

A terror to them who did evil: a Biography of a Victorian Policeman

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From time immemorial there have been people who are destined to become legends, even in their own lifetime. Sadly, when such people die the facts about their lives become intertwined with the fiction and with the passage of time it is difficult to separate the two. Peter Crawford was, and is, such a person and nearly 140 years after his death to separate the fact from the fiction is no mean task. Therefore the objective of this article is to look at his life and career as a policeman through the available evidence and attempt to unravel the folklore that has surrounded him since his death. Peter Crawford was a policeman whose career spanned 30 years and he saw the transition from what is now called the “old police” to the “new police”.ⁱ There are several local newspaper articles recounting the life and career of Peter Crawford. All but one of these articles suggests that he was the first policeman in Falkirk.

The headline of an article in an unknown newspaper describes Crawford as “*Lang Pate’ – Falkirk’s First Policeman*”.ⁱⁱ The article states that he had been a farm hand and a driver of a milk cart. In another article in 1936 Crawford is again described as “*Falkirk’s first policeman*”.ⁱⁱⁱ The other articles are post-1936 and appear to rely on the previous newspaper articles for information. Crawford’s obituary in the Falkirk Herald mentions that he

“spent his early manhood in driving a milk cart”

but no mention is made of him being the first policeman in Falkirk. However, this newspaper article does state that

“till the passing of the General Police Act in 1858,^{iv} Peter was the only constable in the district”.^v

Peter Crawford was certainly a policeman in Falkirk, and he had a considerable area to cover, but to say that he was ‘Falkirk’s first policeman’ is erroneous. When he became a policeman in Falkirk Peter, ‘Lang Pate,’ Crawford enforced the law along with another policeman and it was not until sometime later, perhaps during the early part of the 1850s, that he was the ‘only policeman in the district.’ Before looking at Crawford’s career as a policeman a brief outline of what can be established of his life prior to this may be of benefit.

Peter Crawford was born in the [Parish of Muiravonside](#) on 2 December 1805.^{vi} The exact place of birth in Muiravonside is not mentioned, but in the

Registry of the County of Stirling Police Force 1858 his place of birth was recorded as "Linlithgow Bridge, Stirlingshire".^{vii} In 1831 he married Jean Nimmo, also of Muiravonside, but at this time Crawford was residing in Linlithgow Parish.^{viii} In May of 1831 Peter Crawford's first child, Andrew, was born and baptised in Muiravonside^{ix} indicating that Crawford was still resident in Muiravonside Parish. By the time his next child, Alexander, was born and baptised in 1833 Crawford was residing in [Bo'ness Parish](#) and his occupation at this time was described as a farm servant^x, and again in 1835 when Peter junior was born and baptised, Crawford was still residing in Bo'ness Parish and according to the Parish Record his occupation was that of a ploughman.^{xi} By November 1838 when Mary was baptised Crawford had returned to Muiravonside and he was still residing there in May 1841 when his son William was baptised. It can thus be seen that prior to becoming a policeman, Peter Crawford was occupied in farming; unfortunately the actual farms he was employed on are not known, but the parishes of Muiravonside, Linlithgow and Bo'ness adjoin each other indicating that Crawford did not migrate too far from his birth place.

Exactly when Peter Crawford started his career as a policeman is not known, but it has been suggested in a Falkirk Herald article that he was a policeman at [Slamannan](#) while the [railway](#) in that area was under construction and in 1842 he was appointed rural policeman at Falkirk.^{xii} The Slamannan Railway was established by an Act of the United Kingdom Parliament in 1835. With construction starting in 1836 it ran from near Airdrie to Causewayend on the [Union Canal](#).^{xiii} Whether Peter Crawford was a policeman as early as 1836 is not known, but from the Parish Records previously described he was residing in Bo'ness Parish in May 1835. The next documented record of him is residing in Muiravonside Parish in 1838. A suggestion can be made here that Crawford returned to Muiravonside sometime after May 1835 to take up his new position as constable on the railway as it ran through Muiravonside; Slamannan being a different parish adjacent to Muiravonside. This can only be a hypothetical suggestion due to the fact that the Parish Record for Muiravonside in 1838 does not provide Crawford's occupation.

However, there is another document, albeit three years later, relating to Muiravonside that does give Crawford's occupation. On 6 June 1841 the first Census in Britain to take account of various details of the population was conducted. In the Census for Muiravonside Parish Peter Crawford is described under occupation as "*Policeman*" and residing in [Avonbridge](#) with his family.^{xiv} Although the Commissioners of Supply for the County had established Stirling County Police at this time there was no County Police Station at Avonbridge.^{xv} In the same Census for Falkirk two policemen are mentioned; James Davine who was 25 years of age and residing in West Bridge Street, Falkirk, and William Rew, who was 50 and residing in High Street, Falkirk. Davine was described as a "*Policeman*" while Rew was designated "*Constable*". It can be seen from the 1841 Census that Peter Crawford was a policeman in Avonbridge while James

Davine and William Rew were policemen in Falkirk. It therefore stands to reason just from the 1841 Census alone that Crawford could not have been “Falkirk’s first policeman”,^{xvi} but an entry in the Minutes of the Commissioners of Supply for Stirlingshire states

“the [Police] Committee authorise Ten pounds to be paid to the late officer at Falkirk as a compensation for his having been dismissed without sufficient warning”.

The entry was dated 30 April 1841, which was the date of the Annual General Meeting of the Commissioners of Supply.^{xvii} This entry is made about 5 weeks before the date of the 1841 Census. It does not give any information as to why the officer was dismissed but it illustrates that there was a policeman in Falkirk before Crawford and indeed before either Davine or Rew. It is more than likely that James Davine was the replacement as William Rew is mentioned in a newspaper article in May 1843 as having been a policeman in Falkirk for two and a half years.^{xviii} This means that William Rew became a policeman in Falkirk sometime in 1840.

As already alluded to the article in the Falkirk Herald giving the obituary of Peter Crawford indicates that he was “*appointed rural policeman for Falkirk*” in 1842.^{xix} It was published just six days after his death and makes no mention of Crawford having been “*Falkirk’s first policeman*”. If Crawford was the first policeman in Falkirk then the author of the article would surely have mentioned it, as this would have been an important event not only for Crawford, who was clearly held in high esteem as his obituary suggests, but also for Falkirk.

Just when in 1842 Crawford joined Stirling County Police^{xx} is not known but it was some time prior to September of that year. In an article for the Falkirk Herald on 28 October 1869 and reprinted in *Poems, Songs and Other Writings* by Robert Buchanan published in 1901 there is mention of [Queen Victoria](#) passing along the High Street on her way to Edinburgh. After the Queen had passed through, many of the town’s population participated in drinking to the Queen’s health. The article continues by indicating

“what a job ‘Lang Pate’ had in keeping the ‘bairns’ in order.”

Footnotes to this article show that Queen Victoria passed through Falkirk on 13 September 1842 and that ‘Lang Pate’ was Peter Crawford

“for so many years a well-known police constable in Falkirk”.^{xxi}

Although the passage only mentions Crawford this does not mean to say that he was the only policeman in Falkirk in 1842. The original article was written two years after the death of Peter Crawford and twenty-seven years after the event. What the article does suggest is that Peter Crawford was well-known and a popular policeman in the town and its surrounding area.

A policeman already mentioned was William Rew. The *Stirling Observer* reported in May 1843 that Lord Meadowbank at the Circuit Court at Stirling

complimented the Sheriff on the low level of crime in Stirlingshire. Lord Meadowbank further commented:

“the eastern district of the county has been unhappily characterised for the frequency of outrages of all sorts. Why the dearth of crime arises, however, is of no difficult solution. The rural police now instantly detect every infraction of law all over the neighbourhood; while in the town itself, the constant residence of Inspector Rew and his efficient assistant Crawford afford a guarantee that quiet, security, and order will predominate and that the scenes of black guardism^{xxii} are now wiped out from the name of Falkirk”.

The article continues by stating that William Rew had been made Head Constable at Falkirk.^{xxiii}

So how did the rural police instantly detect every infraction of law all over the neighbourhood? Numerous anecdotes about “Lang Pate” and his detection skills, which have been handed down through the years, emerge from his obituary.^{xxiv} He is described as being energetic, shrewd, smart and single minded, and esteemed by well-doing people as well as being a terror to them who did evil. For example, in one case that he was involved in, Peter had to go to [Carron Iron Works](#) to arrest a [moulder](#) who was wanted for serious assault and upon finding him the suspect became aggressive towards Peter when informed that the Procurator Fiscal wanted to see him. When asked why? Crawford is reputed to have replied,

“to be a witness in that business-ye’ll be paid for’t-never mind yer coat, you’ll no’ be long hindered.”

The moulder went with Crawford and was sentenced to 60 days in jail.^{xxv} On another occasion a sheep had been stolen in [Stenhousemuir](#) and Peter went to the schools to investigate. He asked the children if any had had beef for their dinner and at one school the reply was that one child exclaimed,

“I had beef the day, and the skin’s lying below the bed.”

Exactly when these cases occurred is not known, but the *Stirling Observer* does provide some insight into the detection of some of the



Illus: Lang Pate in his youth.

crimes that Crawford, and indeed Rew, was involved in.

At the Circuit Court of Spring 1844 John Morrison and James Donnelly were charged with theft by housebreaking, and having previous convictions, in that they entered the loft at West Mains, Parish of Falkirk, on 26 or 27 September 1843, they stole from a chest various items of clothing and books the property of Hugh Kerr, servant to Mr. Simpson of West Mains. Morrison pled guilty but Donnelly pled guilty to theft but not the aggravation of housebreaking. At the trial Hugh Kerr indicated that he slept in the loft and he had a chest containing his clothing, but on the morning of 27 September 1843 the clothing was gone. William Rew received the information of the crime and searched local pawnshops and recovered a vest and a silk square at the premises of George Thomson in Roberts Wynd. He recovered various other items in other premises the consequences of which allowed him to trace Morrison who stated that he had found the items on the road to Grangemouth. Peter Crawford *“one of the rural police of Stirlingshire”* had gone to Airdrie and searched brokers there, recovering other items of clothing as well as clothing at houses in Slamannan and Wester [Shieldhill](#). Donnelly was arrested in Airdrie on 28 September 1843. The jury was unanimous in its verdict and found Donnelly guilty of theft without housebreaking. He was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment while Morrison was sentenced to be transported for 7 seven years.^{[xxvi](#)}

On 30 September 1849 in the High Street of Falkirk three men

“wickedly and feloniously attacked and assaulted John Hutton, a boatman, with a stick and kick him by force of violence and rob him of a tobacco box, half ounce of tobacco, a bottle, seven shillings and sixpence of coin”.

The three accused men were Benjamin Nicol, William Roughead and George Easton and had been charged with robbery, and also assault and previous convictions. Peter Crawford, *“Criminal Officer of Falkirk”* arrested Easton at his house and after a search recovered a half crown coin, threepence farthing, the tobacco box and a soda bottle. Easton gave the names of his accomplices and they were soon arrested. At their trial at the High Court of Justiciary in Stirling the jury returned a majority verdict and all three were sentenced to be transported for 15 years.^{[xxvii](#)} The reader will no doubt have noticed that previous convictions were libelled in charges thus making known to the court and the jury that the accused was not a first offender. Unlike today should previous convictions in the majority of cases be divulged during trial then the prosecution cases would crumble.

This next example of a crime of theft and previous convictions illustrates how Crawford not only arrested the thief but in the court he also had to prove that the accused had previous convictions. At the High Court of Justiciary in April 1850 Duncan Fisher had been charged with stealing a sheet from a lodging-house in

Falkirk and Crawford's evidence was that he arrested Fisher in possession of the sheet and he proved the previous convictions.^{xxviii} These are but a few of the crimes in which Peter Crawford was involved in the detection of. One look at the early editions of the Falkirk Herald, however, will illustrate the number of cases that came before the Sheriff Court at Falkirk during the 1840s and 1850s and although Crawford is not mentioned it would be fair to speculate, due to the limited number of policemen in the area, that he will probably have been involved in their detection.

It was probably this high rate of detection that made Peter Crawford a popular policeman to the extent that in November 1845^{xxix} the inhabitants of Falkirk presented him with a silver watch which had been inscribed:

"Presented to Mr. Peter Crawford, rural police-officer, by the inhabitants of Falkirk, and neighbourhood. Nov. 1845"

The following year the inhabitants of [Grangemouth](#) presented Crawford with a watch chain and appendages, being a seal with his initials on red cornelian. Crawford's wife also received a gold ring. The presentation took place in the Crown Inn at Grangemouth, after which a "social party took place".^{xxx} A further presentation to Crawford of a "purse of money" took place on 29 December 1852. The Falkirk Herald article about the presentation describes Crawford as "a terror to evil doers" as well as being a protector to "those who do well".^{xxxi}

Already mentioned was the probability that at some time during the 1850s Peter Crawford was the only policeman in Falkirk and its neighbourhood. In late 1849 or early 1850 William Rew died and William Irvine, who had been a detective with the police in Glasgow, succeeded him.^{xxxii} It is not known how long Irvine served as policeman in the area of Falkirk, but by the middle of the 1850s Crawford appears to have been the only policeman in the area. An editorial of the Falkirk Herald in 1855 argues for the requirement for a [Police Act](#) for the town of Falkirk as well as strengthening of the police force there. The editorial states:

"We are prepared to admit that our police force, such as it is, does all that can be expected: Peter Crawford is one of those local worthies whose name will not soon be forgotten. He is, no doubt, a terror to those evil-doers who come within reach of his truncheon: but, unfortunately, he has not the property of ubiquity, and therefore, however much he may be a praise he cannot fairly be said to be a protection to those who do well".

The editorial continues by highlighting some crimes that had occurred and says:

"We cannot ask our friend Peter to perambulate the streets during the whole night. Those who are expert in the use of the centre-bit and crowbar have, generally speaking, no objection to the use of a pistol or a bludgeon. One man has but one life, and that may be extinguished in half a minute, and we can scarcely ask Mr. Crawford to sacrifice himself for the good of a public, who has denied him any assistance in the discharge of his duties".^{xxxiii}

The content of the editorial certainly suggests that Peter Crawford was the only policeman in Falkirk at this time. The *Rules and Regulations of Stirlingshire Rural Constabulary* published in 1856 corroborates this to a degree. The extent of the force manpower at this time consisted of a Head Officer at Stirling and a Head Officer at Falkirk. A further sixteen officers or District Constables were stationed throughout the County. Ten were at stations within Stirling District and six within Falkirk District. The Stirling and Falkirk Districts mentioned here are synonymous with West and East Stirlingshire respectively. The [Falkirk District](#) stations were Falkirk, [Larbert](#), [Polmont](#), [Slamannan](#), [Grangemouth](#) and [Airth](#). The extent of the Falkirk station

"comprehends the Parish of Falkirk with the exception of Grangemouth."

The Falkirk constable was required to visit frequently the

"villages of [Laurieston](#), [Camelon](#), [Bainsford](#) and [Bonnybridge](#), east of Bonnywater."

Once a week he had to meet with the officers from [Denny](#) at Bonnybridge; [Larbert](#) at [Carron Works](#) and [Redding](#).

A "Head Officer at Falkirk" is mentioned in these Rules and Regulations and this person was William Shaw, who, at the formation of Stirling County Police in 1858, was made Superintendent and described at that time as being "Chief Criminal Officer for the past five years in Falkirk".^{xxxiv} This indicates that Shaw was stationed in Falkirk along with Crawford, but it is more than likely that he had responsibility for the supervision of the constables in the stations throughout the Falkirk District and that Falkirk was his base.

An anomaly regarding the rank of Peter Crawford during the mid-1850s is highlighted in the extract of the death certificate in connection with the death of Peter's son, Andrew. Andrew died on 16 November 1856 and Peter recorded the death; the copy of the extract states that Peter Crawford was a "Police Sergeant".^{xxxv} Whether or not Peter was a Police Sergeant at this time cannot be verified at present. There are two possibilities; one that the extract entry is a mistake, or two, Peter Crawford was a Police Sergeant by this time, which means that there had been an increase in the strength of the police manpower in Falkirk, which by this time means that Crawford is no longer the only policeman in the town. Certainly by the 23rd March 1858 Crawford was a Police Sergeant (Registry of the County of Stirling Police Force 1858, p19). According to



"Registry," Crawford's "*Former Trade or Occupation*" is described as "*Police Constable*". The Falkirk Herald article containing his obituary mentions that Crawford was "*appointed sergeant in 1858*". [xxxvi](#) Another anomaly regarding Crawford is contained in the "Registry". Peter Crawford's nickname was "*Lang Pate*" and tradition has it that the nickname came about because he was well over six feet in height, but the "Registry" has his height recorded as six feet.

Illus: Sergeant Peter Crawford.

From 1858 till his death in 1867 Peter Lang Pate Crawford continued to be a police sergeant in Falkirk. Prior to his death he had been in "*indifferent health*" for a year and towards the end of his life he was unable to take up his duties as a policeman. Although he could be described as "*having died in harness*," Peter relinquished his duties about two weeks before his death. At 8.30pm on Sunday 3 February 1867 Peter died at his home in Cow Wynd where he had stayed for at least for twenty years, of renal and other illnesses. [xxxvii](#) On Wednesday 6 February 1867 Peter's coffined body was carried shoulder high by his colleagues from his home to [Falkirk Parish Church](#) where his body was laid to rest in the graveyard there. During the funeral procession and interment businesses in the town closed and the streets were lined with "*hundreds of spectators*". The toll of a bell could be heard issuing its solemn notes across the silent town of Falkirk as the mourners and town's people gathered to say farewell, not only to a faithful and diligent public servant, but to a friend.

The life of Peter Crawford did not end with his death and he was obviously a character of great esteem that his exploits as a rural policeman live on in the articles of newspapers and folklore. It is the folklore that this article has tried to reduce to provide a brief but reasonable insight in to the life of Peter Crawford.

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ⁱ The term “old police” generally refers to the Justice of the Peace system of policing whereby constables were appointed on a temporary basis. It also refers to the various police systems that were set up during the first half of the 19th century. The “new police” came into existence as a consequence of Acts of the United Kingdom Parliament to make it compulsory for Local Authorities to establish police forces. This is generally considered to be during the mid-19th century, however, care must be taken in distinguishing between the “old” and the “new” as many Authorities had established forces of their own well before the Acts of the 1857s.

ⁱⁱ Callendar House Archives Ref. No.A251.02.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Falkirk Herald* 25.7.1936 p7.

^{iv} Police (Scotland) Act, 1857

^v *Falkirk Herald* 9.2.1867 p.2.

^{vi} Old Parish Record for Muiravonside Ref. 486/1

^{vii} Registry of the County of Stirling Police Force 1858 p.19

^{viii} Old Parish Record for Muiravonside Ref. 486/2

^{ix} Old Parish Record for Muiravonside Ref. 486/1

^x Old Parish Record for Bo’ness Ref. 663/6

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} *Falkirk Herald* 9.2.1867 p.2f.

^{xiii} Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Scotland for Stirlingshire p.441.

^{xiv} Census Enumerators Book 1841 Muiravonside Parish

^{xv} Stirling County Police was established in 1839/1840 with 9 full-time constables, two of whom were stationed at Falkirk (Stirling Council Archive Ref. SC1/1/5 pp297-306.

^{xvi} Census Enumerators Book 1841 Muiravonside & Falkirk Parishes.

^{xvii} Minutes Book of the Commissioners of Supply for Stirlingshire 1827-1844. Stirling Council Archive Ref. SC1/1/5. p336.

^{xviii} *Stirling Observer* 4.5.1843 p.4.

^{xix} *Falkirk Herald* 9.2.1867 p.2.

^{xx} The town of Falkirk never had its own police force.

- xxi Love, James (ed) *Poems, Songs and Other Writings by Robert Buchanan Falkirk* (1901) Falkirk Herald pp123-4.
- xxii A blackguard being a scoundrel or, foulmouthed person. Bla'gard is the diminutive form of the term.
- xxiii *Stirling Observer* 4.5.1843 p.4.
- xxiv *Falkirk Herald*, 9.2.1867 p2.
- xxv Criminal Procedure in Scotland was different then from now and this method of "arrest" may have been acceptable in the mid-19th century.
- xxvi *The Stirling Observer*, 25.4.1844 p4.
- xxvii *The Stirling Observer*, 18.4.1850 p2.
- xxviii Ibid.
- xxix *Falkirk Herald* 11.12.1845 p3.
- xxx *Falkirk Herald* 12.11.1846 p3, and *Stirling Observer* 19.11.1846 p4)
- xxxi *Falkirk Herald* 30.12.1852 p3.
- xxxii *Falkirk Herald* 14.2.1850 p2.
- xxxiii *Falkirk Herald* 1.11.1855 p3.
- xxxiv *Falkirk Herald* 25.3.1858 p3.
- xxxv Extract of Death Certificate, 479/1/141. D48(3).
- xxxvi *Falkirk Herald* 9.2.1867, p2.
- xxxvii Extract of Death Certificate, 479/1, 35.