Captain Percy Sillitoe: Chief Constable of Chesterfield, 1923-25

By David Beeston
(University College of Wales, Aberystwyth)

I

Captain (later Sir) Percy Sillitoe was the best known and most successful British police officer in the first half of the twentieth century. During the inter-war years, outstanding periods of service in the tough, gangster-dominated cities of Sheffield and Glasgow established his international reputation as a police reformer and a resolute champion of law and order — achievements which paved the way for his controversial career as head of M.I.5. in the early stages of the Cold War, and also earned him numerous accolades from the popular press.[1] Yet his progress into the upper echelons of the British police and security services was not without its setbacks. On the contrary, it almost ground to a complete halt in the years immediately after the First World War and could have foundered permanently but for the opportunities offered by a Derbyshire town. The entire episode merits a more careful analysis than it has hitherto received, partly because of the important biographical details which it illuminates but also because it provides many interesting examples of the capacity of local government to influence significant administrative developments at national level.

II

Percy Joseph Sillitoe was born at Tulse Hill in South London on May 22nd, 1888. His father, who came from a middle-class Shropshire family, had enjoyed moderate, inherited wealth at the time of his marriage but frittered the money away in a series of disastrous investments. Although later described by his son as an average adjuster in marine insurance, he probably never had regular employment. Instead, he acquired an infamous reputation as a compulsive gambler and womaniser who seldom lived with his family, served several short prison sentences for drunkenness and vagrancy, and spent his declining years in a workhouse or old people's home. His wife and children — Sillitoe had an elder brother and a younger sister — were therefore condemned to the penny-pinching lifestyle of the genteel poor.[2]

Fortunately, a love of singing, nurtured by his mother, had enabled Sillitoe to obtain a place as a boarder at St. Paul's Cathedral choir school, where he met Colonel Hugh Sinclair, brother of the archdeacon of London. A keen sportsman and widely-travelled army officer, Sinclair became a father figure for the young chorister to whom he imparted a spirit of adventure and an interest in foreign lands. Consequently, when Sillitoe left school in 1902 and returned home to study for the Indian Police examination with the help of a private tutor, he had kept in touch with the colonel and his wife and, at the age of seventeen, went to live at their home in Woolwich. They had used their personal influence to help him, first in obtaining a junior clerical post with the Anglo-American Oil Company and again, in 1908, when he had enlisted as a trooper in the British South Africa Police.[3]

Three years' service throughout Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) with this strictly-disciplined, paramilitary force enabled him to send financial assistance to his hard-pressed mother, and had also enhanced his own long-term prospects. After completing the engagement with outstanding discharge references, he had been commissioned in the Northern Rhodesia

Police in 1911 and, at the outbreak of the First World War, was based at Lusaka (the capital of modern-day Zambia). Although the events in far-off Europe had come as a considerable shock, the rapidly-unfolding East Africa campaign had brought many personal benefits in its wake. By 1915 he had been promoted to captain, commanding a company of askari infantry, and the following year, as areas of German East Africa (later Tanganyika) were wrested from enemy control, he had been appointed as a political officer, entrusted with introducing British administration into the territory. By the end of hostilities, Sillitoe's future seemed assured. Experienced and capable, his prospects would have been excellent provided he remained in Africa.

At this point, however, circumstances had combined to work against him. First, in 1920 he had returned to England on leave and married his fianceé, Dorothy Watson, whom he had first met on a sea voyage between Southampton and Durban seven years earlier. Her father, the senior partner in a Hull architectural firm, was also a magistrate, philanthropist and local Unionist politician and his family were accustomed to the comforts of a palatial, well-staffed house, set in spacious grounds at Elloughton in the East Riding of Yorkshire. This privileged and cossetted background had given Sillitoe's wife few of the inner resources needed to adapt to life in East Africa, and when the couple arrived at Dar-es-Salaam she loathed the unfamiliar surroundings and unsophisticated lifestyle. Within months she became pregnant, and both agreed that she should return home to have the baby. Further lengthy separations were likely unless Sillitoe abandoned his present career.

A second major problem was a profound deterioration in the state of his health.[4] During the previous twelve years he had already suffered from malaria, typhoid, blackwater fever and several varieties of dysentery but finally, whilst serving in a remote district of Tanganyika in 1921-22, he had contracted rheumatic fever. In excruciating pain from a severely swollen knee, he had endured a sixty miles journey by stretcher to the nearest station and a further one thousand miles by rail to the coast. A long course of water treatment, followed by a period of convalescence, had relieved the symptoms but left him in a seriously weakened state. When his wife had arrived back in East Africa, having left their baby with her mother, she had insisted that Sillitoe should return to England for the forseeable future. Only a combination of stubbornness and anxiety about finding a post with comparable status — especially since his recent promotion to Administrative Officer, First Grade in the Colonial Service (August 1922) — had prevented him from reaching this decision himself.

Her assumption that he would quickly obtain a position commensurate with his experience and qualifications in the British police force, ignored the wholly new approach to senior police appointments in the post-war years. The influential Desborough Committee (1919) had envisaged a police service commanded entirely by internally-recruited chief constables, instead of the traditional complement of former army officers and colonial policemen. The relevant section of its report had been quite explicit:

> 'No person without previous police experience should be appointed as chief constable in any force unless he possesses some exceptional qualification or experience which specially fits him for the post, or there is no other candidate from the police service who is considered sufficiently well-qualified.'[5]

In this harsh climate, Sillitoe's hopes would, at first, be repeatedly dashed.

Whilst still in East Africa, he had been informed by his father-in-law John Watson that the post of chief constable of Hull would soon become vacant and, having applied by cable, he and his wife had hurried to Mombasa and sailed for England. Meanwhile, Watson had attempted to convince the councillors serving on the Hull Watch Committee (several of whom had attended his daughter's wedding two years earlier) that his son-in-law was the ideal candidate.[6] These clandestine efforts had been unsuccessful. Although Sillitoe was shortlisted and interviewed he was placed a tantalising second in the final standing. After the excitement and air of expectancy surrounding the homeward voyage, the sense of anti-climax had left him bitterly disappointed and deeply depressed. A short time later, Sillitoe had reluctantly submitted a second application, this time for the vacant chief constableship of Nottingham, but the result was almost identical. He was very carefully considered — indeed, he was interviewed twice — but was ultimately placed second once again.[7]

These creditable near-misses would have encouraged many in his position to redouble their efforts. Sillitoe, however, had not seen his narrow failures in such a positive light. As his biographer has noted:

> 'Of all Sillitoe's weaknesses and failings, that of extreme sensitivity to any form of rejection was his personal millstone. Perhaps this stemmed from his competitive spirit; he simply did not like being a loser. Even is he only imagined he was being rejected, he took it very much to heart.'[8]

Instead of applying for other available posts, which were frequently advertised in police journals and both the national and provincial press, he had abandoned indefinitely his ambitions in this field and had begun to contemplate seriously alternative careers to the one for which he was eminently suited.

The most appropriate had seemed to be the Law, since he had already passed examinations in this subject during his service in the colonies.[9] Using his own savings, augmented by a generous gift from his father-in-law, he had enrolled as a student at Gray's Inn, intending to qualify as a barrister within three years and prepared, if necessary, to return to Africa to practice his new profession. Having settled at Elloughton with his wife, daughter and in-laws, he had seemed determined at first to make the most of the opportunity. Nevertheless, during the winter of 1922-23 he had sunk rapidly into a slough of despondency.

The reasons were closely interrelated. Although Sillitoe was high intelligent and possessed of an encyclopaedic memory, he was not especially gifted in either the academic or literary spheres. In adolescence he had already found home study particularly difficult and, once more, with neither the encouragement nor example of others to sustain him, this shortcoming had quickly resurfaced. Inevitably, he had soon become convinced that he was not cut out to be a lawyer. These problems had been aggravated by his social surroundings. Sillitoe had long been accustomed to an active and solitary lifestyle; although he and his wife had known each other for more than nine years they had actually spent less than eighteen months together. At Elloughton, he had been forced to assume the roles of husband and father to the exclusion of any full-time work commitments and, predictably, disliked the claustrophobic atmosphere in his father-in-law's house. The need to avail himself of John Watson's financial assistance, however well-intentioned, also undermined his own cherished independence. Rejected and inappropriately occupied, there is little doubt that throughout those dismal months Sillitoe had 'fretted like a war-horse prematurely put out to pasture.'[10]

At the end of February 1923, when close to his lowest ebb, he and his wife took a short break at Monkseaton in Northumberland. In his autobiography, Sillitoe's account of this visit (which had such important repercussions) is unsatisfactory and invites scepticism. Ostensibly they had stayed at the house of his parents but, according to all who had known the family at this time, only his father lived at Monkseaton, in an institution, whilst his mother still resided at the family home in Tulse Hill, Even assuming that Sillitoe's mother had maintained personal contact with her estranged husband, it is unlikely that she had the financial resources to visit the area often enough to make friends there and equally improbable that, given their lack of suitable accommodation, either parent extended their hospitality to local acquaintances. Yet Sillitoe later claimed that a casual visitor — a man whom he had never seen before, would never meet again, whose surname he could not remember, and who had no connections whatever with the police — had cajoled him into applying for the vacant post of chief constable of Chesterfield, which he had seen advertised in the press. The whole story is anecdotal, even mystical. It embodied Sillitoe's increasing despair and the need for some form of miraculous, outside intervention to rescue him from an idle and futile existence.

Since the deadline had expired that very day, he had telephoned Chesterfield town hall and sought permission to submit a late application. Creditably, the town clerk, J.H. Rothwell C.B.E., had sanctioned the request. This was an age when local government officials were not renowned for flexibility, and since he himself was shortly leaving the borough to take up a similar post at Brighton, he would not have been personally affected by the outcome.[11] Nor had there been any shortage of candidates to fill the post for which Sillitoe applied. Although the chief constableship of Chesterfield was obviously less prestigious than those of Hull and Nottingham, the number of applicants had compared quite favourably with either of them.[12]

A sub-committee of Chesterfield Borough Council drew up a six-man short list for the post (5th March 1923) all of whom were invited to attend a special meeting of the entire fifteen-strong Watch Committee. Sillitoe, surprised to find that his eleventh-hour application had progressed this far, was in competition against five senior and experienced police officers, several of whom came from towns and cities which were either of a similar size to Chesterfield or had a comparable economic and social structure.[13] For most, if not all, of his rivals the Chesterfield appointment would have been a natural career progression. Sillitoe, by contrast was an outsider with little first-hand experience of a British police force. Yet, when the interviews were concluded (16th March 1923) it was he who was invited to fill the post — an offer which he readily accepted.

The reasons why Sillitoe's application succeeded in the teeth of such strong opposition will probably never be known, though there are several useful indicators. His military bearing, above-average height (6' 2.5 ") and strikingly handsome appearance — later in his career he was variously nicknamed 'the Captain' or 'the Big Fellow,'[14] — often made a positive impression upon selection panels. He bore all the hallmarks of an officer and a gentleman with the added recommendation of having risen through the ranks. Unlike most of the other candidates, he had served in the armed forces during the Great War. His educational background also compared favourably with those of his peers. It would be misleading to assume that a committee dominated by self-made men was necessarily philistine or anti-intellectual; a key member, Alderman Ernest Shentall J.P., had also served as a governor of the town's Elizabethan grammar school and as a member of the borough's Higher Education Committee[15] and would probably have given due credit to Sillitoe's school background, legal qualifications and mastery of three difficult African languages. Finally, it should be emphasised that during the previous winter, Sillitoe had been working alongside the Chief constable of Hull as a part-time attachment. This arrangement, which may have been arranged by his influential father-in-law, was a common device used by aspiring chief constables, who could then enlarge upon the experience at interview.[16]

Even allowing for these attributes, the Chesterfield Watch Committee was bold and imaginative in selecting Sillitoe although his career achievements at that stage were certainly impressive, they were also unorthodox and out of favour. He later paid tribute to their 'admirable patience' in allowing him to present his case at length and, when asked by the chairman, Alderman Eastwood, how he was currently employed, had the good sense to admit that although in theory he was studying for the bar, he was actually out of work — a candid reply, which evidently amused them. Instead of meekly following the line of least resistance, they were prepared to appoint a candidate with little experience but huge potential. More than thirty years later, Sillitoe was still full of praise for their generosity and vision, insisting:

> 'To the members of the Chesterfield Watch Committee, and also to the members of the Police Force who subsequently supported me so loyally, I shall always feel deeply grateful. Thanks to them I now had my chance to make a career for myself in England.'[17]

His gratitude was entirely justified. Their judgement had brought back from the brink of virtual obscurity, a man with the ability to become a great public servant.

III

The Chesterfield Borough Police Force had a respectable pedigree, stretching back into the early nineteenth century when the modern police system had first been established throughout Britain. In 1829 the Home Secretary, Peel, had introduced a professional force into the metropolitan area and, following the success of this measure, the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 had required the 178 boroughs of England and Wales to organise a similar service. Each selected a Watch Committee (restricted by later legislation to not more than a third of the council) which, within three weeks of its formation, had to recruit a local force, large enough to preserve the peace and contain criminal activity. Although the Chesterfield Watch Committee (established on January 1st 1836) had certainly acted quickly, the widely-held local belief that the borough had been the first to employ a force in the provinces, was a fallacy.[18]

The scope of the original force (consisting of one superintendent, one inspector and seven constables) had been initially restricted to that of a night watch, and day patrols were not introduced until 1849. During those first, troubled decades when Chesterfield — like many other expanding industrial centres — was the scene of Chartist demonstrations, and was also briefly engulfed by armies of navvies working on the North Midland railway (which reached the town in 1840), its bleagured police officers often struggled to maintain law and order in the borough. Against this backcloth, the task of recruiting constables with the required standards of honesty, commitment and sobriety was a persistent problem and turnover was high. Overall, the foundation of an efficient force had been a very slow and unsteady process.[19]

A period of more orderly development had been inaugurated by the far-sighted County and Borough Police Act of 1856 which had empowered the Crown to appoint inspectors of constabulary to assess the capabilities of all forces. Those certified as efficient had received an exchequer grant amounting to a quarter of the cost of police wages and uniforms, providing they served a community of at least five thousand people — an obvious incentive to encourage the merger of smaller forces.[20] However, since Chesterfield already had a population which roughly trebled that figure (it numbered 13,421 in the 1851 census), the borough's police force had retained its autonomy, and continued to do so until 1947, when it was finally absorbed into the Derbyshire Constabulary.

Gradually, it had earned a sound reputation among the smaller borough forces, particularly during the lengthy administrations of Chief Constables Emery (1882-1900) and Kilpatrick

(1900-1923) who had been well-respected for their diligence and personal integrity. The force had also expanded steadily at the rate of approximately one officer per thousand of the borough's population and, by the beginning of 1923, comprised one chief constable, five inspectors (including a chief clerk and a detective inspector), five sergeants and fifty-four constables — a total of sixty-five men, including supernumaries.[21] At one and the same time, it was large enough to present Sillitoe with an exciting administrative challenge, but of the manageable proportions required by a chief constable who had still to master the basic principles of senior management and intended to gauge the efficacy of important reforms.

IV

When Sillitoe took the post of chief constable of the Borough Police Force and captain of the Fire Brigade on 1 May 1923, his first three days in office were devoted to formalities — the handing over of command by his predecessor in the vicinity of St. Mary's and All Saints church, with its famous crooked spire; a complimentary dinner at the Police Institute; and the official swearing-in ceremony before the borough magistrates. The Mayor, various members of the Watch Committee and several senior police officers were all keen to extol his personal qualities and experience, and to express the hope that he would stay long in the town. In a time-honoured display of leniency, the first summons under the new chief constable — a local man, guilty of using indecent language — was dismissed with a caution.22 After moving his family from the East Riding to a house of their own at Brampton, two miles from Chesterfield town centre, Sillitoe threw himself wholeheartedly into his new vocation. The first priority was to secure the friendship and confidence of the Watch Committee, whose co-operation was an essential prerequisite for any changes he would advocate.

There has been a scholarly debate over the relationship between Watch Committees and their chief constables in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The traditional view, that police recommendations were invariably subordinated to the wishes of their borough's elected representatives, has recently been questioned by historians who have identified a considerable element of constabulary independence in the drafting of policy.[23] Sillitoe's brief period of service in Chesterfield would seem to reinforce the original theory, for he clearly believed that the borough councillors were worth cultivating. Fortunately for him, the overwhelming majority were supportive of the principles of efficient and well-funded policing. In later years, the town would become a stronghold of the hard left in British politics but, in 1923, it was most definitely not. The Labour party had made only token gains in the Borough Council elections of 1921 and 1922 (it would make none at all during Sillitoe's stay) and was represented by just two members on the Watch Committee. Most of the other thirteen, though not formally affiliated to any political party, were businessmen, managers or shopkeepers — solid representatives of the mercantile middle class.[24]

Throughout his time at Chesterfield, Sillitoe attended religiously the formal meetings of the Watch Committee, held once a month except during August, but also realised the advantages of meeting the members socially. To this end, he joined the Rotarians, an organisation which enjoyed a high profile in the town.[25] Its weekly luncheons, followed by a lecture (usually on foreign travel), were consistently well patronised and at least seven members of the Watch Committee were active in the movement.[26] Sillitoe was only too willing to deliver the occasional lecture (described by contemporaries as 'interesting and racy') on big-game hunting, tropical birds or the East Africa campaign, in the knowledge that these gestures helped cement his working relationship with the councillors.[27]

Adapting quickly to the everyday life of the borough, he later claimed to have made the following assessment of his responsibilities:

> 'Police duties in a town like Chesterfield had many similarities, I was pleased to find, with those in towns like Salisbury and Bulawayo. There was not much wrong that could not be induced to yield to the persuasion of common sense, and few problems that the asking of a few pertinent questions could not solve.'[28]

At first glance, such remarks seem like the shallow appraisal of a recently-returned expatriate, hopelessly out of touch with the social realities of twentieth-century Britain. On closer investigation, they contain more than a grain of truth.

Chesterfield had undergone dramatic expansion since 1890, largely through local government reorganisations which had incorporated many neighbouring parishes and urban districts into the borough. These included Newbold and Whittington to the north; Brimington to the east; Hasland, Spital and Walton to the south; and Brampton to the west. This process which had been completed by the Chesterfield Extension Act of 1920, had increased the size of the borough from 332 to over 8,000 acres in less than thirty years and enlarged its population from under 35,000 to more than 61,000.[29] Parallel with these administrative changes was a steady development of the area's mining and heavy industries. Within the suburbs and surrounding villages were four ironworks, three collieries, three wagon works, a pottery, a tannery, a leather works, a furniture factory and a multitude of specialised concerns including manufacturers of medical supplies, colliery equipment, steel tubes, industrial pumps and blowers, valves, bearings, axle-boxes and rolling-stock fittings.[30]

Predictably, the consumption of alcohol played a major role in the social life of the labour force. The borough was a well-established centre of the brewing industry — three breweries, the Chesterfield, Brampton and Scarsdale companies had been based there since the mid-nineteenth century[31] — and the Chesterfield County Licensing Division continued 83 fully-licensed public houses, 17 beer houses and 33 off-licenses. Whilst the ratio of licensed premises to the overall population was not particularly high when compared to other parts of the country, convictions for drunkenness increased steadily throughout the 1919-1924 period. This usually represented the largest single category of offences dealt with by the Chesterfield magistrates, though many of the culprits were casual labourers, temporarily engaged in pit-sinking or house-building programmes. The town centre was generally quiet during the week, but could be very disorderly on Friday and Saturday nights, whilst on Sundays it exported this problem to outlying villages (notably Staveley) where several public houses had been granted music licenses, a privilege which was always vetoed on the Sabbath in Chesterfield itself.[32]

It would be misleading, however, to infer that Sillitoe's service entailed nothing more than preserving law and order among the boisterous miners, engineers and foundrymen who, in his opinion, bore more than a passing resemblance to their counterparts in far-off Southern Rhodesia. Simple larceny was another continuous problem and the town also suffered from occasional outbreaks of more serious crime including burglary, shop and warehouse-breaking, obtaining cash and goods by false pretences and even, on occasions, the hijacking of a lorry and the attempted armed robbery of a sub post office. There were certainly no grounds for complacency. As the following statistics confirm, the number of cases sent for trial by the local bench increased markedly throughout 1923 and the first half of 1924:

Cases dealth with by Chesterfield magistrates, 1923-1924.[33]

Quarter Ending	Cases Sent For Trial	Main Categories	Non-indictable Offences	Main Categories
March 31st 1923	4	Shopbreaking^{2}	355	Non-payment of rates
June 30th 1923	20	Warehouse-breaking^{17}	523	Non-payment of rates^{200}
September 30th 1923	42	Simple larceny^{29}	414	Drunkenness^{52}
December 31st 1923		NO DATA AVAILABLE		
March 31st 1924	41	Simple larceny^{24} Burglary^{7}	233	Drunkenness^{52}
June 30th 1924	51	Simple larceny^{23} Burglary^{7}	260	Drunkenness^{30}
September 30th 1924	39	Simple larceny^{24}	281	Drunkenness^{52}
December 31st 1924	36	Simple larceny^{23} False pretences^{6}	288	Drunkenness^{39}

Modern policing has, of course, a much wider application than the fight against crime but, during Sillitoe's time in the borough, there were few other problems to cause serious concern. Chesterfield had long been a major centre of spectator sport, and in 1921 the town's soccer club had been re-admitted to the Football League after a twelve-year absence but, although its matches in the Third Division (North) attracted attendances of up to 15,000, crowd trouble was rare. Despite the purchase of two police horses early in the 1923-1924 season, the strategies which he later employed in Glasgow before and after the Rangers-Celtic encounters at Ibrox Stadium (earning his mounted officers the nickname 'Sillitoe's Cossacks') were not needed here.[34] The Chesterfield Races, a two-day event dating back to the seventeenth century which were held on Newbold Common and land in the adjoining parish of Whittington, could have proved more troublesome. Since their loss of recognition by the turf authorities in 1877, they had become increasingly disorganised and rowdy, and the presence of large crowds, flush with money, was an obvious attraction to the criminal fraternity. Fortunately for the police, these meetings were abolished by the Chesterfield Corporation Act of 1923 and the site was purchased by the borough during the following year for the development of recreation grounds and council housing.[35]

Similarly, political activities did little to disturb the outward tranquility of the town. Chesterfield formed a parliamentary division of the county of Derby and was contested in the General Elections of December, 1923 and October, 1924. On both occasions, the local Liberal M.P., Barnet Kenyon (a popular figure, with roots in the mining community[36]) was returned with a comfortable majority, the first time in a three-cornered fight and, on the second occasion heckling at the numerous public meetings, the election campaigns were trouble-free.[37] Industrial strife was also at a low ebb when compared with the upsurge of militancy in the immediate post-war period. The only potentially serious stoppage — a railway strike on the L.N.E.R. in January 1924 which badly affected Chesterfield station and temporarily closed several local collieries — was abandoned within days and did not, in any case, involve the local N.U.R. branch.[38]

This absence of sporting and political disturbances was probably a great relief to Sillitoe. He enjoyed sport too much himself to wish to deny its pleasures to others, whilst politically his own experience of unemployment and numerous dealings with industrial workers often caused him to refer to 'the essential goodness of the working man' and to adopt, eventually, a moderate socialist outlook. It would be wrong, however, to assume, that no responsibilities were ever placed upon him in Chesterfield which he might have found morally questionable. One of the policeman's less savoury duties was the enforcement of Poor Law legislation. The Chesterfield Union Workhouse (built in 1838, enlarged in 1881) occupied a site on Newbold Road, to the north of the town, and notwithstanding a significant post-war increase in out-relief still provided shelter and subsistence to about four hundred paupers.[40] When an inmate absconded with workhouse property (often nothing more than a cheaply-made uniform) it was the duty of the police to apprehend the wretch, in the knowledge that they might receive a short prison sentence. Such punitive measures must have offended Sillitoe's humanitarian principles, especially in the light of his own father's position. The customary method of softening the blow was to request that a proportion of the reward offered by the local Board of Guardians should be given to the arresting officer — a demand which he successfully made on nine separate occasions.[41] Another unpleasant task was the destruction of considerable numbers of stray cats and dogs which were a potential health hazard.[42]

One problem which became progressively more difficult to solve was that of road traffic; between 1920 and 1930 the numbers of privately-owned motor vehicles in Britain increased fivefold. To cater for motorists seeking access to the centre of Chesterfield, Sillitoe designated seven car parks to the south of the Market Place. At the same time, he encouraged through traffic on the busy Derby to Manchester road to by-pass the town altogether, via St. Augustine's Road (where clear instructions were signposted) and on through Ashover, Matlock and Bakewell. Within the borough itself, many people relied on the electric tramway (installed in 1904) which followed a roughly south-west to north-east axis between terminuses at Brampton and Whittington Moor. The eighteen tramcars in their distinctive chocolate and yellow liveries were still an important, though declining, amenity in Sillitoe's time.[43] They were also a major cause of bottlenecks, especially along High Street, Cavendish Street and Holywell Street, and on two occasions he had to intervene, asking the Tramways Manager to move stopping places to wider and less-congested routes.[44] It is to Sillitoe's credit, in part at least, that only one fatal accident occurred in Chesterfield whilst he was Chief Constable.[45]

V

To meet all these contingencies he depended upon his newly-acquired subordinates. It has been claimed that he commenced his reform of the Chesterfield force with a purge of its upper echelons, demanding the retirement of senior officers under the generous terms of the Police Pension Act of 1921, a tactic he later employed in Sheffield and Glasgow to rid those forces of the stagnant and demoralising atmosphere which pervaded there.[46] This allegation is inaccurate for several reasons. Firstly, an adequate system of pensions had been introduced much earlier by the Police Pension Act of 1890. More to the point, the 1921 legislation — designed to secure police loyalty during the unsettled post war years, which had witnessed the alarming police strikes of 1918 and 1919 — was primarily concerned with improving benefits for those officers who were killed or disabled in the line of duty, and with providing better financial support for their widows and children. On the crucial issue of retirement on completion of service, however, its terms were actually slightly inferior to those already in existence and, consequently, some officers preferred to remain on the old scales.[47]

Far from dismissing his tiny cadres of inspectors and sergeants, Sillitoe relied heavily upon their experience. He secured permission from the Home Office to promote his most senior inspector (who had completed twenty-six years' pensionable service by 1924) to the rank of chief inspector and also persuaded the Watch Committee to award this officer the inducement of a non-pensionable pay increase. Each of the other four inspectors were given increased responsibilities under the provisions of the Explosives Act (1875) and the Shops Act (1912 and 1920).[48] In addition, two of the five sergeants were empowered to visit the numerous shops and other premises which were liable to inspection under the Weights and Measures Acts (1878 and 1904) and the Sale of Tea Act (1922) and institute proceedings for appropriate offences.[49] This willingness to delegate, improved administrative efficiency and promoted effective staff development.[50]

Sillitoe's relations with the rank-and-file developed along similar lines. From the outset, he spent long hours tramping the streets of the borough, getting to know the man on the beat. He was not content merely to exchange civilities with the men, nor even to garner statistical information about them for his annual reports.[51] He also wanted to learn about them as individuals — a difficult task, since they hailed from many different parts of the British Isles and had been recruited from a wide range of occupational backgrounds.[52] Here again, he did not attempt to implement a purge. Although there were four pensionable retirements and one resignation among his constables over the next two years, there was no evidence of any coercion being applied and recently-retired members of the force were adamant that their short periods of service under Sillitoe had been the happiest of all. Every single member of the Chesterfield Borough Police contributed to the purchase of a silver christening cup, presented to their chief constable after the birth of his second child, and it was widely known that he was held in high regard by the men.[53]

The reasons are not hard to discover. Sillitoe rejuvenated the Chesterfield force, gaining Home Office approval to increase its strength from sixty-five to seventy-one, and promptly recruiting six probationers, all of whom had been appointed as constables before his departure. Whenever possible, he recommended men for internal promotion — one to sergeant, a second to detective officer[54] — and urged that, whenever a member of the force had passed the relevant examinations he should be given a pay increase if a vacancy was not immediately available. He requested that all officers who had performed meritorious actions should have official commendations endorsed on their records of service and also suggested that the Watch Committee should award its own medals for conspicuous acts of bravery.[55] In short, he repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to give full support to those under his command in all dealings with higher authority — a trait considered, by some, to be his most admirable characteristic.

He also felt a deep concern for the welfare of his men and was prepared to pursue seemingly trivial matters if they were important to the morale and efficiency of the officer concerned. For example, the inspector and sergeant in command of the force's outstations at Whittington Moor and New Whittington had never received motor-cycle or pedal-cycle allowances until Sillitoe argued the justice of such payments.[56] He was equally sympathetic to the plight of an officer, suffering from the after-effects of shrapnel wounds, who had been on sick leave for ninety-one consecutive days (compared with just fifty-five for the rest of the force in the same quarterly period) and placed the man on night reserve duties to assist his complete recovery.[57] Most important of all, he was keen to improve the standard of police housing, gaining important increases in the rent allowances paid to married officers living in private accommodation and also asking the Watch Committee to obtain six more houses for his constables and firemen (five in the town centre, one at Hasland) which were cleaned and repainted at the borough's expense.[58]

Always interested in the professional development of his officers, he launched several important initiatives in this field. Courses were organised in first aid, an area of knowledge which he considered indispensable, and less than a year after coming to Chesterfield he was able to announce that every member of the force (except one probationer) was formally qualified in the subject.[59] He also arranged education classes during the winter months, open to all ranks of the Borough Police Force, paid for by the Watch Committee, and taught by a qualified teacher whose efforts were supplemented by lectures from senior officers and borough officials. This tuition was directed towards the Police Qualifying Examinations for promotion to sergeant and inspector, which included tests in Education (reading, dictation, English, arithmetic, geography, general knowledge) and Police Duties (criminal law, evidence and procedure, general statutes, local regulations, principles of local government). No fewer than twenty-two candidates — nearly a third of the force — took the final examinations on December 1st and 2nd, 1924 and all but three were successful.[60]

Some of Sillitoe's later critics would have found this a surprising development, claiming that his total opposition to the Hendon Police College experiment (1934-1939) introduced by Lord Trenchard, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, illustrated a low regard for academically well-qualified policemen. This accusation is simplistic and unfair. In fact, he believed in raising educational standards throughout the police service and also welcomed recruits who had benefited from higher education, provided they enlisted as constables. On the other hand, he disagreed fundamentally with any scheme which allowed public school or graduate entrants to by-pass service in the lower ranks, partly because he believed that there was no substitute for experience on the beat, but also because he feared that the creation of an officer class in police forces was inimical to the public interest.

Sillitoe's campaign to develop the potential of his men also included a six-day course in jiu-jitsu for any volunteers whom he felt would benefit from instruction.[61] Martial arts training might seem a bizarre measure in a small borough police force but he was probably influenced by a spate of attacks on his officers during his first eight months in the town when an inspector and four constables were assaulted in separate incidents. In each case the disturbances were caused by drunkenness or domestic disputes, but Sillitoe (himself a competent boxer) reacted in the same way as in his later skirmishes with the cosh and razor gangs of Sheffield and Glasgow. To the end of his career, he still believed:

> 'The element of a beast in a man, whether it comes from an unhappy and impoverished background or from his own undisciplined, lustful appetites, will respond exactly as a wild beast of the jungle responds — to nothing but greater force and greater firmness of purpose.'[62]

In Chesterfield, of course, organised gangs did not exist. The rackets which sustained them in the larger cities — particularly the game of pitch and toss — were not unknown in and around the town, but the number of participants was relatively small and the amount of money involved, insignificant. Nevertheless, Sillitoe was adamant that, whatever a policeman's routine duties might entail, he should be able to defend himself and others adequately if the need arose.

VI

It has been inferred that, although he lacked the power of original thought, Sillitoe's importance as a police reformer should be measured by the alacrity with which he supported new developments in police work. As chief constable of Chesterfield, there were three specific examples of this pioneering attitude — daily occurrence reporting, forensic science and the employment of policewomen.

During his first ever police command — as a B.S.A.P. lance-corporal at Victoria Falls, Southern Rhodesia (1910-1911) — Sillitoe had occupied his small force of European troopers and African constables with information-gathering exercises and, throughout his career, this was an activity which he regarded as invaluable. Long after his return to Britain, he still made mysterious references to 'using methods he had developed in Africa' by which he meant daily occurrence reporting, now standard police practice but then an entirely new concept. All officers were required to submit a report on the completion of each foot patrol noting such details as vehicles parked in unusual locations, houses left unoccupied for long periods of time, business premises left unprotected outside of opening hours and any other signs of suspicious activity. Carefully scrutinised and filed away, they could be used to compile weekly internal bulletins of crime information and were also a source of numerous leads in the aftermath of serious offences.[63] It is noteworthy that when the Chesterfield Borough Police received their annual inspections under Sillitoe's command (June 1923 and June 1924), Major-General L.W. Atcherley, expressed particular satisfaction with the initiative shown by officers when making their reports and also with the efficiency with which the official records of the force were maintained.[64] No doubt he was impressed to learn that they had already identified 638 windows and 900 doors which were insecure during the hours of darkness.[65]

Sillitoe's conversion to the principles of forensic science actually took place in Chesterfield itself following a sensational crime at the Crown and Anchor Inn, a public house situated on the Sheffield Road, near Whittington Moor, during the afternoon of Easter Monday, 1924. The landlord's wife had been viciously attacked by her jealous lover (a lodger at the house), sustaining severe injuries, several of which had been inflicted by a bill-hook. Unconscious and close to death, she had been taken by police ambulance to Chesterfield Royal Hospital, remaining in a critical condition for the next four days before making a slow recovery. The assailant had been arrested in the town's New Square on the day after the attack and transferred to Nottingham Gaol,[66] but the Chesterfield C.I.D. officers had still needed a statement from the victim and were frustrated to find that the doctor in attendance denied them access to the woman. Sillitoe had been forced to intervene personally.

His first meeting with the physician, Dr. J.M. Webster, had begun with an irritable confrontation but ended amicably enough. Sillitoe had been deeply affected by the doctor''s devotion to duty — his unkempt and dishevelled appearance were the result of having stayed with his patient day and night, fighting for her life — and had gauged correctly that the unconventional young Scot had a probing and analytical mind.[67] Later, at the woman's bedside, Webster had outlined the identifiable differences between blows delivered by a fist and an axe-handle, and between those received in a standing or lying position. Sillitoe, fascinated by these explanations, admitted:

> 'I was impressed and rather excited. Forensic medicine as we know it today was only in its infancy in 1924... In the years that followed after I left Chesterfield the thought struck me that the right kind of medical expert working in close collaboration with the police could prove of great value in the scientific detection of crime, particularly in cases of violence and murder.'[68]

During the rest of his stay in Chesterfield, Sillitoe met Dr. Webster on several more occasions but temporarily lost contact with him after his departure the following year. Their chance meeting in the town did, however, have important consequences.

Four years later, when Sillitoe was serving as chief constable of Sheffield, he persuaded the city's Watch Committee to employ a police surgeon, primarily to treat the police force, the fire brigade and prisoners held in police cells, but also to establish a forensic science laboratory. Webster applied for the post, was appointed on 1 April 1929 and quickly developed this facility which became allied to the University of Sheffield where he also lectured in Toxicology and Forensic Medicine. In time, the laboratory also served the police forces of Chesterfield, Doncaster, the West Riding and Derby County, carrying out work on post-mortems, blood samples, human stains, cases of carnal knowledge and rape, forcible entry scratches, fibres, wood, safe ballast, counterfeit money and poison-pen letters. Photographic and finger-printing sections were also added to this useful little establishment.69

As Sillitoe readily admitted, Dr. Webster's laboratory was not the first of its kind in Britain. In 1928, Superintendent Else of the Derby County force had become the country's first policeman scientist, whilst another Midlands police laboratory founded by Captain Athelstan Popkess (chief constable of Nottingham, 1930-59) developed almost parallel with the experiment in Sheffield. Yet, when Sir Arthur Dixon, assistant under-secretary at the Home Office, launched an enquiry into the effectiveness of forensic science in 1932, it was Sillitoe and Webster whom he invited to explain their work and deliver a report. This, in time, led to similar facilities being established at Hendon for the benefit of the Metropolitan Police and the Southern counties' forces.[70]

Another innovation in which Sillitoe showed a lively interest was the employment of policewomen. Female officers had originally been recruited during the First World War and by 1919 about 150 were attached to British police forces. A few chief constables had a high regard for their efforts, especially when dealing with women and children, but the overwhelming majority felt that these duties could be performed equally well, if not better, by female clerical staff or members of voluntary organisations. Furthermore, the Police Federation (founded in 1919) was continually hostile towards them. By 1924 their numbers had dwindled to a mere 110, and the lukewarm recommendations made in that year by the committee chaired by outgoing Home Secretary, William Bridgeman, did not augur well for their future. Indeed, fifteen years later, less than a quarter of the forces in England and Wales employed female officers.[71] In these difficult circumstances, it is commendable that Sillitoe was no timeserver. Against the prevailing tide of opinion, and after careful consultation with the commandant of the London Auxiliary Police Force, he advised the Chesterfield Watch Committee to appoint the borough's first policewoman — a recommendation which was acted upon within six months of his departure, and proved to be an outstanding success.[72]

VII

One of the very few aspects of the Chesterfield appointment which had irked Sillitoe since his arrival there was the condition of the Central police station. During his service in Africa, he had always endeavoured to make even the most basic police office or compound as presentable as the conditions permitted, believing that the impression made upon visitors could be all-important. Yet here in the English Midlands he was appalled to discover that few such efforts had been undertaken, and indignantly remarked:

> '...I did not see how the police of Chesterfield could be expected to carry out their duties with pride and dignity when their headquarters and offices, which were part of the court itself, were so inadequate in size and so dingy.'[73]

A suitable alternative was Municipal Hall House on South Street, close to the town's Market Square. This substantial mid-Victorian building (completed in 1849 and formerly used as a court house for the borough petty sessions) was structurally sound, but needed extensive renovation including re-wiring and the installation of an internal telephone system. Sillitoe convinced the Watch Committee of the advantages of this move, and successful applications were made to the Home Office (through under-secretary of state, R.J. Davies) for loans totalling £750, repayable over thirty years, to cover the cost of the alterations. The Chesterfield Borough Police Force moved into this superior accommodation on 10 November 1924. Their old offices and cells were promptly demolished and the fittings sold off to provide a reserve fund for future improvements.[74] Although Sillitoe did not neglect the force's three outlying stations — two of which were altered and repaired after inspections by borough surveyor, V. Smith[75] — the acquisition of Municipal Hall House was an altogether more considerable achievement, and a tangible legacy bequeathed to the force he had served so effectively.

VIII

Sillitoe's appointment at Chesterfield included the subsidiary post of captain of the Fire Brigade and, in the light of his later career, it would be tempting to attach relatively little importance to this additional responsibility. Yet a surprisingly large proportion of his time and energy was devoted to revitalising this small and initially inadequate force. Under his leadership, the position was certainly no sinecure.

Founded in 1839, the Chesterfield Fire Brigade was nearly as old as the Borough Police Force but had not expanded at the same rate in terms of manpower, equipment or facilities. Since there had been no major improvements for over a decade before Sillitoe's arrival, its requirements had been woefully neglected. His first step was to enrol both himself and the superintendent as members of the Professional Fire Brigades Association (a move which, alarmingly, had never been taken before) with their subscriptions paid by the borough. Availing themselves of the expertise of senior members of this organisation — notably Chief Officer A.R. Tozer of the city of Birmingham Fire Brigade — inevitably offended some of Chesterfield's older firemen, four of whom either resigned or transferred to other duties within the first ten months of Sillitoe's regime. Undeterred, he pressed on with his planned reforms, attending the P.F.B.A.'s next annual meeting in London (1-3 July 1924) and acquainting himself thoroughly with the technicalities of firefighting.[76]

With a complement of three full-time and thirteen part-time firemen, the Chesterfield Fire Brigade was understrength, relative to the recent increases in the size of the borough. Taking this into account, Sillitoe gained Watch Committee approval to appoint a full-time Chief Engineer (with the rank and pay of an inspector) and to engage three more part-timers. He also immediately replaced much of their shabby clothing and tatty personal equipment which detracted from the professional image he wished to create.[77]

The brigade's only motor fire engine (originally purchased in 1911 from the established and widely-respected manufacturers, Merryweather and Sons) had been allowed to deteriorate seriously through lack of maintenance and replacement parts. In the short term, Sillitoe purchased a whole range of new fittings — wheels, tyres, a carburetter, a forced feed lubricator, piston-rings, valves and non-skid chains — and also arranged for its fire escape to be attached to the engine. However, the absurd situation of having to rely upon an antiquated horse-drawn engine whilst these improvements were made, encouraged him the explore the possibility of acquiring a second, more modern appliance. After thorough consultation with other brigades, he recommended the purchase of a Leyland engine, bought with a Ministry of Health loan of £2000 repayable over ten years, and delivered by the firm in May 1924.[78]

The need to house an extra engine and its highly specialised equipment would have placed an intolerable burden upon the Fire Brigade's cramped premises in Theatre Yard, off Low Pavement, just to the east of Market Square, but fortunately there was ample additional space in the adjoining Ward's Yard. The purchase of this land and the construction of a new fire station covering both sites, involved a huge capital outlay, far greater than anything Sillitoe had previously attempted but, again, a supportive Ministry of Health agreed to more loans totalling £21,500, also repayable over ten years.[79] After considering various tenders, the contract was offered to Thornhill Brothers of Lincoln and work on the new station — modelled on that recently erected at Aston, Birmingham which had been inspected and approved by two members of the Watch Committee — was well in hand, though not actually completed, when Sillitoe left the town.[80] In an effort to alleviate the burden of these repayments on the local ratepayers, twenty-nine neighbouring parish and urban district councils were invited to enter into financial arrangements with the borough over the use of its Fire Brigade. The scheme was only partially successful, and henceforth permission for the engines to attend fires in those areas which had rejected the offer was steadfastly refused unless life was directly endangered.[81]

Firefighting in Chesterfield, as in most densely-populated industrial towns, called for eternal vigilance and Sillitoe was meticulous in carrying out regular inspections and drills (including wet drills in the nearby River Hipper) to keep all his firemen and police officers in a state of preparedness. He also made personal checks on those institutions which were particularly vulnerable — including the Royal Hospital, the Walton Sanatorium, the Union Workhouse, and the town's five common lodging houses — recommending urgent improvements in water supply and staff training, wherever necessary. He also conducted comprehensive survey of the borough's fire hydrants and, shocked to discover that nearly half (297 out of 613) were completely useless for firefighting purposes, arranged all the necessary repairs.[82]

There were two other areas of special concern. One was the storage of fuel and spirit in built-up areas, a practice which Sillitoe discouraged, even obstructing an application from the Anglo-American Oil Company (his former employers between 1905 and 1907) to store 24,500 gallons on land to the east of Eyre Street.[83] A second was the state of the borough's cinemas. Under the Cinematograph Act of 1909 they were required to observe stringent fire regulations, but in Chesterfield some had been allowed to flout the law. A sharp reminder of the dangers involved occurred in the mining community of Morton, seven miles south of the town, when the village's five hundred-seat picture palace was gutted by fire (9 November 1923) shortly after an evening performance.[84] In the aftermath of the accident, Sillitoe's inspection of all the borough's cinemas identified two serious defaulters — the Lyceum at Whittington Moor and the Corporation Theatre in Chesterfield itself. Conditions at the latter venue were particularly dangerous. It occupied part of the Stephenson Memorial Hall (built in 1879 by public subscription) and hosted a variety of entertainments, of which films were only one example. At first, the manager ignored Sillitoe's requests to comply with the appropriate regulations, until informed that the chief constable would oppose the annual renewal of his license — a warning which produced swift capitulation.[85]

Despite these precautions, the Fire Brigade was called to more than forty fires between May 1923 and February 1925. In the borough's older houses, dirty or defective chimneys or fireplaces were a recurring problem, whilst on the streets the backfiring of cars caused a disproportionate number of accidents. A few fires were also started deliberately by mischievous children though, in general, juvenile crime was not a serious problem in Chesterfield.[86] The most common causes were, quite simply, human error or negligence. Occasionally, the cost of the damage could be considerable, especially when fires occurred on industrial or commercial sites such as the Sheepbridge Works Pattern Shop (£5,000), Ford's Bookshop in the Market Hall (£450) or the L.N.E.R. Goods Yard (£150).[87]

The accident which had the greatest impact took place at a house in Chesterfield's Ashgate Road (3-4 November 1923) where an elderly couple (both aged eighty-six) died in their own home. The fire had probably been caused by the old man, who suffered from fits, dropping a lighted candle. No criticisms were levelled at the three firemen who attended the blaze. Eyewitnesses praised their outstanding bravery and two of the officers sustained injuries in their repeated attempts to enter a smoke-filled bedroom. However, a neighbour of the deceased had attached considerable blame to the Post Office, claiming that she had tried unsuccessfully to telephone the emergency services on ten separate occasions.[88] Obviously, some form of direct communication between the public and the fire station was urgently needed.

The remedy was a closed-circuit electric fire alarm system. This comparatively new idea was quickly but conscientiously examined in several other towns by a Watch Sub-Committee and then demonstrated, first to local firms and later to the general public. Twenty-two strategic points were chosen in and around the town at road junctions, railway bridges, public houses, village halls and police stations and the whole network was finally installed with yet another loan (£1,439 over ten years) from the Ministry of Health. As a second line of defence, the Watch Committee (supported by Barnet Kenyon) asked the Post Office Telephone Authorities to place signs on all kiosks emphasising that calls to the Fire Brigade were free.[89] By enabling the people of Chesterfield to make immediate contact with the emergency services, Sillitoe left them with a degree of protection which they had never previously enjoyed.

The vastly-improved performance of the Fire Brigade was exemplified by their skill in handling a major fire, which caused damage totalling £15,000, at Green's Timber and Joinery Company, Whittington Moor (30 December, 1924). Expressing his gratitude and admiration for their services, the proprietor wrote promptly to the Watch Committee, claiming:

> 'Their efforts, considering the dreadful weather conditions were most heroic and wonderful. Whilst the fire is a most disastrous occurrence for us, it would undoubtedly have been far greater in extent but for the work they did in confining it within certain limits. At one time the Gas Works were in danger of being involved, and it was entirely due to the men's magnificent work that a greater disaster did not befall the neighbourhood.'[90]

This was no isolated tribute to Sillitoe's reforms, but it summarised the devotion to duty which had inspired him to transform an understrength and ill-prepared service into a highly professional fire brigade, in such a short period of time.

IX

During the second half of 1924, Sillitoe began to search for a more senior post. The decision was motivated primarily by domestic circumstances; a second child, his son Anthony, had been born at Brampton in January, and a third was expected early in the following year. Sillitoe needed an increased salary and, even more important, a larger house.[91] He was probably also influenced by his visit to the annual conference of the Chief Constables' Association in London (6 June 1924). The knowledge that he compared favourably with others who held more remunerative and challenging positions, no doubt raised his own ambitions. Gone was the sense of failure and rejection which had overwhelmed him a few years earlier. His success at Chesterfield had rekindled his self confidence and enthusiasm for police work. He had finally abandoned the legal studies which he had pursued fitfully for some time after coming to the borough[92] — probably as a fall-back position in the event that the post proved too much for him — and he had decided instead to aim for the highest appointments in other police forces.

It has been suggested that by resolving to leave Chesterfield so quickly, he repaid the Watch Committee's trust in him with a display of some ingratitude. When considering this judgement it is ultimately impossible to reconcile two conflicting arguments. The Watch Committee had taken some risks in appointing a chief constable with virtually no experience of a British police force. They had supported all his proposed reforms; had authorised the purchase of every item of equipment he had recommended; and had rewarded his services with a pay increase and retrospective improvements in his allowances and expenses.[93] Yet, when he relinquished the post of chief constable of Chesterfield on 18 February 1925 he had held that office for less than twenty-two months, whereas the eight previous incumbents had averaged more than nine years each and only one (Chief Constable J. Farndale, 1869-1871) had served so short a period.[94] It is hardly surprising that no official functions were held to mark his departure — though protocol, rather than pique, may have been the cause — or that it was left to the local newsboys, whose annual treat Sillitoe attended shortly before his resignation, to honour him with the traditional three cheers.[95]

On the other hand, it is significant that the local press expressed neither surprise nor recriminations about his decision.[96] It is also highly unlikely that it had not occurred to the hard-headed councillors on the Chesterfield Watch Committee that their chief constable might soon start searching for a more important post, knowing as they did about his earlier applications to Hull and Nottingham. Furthermore, their replacement for Sillitoe — Major F.S. James (1925-1931) — had a remarkably similar career background to that of his predecessor,[97] and was accommodated in the same house which the borough decided to buy at the time of his appointment.[98] Neither development would seem to indicate any deep-seated resentment by either the Watch Committee or the rest of the Borough Council. Moreover, for much of his later life Sillitoe retained a direct link with the town. Shortly before his resignation, his elder brother, the Reverend Hubert Sillitoe, had returned from the Far East and secured the post of Rector of St. Thomas's, Brampton which he held for the next nineteen years.[99]

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the affair, Sillitoe successfully applied for the post of chief constable of the East Riding of Yorkshire and moved to new headquarters at Beverley. Although the basic salary was not much higher, generous fringe benefits boosted the value of the entire package to £1,200 (compared with less than £800 at Chesterfield) and included the tenancy of a fine house within easy travelling distance of Elloughton — a great attraction to his wife, now preoccupied with three young children.[100] Despite these advantages, the life of a rural policeman was not to Sillitoe's liking (he found the semi-feudal relationships in country villages particularly tiresome) and he spent a mere fourteen months in the county before returning to police duties in urban and industrialised environments.

His burgeoning reputation enabled him to proceed to the chief constableships of Sheffield (1926-1931), Glasgow (1931-1943) and Kent (1943-1946); the award of C.B.E. (1936), a knighthood (1942) and a K.B.E. (1950); and finally to his appointment as Director-General of M.I.5 (1946-1953). Even after compulsory retirement from public service at the age of sixty-five, he would find commercial outlets for his expertise, first as head of the International Diamond Security Organisation (established by De Beers to reduce the loss of gems smuggled through outlets in West Africa) and later as Chairman of Security Express Ltd (a London-based company specialising in payroll collection and delivery). In fact, he remained fully employed for the rest of his active life until incapacitated by the terminal cancer to which he finally succumbed on 5 April 1962.[101]

X

Sillitoe's record in Chesterfield was, by any standards, impressive. In less than two years, he had reorganised the services for which he was responsible, improving morale and efficiency, advancing new practices which would later be considered invaluable and, coincidentally, taking the first important steps along the road to personal success. Energy, dedication and attention to detail had, undoubtedly, accelerated the rapid development of his highly effective managerial skills. He was also assisted by three factors beyond his control, which proved to be of incalculable importance.

Firstly, he sought the Chesterfield appointment at a time when the Borough Council in general, and its Watch Committee in particular, were still highly conservative in composition — politically, economically and socially — and were therefore instinctively sympathetic to someone from his middle-class and colonial background. In most other English boroughs this would definitely not have been the case.[102] Secondly, he held the post during an era when local government was approaching the peak of its powers, a position it would reach in 1928 and maintain until shortly after the Second World War. The average British citizen had less contact with central government than almost any other nationality in Europe. All local authorities controlled a comprehensive range of services and utilities, and in Chesterfield (where the Borough Council had an annual turnover of £2,107,419 in 1922-1923) they had both the authority and the financial resources to support Sillitoe's proposals[103] Finally, his short spell as chief constable of Chesterfield avoided the inter-war period's two phases of national austerity, each of which involved major budgetary economies — the 'Geddes Axe' of 1921-1922 (a series of swingeing cuts totalling £64,000,000) and the financial crisis of 1931 (resolved by further reductions of £78,000,000). On neither occasion were the police immune from the stringencies applied to many other areas of the public sector.[104]

In contrast, a substantial part of Sillitoe's brief service in Chesterfield coincided with the first Labour government (January to October 1924) in which the radical John Wheatley served as Minister for Health and was eager to give financial assistance to worthwhile public building projects.[105] Consequently, Chesterfield Borough Council's numerous applications for loans totalling £26,409 (repayable over periods ranging from ten to thirty years) were all approved. These propitious circumstances do not diminish the stature of Sillitoe's achievements; they do, however, clarify the political and economic scenario in which they were attained.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Whilst serving as chief constable of Sheffield (1926-1931), Sillitoe was already being referred to as 'the doyen of England's higher police officers'. See *Pictorial Weekly*, 27 June 1927.
2. Sillitoe's lifelong embarrassment about his father is analysed in the useful biography by A.W. Cockerill, *Sir Percy Sillitoe*, (1975), pp.1-3.
3. Sinclair's father-in-law, the financier Sir John Jackson (1851-1919), had important connections with the British South Africa Company. *Ibid*, pp7-8.
4. Sillitoe appears to have originally claimed that he returned to England because of his wife's ill health. See *Derbyshire Times*, 24 March, 1923.
5. *Committee on the Police Service of England, Wales and Scotland, Report (Chairman; Lord*

Desborough), Paragraph 139, (1919).

6. Curiously, although Sillitoe was a merciless opponent of corruption in the police service and in local government, he was not averse to nepotism on behalf of himself, his wife or his children. See Cockerill, *op cit*, pp57, 160 and 207.
7. In his autobiography, Sillitoe does not even mention the Nottingham application or interviews. See Sir Percy Sillitoe, *Cloak Without Dagger*, (1955), pp49-50.
8. Cockerill, *op cit*, p58.
9. These qualifications were the Statute Law examination under English Law, Northern Rhodesia (1913); and the Criminal Law of Procedure, Law of Evidence under Indian Penal Code, Tanganyika (1922). See *Derbyshire Times*, 24 March, 1923.
10. Cockerill, *op cit*, p59.
11 *Derbyshire Times*, 24 March, 1923.
12 There had been 146 applications for the chief constableship of Hull; 250 for that of Nottingham; and 143 at Chesterfield. See Cockerill, *op cit*, pp57-58.
13. The other shortlisted candidates were Inspector D. Heald (Middlesborough); Superintendent A.A. Johnston (Carlisle); Inspector D. Leslie (Liverpool); Superintendent W.C. Wood (Preston); and Captain H.Y. Hicking (Cheltenham). See the *Minutes of Chesterfield Borough Council* (hereafter *C.B.C.*), Watch Sub-Committee, 5 March 1923, Local Studies Section, Chesterfield Public Library.
14. A. Simkins, *Dictionary of National Biography, 1961-1970*, (1981), pp940-941.
15. *Chesterfield Shopping Festival Official Booklet*, (1914), p7.
16. Cockerill, *op cit*, pp43 and 59.
17. Sillitoe, *op cit*, p50.
18. In fact, seven boroughs had established police forces before the end of 1835. See J.M. Bestall, *History of Chesterfield*, Vol III, (1978), pp29-38.
19. For a broader account of these difficulties, see J. M. Hart, 'Reform of the Borough Police, 1835-1856'. *The English Historical Review*, (July 1955).
20. This crucial legislation is analysed in J.M. Hart, 'The County and Borough Police Act, 1856', *Public Administration*, (Winter 1956).
21. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 24 January, 1923.
22. *Derbyshire Times*, 5 May, 1923.
23. The traditional theory is advocated in G. Marshall, *Police and Government*, (1965), pp28-29; and T.A. Critchley, *A History of Police in England and Wales*, (1967), pp131-133. The alternative view is explained in M. Brogden, *The Police: Autonomy and Consent,* (1982), p62; and T. Jefferson and R. Grimshaw, *Controlling the Constable*, (1984), pp41-44.
24. The Labour members were Alderman Varley and Councillor Hatton. The others included a mechanical engineer, a manufacturer of railway carriages, a tanner, a boot dealer, a wholesale fruit merchant, a pottery manager, the district manager of a friendly society, an insurance collector, a butcher and a tobacconist. See *C.B.C.*, Special Watch Committee, 16 March 1923; and T.P. Wood's *Almanac*, (1923), pp283-287 and (1924) pp290-295.
25. The Duke of Devonshire occasionally attended its meetings. See *Derbyshire Times*, 28 April, 1923.
26. These were Aldermen Sir E. Shentall and G. J. Edwards; and Councillors H.J. Watson, J.E. Bird, H.P. Short, J. E. Clayton and W. E. Wakerley. See *Derbyshire Times*, 12 January, 1924.
27. *Derbyshire Times*, 9 February, 1924.
28. Sillitoe, *op cit*, p51.
29. *Derbyshire Times*, 10 March, 1923.
30. R. Cooper, *Book of Chesterfield*, (1977), pp105-107.
31. See J. Hirst, *Chesterfield Breweries*, (1991).
32. *Derbyshire Times*, 14 February, 1925.
33. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Reports, 1923-1924.
34. Cockerill, *op cit*, pp131 and 153-154.
35. Borough of Chesterfield, *Chesterfield — Scenes From Yesterday*, (1974), p17.

36. Barnet Kenyon (1853-1930), an ex-miner at Barlborough and Clowne (Southgate) collieries, served as President of the Derbyshire Miners' Association (1896-1906) and as M.P. for Chesterfield (1913-1929). See, *Who Was Who, 1929-1940*, (1941).
37. The results were: (i) 6 December 1923 - B. Kenyon (Liberal) 12,164; G. Benson (Labour) 6,198: and R.F.H. Broomhead-Colton-Fox (Conservative) 5,541. (Turnout 69.0%). (ii) 29 October 1924 - B. Kenyon (Liberal) 13,971; and G. Benson (Labour) 9,206. (Turnout 64.4%). See F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, (1969), p320.
38. *Derbyshire Times*, 26 January 1924.
39. Cockerill, *op cit*, pp78 and 154.
40. In January 1924, the Chesterfield Union Workhouse had 442 inmates; a year later the figure had fallen to 395. See *Derbyshire Times* 10 January 1925.
41. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 19 September and 12 December 1923; 24 September, 15 October and 19 November 1924; and 21 January 1925.
42. Lethal chambers and pistols were supplied, free of charge, by the RSPCA. See C.B.C., Chief Constable's Quarterly Report, 30 September 1924.
43. Between 1904 and 1927 (when the electric trams were replaced by trolley buses) they conveyed 73,222,529 fare-paying passengers a total of 6,245,426 miles. See B.M. Marsden, *Tramtracks and Trolleybooms; Chesterfield Trams and Trolleybuses*, Part Two, (1988), pp16-42.
44. *C.B.C.*, Hackney Carriage Licensing Sub-Committee, 18 July, 1923; and Watch Committee, 15 October, 1924.
45. This was caused by a car overturning on the Hasland Road, fatally burning two people. See *C.B.C.*, Report on the Fire Brigade, 30 September, 1923.
46. Cockerill, *op cit*, pp61-62, 79 and 85.
47. Critchley, *op cit*, pp170-171 and 193-194.
48. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 18 July and 19 September, 1923; and 19 November, 1924.
49. The two officers made 1,466 visits to 1,338 shops and other premises. See *C.B.C.*, Weights and Measures Report, 31 March, 1924.
50. One of the officers, Sergeant F. K. Exelby, was promoted to inspector on 1 April, 1925. See *Chesterfield Borough Police Force Personnel Register, 1914-1946*, (hereafter *C.B.P.F.P.R.*), D.3376, Derbyshire Record Office, Matlock.
51. These showed that the average age of the Chesterfield force was 31 years 1 month; the average height, 5' 10.5"; and the average length of service, 7 years 7 months. See *Derbyshire Times*, 16 February, 1924.
52. Their places of origin included Derbyshire (5), Yorkshire (2), Nottinghamshire (1), Staffordshire (1), Lancashire (1), Cumberland (1), Durham (1), Kent (1), Bristol (1), Gloucester (1), Scotland (3) and Ireland (2). Their former civilian occupations were labourer (3), miner (2), carter (2), iron moulder (1), locomotive fireman (1) signalman (1), gardener (1), gamekeeper (1), clerk (2), bank clerk (1), assistant inspector of weights and measures (1), photographer and framer (1), motor engineer (1), soldier (2) and members of other police forces (2). Details of officers who joined before 1914 are not available. See *C.B.P.F.P.R.*
53. *Derbyshire Times*, 19 February 1924.
54. The officer concerned, Police Constable (later Detective inspector) George Manifold, also served under Sillitoe in Sheffield. See Sillitoe, *op cit*, pp94-95.
55. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 20 June and 17 October 1923; 24 September and 19 November 1924; and 21 January 1925.
56. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 19 November 1924; and 21 January 1925.
57. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Report, 30 September 1924.
58. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 24 September 1924.
59. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Report, 31 March 1924. On at least two occasions, these skills enabled officers to save the lives of members of the public. See Watch Committee, 19 March 1924.
60. Fourteen out of seventeen candidates passed the promotion examinations to sergeant; all five passed

the promotion examinations to inspector. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Report, 31 December 1924. Among those who succeeded, three were later promoted to sergeant (Constables Dickinson, Dixon and Fenton); four to inspector (Sergeants Exelby, Harris, Kitchin and Olive); and one to Chief Inspector (Constable Hood). These examples do not include officers who won promotion in other forces. See *C.B.P.F.P.R.*

61. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 24 September 1924.
62. Sillitoe, *op cit*, p67.
63. Cockerill, *op cit*, pp66-67. For an account of the survival of these procedures, see S. Holdaway, *Inside the British Police*, (1983), pp43-44.
64. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Reports, 30 June 1923 and 30 June 1924. Major-General Atcherley (1871-1954) served as chief constable of Shropshire (1905-1908) and of the West Riding of Yorkshire (1908-1919) before becoming H.M. Inspector of Constabulary (1919-1936), See *Who Was Who, 1951-1960*, (1961).
65. *Derbyshire Times*, 16 February 1924.
66. *Ibid*, 26 April 1924.
67. Dr. J. M. Webster (1898-1973) later became Professor of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at Birmingham University and Director of the West Midland Forensic Laboratory. See *Who Was Who, 1971-1980*, (1981).
68. Sillitoe, *op cit*, pp70-71.
69. *Ibid*, pp71-73
70. Cockerill, *op cit*, p85.
71. See J. Lock, *The British Policewoman: Her Story*, (1979), pp152-155; and Critchley, *op cit*, pp215-218.
72. Jessie Webster, a former office cleaner, married with three children, served with the Chesterfield Borough Police Force from 1925-1939 before retiring on the grounds of ill-health. At discharge, her certificate of character was exemplary. Between 1940-1945, a further twenty-four policewomen served in the force but all had resigned, been dismissed or transferred to other borough departments by 1946. See *C.B.P.F.P.R.*
73. Sillitoe, *op cit*, p51.
74. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 24 September, 15 October and 19 November, 1924.
75. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Report, 30 September 1924.
76. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 16 May and 20 June 1923; 20 February and 19 March 1924.
77. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 30 June 1923 and 21 January 1925; and Report on the Fire Brigade, 31 May 1924.
78. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 20 June 1923; 20 February and 24 September 1924.
79. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 16 April 1924.
80. *C.B.C.*, Chief Constable's Quarterly Report, 30 September 1924.
81. Ten councils agreed to participate in this scheme; sixteen refused; and three did not reply. See *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 21 May, 16 July, 24 September, 15 October and 19 November, 1924. For examples of unwillingness to help recalcitrant councils, see Report on the Fire Brigade, 30 September 1924.
82. *C.B.C.*, Reports on the Fire Brigade, 30 June 1923; 30 June and 30 September 1924.
83. *C.B.C.*, Special Watch Committee, 25 September 1923.
84. *Derbyshire Times*, 17 November 1923.
85. *C.B.C.*, Reports on the Fire Brigade, 30 September and 31 December 1924.
86. In 1923 there were only 112 juvenile offences in Chesterfield. See *Derbyshire Times*, 14 February 1924.
87. *C.B.C.*, Report on the Fire Brigade, 30 June 1924.
88. *Derbyshire Times*, 10 November 1923.
89. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 12 December 1923; 20 February, 19 March, 16 July and 19 November, 1924.

90. *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, Appendix, 21 January 1925.
91. Sillitoe, *op cit*, p51.
92. He had actually registered as a student member of Gray's Inn on 22 March 1923, six days *after* his successful interview at Chesterfield. See *Student Register, Gray's Inn Library*.
93. These included £100 per annum for his car, telephone, gas, coal and electricity, and a further payment of £50 to cover his removal costs. See *C.B.C.*, Watch Committee, 16 May and 19 September 1923.
94. In other forces, the average length of service by chief constables was often much longer, since many did not insist upon retirement at the age of sixty-five. The Surrey Constabulary, for example, had only two chief constables between 1850 and 1930. See Critchley, *op cit*, p142.
95. Sillitoe, *op cit*, pp51-52.
96. *Derbyshire Times*, 17 January 1925.
97. Major F.S. James, had spent twenty-one years in the Rhodesia Police, rising from trooper to head of the C.I.D., and had also served in Africa throughout the First World War. See *Derbyshire Times*, 21 February 1925.
98. The house at 712 Chatsworth Road, Brampton was purchased for £1,200. See *C.B.C.*, Watch Sub-Committee, 21 January 1925.
99. Hubert Sillitoe had previously served as British chaplain in Batavia (now Jakarta) in the Diocese of Singapore from 1921 to 1924. See *Derbyshire Times*, 3 January 1925.
100. *Ibid*, 17 January 1925.
101. Cockerill, *op cit*, pp210-211.
102. In 1908 only 15 out of 123 English borough chief constables were ex-army officers or colonial policemen; the remainder had risen through the ranks. By 1939, their numbers had dwindled even further to just 6 out of 117. See R. Reiner, *Chief Constables*, (1991) p15.
103. *Derbyshire Times*, 10 March 1923.
104 Under 'Geddes Axe' the numbers of Metropolitan policewomen were reduced from 112 to just 24; whilst in 1931 all police ranks suffered a temporary 12.5% pay cut. See Critchley, *op cit*, p217.
105. John Wheatley (1869-1930) drafted the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act of 1924, designed to assist local authorities to build 2,500,000 houses over the next fifteen years. For accounts of his career, see *The Times*, 13 May 1930; and T. Johnstone, *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1922-30, (1937), pp904-905.