Late-Victorian and Edwardian England was a policed society in a way that set it apart from Regency and early-Victorian England and that had more in common with the twentieth-century experience, at least until the 1970s. This did not mean that the police were universally liked. The Times painted an over-rosy picture of working-class attitudes with its reference to the ‘handyman of the streets’ but the very fact of a policed society was evidence of the ability of the police to win support and defuse or disperse opposition to such an extent that much of their work was unquestioned and many of their men went about that work unchallenged. Despite the importance of this development, policing late-Victorian and Edwardian England has not attracted the same degree of detailed attention from historians. The broad outlines have been established and offer a relatively comforting image of society that contrasts with the experience of the late twentieth century. However, there is a danger not only of losing the subtlety that comes from an appreciation of the variety of local experience, but also of underestimating the problems that still faced the police in the second and third generations, and thus of overstating the stability of that policed society so praised by The Times in the early twentieth century.

Middlesbrough’s peculiarly rapid growth had created a range of social troubles and social tensions that, in part, manifested themselves in conflicts between the town’s still inexperienced police and certain sections of its working-class population, especially in the 1860s. The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw an easing of tensions as the town, its inhabitants and institutions, moved from the turbulence of its ‘frontier’ days to greater stability and maturity. At the same time as the town’s police force became more professional, the recorded crime rate in Middlesbrough fell dramatically. The creation of a policed
society was a considerable achievement and not easily or simply achieved. None the less, a profound change had taken place and with it a significant shift in the relationship between the police and the policed. Behaviour among both the police and the policed changed and, almost symbiotically, the police benefited from wider societal changes while local society (for the most part) benefited from improvements in local policing. The police were never universally popular, especially in certain quarters, but there were clear signs that overt hostility declined over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century. The number of recorded assaults on police officers in the town fell steadily notwithstanding the growth in the size of the town and of its police force.3

During the 1860s there was an average of almost 60 assaults per year with over 100 cases recorded in the worst year. In the following decade the average fell to just over 40 with an annual peak of 53. In the following decade the average number of incidents fell below 50 while in the 1880s it had fallen to 26 with a maximum of 40 cases in one year. This decline of over 50 per cent took place at a time when the population of the town had almost trebled and its police force had grown in overall size by nearly 50 per cent. The position deteriorated somewhat thereafter and in 1893 the only murder of a serving policeman took place when the ‘dangerous lunatic’ John Henry Gould shot PC Henderson. By the first decade of the twentieth century the annual average figure had risen to approximately 90 (more than a three-fold increase) but the population of the town had more than doubled, as had the borough’s police force during this period. Put simply, the 1870s and 1880s saw a dramatic reduction in the level of assaults on the police in relative terms. Furthermore this trend continued, albeit much more modestly, in the following decades.4 The figures have to be interpreted with care. Society was becoming less violent generally and the police in Middlesbrough – and indeed elsewhere – may have been no more than beneficiaries of this trend. Legislative change that increased the penalty for assaulting the police will also have influenced the figures, and it is also possible that the police were more prepared to turn a blind eye to, or at least deal informally with, incidents which previously would have led to a court appearance. Nevertheless, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that a real change was taking place in this period.

It is also the case that there was a decline in the incidence and scale of mass anti-police incidents. The majority of such incidents that did take place occurred in the 1870s. Holiday periods, involving long drinking sessions, could lead to violence, as in 1869/70 when the Christmas and New Year period saw a number of violent assaults.