

Lord Mayor of London meets the Mounties



Photo: UPPA Ltd

The Mounties parading in front of Guardian Royal Exchange, City of London.

The traffic in Central London came to a halt on May 11 to make way for a procession of horsemen clad in stetsons and scarlet tunics. The Mounties were back in town marking the start of a ten-day visit to Britain, which was to include appearances at the Royal Windsor Horse Show and the Devon County Show in Exeter.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police are no strangers to London crowds. A RCMP contingent has taken part in every Coronation procession this century (the last time they were in Britain was for Queen Elizabeth II's jubilee parade).

On this occasion, they were to be received at the Mansion House by the Lord Mayor of London, the Rt Hon Sir Greville Spratt. Canadian High Commissioner, Mr Roy McMurtry, accompanied the 36-strong troop, riding in an open landau. An escort was provided by mounted officers of the Metropolitan and City of London police forces.

After a review by the Lord Mayor and High Commissioner, the procession continued to the new Royal Bank of Canada Centre in Queen Victoria Street, and then to Saddlers' Hall for a reception.

A modern force that is proud of its traditions

The image of the Mounties may be traditional, but the modern-day reality is quite different. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police is one of the world's most dynamic and advanced crime-fighting organisations. When the modern Mountie sets out to get his man, he will be in a fast patrol car or helicopter, not on a coal-black charger.

However, the force is proud of its traditions, which go back more than a century. The RCMP Musical Ride, in particular, is a popular spectacle throughout Canada, and in addition to making regular appearances in every province, has undertaken several overseas tours. This year's tour takes in Ireland, Holland, Germany, France, Belgium and Switzerland as well as the UK.

The forerunner of the RCMP was the North West Mounted Police, a force which came into

being on August 30, 1873 with an establishment of 300 men. It started out as a semi-military body with the immediate task of stopping liquor traffic among the Indians, gaining their respect and confidence, halting tribal warfare and attacks on white settlers, and collecting customs dues.

Their task was not an easy one considering the vastness of the area they were expected to patrol. It was further complicated by the arrival of the rebellious American Sioux following the Custer massacres. Later, the influx of white settlers and the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway brought increased responsibilities from the provision of a mail-delivery service to acting as welfare officials and land agents.

In 1904, King Edward VII granted the Force the prefix 'Royal' in recognition of its service to the Crown. Then, in 1920, the Royal North West Mounted Police absorbed the Dominion Police and became the RCMP, responsible for the enforcement of federal laws from the Pacific to the Atlantic shores.

Nowadays, the RCMP has exclusive police jurisdiction in the Northwest Territories, and in eight of Canada's ten provinces the force is contracted to enforce criminal and provincial laws. The Mounties also provide policing services to over 150 municipalities throughout Canada.

More than a century of colourful pageantry

The origins of the Musical Ride are obscure, but it is believed to derive from a form of diversionary cavalry drill developed by British troops in India. It may well have been performed in Canada as long ago as 1876, but the first recorded performance was in Regina, Saskatchewan, in 1887. The first public performance was in 1904 and it proved an instant hit with audiences.

The Ride is performed by a troop of 32 riders and horses. To the accompaniment of appropriate music they execute a variety of intricate figures and movements which demand careful control, timing and co-ordination. The climax of each performance is the 'charge', when the riders lower their crimson-topped lances and move forward at a gallop.

The riders are policemen and policewomen with at least two years of active police work who volunteer for the Ride and stay with it for two years before returning to normal police duties. They are put through a two-month basic equitation course; then the 18 most successful ones proceed to a second course of six months' duration.

The horses are specially bred by the Force. The first breeding ranch was Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan, but now the breeding centre is in Pakenham, Ontario. The horses begin their training at the age of three and continue until they are five and a half. They stay with the Musical Ride for up to 18 years.

The Mounties have come a long way in their century or so of existence. From a small force set up to control Canada's western frontier they have developed into ambassadors of goodwill whose skill and pageantry have won them admirers around the world.

The High Commissioner for Canada and the Lord Mayor of London exchange gifts outside Mansion House.



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