Policing in Great Britain was not a new phenomenon and had existed in the form of Parish Constables and Special Constables for centuries. But, it was the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act which gave rise to organised, ‘modern’ Policing in Essex. The Act required the appointment, from the Borough Council, of a Watch Committee which would oversee and manage a Police Force for the Borough. The Watch Committee was responsible for the appointment of Constables, including a Head or Chief Constable and, later, for the running of an ‘efficient’ Police Force which would attract Central Government funding.

The new Borough Forces initially made use of the existing arrangements, especially to source their Officers, but the real innovation was the Head or Chief Constable post; also titled Superintendent, Sergeant of Police or Sergeant of the Watch. All the Boroughs appointed a paid person in this role, although the Constables pay system rather varied.

The Head Constable was purely that, one of the men with a bit more about him than the rest. He was expected to check that the instructions of the Watch Committee were carried out and that the men behaved correctly. Everything had to be reported back to the Watch Committee, who made all the decisions.

Guidance on exactly how Boroughs should manage their Police Forces appears to have been missing, and this led to a rather slow and inefficient transition from the traditional methods, to what was clearly envisaged and intended to be a much more effective system of law enforcement and maintenance of Public Order.

The Act became law in September 1835 and the four ancient Boroughs of Essex; namely Saffron Walden, Harwich, Colchester and Maldon were quick to react.
Saffron Walden Borough Watch Committee was appointed on Friday 1st January 1836 and had held meetings by 29th January 1836. By this time they had appointed two Constables (John Mynott for Sewards End and Jeremiah Stock for Audley End) and were intending to appoint a third for Little Walden. There is reference to a Head Constable but it is unclear whether he was one of the three or the intended establishment was to be Head Constable plus three Constables. By July 1836 Joseph Kent is being referred to as the Head Constable.

Records of payment to 'Constables' pre-date 1st January 1836 and they refer to specific tasks and actions performed by these men and include 'Constable's time'. They name the individuals, and include Kent, but not Mynott and Stock. This supports that the transition from the old Parish Constable arrangements to the new Constabularies was gradual rather than abrupt.

By 1839 Kent was receiving '1 year's salary for the posting' and by 1844 Constables David Smart and John Adams were adding to their bills 'The usual gratuity for the past years service will be thankfully received', but no amount is shown. In 1856 the new Chief Constable was appointed at a salary of 28 shillings per week and Constable Dewberry as a 'permanent Policeman' at 15 shillings per week.

In 1849 the Force became unhappily notable when the Chief Constable, William Campling, was the victim of murder. Campling was shot in the legs with a shotgun and later died from his wounds. In spite of a strong suspect, three separate investigations and an Assize Court trial, no conviction was secured.

In 1856 the County & Borough Police Act required Counties to form a Police Force (only 25 out of 55 Counties having responded to the earlier Act). This Act also allowed for Central Government payment to 'those Boroughs maintaining an efficient Police Force', although this did not extend to Borough Forces where the population of the Borough was less than 5,000. This Act saw the end of the Saffron Walden Borough Force, which amalgamated with Essex Constabulary in 1857.

Harwich Borough Watch Committee met on Monday 4th January 1836 when they appointed William Burton as Chief Constable (paid £20 per annum), plus 12 Constables. Nine of the Constables were appointed for St Nicholas Parish and three for Dovercourt Parish.

The Constables were paid in accordance with the duties they performed which again suggests the move to a 'professional Constabulary' was a gradual one and that it was a case of adapting existing arrangements, rather than a brand new start.

This changed in 1847 to a fully paid Force of Chief Constable plus three Constables. The 1856 Act saw the end of the Harwich Borough Force, which amalgamated with Essex Constabulary in 1857.

Colchester Borough Watch committee met on 25th January 1836, when their first action was to seek some guidance from the Attorney General on farming and managing a Police Force, confirming the lack of guidance to Borough authorities, in the act. The reply was read to the Watch Committee on 8th February 1836, by which time arrangements were under way.
On 11th February 1836 several Constables were appointed (although they did not commence duty until 25th February) and a comprehensive set of Regulations was approved. The Force formed in two sections, A Night Police of 16 Constables plus a ‘Superintendent of Police’; and a Day Section of three Constables. Colchester employed three men in the ancient role of ‘Town Sergeant’ and these men were utilised as the Day Section.

The ‘Superintendent of Police’ was responsible for managing the Night section and also had to attend any report of a fire, at any time of day. His authority over the Town Sergeants gradually evolved as time went on. The title soon changed to Head Constable and he was paid 21 shillings per week, with Constables only receiving 7 shillings.

In January 1837 the number of night Constables was reduced to eight, their pay increased to 10 shillings per week and they were clothed at the Borough’s expense. They received a Greatcoat (double breasted), oilskin cape and truncheon. The uniform pattern used was that of the ‘London Police’.

A further review during 1837, to produce ‘the best plan for reducing the Police and watching the Town’, changed the Head Constable title to Sergeant of the Watch (although in Watch Committee minutes the old title of Superintendent still crept in) and he was one of six Constables appointed. The split between the Night and Day force was retained with the Town Sergeants continuing the Day duties. In addition the Parishes of the Borough were to appoint their own Parish Constables (the system in place pre the 1835 Act). An interesting mix of the old and the new! From 1867 the Force made use of Officers in plain clothes and in 1891 a River Force was introduced, based at Brightlingsea and West Mersea, for the purpose of policing the oyster fisheries.

The Police Act of 1946 required, for a Borough to maintain a Police Force, a population in excess of 100,000. Colchester Borough could not match this and on 1st April 1947 the Borough Force and Essex Constabulary amalgamated, with 61 Officers transferring across.

Maldon Borough Watch Committee met on 5th January 1836, having been appointed on 1st January. ‘11 Constables were appointed and duly sworn in. It appears they were part time Constables, paid for specific duties performed. The minutes of the Committee, dated 1st January 1839, quote a report to the Secretary of State for the Home Department:

‘The Committee have appointed twelve Constables for the Borough. With the exceptions after mentioned, the Committee have not thought it expedient to pay them any permanent salary or to provide them with clothing, but they are paid according to their service in each case.

The Chief Constable has a salary of five pounds per annum & he and two other Constables received the sum of 2/- per week each ‘for watching the Town on Saturday nights and seeing that the Public Houses and Beer Houses are closed at proper hours’.

It is difficult to be exact about the early Head Constable arrangements. An entry in 1837 directs a John Beale to ‘arrange the beats and stations of the Constables’ for the annual fair, which suggests he had the responsibility. John Beale is certainly among the men sworn as Constables on 1st January 1836 and re-appointed the following year.

The first direct reference is in September 1839. ‘And Mr Bale, the Chief Constable, is to arrange with the Constables accordingly’. John Bale is amongst the men appointed.
on 1st January 1836 and re-appointed the following year. By 1853 the Borough was advertising for Constables to be employed to fill an establishment of a Head Constable plus two Constables. In 1872 the Police Force was declared ‘efficient’ in accordance with the 1856 Act and, with the Government grant, able to expand to two more Constables.

The Borough Force continued until 1889 when, on 1st April, it was amalgamated with Essex Constabulary. The Chief Constable and three Constables all transferred to the County Force.

Southend-on-Sea County Borough Authority was formed on 1st April 1914. The newly formed County Borough Authorities wanted to control policing within the Borough and, following disagreements with the County Chief Constable and the Standing Joint Committee, decided that a separate Police Force was the only answer. Southend-on-Sea Constabulary formed on 1st April 1914 with its members being sworn on 31st March, the Chief Constable having been appointed the previous December. The new Chief Constable, Henry Kerslake, took over from the retiring County Superintendent Jones.

With the well established model of the County Force to follow, plus equally well established Borough Forces around the country, the new Southend on Sea Force started life on an organised and professional footing. The Force comprised 101 men, of which 73 were County men who had been in the previous Southend Division of the County Force, who were organised into three sections: - Southend, with a Chief Inspector, five Inspectors, seven Sergeants and 37 Constables. Westcliff, with one Inspector, two Sergeants and 16 Constables. Leigh, with one Inspector, two Sergeants and 15 Constables. There were also three sub Sections of four Constables each, at Prittlewell, Southchurch and Thorpe Bay.

Inspectors were paid 44 shillings per week, Sergeants 35 shillings per week and Constables 26 shillings per week. The Borough paid more than the County so probably took the pick of the men.

The Force moved with the times and embraced modern technology with motor vehicles from 1927 and wireless from 1943. They took female officers from 1941 and in 1962 introduced the white helmet for summer use.

In 1964 the Police Act only permitted Forces of less than 250 to 350 Officers in exceptional circumstances, stating that the optimum size was over 500 Officers and a population of over 250,000. Southend Borough could not make a special case nor match either of these criteria. On 1st April 1969 the two Forces amalgamated with 484 Officers transferring from Southend-on-Sea Borough Constabulary to the newly named Essex and Southend-on-Sea Joint Constabulary, renamed Essex Police in 1974.