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THE HUNTINGDONSHIRE CONSTABULARY BEFORE 1857

JOANNA BROWN

COMPULSION has always been necessary to secure law and order, and in England this function was performed by the Constables under the supervision and control of the Justices of the Peace. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, economic and social changes, aggravated by the long period of war, had made clear that the old system of local government, largely in the hands of the J.P.s, was inadequate as it existed to cope with the new demands made upon it and the tasks set before it. As early as the sixteenth century the Justices' functions could only be listed alphabetically, the burdens laid upon them in succeeding centuries growing still heavier in proportion to the increasing recognition of their usefulness by the central government. As the Justices' burdens grew, so did those of their executive officers, the constables, and it was therefore natural that when reform of local government as a whole took place in the early nineteenth century, and with it the gradual imposition of uniformity and centralization, the constabulary, an important part of government whether central or local, shared in this process. In Huntingdonshire this reorganization and development can be clearly seen, even though, being a small county, the reorganization took place rather more slowly than elsewhere.

The constable had originally been a manorial official, although with the decay of the feudal system and his increasing use by the J.P.s as their executive officer, he had very largely become, like the Justices themselves, a conservator of the peace, with the same wide jurisdiction over financial, administrative, and legal affairs. In spite of this heavy burden on the Constable in the performance of his duties, he received very little remuneration for his disagreeable and often dangerous work, at least at the beginning of the century. It was one of the benefits of the reorganization of local government, and with it the constabulary, that the men employed became increasingly professional and better paid. The amateur devoting only part of his attention to the very demanding job of constable – which in 1834 was said to involve some 500 miles of travel at least per annum (no mean feat at that time) by the high constables of Huntingdonshire – was replaced by the professional, devoting all his time and energy to the job. The changing attitude towards the constables can be seen most clearly in the successive reorganization of the constabulary.

The police force at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in Huntingdonshire as elsewhere, consisted of the traditional and well-established parish or petty constables, often taking the unpopular office on the basis of the 'roundsman' system, and the high or chief constables from whom they took their orders and who were appointed by the Justices in Quarter Sessions. The petty constables were normally appointed

by the Court Leet, but with its decline its function in this respect was assumed by the Justices at Quarter Sessions. In Huntingdonshire the four hundreds of Norman Cross, Hurstingstone, Leightonstone and Toseland each had two high constables, each being appointed virtually for life; William Stokes of Elton became high constable of Norman Cross on John Bradley's death in 1807 and only relinquished the post in 1846 on his own death, when his duties were taken over by the other high constable of Norman Cross, William Nicholl, who had himself been appointed in October 1821 on William Child's death. Very rarely an officer resigned, such as John Islip, chief constable of Leightonstone, in June 1835, or John Danns of Hurstingstone in August 1853.

The practice of maintaining two high constables for each hundred was continued, an enquiry into county expenditure showing this system was still in force in 1833. Change was contemplated in 1839, when a letter from the Secretary of State and a resolution of the Shropshire magistrates on the subject of the county constabulary was discussed, but it was decided that a county as small as Huntingdonshire was too small and sparsely populated to make such an undertaking worthwhile, and the proposed scheme was finally rejected in 1840. In 1842, however, it was decided to build a lock-up house at St Ives under the Parish Constables Act of 5 & 6 Vict., and in 1845 it was decided to reorganize the constabulary at the same time, placing the lock-up house in charge of a superintending constable who was also to be in charge of a district, consisting of parishes and their constables, chosen by the magistrates of Norman Cross bench. In April 1845 Charles Wootten of the Metropolitan Police was chosen superintending constable over the lock-up and the district. In 1849, however, he resigned, and was replaced by Sergeant William Benson, police officer of Sittingbourne in Kent.

A further change came in October 1850 when the high constables were ordered to be appointed in future by Justices in Special Sessions, and again in November 1850, after a change in the collection of the county rate and following the precedent set in 1846 with the appointment of one high constable at an increased salary for Norman Cross, two high constables were to be paid the same as one. In April 1852, however, the constabulary received a complete overhaul; a committee appointed by the Justices to consider 13 & 14 Vict. for appointing superintending constables, produced a scheme in June 1852 whereby a superintending constable was placed over each petty sessional division. Each superintending constable was also to be high constable, and Inspector of Weights and Measures. In August the superintending constables for the divisions were appointed; William Preston for Norman Cross, William Benson for Hurstingstone, Robert Hornsby for Toseland (replaced 1854 by Thomas Stokes, formerly lock-up keeper), and in June 1853 Thomas Simpkin was made keeper of St Ives lock-up at £70 per annum but not Inspector of Weights and Measures.

In June 1854 a committee was appointed to investigate still further all matters connected with the county police, but was suspended pending the outcome of the forthcoming parliamentary bill. The Whitehall returns of 1855 show however quite clearly what the organization was at that time: five high constables with only four hundreds; but for one hundred there were two high constables, and three for the other three hundreds. In 1856 too the same returns show that the rural police were divided into four divisions for the county, and that each had a superintending constable though there were no petty constables under 2 & 3 Vict. because the county had not adopted the Act.

But it was perhaps in 1856 that the greatest changes took place in the reorganization of the police force. The bare bones of these changes can be seen in the Quarter Sessions minute books, which reveal that in the 1857 Epiphany Sessions, in accordance with the Act of 1856, Huntingdonshire set up a new police force for the county, as follows.

Four Superintendent constables, one at £150 p.a. for Hurstingstone and 3 at £140 for the other divisions.

One inspector, to reside at the county lock-up at Ramsey in the Hurstingstone division, at £70 p.a.

Three sergeants, one for each of the divisions of Leightonstone, Toseland, and Norman Cross at £1. 3s. per week each.

Ten first-class constables at £1 per week each.

Twelve second-class constables at 18s. per week each.

Ten third-class constables at 16s. per week each.

The superintendent should bear the cost of providing and keeping a horse and maintaining in good repair a cart and harness provided by the county.

The county should furnish clothing and accoutrements with uniform, stationery and office for each superintendent. The superintendent constable of each division should act as Inspector of Weights and Measures within his division; but all fees and portions of fines received by him should be paid over to the police rates.

All officers who should have public money under their charge should give security to the county.

One question, whether Huntingdonshire should have its own independent chief constable (salary £250 p.a. plus £50 travelling expenses) or should appoint in conjunction with Cambridgeshire and contribute £180 p.a. with £70 travelling expenses, was debated in Quarter Sessions and it was finally resolved (after Whitehall had been consulted) that the joint appointment be made.

At the Easter Quarter Sessions the number of high constables was reduced to one for each division at a yearly salary of £10. A committee was set up to negotiate with Huntingdon borough about the consolidation of the borough police force with that of the county. It was agreed that:

The borough should maintain and pay the salary and clothing of three of the first-class constables, the money being paid by the borough treasurer to the county treasurer to be placed to the police rate account. The salaries of the three first-class constables were to be in all £156 with £12 for clothing.

The staff and contingent expenses to be paid by the county, the maintenance of prisoners in the lock-up by the borough. Fees and fines arising in the borough to be given over to the borough fund.

The existing lock-up belonging to the borough to be leased to the county at a peppercorn rent with power for the county to alter and extend. The borough to have the joint use of the lock-up for borough prisoners.

The borough constables to be appointed by the chief constable in common with the constables of the county.

The Godmanchester borough force also underwent the same consolidation some time later, and during the Midsummer Sessions the levying of a police rate of $\frac{1}{2}d.$ in the $\pounds 1$ was authorized; and the county treasurer was instructed to replace, from the police rate collected during these sessions, the $\pounds 700$ which had been previously advanced from the general county balance to cover expenditure on the setting up of the force. The closing session of the year ordered the following innovations to the police superannuation fund: it was to be financed by deduction from the constables' pay, stoppage during sickness, sale of worn and cast-off clothing, fines imposed on police constables for misconduct, a portion of fines imposed on drunken persons, fines for assaults on police constables and moieties of fines and penalties awarded to informers on summary convictions.

The clearest picture, however, of the whole reorganized police force, its structure, personnel and duties, can be seen in the first annual report of the newly appointed chief constable, Captain Davies, R.N., to the adjourned Huntingdonshire Quarter Sessions on Saturday 2 May 1857.

I received the Secretary of State's confirmation of my appointment on Saturday, 13th April, just expired. I on my part, the same day appointed the 4 Superintendents, and on the Monday following, all 4 were in place and charge of their respective divisions of the county - being 4 officers of approved merit from the Cambs. Force. Such Superintendents requiring no initiation into the system to be carried out, and not required by me in organization of the Force and Head Quarters, will, therefore, on the distribution of the force, receive their men with a thoroughly acquired knowledge on their own part, in the interval, of every inch of ground; and the duties, intersecting conferences and communications so perfectly arranged with me as to ensure almost immediate efficiency. The raising of the rest of the Force has gone on much more slowly than I anticipated; arising, I believe, from our being the last of the counties to enrol its force, and the great mass of rolling stones from other forces, of which new Constabularies usually avail themselves, having elsewhere provided themselves, whilst I have also been compelled to reject a host of ineligible candidates; yet from having already provided the most important parts of the corps, the Superintendents, Sergeants, etc., now numbering rather more than half of the allowed total establishment, I have no doubt that the whole will be raised, and (dependent on the clothing) distributed by the end of the present month, and infinitely less time than ever done in any other county . . . my intended distribution of the force . . . still exclusive of Superintendents, there are but 36 men to 106 parishes, on the average of 3 parishes to a man; universal satisfaction is not to be expected, neither does it follow that the 36 largest or most populous parishes will all have the constables whereas the whole county is to be traversed and visited; but with only 2 or 3 exceptions the county does not present difficulties. Full two thirds of the men will be located in the larger and more populous villages whilst the rest having more numerous and smaller parishes, and by far the most onerous duties, will maintain the necessary intersecting communications as a whole.

It is somewhat singular but fortunate that it does so happen that with one exception there will be a resident policeman in the immediate vicinity of every magistrate in the county, which will be found a great advantage to the public, and convenience to the force.

It is scarcely necessary for me to say, that the police having duties constantly taking them beyond the parishes they reside in; it should not be forgotten that every parish has still its ordinary parish constable at call; but in all cases of robberies etc. the police constable should immediately be informed, and the Superintendent of the division with the least possible delay; but in all matters as to efficiency, character, conduct, or discipline of the force, the Chief Constable himself should be written to direct; and I may here state, perhaps, whilst desirous of knowing and fulfilling the views of the Court, what I deem and have hitherto acted on, from the highest example to be my own duties as the administrative head of your force; and that is to organize, instruct, and discipline the same; to keep it recruited and in efficiency; to enforce full and complete reports of every occurrence, and never to be satisfied till I deem all is done that may be done; to manage and direct the central and generally very extensive and somewhat complex duties of Office returns; and correspondence, and to maintain a system of prevention, rather than by any personal attendance in cases of crime, which does not appertain to me; and having appointed thoroughly experienced and competent Superintendents and superior officers, trust to distribute a force every man of whom will become from his habits of life, very shortly a better detective than myself . . . the system of organization pursued has been to drill the men daily, to have the portions of the instructions applying to constables read to them, the duties and powers of constables, as furnished and warranted by the Secretary of State, clearly explained to them day by day, with a nightly duty in pairs of a circuit of from 4 to 6 miles in the county, beyond and around the two boroughs; to inure them to night duty, whilst they have otherwise been allowed that free disposal of their time, by which the conduct and characters of men are best ascertained, and I am happy to say without a complaint having reached me. . . . In conclusion, I beg to state that it will always be my desire to receive communications and representations connected with the conduct of the force, or in any way to the interest of the public, and that they will not fail to receive earnest and immediate attention on my part, whether from magistrate, rate-payer, or other whatsoever.

This greater streamlining and increased professionalism in the police force, making, as it were, its public image more attractive, can perhaps be more clearly seen in its financial organization. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Huntingdonshire constabulary received no salary; each constable received his remuneration either from fees and fines collected in the course of his duty, or of money he took from the county rate. By 1816 the Justices had realized the inefficiency of this method, and investigated the whole question; as a result all high constables were paid a salary of £40 p.a. with permission to bring in a bill during Quarter Sessions for any extra expense incurred and which would be paid for with the other county bills, and in January 1818 the chief constables were paid half a year's salary in lieu of former remuneration (which thereby showed itself to be profitable, if illegal). In spite of this it appears that there were anomalies, for some high constables were paid less than others, and in October 1833 and February 1834 a committee appointed to investigate county expenditure reported that of the eight high constables six received £40 p.a. and two only £20 p.a. (total £280) and they recommended that all salaries should be reduced to £20, a recommendation which was very shortsightedly adopted in spite of the protest signed by all the chief constables of the county in 1834.

This attitude to the police lasted a good many years. In November 1842 the Justices at General Quarter Sessions authorized what was in some quarters considered a great extravagance, namely the building of a new county lock-up house at St Ives which was to be financed by the county, and in January 1843 they appointed a committee to arrange a scale of fees for constables under the Act of 5 & 6 Vict. By 1845 the new lock-up house was ready, and with it a new plan to put it in charge of a superintending constable who was to be paid 25s. per week, payable also from the county rate. Economies, however, were made to compensate for the Justices' extravagance; when William Stokes, high constable of Norman Cross hundred, died, his duties were taken over by his fellow high constable at a salary of £30 p.a. and a second high constable for the hundred was not appointed, thereby saving, in the county's financial estimates at least, £10. When the new superintending constable of the St Ives lock-up and division resigned in 1849, his successor William Benson was appointed at a reduced salary of 21s. per week. In the same year a committee appointed to investigate the payment of the county rate recommended it to be paid direct from the Poor Law Unions to the county treasurer, thereby cutting out the high constables altogether. Not unnaturally they also recommended that the high constable's salary be reduced by half. Both recommendations were accepted, together with a new table of allowances for constables in 1851. As a result the position of constable, whether petty or high, became even less financially rewarding than ever, with high constables, if appointed to a hundred, receiving £10 each or, if only one was appointed, receiving £20.

Such a cheeseparing attitude was not allowed to last for long. In 1852 a committee was appointed from the Justices to consider the Act of 13 & 14 Vict. for appointing superintending constables which improved the high constables' financial standing. A superintending constable who was also a high constable for each district was to receive a salary of £80 (this was a great increase on the £20 maximum of two years before) with another £5 if he was also an Inspector of Weights and Measures, and a £25 allowance for a horse, cart and harness, bought by the county. Further improvements came in August 1853 when it was decided to allow superintending constables to keep the fees and fines received for their own use and not pay for them quarterly to the county treasurer, and in October 1853 when superintending constables could also retain half of any fines imposed on a public house or beer house which was successfully prosecuted for being disorderly. Such an arrangement did not, of course, last long, for in 1857 the amalgamation and reorganization with the Cambridgeshire police force took place and with it further streamlining and improved pay for the constables, as described above.

The constables' functions were, then as now, many and varied. Those of the chief constables are best described in their own words, in a petition of 1834.

Four times in the course of every year we are required to go through our respective hundreds to give notice of the Quarter Sessions to the constables of the several parishes; that we are required to be present at the several Quarter Sessions.

That it is our duty to collect the county rate every quarter from the constables of the several parishes and to pay the same to the County Treasurer and have our accounts duly supported by proper vouchers.

That we are likewise required to go through our respective hundreds to give notice of Special Sessions

First for appointment of overseers

Secondly of surveyors of the highways

Thirdly for tax assessors

Fourthly for the revision of jury lists

Fifthly for the licensing of alehouses and are likewise required personally to attend at each of these several sessions

That we are required at our own expense to provide the necessary precepts to the constables of the several parishes and although for the last two or three years the ballotting for the militia has been suspended yet we are always liable to the duties imposed upon us by the militia Acts and expect no extra remuneration for such services.

We would also humbly observe that in cases of felonies and riots we have public duties imposed upon us sometimes of a very responsible nature and although we are aware that the Justices in Quarter Sessions may allow reasonable charges for any extra-ordinary expenses incurred in such cases yet we humbly assure your worships that in the riots which so much disturbed the Peace of the county at the latter end of the year 1830 when we were called upon to a very arduous and responsible duty and were subject to many expenses we had no extra remuneration allowed to us. We humbly beg to observe that each of us in the discharge of our several ordinary duties is obliged to travel a distance of 500 miles at least and we are therefore each of us under the necessity of keeping a horse and of incurring many travelling charges.

The functions of the petty constables were not of such great importance as those of the chief constables, yet in their own way were just as important to ensure that the course of parish life ran relatively smoothly. As executive officers of the Justices of the Peace they had many duties which had very little to do with the keeping of the peace, and which inevitably covered the legal, administrative and financial spheres.

Financially the constables' most important duties were the disbursing of money to the poor and the collection of the county rate. Sometimes, as at Brampton during the early nineteenth century, the constable was also the overseer, but usually these two offices were held by separate people. All matters to do with the administration of the Poor Law were the province of the Justices and of the overseers, but occasionally the constable also gave out money to the deserving poor, such as poor pensioners and maimed soldiers. One account of the constable of St Neots in 1782 reads as follows.

	£	s	d
Paid a soldiers wife			2
Gave a soldiers wife			4
Gave 2 soldiers wives 3d each			6
Gave 1 ditto 6d and 1 ditto 3d			9
Gave a soldiers wife			3
Gave a soldiers wife and child			6
Paid Mayes a lock for the stocks	1		2
Gave a Hessian soldier			3
Gave an old soldier			3

Gave 2 poor old men	6
Gave a sailor and family	6
	<hr/>
TOTAL	5 2

The collection of the county rate was also an important task performed by the petty constables on the warrant of the high constables of the hundreds. Without the county rate nothing ordered by the Justices at Quarter Sessions could be paid for or would in fact be done, including the paying of the constables' wages. In spite of this the constables were not always honest in discharging this unpleasant duty, for in 1816 the Justices at Midsummer Quarter Sessions gave notice to the constables to attend a later Quarter Sessions in order to show cause why they had not paid in to the county treasurer all such sums as they had collected from their parishes, and in 1851 one of the magistrates, a Mr Wilkinson, in discussing a housebreaking, asked, 'Is it worth their while to do anything?'

Even at this date constables were involved with paperwork, and even at this date it was disliked. It was their duty to give notification of inquests to all concerned as well as to draw up presentments which were delivered up by the high constables. Often the duty was evaded by merely stating 'All well' and 'Paid for' (the county rate) while in 1799 petty constables were ordered to turn up at Quarter Sessions, failure to be punished by a fine of £5, no small sum in those days. In 1827 printed questionnaires were issued on oath by the constables and delivered to the high constables giving information about false weights, new bridges, stocks, drunkenness, immorality (in alehouses) and apprehension of gipsies. In Great Gidding alehouses, for instance, 'tippling at all hours' was allowed, and at Kimbolton publicans 'draw short measure, the gardners sell by skips instead of a bushel'.

Yet this was not the sum total of their work; a large part of local government was concerned with the administration of the Poor Law, and with this the problem of the vagrants was very much bound up. Not only was it the constables' duty to hand out relief to those with passes, but also to execute removal orders against people having no legal right to settlement in, and likely to become chargeable to, the parish. Removal of vagrants seemed to be an obsession with the parishes at this time, but sometimes humanity was shown, as with a Susannah Rawlings who, being ill, was to be conveyed in a cart from Huntingdon to Dartford, Kent. Many passes exist from 1780 charging constables to receive such unwanted persons and to convey them on stages of their journey which could be as far as Somerset or Ireland. More paperwork was here involved, for it was only on the presentation of detailed accounts that officers were reimbursed for their expenditure on this duty and also for money paid out for the conveyance of prisoners to gaol (though occasionally the suggestion was made that the culprits should pay for their own transport!). In 1819, however, this duty, with all the time and trouble it involved, was taken from the constables by the

Justices at Quarter Sessions and a contract made instead with a carrier for the conveyance of vagrants 'who will combine the smallest sum with security for his (the pauper's) good and Humane treatment'.

The constables' other duties are those more generally associated nowadays with the police; giving evidence in court (in 1816 this involved at least some ten days a year), the apprehension of offenders caught in the act, prosecution for gaming and disorderly houses (as two ladies in St Ives discovered to their cost, being indicted for keeping one such disorderly house for fifteen years!), the execution of justices' warrants, and the quelling of riots, which seem to abound at all times in the county. Suppressing riots in alehouses could be dangerous; and it was not always the lower orders who caused trouble. In 1816 Taylor White, Gent., was indicted for assaulting John Conquest, special constable of St Ives. In 1824 the same John Conquest, a parish watchman, two of the St Ives constables and two members of the public were engaged in stopping a fight at the 'Ram' for which politics may have been responsible, since it was about this time that another St Ives citizen 'who Disliked King George IV' was rude to the police. Also in 1830 John Islip, high constable of Leightonstone hundred, received a notice from William Wright that he intended to claim £20 damages from the inhabitants of the hundred for a threshing machine destroyed by rioters.

The constables themselves were not always peaceable men; in 1842 in Somersham, Thomas Charity, as parish constable, was accused by James Donnelly, assistant constable, of having insulted him and his brother-in-law, Amon Holding, chief police officer, by calling them 'Bloody Jew-looking humbugs'. Donnelly's attempt to arrest Charity led to a disturbance which ended only when 'several gentlemen of the town came out'. Riots increased towards the middle of the century, for which in 1848 Mr James Rust, Chairman of Quarter Sessions, blamed the railway construction and imported labour. There were many ugly incidents, such as at Ramsey, 'that very criminal quarter', where the constable in 1849 was attacked by five men and the gentlemen of the parish had again to give assistance.

Detection too had its part to play in the constables' duty. In 1837 a case of house-breaking at Sawtry was solved by Algernon Smith, a Westminster constable, who traced the stolen goods from Sawtry St Andrews to Stamford. The criminals, a tailor and his sons, were transported, the former for life. This was an early example of police co-operation, and by no means the only one. In 1842 two St Ives horse stealers were tracked to Horsham, Sussex, while pickpockets who infested the fairs of Bridge Fair and Fletton were watched and caught, and cattle thieves apprehended.

On the whole the constables' duty was neither an easy nor a safe one. In 1786 the Alconbury constable, John Atwood, butcher, was so assaulted by menfolk of women arrested for illegal gleaning that 'his life was despaired of'; James Dean, constable for Brampton in 1843, was disabled when his finger was bitten by a man he was

arresting under the Game Laws; the Hail Weston officer in 1827 was 'afraid as the prisoner was a resolute young man, so he asked him to go to the public house and drink a pint of ale. They went to the alehouse together and he then told him he was his prisoner.' The Hilton constable of 1842, Henry Cook, also had his difficulties: 'he was called to the house of William Crane, butcher, who was knocking his wife about. Crane attacked Cock and threatened him, and Cock went home, half a furlong round to avoid a meeting with him, having been told he was waiting for him' (Crane was fined £5). In many cases, such as the riots above, the constables often only succeeded in keeping the peace with the help of voluntary assistance from the public, and when they were themselves assaulted (as often happened), such offence was merely punished by fine or recognizance rather than by imprisonment.

The constable's duties, and the difficulties with which they were fraught, do not seem to have changed very much in the past century. The organization which encompasses him, however, has changed radically, becoming more professional and streamlined as the years pass. Such streamlining dates in this county, for practical purposes, from the amalgamation and reorganization which took place in 1857, transforming the more amateur and often ineffective body into a professional, full-time and efficient one.

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