There is strong evidence to suggest that John Bunch Bonnemaison McHardy, founding Chief Constable of Essex and a former coastguard, was a particularly moral commander. Faced with the task of gathering a disparate (if not yet desperate) group of men into a team and moulding them to his wishes, it should have been no surprise that he favoured strict disciplinary action. Many of his men had been soldiers, sailors and labourers. Both in the naval service that Captain McHardy RN had so recently left, and in the army, discipline was still enforced by the “cat o’ nine tails.” On 25th July 1843 Constable Thomas Kelly, a twenty-nine year old former paper maker, concluded his thirteen day career when he was found to be “Drunk on Parade.” For the same offence, nearly thirty years after the police were founded, an hussar was flogged to death at Hounslow Barracks, pursuant to his colonel’s order. The skills needed for contemporary military command were not those needed to form an efficient constabulary.

Within the preserved early registers of the Essex Constabulary is a “remarks” column, in which a common final analysis of many of his men’s character is recorded. So many finished their police careers with the valedictory; “Want of Sobriety.” Nowadays we might consider as mitigation the social conditions in which they worked, lack of tea for breaks, coffee too expensive, a county littered with beer houses, also that few of the original hundred constables joined as experienced policemen. Their pre-1840 employment had allowed many of them ample opportunities for imbibing off duty. Now they were on duty 24 hours a day. The size of the county often left officers to their own devices, which 15 superintendents, later 20 inspectors, and much later 20 sergeants would have difficulty supervising. Early recruiting techniques may have been inefficient. In the 20th May 1840 instance of Constable 95 Charles Calcraft, the village policeman at Little Baddow, he had apparently been employed soon after leaving.

A light-hearted look at Victorian Discipline
by Fred Feather
Curator of the Essex Police Museum
Colchester Gaol, where he had been serving a prison sentence. His nineteen day police career ended when he was dismissed for “leaving his guard (the earlier name for a beat) with a prostitute!” As his brother was William Calcraft the national hangman, one is led to whimsical speculation that some influence may have been brought on his behalf. Or, was the attitude to recruiting more liberal or less thorough than at present? An analysis of several hundred men who were discharged for disciplinary reasons during the forty-one years of the Admiral’s service (McHardy received regular naval promotions whilst serving as Chief Constable) reveals many strange stories.

The first Brentwood Fair after the formation of the County Constabulary must have been lively, for, on 21st July 1840, three officers were dismissed for their behaviour there. They were Constables 41 James Pettican, 73 William Shiplee and 97 Charles P. Yardley who were marked off “Drunk on Duty”. It might be instructive to trace the family connection of the latter with Superintendent Job Yardley of Rochford (both were born in East London). Three months later he was marked as “absconded.” On a more gentlemanly level, on 2nd November 1840 Superintendent Henry Wellington Riom of Halstead, formerly a proctor, was dismissed for “misappropriating county funds”. On 20th August 1840 Inspector William Alford, a thirty-nine year old former soldier, was dismissed for “insolence to Captain McHardy RN.” Perhaps some inter-service banter? Constable 21 Samuel Allingham was twenty-seven, with eight weeks service, when he apparently forgot that he had formerly been a servant and was “drunk and disobedient to Superintendent McInnes.” On 25th June 1842 John C. Grindrod, a twenty-eight year old former labourer with fourteen months service, was “found by his superintendent, drunk during divine service.” Lack of training may have contributed to an incident in June 1862 when Constable 144 James Brewster, a labourer with six months service, left after “fighting with civilians.” In 1862 Constable 208 Robert John Cox was charged with “Entering a public house, getting beastly drunk and remaining there all night.” Constable 44 Daniel Cook, a married man with two children, lasted but the one day 24th August 1861, “having got drunk on first night patrol, was drunk again
next morning.” Some officers were got rid of for more exotic reasons. On 25th October 1842 Constable 21 James Pendergast, a thirty-one year old former clerk, was found after one month to be “Uncleanly in person” and in 1858, Constable 36 John Davis, formerly with the Royal Irish Constabulary and having seven years service, was dispensed with, having been “Found covered in vermin.”

On 30th April 1855, Constable 151 James Marchbanks, a twenty-nine year old former mariner with two years service, was dismissed as he was “Connected with Mormons.” It is intriguing that, two decades after its birth in mid-west America, the Church of Latter Day Saints was so well known in this county that is could be a disciplinary problem. “Heightism” was the downfall of Constable George Verlander, who after three years service measured a quarter of an inch less than when recorded at the minimum height when he joined. He was dismissed. Others went through no apparent fault of their own. Constable 145 George Stewart of Great Baddow, formerly a gardener and having eighteen months service, had to leave on 15th November 1859 “because his wife was a lunatic.” A less flamboyant clerk the week before, on 10th November 1859 wrote off the dismissal of Constable 523 Daniel Webb, a twenty-seven year old former militiaman with three years service, “In consequence of the health of his wife,” and on 31st August 1872 that of Constable 36 Robert Parr aged thirty-one as “The conduct of his
wife was prejudicial to the service.” A mystery surrounds the leaving of Constable 104 Robert Buck on 30th June 1863. He had been allowed to serve for one month and was only twenty-four when he resigned “In consequence of having four children dependent upon him.” Had his wife left him, or died, or had he given false particulars to join? A more straightforward situation presented itself on 6th July 1854, when Constable 77 John Goddard, who, though thirty years of age, had been a policeman for only a week, when he was adjudged to have had “Improper correspondence with a married woman.”

On 12th June 1862, Constable 188 John Chas. Gray was dismissed. He may have thought that he had left his troubles far behind him when he transferred to this county from the Sudbury Borough Police. Aged thirty-three, he had been here eighteen months when he was summoned “for bastardy” before Sudbury Petty Sessions. An order for 1/6d per week was made against him. Later that same year a similar fate befell Inspector Richard Harvey, also with eighteen months service, when, on 3rd December he left, “Being putative father of two illegitimate children.”

Operational and legal reasons were also quoted. Constable 118 Thomas Muldowney, with eighteen months service and experience with the Royal Irish Constabulary, was marked off the register on 16th March 1863 for “Want of sobriety and contradicting himself in his evidence.” In 1845, Constable William Thomas was “Drunk and purloining eggs.” In 1861 Constable 41 Robert Layton was accused of “Stealing a watch and paying £3 to compromise the evidence.” In 1869 Constable 191 William Savage was dismissed for “Accepting £1 from a prisoner to obtain legal advice for him and kept it” (sic). Force Sport comes to mind when considering the fate of Constable Henry Harris. On 4th October 1842 the twenty-two year old concluded his service “Drunk and playing at skittles in a public house.”

My search for one particular mythical character has been long, though not intense. Colleagues recalled reading of a man who had “watered the superintendent’s beer” and spoke of a register which gave the details, which I finally located. This unsung hero, Constable 225 John Totham (formerly a labourer, aged twenty-one, with ten months service) was, on 19th September 1872, dismissed for “Taking a glass of the inspector’s beer.” It is supposed that at headquarters the duty constable collected the duty inspector’s refreshment and took it to the latter’s lodgings. Again, it is presumed that he drank much of it and filled up the glass, perhaps with water.

What is certain is, despite the peccadilloes of the small minority, of which the foregoing is but a sample, the discipline of Essex Constabulary was a much admired quality. T.A. Critchley’s “History of the police in England and Wales 900-1966” contains favourable comment. The government’s inspector of constabulary commented “The force has long been known as one of the most efficient in England, and has been most valuable in leading the way with a few other forces when police organisation was but little understood…..”

It was also reported that a former Essex officer, who had transferred to another force as a superintendent, told the Commission enquiring into the effectiveness of the rural police, that he would rather have “some constables from Essex” than the whole of his present command.

Thanks are offered to R.J. Marrion (Doggy) our cartoonist and to M. Surrell for the illustration.