and evaluated before being sent to the main database. These offices form central points for dissemination of data via the database, both to the district police divisions in each individual state and between states. The SIRENE office in Iceland is under the International Department of the office of the National Commissioner.⁵⁴

Peacekeeping

It is just over half a century since the first Icelandic policemen were chosen for peacekeeping service for the United Nations; this was in 1950, when two policemen were sent to Palestine after training in the UN headquarters. They served in the "no man's land" between the Arab and Jewish populations.⁵⁵



More recently, Icelandic policemen have served in international UN police peacekeeping forces in Bosnia/Herzegovina and Kosovo; in Kosovo they have been armed and had full police powers, while in Bosnia/Herzegovina they have been unarmed and not authorised to use force. Their duties there have consisted in monitoring the authorities, teaching, training and investigative work. Icelandic policemen have earned a good reputation in this capacity, and some individuals have earned considerable advancement.⁵⁶

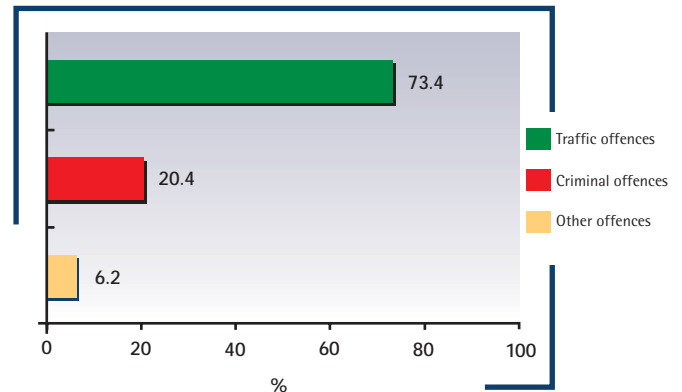
Crime levels and trends

One of the duties of the National Commissioner is to supervise the systematic collection and processing of data on crime and criminals for use in criminological studies and dissemination to the district commissioners for use in law enforcement.

Statistics for the past few years show that the numbers of offences committed in each category have remained broadly similar.

In 2001, 90,729 offences were recorded in police dossiers, of which 66,570 (just over 73%) were traffic offences. As can be seen from Fig. 1, violations of the Criminal Code amounted to about 20% of all recorded violations, and about 6% were violations of other types.

Fig. 1. Breakdown of offences reported to the police in 2001, by category.



The largest proportion of criminal violations were reported on Sundays or Mondays; most traffic offences were recorded on Fridays and other violations on Saturdays or Sundays. Most traffic offences in 2001 were committed during the summer months; the numbers tailed off again as winter approached. Criminal violations, on the other hand, peaked in April and May, dropped off in June and July and then rose slightly as autumn wore on. The same applies to other offences: they were at a minimum in February, the numbers rose on into May and then they declined during high summer, rising again slightly in the autumn.

Table 1 shows the changes in the numbers of reported offences in the various categories from 1999 to 2001. Total numbers in most categories have been more or less stable in recent years; the largest change was a decline of 17% in car thefts. At the same time, there was an increase of nearly 7% in offences against life and limb.

Traffic offences account for by far the largest share of the total (72% in 1999 and 73% in 2000 and 2001), followed by offences committed for financial gain (11-12%).

Table 1. Recorded offences in various categories, 1999-2000.

	2001		2000		1999	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
For financial gain	10,522	11.6	10,482	11.4	10,040	11.6
Violations of the Alcoholic Beverages Act	2,230	2.5	2,665	2.9	2,297	2.6
Violations of personal privacy	759	0.8	757	0.8	711	0.8
Offences against life and limb*	1,737	1.9	1,736	1.9	1,623	1.9
Vandalism	4,463	4.9	4,182	4.6	4,242	4.9
Drug offences	911	1.0	781	0.9	962	1.1
Forgery	398	0.4	455	0.5	412	0.5
Unlawful use of vehicle and other property	388	0.4	427	0.5	456	0.5
Traffic offences	66,570	73.4	66,814	72.9	62,739	72.3
Other categories, total	2,751	3.0	3,366	3.7	3,248	3.7
Total	90,729	100	91,665	100	86,730	100

* Assaults, sexual offences and other violent crimes. See Table 2 on next page.

Table 2. Numbers of offences in selected categories, 1999-2001.

	2001	2000	1999
Burglary	2,857	2,407	2,556
Theft	7,022	7,439	6,787
Robbery	39	34	40
Rape	51	36	48
Other sexual offences	231	192	182
Manslaughter	1	5	2
Other violent crime	1,454	1,503	1,391
Distribution or sale of drugs	63	46	69
Importing of drugs	117	103	74
Possession or use of drugs	593	507	693



Publicity and education work, directed at young people in schools and at their parents, is one of the methods used by the police to reduce crime and create a better society.

Photo: Júlíus Sigurjónsson.

Table 3. Drug seizures 1998-2001: main substance categories.

	Year	Grams	Units	Millilitres
Cannabis substances	1998	14,963		
	1999	42,376	61	
	2000	31,859	1,013	
	2001	48,232	1,233	
Amphetamines	1998	1,875		
	1999	5,078		
	2000	10,268	18	
	2001	1,019	2	35
Cocaine	1998	1,077		
	1999	955		
	2000	945		
	2001	599		
E tablets	1998		2,149	
	1999		7,478	
	2000	79	22,057	
	2001	293	93,716	
LSD	1998		269	
	1999		339	
	2000		15	3
	2001		40	

Table 4. How drugs were smuggled into Iceland in 2001

	By air			By sea			By post		
	Quantity	Cases	%	Quantity	Cases	%	Quantity	Cases	%
Hashish (g)	31,406.04	24	71.2	2,144.64	1	4.8	10,588.95	51	24.0
Amphetamines (g)	74.33	3	56.3				57.81	1	43.7
Cocaine (g)	245.59	6	95.5				212.65	2	4.5
E tablets (no.)	75,750	5	81.3				17,401	4	18.7

The National Commissioner publishes crime statistics for Iceland in a special report. It is accessible on the Internet at www.ris.is⁵⁷





Photo: Júlíus Sigurjónsson.



Ranks:

National Commissioner

Deputy National Commissioner, Police Commissioners
and the Director of the Police College

Deputy Commissioner

Chief Superintendent / Detective Chief Superintendent

Superintendent / Detective Superintendent

Chief Inspector / Detective Chief Inspector

Inspector / Detective Inspector

Sergeant

Policeman / Constable

Trainees, temporarily employed policemen and reservists

Ranks and insignia of the Icelandic Police

Cap 1 Cap 2 Epaulette strap Slide-on epaulette strap Collar insignia on jacket Sleeves Arm patch Cap patch/badge

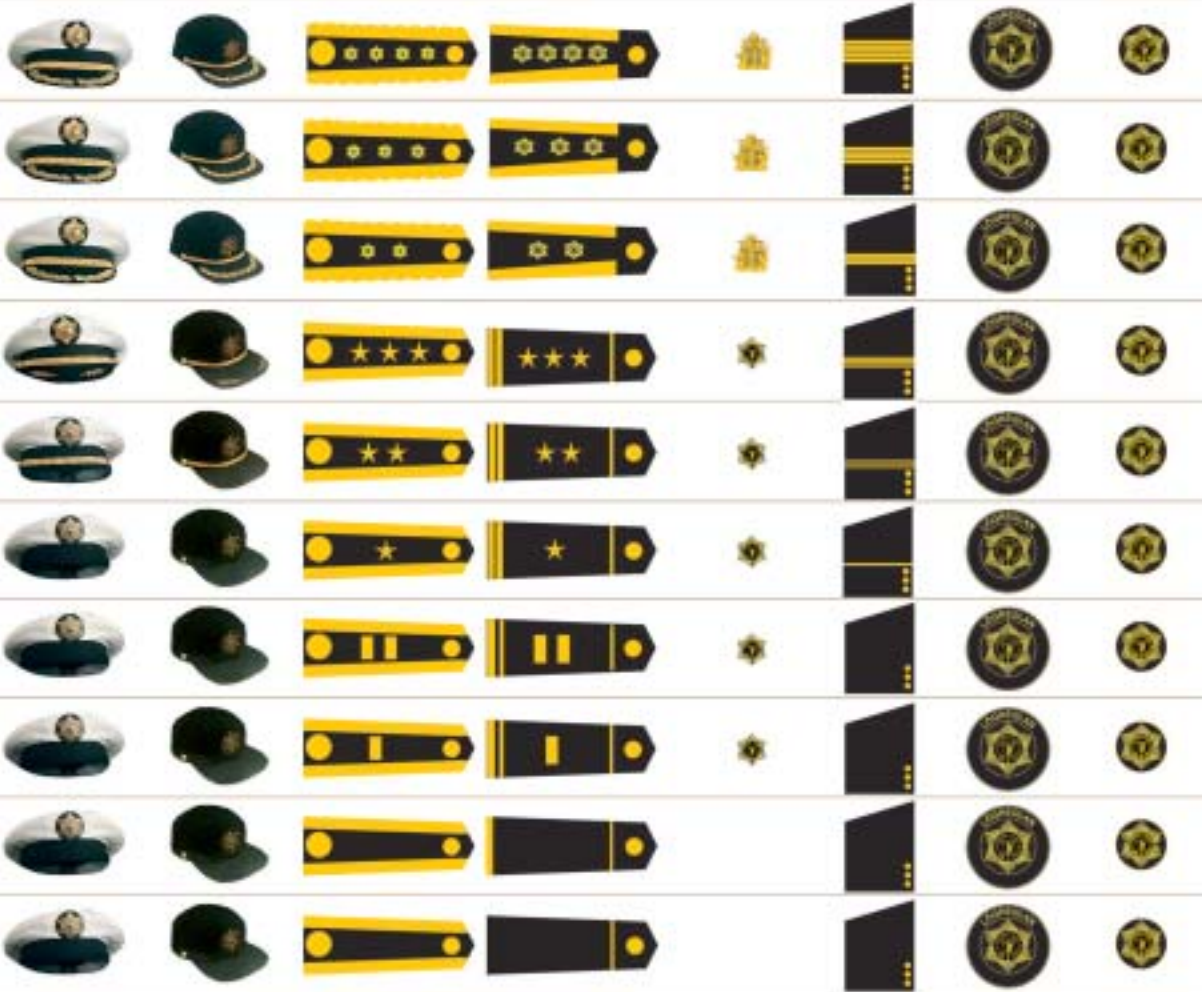


Photo: Gutenberg hf.



Appendix

REYKJAVIK'S FIRST REAL POLICEMEN

On 15 April 1803, by a royal decree, Reykjavik became a separate jurisdiction headed by a magistrate, Rasmus Frydensberg, a Danish lawyer, and two Danish policemen were engaged to assist him.

With the establishment of the magistracy, Reykjavik became a fully valid town with special rights and the magistrate took charge of law enforcement. The magistrate was responsible for a very wide range of functions: in addition to being the town sheriff and the agent administering the crown properties, he judged civil law cases in Reykjavik, collected taxes and customs, handled the financial affairs of persons who were not financially competent, judged criminal cases, and was also the head of the police force and the mayor. He also sat in the board of governors of the prison on Arnarhóll.



Photo: Júlíus Sigurjónsson.

In summer 1809, when Jörgen Jörgensen, the "Dog-day King", seized power in Iceland, he had Frydensberg arrested: the magistrate had flouted the order of house arrest that had been imposed on Danish government officials in Iceland and taken his child out for a ride on Austurvöllur. And so it fell to the policeman, Ole Biörn, to take his superior to the prison and lock him up. As it could hardly be expected that Denmark would not try to liberate Iceland and Danish property from the control of the British, Jörgensen engaged a force of eight Icelanders (first called "soldiers" and later "watchmen") and provided them with arms and training in their use. The policeman Henrik Kragh, a tailor by trade, was engaged to make uniforms for them: Jörgensen, who himself wore a uniform, wanted to have his watchmen smart and well-turned-out.

No	Foru Naevne	Stættir	Aldur	Ástætt	Stærð	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
1	Alex. Svartli	Þorshöfð	61	gudst.	Stættir	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
2	Jonas Jensen	Þorshöfð	31	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
3	Gust. Svartli	Þorshöfð	27	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
4	Magnús Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
5	Jón Jensen	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
6	Benjamin Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
7	Jón Jensen	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
8	Ólafur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
9	Álfur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
10	Jón Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
11	Jón Jensen	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
12	Jón Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
13	Jón Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
14	Svein Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
15	Kristján Ólafsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
16	Jón Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
17	Þórn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
18	Ólafur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
19	Þorsteinn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
20	Þorsteinn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
21	Gudbrandur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
22	Álfur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
23	Þorsteinn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
24	Þorsteinn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
25	Ólafur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
26	Þorsteinn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
27	Þorsteinn Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
28	Helga Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
29	Ólafur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur
30	Ólafur Einarsson	Þorshöfð	20	gudst.	Þingdómur	Þingdómur	24. Okt. 1807	Þingdómur	Þingdómur

A list of the inmates of the prison in Arnarhöll in 1808. Þorsteinn Einarsson, the prisoner who died as the result of a flogging, is number 19. Photo: Júlíus Sigurjónsson.

Reykjavík's first real policemen

Ole Biörn (b. about 1756) served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1803–14. He had been a subaltern in the Danish army and came to Reykjavík in 1803, together with magistrate Rasmus Frydensberg and Vilhelm Nolte, who is mentioned below.

Ole Biörn was involved in running a "club"; societies of this name were common in other countries at this time. Officially debating societies, they were more frequently known as places of drinking and gambling, and club in Reykjavík was no exception to this. It was founded in 1805 under the direction of Ole Biörn and Jóhannes Zoëga, former chief prison warder. It began purely as a drinking and gambling society and magistrate Frydensberg was very much against it. Later, many of the town's more respectable citizens seem to have joined it and it became a sort of social centre where dances were held.

Early in 1806, the board of governors of the prison on Arnarhóll agreed to engage constable Ole Biörn as a prison warder and also doorkeeper at a salary of 30 ríkisdalir, paid from the prison fund, with free lodging in the prison and free firewood. Ole Biörn undertook to be available at all times

in the prison except when engaged on his police duties or serving summonses, and to maintain order in the prison and ensure that none of the inmates went out into the town without wearing prisoner's uniform.

On Sunday, 10 April 1808, the Medical Officer of Health, Klog, announced that Þorsteinn Einarsson, who had been imprisoned for stealing sheep and sentenced to be flogged and to work for the rest of his life in chains, was on the point of death. Klog had visited him at the request of the prison authorities, and the prisoner told him that his condition was the result of a flogging he had received at the hands of the warder Ole Biörn a few days earlier. An inquiry was held, and the board of governors of the prison met and decided that the death of the prisoner could have been the result of the punishment administered the previous week. It was taken into account, however, that Ole Biörn was nearly 60 and had served as a subaltern in the Danish army for more than 20 years before being taken on as a policeman in Reykjavík in 1803, and had always shown great care in his police work, as a consequence of which he was popular. Both in terms of the regulations and his instructions from the board, he was authorised to punish prisoners for minor offences that could not be referred to the board at short notice, and had been given a length of thick rope

for this purpose. According to the testimony of the prisoners, he had punished Þorsteinn Einarsson on 3 April 1808 after reminding him of his duties on several occasions without result. The unfortunate consequences of the punishment were due to the prisoner's "restless conduct" while it was being administered, which must have resulted in the blows landing on vulnerable places. However, he had said nothing, either to the physician or the chief warder, about pains until four days later, and had in the meantime been put to quarrying work, despite the bad weather, by which time his condition had worsened. But there was not considered to be any reason to suspect that the warder had victimised anyone, and the board's conclusion was that he had not intended to cause the prisoner, who was from another district and had been in the prison for a long time, death or serious injury. Thus, the board's finding was that it was not prepared to believe that the warder had committed a capital offence or one punishable by imprisonment; rather, it was an unfortunate accident. However, because of his good conduct and the difficulty of obtaining good workers for the position, and also the reasonable fear that if the warder were to be prosecuted, and perhaps put in custody, then the prisoners would believe that all discipline was at an end, the board referred the matter to the chancellor.

A public inquiry was held. The conclusion was that this was not a case of homicide, but Ole Biörn was made to pay legal costs, and he also resigned his position as a prison warder.

Vilhelm Nolte (b. about 1758) served as a policeman in Reykjavík in 1803–04. He was a shoemaker by trade and like Ole Biörn he had been a subaltern in the Danish army. At this time there was only one shoemaker working in Reykjavík, and one of the reasons why Nolte was chosen for the police job was that he could make and repair shoes, and he was engaged on the understanding that he would pursue his trade concurrently with his police work. He came to Reykjavík in 1803 together with the magistrate, Rasmus Frydensberg, and Ole Biörn. However, he took to drink immediately and was dismissed after only a year's service and sent back to Denmark. Nolte had good references when he arrived in Iceland and must have disliked the job or the country intensely, as he went off on a massive and prolonged binge straight away during his first year and totally neglected his duties.

Henrik Kragh (b. about 1770) served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1804–26. He was a tailor by trade. He took over from Vilhelm Nolte, and was one of the founders of the club, together with Ole Biörn. Little is known about Henrik Kragh, but he seems to have been reasonably good at his job.

Jón Benjamínsson (b. about 1790) served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1814–15. He succeeded Ole Biörn, and can be said to have been the first Icelandic policeman in the force. He served only one year, from 1 July 1814 to 30 June 1815. Little is known about him save that he had been a shop worker, in Hofsóss and later in Reykjavík. He is believed to have left Iceland after his time as a policeman.

Lars Möller (b. about 1790) served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1815–37. Frydensberg, the former magistrate, was instrumental in having him employed. He took over from Jón Benjamínsson, and was eventually dismissed for drunkenness.

Magnús Jónsson (b. 1771) succeeded Henrik Kragh and served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1826–39. He was from Eiði on Seltjarnarnes and matriculated from the school Hólavallaskóli. He is described as having been poor and having a strange manner.

Þorsteinn Bjarnason (b. 1791) succeeded Lars Möller in 1837 and served as a policeman in Reykjavík until his death in 1865. Earlier, he had been a farmer, local parish director and carpenter.

Hendrich Hendrichsen (b. about 1810) succeeded Magnús Jónsson and served as a policeman in

Reykjavík 1839–56. Stefán Gunnlaugsson, the magistrate at the time, made law enforcement a priority and approached the police authorities in Copenhagen asking them to provide a particularly capable man for the job. The position was therefore offered at a considerably higher wage than the other policeman received; however, Hendrichsen did not prove to be quite of the calibre expected. Concurrently with his work as a policeman, he ran a restaurant under a licence that did not allow the sale of alcoholic drinks, but this did not stop him from doing so. He also held dances, playing the flute to accompany the dancing. He was dismissed from his position for drunkenness.

Alexíus Árnason (b. 1813) was taken on in 1855, when the number of policemen was increased from two to three, and served until 1874 and again from 1 October 1875 to 31 January 1876. His salary was paid from the Land Register Fund until 1856, when the governor, who was also the head of the police force, decided this was not in accordance with the law; he based this view on statements in an open letter of 24 November 1856 stating that the costs resulting from the Act of 15 April 1854, on Shipping and Trade in Iceland, were to be met from the government departments' equalization fund. This was in line with the conclusion reached by the Althingi, which had also discussed the matter; nevertheless



THE HEAD CONSTABLE

...On St Monday, however, there was a tavern quarrel, when one of the strongest men in the town had his face cut open by a stone. We were assured by all that such things are very rare. Yet on the following Wednesday one of the couthless Calibans from the country, whom tangle-leg had made "drunk as an auk," thinking that he was derided by a party of Englishmen, slipped up behind one of them and hit him a rounder, in popular parlance a "regular slogdolager." The Briton, thus unexpectedly assaulted, soon recovered himself, and though the peasant bundled away, rolling like a bolting bear, Mr. A- succeeded in lodging a couple of sound lashes with his horsewhip. A small crowd gathered; of course it took part against the strangers, and a free fight became imminent. This was prevented by the chief constable, whose badge is the tallest hat I ever did see, and who commands a body of three men, armed with the "Northern Star." When appealed to, however, the dignitary distinctly refused to take his fellow-countryman into custody; hence, perhaps, the freedom of the jails from jail-birds, a peculiarity strongly insisted upon by complimentary writers, and quaintly cor-responding with our "gratifying diminution of crime." This is not what we read about Iceland and the Icelanders. It of course will be said that fair time is approaching, and that we are at Reykjavik, a centre of dissipation, where men are eagerly looking forward to the arrival of a grind-organ.

Richard F. Burton (1875)

ULTIMA THULE; OR, A SUMMER IN ICELAND

the policemen who had been engaged earlier continued to receive their wages from the Land Register Fund. Alexíus was regarded as a notable figure, and played a large part in public life in Reykjavík. He was a resourceful policeman with a talent for extracting confessions from thieves. Alexíus was also the assistant magistrate, process server and court witness, and probably Reykjavík's first detective.

In 1857 Alexíus received a written reprimand and a warning that conduct of the type he had shown was quite inappropriate if he intended to retain his position in the police. The background to this was that in 1856 the bishop's residence in Laugarnes had been auctioned; the magistrate wrote to the regional governor asking whether the town council could make a bid for the property and permission had been refused. After the auction there was a lot of bad feeling among the townspeople because of this and they wrote the regional governor a strongly-worded letter; one of the signatories was Alexíus, which accounts for the magistrate's reprimand.

Carl Peter Steenberg (b. about 1809) served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1857-59. On Hendrichsen's retirement, the regional government tried to arrange to have someone engaged as his successor who could also teach physical education in the

Latin School in Reykjavík. In addition to teaching, he was expected to do his police duties, his prison warden duties and act as a messenger for the High Court. He had to meet the requirements for the police position: intelligence, quickness, resourcefulness and reliability, in addition to being reasonably good at writing. Steenberg's background was that he had been a subaltern in the Danish army. He resigned his police position after two years, retaining his other duties and entitlements, which gave rise to a long dispute about the wages and perquisites he received, which the other policemen regarded as pertaining to their positions. Steenberg continued as the physical education instructor of the Latin School until 1877, when he was 68. That year he was awarded the Dannebrog medal.

Árni Gíslason (b. 1833), an engraver by trade, succeeded Carl Peter Steenberg and served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1859-75. It is known that he was skilled in improvising verses and was a passionate temperance campaigner.

Jón Jónsson, known as "Jón Borgfirðingur" ("Jón from Borgarfjörður", b. 1826), succeeded Þorsteinn Bjarnason and served as a policeman in Reykjavík 1865-88. Jón was a book-binder by training, and also well known as a scholar and writer; he collected books and manuscripts that he later



"Jón Borgfirðingur" and the official emblem carried by him, "Royal policeman" from 1865 to 1888. Photo: National Museum, Photo Department.

presented to the National Library. His letter of appointment, the first that a policeman is known to have received, was issued by the regional governor on 8 January 1866. It states that he was to conduct himself in accordance with the instructions already issued, or to be issued subsequently, regarding his job, and carry out the orders of his immediate superiors faithfully and efficiently. Jón Borgfirðingur's own records state that his police job was demanding and poorly paid, with the result that he scarcely had sufficient for basic necessities, even though he lived economically.

For a long time he yearned to give up the job and spend his time doing what he wanted – independent reading, studying and writing – particularly after the town council instructed him to wear a uniform, which he regarded as "military shackles", but dared not resign because he was so poor. He was made an honorary member of the Icelandic Literary Society, as his library had been of great use to its members and had also done much to recruit new members.

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Appendix

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