

LAW AND ORDER IN WILTSHIRE

Notes taken from a U3A Local History talk by Marlene Lewis
and then augmented by own research.

I am particularly indebted to "The History of Wiltshire Constabulary" by Paul Sample

The story of law and order in Wiltshire goes back to Anglo-Saxon times.

1280 – there was a debate as to whether Devizes or Marlborough should hold county court sessions.

1383 – Devizes was confirmed at the site for the court.

1563 – This is the earliest reference to a lock up in Devizes. The lock-up still present to-day dates back to the 17th century and was incorporated into the Town Hall when the new building was erected at the beginning of the 19th century. The lock-up is near Barfield House which was once a Police House.

The "Blind Houses" of Wiltshire were probably so called because they have no windows. There is one in Bromham, built on the outside of the church and now often used for Nativity scenes at Christmas.

1578 – Wiltshire Justices set a county rate for a House of Correction.

1579 – A Bridewell was built in Devizes and was the only one in the county of Wiltshire until 1641.

1771 – The Bridewell was re-fronted in brick and was also extended at this time. In 1784, 1801 and 1806, further improvements were made to it and a chapel was also built on the site.

1817 – A new Bridewell was opened in what is now Avon Road. It included a two storey polygon of brick and stone and two infirmaries. 1823: a treadmill was authorised. In 1841 two new cells for women were added and the following year a school room was built on site.

1824 – the first executions took place in Devizes when two men were executed for burglary. Large numbers came to witness the event with many travelling by boat via the canal.

1836 - the City of Salisbury took a decision to form its own modern police force, though the rest of the County took a few years to catch up. At the Quarter Sessions, committees of Magistrates were set up to deal with the administration of the County. They met in different parts of the County four times a year -at the same time as the Court. The constables seldom acted on their own initiative, but usually on the complaint of another, who was invariably the prosecutor when an offence was detected. Many large areas, and some major communities, saw no police from one year to the next. In times of unrest, additional or special constables would be sworn in, but were quickly released as troubles abated. This ad-hoc approach to policing did not offer much chance of the detection and apprehension of offenders.

The first half of the 19th century was a time of change and unrest throughout Britain. War with Napoleon, economic upturns and slumps, the demands for electoral reform, the Peterloo massacre, the Swing Riots, Anti-Corn Law protests and Chartism defined a period of immense political turbulence and social change.

As the Industrial Revolution progressed, bringing more and more social and public order problems, several Wiltshire communities formed 'private associations for the prosecution of felons'. Such organisations were formed at Box, Devizes, Lacock, Ramsbury, Aldbourne and Trowbridge. The Devizes Prosecution Society, for instance, was formed in 1787 and continued to hold social meetings until 1867. The agricultural riots and the later Chartist disturbances all were to put an insupportable strain upon the Parish Constables.

In London pressure for reform was strong. When Sir Robert Peel, the Home Secretary, introduced his 1829 Metropolitan Police Bill, it met with little Parliamentary opposition. The Act gave rise to the appearance on London's streets of 'Peelers' and 'Bobbies'.

Five years later the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 required the boroughs to set up their own police forces. It was as a result of this Act that Salisbury set up its own City police force.

In 1835, Devizes had four policemen, a night constable and four constables who acted as watchmen. These continued until they were amalgamated into the Wiltshire Constabulary in 1847.

In Wiltshire calls for a force similar to the Metropolitan Police increased as the public became alarmed by the increasing levels of violence.

Throughout November 1830 agricultural workers staged major disturbances in the South West in protest against poor wages and food price rises. Most attributed their poverty to the introduction of new agricultural machinery – and accordingly embarked on an orgy of destruction.

23rd November 1830 such a riot occurred at Bishopdown Farm, near Salisbury. A party of men had wrecked a threshing machine, and, armed with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on, began to march towards Salisbury – intent on destroying Messrs Figs Iron Foundry. Within an hour Salisbury was in turmoil as the news spread. Wealthier citizens armed themselves; special constables were sworn in and the Yeomanry Cavalry were mobilised.

The rioters were met on the road, but refused to withdraw. Above angry threats and taunts the Riot Act was read. Eventually the militia arrived and moved in to break up the crowd. A number of men were taken prisoner – and gradually the gathering was dispersed. The rioting, however, was in full swing in other parts of the County and serious incidents took place later that day in at least fourteen towns and villages.

The County's only surviving example of a wooden Blind House is at Bromham. It is said that drunks would suck beer from clay pipes pushed through the keyhole into tankards held outside by their friends.

Hilperton Blind House was one of several similar buildings used to hold drunks, vagrants and prisoners in the days before Wiltshire Constabulary was formed. The policing of rural Wiltshire until 1839 was the responsibility of the Parish or Petty Constables, whose ancestors dated from before the establishment of Parliament. Appointed by the Courts Leet and latterly by the Magistrates in Quarter Sessions, the constables were supervised by the Magistrates. They were unpaid, untrained and usually unwilling to undertake any protracted investigation.

29 people were arrested by the militia and 225 cases of wilful destruction were tried. Therefore the people of Wiltshire acknowledged that they needed a police force and at Marlborough in November of

1839 came a recommendation for the formation of a 200 strong Constabulary for Wiltshire. **Primus et Optimus** or “First and Best” is the motto of the Wiltshire Constabulary which is the oldest County Police Force in the United Kingdom.

The appointment of Chief Constable was advertised in the Wiltshire Gazette on the 21st November 1839. Interviews, before a Committee of Magistrates, would be held at The Bear, Devizes on Wednesday 27th November 1839 at 11.00 a.m. The necessary qualifications were that candidates:

- 1) Must be no older than 45.
- 2) Must be certified by a Medical Practitioner to be in good health and of sound constitution, and fitted to perform the duties of the office.
- 3) Must not have been a Bankrupt, nor have taken the benefit of the Insolvent Act.

4) The candidate for Chief Constable must be recommended to the Secretary of State by the Magistrates, in whom the appointment is vested, as a person of general good character and conduct. If he has been previously employed in any branch of the public service, civil or military, he must produce testimonials from the proper authorities in such service as to general conduct whilst so employed.'

13 candidates presented themselves at The Bear that Wednesday morning. They were each interviewed – but 2 were found to be over the age limit and a further 6 withdrew after the interview. 4 were short listed for consideration by the Quarter Sessions. The 4 were all military officers from the Army and Navy. They were: Captain Calder, Captain Edwards, Lieutenant Hill and Commander Meredith.

The candidates were discussed at length during the Quarter Sessions in Devizes the following day – Thursday 28th November 1839. One Magistrate, Mr Neeld, objected to the preparation of a shortlist by the Committee, and argued that all of the Magistrates, the full Quarter Sessions, should discuss the merits of the 13 individuals.

Lord Radnor's clear favourite for the post was Captain Hay, who had not even been short-listed. The Captain was two days over the age limit – but Lord Radnor had gone to the length of writing to the Marquis of Normanby, one of Her Majesty's principal Secretaries of State, who had declared that his age would not prohibit Captain Hay's appointment. In a last ditch effort to get his man onto the shortlist Lord Radnor moved that there were 'special reasons in this County for not adhering to the rule touching the age of the candidate.' His motion was defeated by 39 votes to 9 – a fairly crushing majority.

After a short debate, those present at the Quarter Sessions voted to appoint Commander Samuel Meredith as Chief Constable – subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for the Home Department.



Captain Samuel Meredith RN, the first Chief Constable of Wiltshire.

A letter was dispatched for London that night, and by less than a week, Wiltshire had beaten Gloucestershire to become the first County to appoint a Chief Constable. Gloucestershire appointed theirs on 1st December, closely followed by Worcestershire on 2nd December and Durham on the 10th.

Approval for Meredith's appointment came in a letter from the Marquis of Normanby on 5th December. The letter was short and to the point: 'I have to acknowledge receipt of your letter submitting for approval the appointment of Samuel Meredith, Commander in Her Majesty's Navy, to be Chief Constable of the County of Wiltshire and I signify to you my approval thereof'

On retirement from the Royal Navy, Meredith was promoted to the rank of Captain, the title by which he has since been known.

1877 – the Devizes Bridewell was transferred to the control of the State as it housed the only county prison. Finally, in 1921, it was closed. In 1922 it was purchased as a building site and was demolished in 1927.

Not all early policemen were of good character and there were instances where they themselves got in trouble with the law. They had to work a twelve hour day and in summer were expected also to do another five hours in the evenings. By the 1880s, they were directed to go to bed at 10.00 p.m. and to rise at 4.00 a.m!

Meredith faced a formidable task. He was to raise a Force of over 200 men, allocate them to areas of patrol, and arrange for their accommodation, supervision, clothing and discipline.

This had never been attempted in the County before, and many of the ground rules were modelled on the Metropolitan Police.

Following the appointment of the Chief Constable, an advertisement was placed in the Wiltshire Gazette on 19th December 1839. It read:

***WANTED FOR THE CONSTABULARY FORCE
in the COUNTY OF WILTS.
CONSTABLES.***

Their pay to be 17/6d. per week, with clothing.

To be under forty years of age.

To stand five feet six inches without shoes.

To read and write and keep accounts.

***To be free from any bodily complaint, of strong constitution
and generally intelligent.***

***The form of certificate of character to be signed by one or
more respectable persons, who have had personal knowledge
of the candidate during the last five years at least, either singly
or collectively, may be had by personal application to
Captain Meredith at the Magistrates' Office at Devizes
on Tuesdays and Friday, until on 31st December instant,
between the hours of ten and three o'clock.'***



Drawn in September 1841, this is the first known picture of a Wiltshire police constable. He is James Dewey, Police Constable No. 107, who was based at Shrewton.

Those recruited started their duties from January 1840 onwards. By the end of March the Force had 12 Superintendents and 170 men, of which 40 were stationed in towns and 120 in rural districts. Within the first three months, a number of crimes and incidents had been reported. These included a highway robbery, five burglaries, 9 Incendiarisms, 9 cattle thefts, 20 vagrants, 24 assaults, 35 drunk and disorderly, 59 felonies and 60 misdemeanours.

A particular problem was the system of Parish Constables, whose responsibilities the new Force now took over. They were a varied mixture, ranging widely in age, enthusiasm and experience. Some applied for positions in the new Constabulary – and one, John Foley, went on to become a significant figure in the famous Rode Hill House murder later in 1860. Those who did not join the Force often remained as Parish Constables for some time, often operating in direct opposition to the paid Force.

Nevertheless, Meredith's naval training had prepared him for the task, and in the first year of operation he visited most areas of the County – spending most of his £400 salary on travelling! Meredith organised his Force into Divisions, each under the command of a Superintendent. Constables were allocated to a district within the Division – usually the size of a Parish. They lived and worked within the community, always on call and often patrolling into the early hours. They were paid 17/6 a week – enough for a comfortable standard of living at the time.

It was a difficult life for the newly appointed police constable. For the most part they were ignorant of their powers or duties. No experienced 'old hands' were around to show them how to deal with difficult situations.

At first no instruction or training was given. The men were interviewed, accepted and sworn in. Then they were sent off, with an instruction book and uniform, to their districts. There they had to find lodgings and commence work.

Superintendents were given the task of travelling around their Division on horseback, instructing the men as they went. The Superintendents were entitled to an allowance of £30 year or the provision and keep of a horse. In July 1843 they were supplied with light carts. This enabled them to take stores and equipment with them when they visited their districts

Between 1839 and 1908, there were just two Chief Constables of Wiltshire:

1839 - 1870 Captain Samuel Meredith RN

1870 - 1908 Captain Robert Sterne RN

1907 – The first motoring offence was committed in Wiltshire when the offender was charged with speeding above 20 mph!

1911 – A bicycle allowance was introduced as was finger printing.

A yearly rest allowance of 12 days was permitted in addition to the 52 days derived from one day off a week.

1970 – Women were allowed to join the Police Force for the first time.

1839 – 2005: The Police Force in Wiltshire was named the “Wiltshire Constabulary”. It then was renamed “Wiltshire Police”; apparently to make the police accessible.

I have saved the very interesting PDF of the History of Wiltshire Police in our Talks folder under “History”.