Essex Police

Night Conference Points 1915

Pc Arthur OLIVER (left) with colleague at a Conference Point near Ridgewell at the turn of the century. Note unmade road surface and leather gaiters or buskins worn by officer on the right.

HISTORY NOTEBOOK NUMBER 17
BY JOHN WOODGATE
In October 1915 Captain John Unett, the newly-arrived Chief Constable of the county, carried out a survey of night Conference Points, which were required to be made by superintendents after midnight with their constables. Such a survey was made easy by the fact that the superintendent had to record such visits in red ink in his daily journal. Concerned by their infrequency he wrote a letter to each of them, reminding them of their responsibilities. The original memorandum is not on file but its content is obvious from the replies that he received. The replies come from a recently unearthed Essex County Constabulary file marked “Hours of duty, rest days, beat books and conference points, September 1884 to December 1944.”

The war was by then just one year old, but already the enormous increase in work-load was apparent and their replies, (all but one were hand-written) cast light on the increase in their responsibilities with duties from 9am to 1am the following morning being quoted. Their replies reveal too the distances they covered and that those fortunate enough to have a railway line in their divisions used the train for making points. Others resorted to bicycle or horse but only then if, as in the case of Superintendent Cowell of Braintree, the animal was not “too tired”!

They reveal too their various attitudes to Captain Unett’s criticism. Some were confident enough to dismiss it almost out-of-hand with replies of just three or four lines, while others justified their lapse of duty with pages of graphic detail.

On the subject of points and constables in mind this time, it is interesting to note that regulations ordered that “every omission to attend a point must be immediately reported. In towns this must be done by the constable before going off duty, whilst the constable on detachment must report such omission by first post...” No satellite communication then!

A handwritten review of Conference Points attended by superintendents in August and September 1915 was attached to the file. The author is unknown but is almost certainly Captain Unett or his clerk. The following comments are verbatim.

**Brentwood**

“August - No bone-fide C.P.s attended. On leave from 6th to 28th September. Four bone-fide C.P.s attended, all in the neighbourhood of Brentwood.”

From Superintendent A.C. Cowell of Brentwood 28th October 1915:

“Sir, I beg to report that the four points I attended I had to use my own cycle as I am without a horse. I am performing 14 to 18 hours duty daily and it is a rear (sic) occurrence if I am not called out at mealtimes.”

**Colchester**

“August - No night Conferences attended. September - On leave from 9th to 28th.”

From Superintendent J. Lennon Colchester 19th October 1915:

“Sir, I beg to point out that I have not been able to attend Conference Points for the reason stated in my journal. I have been doing my best to carry out the very many extra duties that have been put upon me since the war broke out, which has taken up almost all of my time day and night.”

**Epping**

“August - One C.P. attended. On leave from 11th to 31st - September Three C.P.s attended 1 of 3 miles and 2 of 5 miles.”

From Superintendent E. Smith Epping 29th October 1915:

“Sir, I have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of 28th inst., and to report that on the night of 7th Sept. I attended a night conference point, and intended to attend a morning conference, but while at the 12pm C.P. a Zeppelin passed over us going in the direction of Waltham Abbey and London, hearing the bombs exploding in the direction of Waltham.

I returned home at once and remained on duty in the town until information was received that the Hostile aircraft had gone back, which is the reason I omitted to attend the 1st morning C.P. in the month. The other morning C.P.s were one in each Sub Division.”

**Grays**

“August - Four C.P.’s attended. Out on two occasions only. September - No C.P.’s attended. On leave from 12th to 30th.”

From Superintendent G.W. Page Grays 29th October 1915;

“Superintendents Journal.”

“To the Chief Constable, in reference to the above, during the month of August I was very unwell and at times I hardly knew how to keep about and was hoping by not having long rides at night I might get well, but could not do so until I had my leave of absence and a thorough rest.”

**Hinkford**

“August - Five C.P.s attended. Out on one occasion only. September - Five C.P.s attended. Out on Two occasions only. From Superintendent William Cowell Braintree 30th September 1915.”

“Sir, Re: Conference Points. In reply to your memo of 27th inst re above, I beg to report that owing to my duties being so heavy I was quite unable to do more night duty than I have shown.

My division is a very hard one to work, even in normal times, owing to its very large area and to the fact that it all has to be covered by road. I am unable to do even a mile of my journeys by rail. Consequently the whole of my travelling has to be performed by driving or by riding my own cycle.

In August last I find I travelled during the daytime 503 miles on duty in my own Division, about 140 miles of this was done on my own cycle for which I receive no allowance. This left a pretty heavy months work for the horse. This travelling

![Image of the Chief Constable's 'Belsize' being delivered to Superintendent FULCHER (seated in the back).]
was all absolutely necessary owing to various special inquiries, and also to the fact that the Hedingham Inspector was away 16 days on Annual Leave and that I had only an acting Sergt. in charge there."

The four Conference Points I attended in August (two before and two after midnight) were all done on my cycle owing to the horse being tired. The foregoing remarks apply generally to my day duty. In September I find I travelled with horse and my own cycle about 400 miles. I had various special inquiries and my Inspector at Halstead was away 16 days on annual Leave. I was out three nights on Conference duty, 4th two morning C.P.s, 12th one night C.P. (11pm Hunters Farm) and I was kept out till 3am (on 13th) owing to "Zeppelin" scare, 28th one morning C.P.

In addition to outside duties, there are my office duties which cannot be called light. In fact I am generally on the go either in the office or out in the division from 8am till 11pm. I therefore respectfully ask you to consider this explanation as fully satisfactory."

Rochford

"August - No C.P.s attended. September - No C.P.s attended. Note - unable to attend any other points in consequence of being busily employed, clerical work, air raids etc." No reply recorded.

Romford

"August - No C.P.s attended. On leave from 6th to 30th. September - No C.P.s attended." No reply recorded.

Thorpe

"August - No C.P.s attended. September - No C.P.s attended." No reply recorded.

Walden

"August - Two C.P.s attended. September - No C.P.s attended." On leave from 2nd to 22nd.

From Supt. J. Bisco Saffron Walden 29th October 1915:

"To the Chief Constable of Essex. Re: Conference Points Superintendent Bisco respectfully reports with reference to C.P.s that owing to pressure of work caused by the War, and having during the last 12 months had the area of responsibility doubled, and having to attend Petty Sessions at long distances, and the supervision of the Division generally during the day, I find it impossible to attend C.P.s the same as when the Division was only half the size in peace time.

In August last I had the bulk of the clerical work to do myself. Inspector Brown, who used to assist me, having removed to Ongar and P.S. 29 Newport having had little experience of office work. I always attend C.P.s as often as I can get to them."

Witham

"August - Two C.P.s attended. 1/2 miles 1/3 miles. September - No C.P.s attended. On leave from 8th to 30th." From Superintendent Henry Coppin Witham 30th October 1915;

Sir, Superintendent's Journals, Witham. Respecting your memorandum of 27th inst. that only two Conference Points were attended after midnight for the month of August and these were in the neighbourhood of Witham.

In these abnormal times, hostile Aircraft may at any time during the night drop bombs on this Division and the police would be expected to act immediately, as it frequently occurs that I have only one paid Special Constable on night duty I am afraid that in the event of anything serious happening and I am miles away from the station the consequences would be serious as regard to immediate action by the Police.

In attending Conference Points at a reasonable distance from home it would necessitate me being absent from the station at least three hours, the orders issued for our instruction and immediate action appear to me as being most important that everything possible should be done at the earliest possible moment, and in consequence I have remained within easy distance of a telephone call so that I could take immediate steps to carry out the duties and instructions issued in General Orders on the subject.

Although not from the Police Station any great distance, I respectfully point out for your information that I am not in bed once a month until between the hours of 1am and 2am. If it is your wish that I should attend Conference Points as in normal times I shall be pleased to obey."

It took Captain Unett only a week to let his feelings on the subject be known. He penned the following reply;

CONFIDENTIAL
7th November 1915
To all Superintendents

I quite appreciate what has been said by the various Superintendents with reference to their shortage of attendance at night conference points, nor am I unaware of the fact that the amount of work of every description which they are now called upon to perform is greatly in excess of what is the case in normal times.

From what I have seen and learnt in going round the County I also appreciate the fact that many hours of work have been ungrudgingly given by Superintendents (especially) and others in consequence of war conditions. I feel I cannot however let omissions of this nature now under observation pass unnoticed because juniors are liable to take their cue from seniors and a general falling off in the performance of regular duties may consequently occur.

To Braintree for its twelve month divisional trial by
This car was subsequently sold in 1923 for £100.
Under no circumstance can I exempt particular Superintendents from visiting conference points but I leave it to Superintendents to do all in their power and within reasonable bounds, to set an example in their divisions to juniors, and see that a strict standard of attention to duty is maintained. I am of the opinion that two night patrols per month after midnight at some distance from divisional Headquarters should be performed, that 2 or 3 conference points should be visited on each occasion, and that such attendance should be in the nature of surprise visits.

J. A. Unett Capt.,
Chief Constable

Despite his uncompromising stand, his thoughts began to dwell on the feasibility of modernising his superintendents’ means of transport.

Although horses were still a perfectly common sight, the arrival of the motor car only a few years before had revolutionised road transport both at home and on the battlefields of Europe. It was obvious from what they said that his superintendents were now working enormously long hours and, if he insisted that they also attend Conference Points with their constables, then they should not have to spend hours walking, cycling or catching trains to do so. Some divisions, notably Brentwood, covered huge areas of the county and he resolved to help them get about their divisions in the quickest way possible.

Unett was already enjoying the benefits of his predecessor’s foresight when, as far back as 1909, Captain Showers had obtained permission to hire a car for £100 a year, "to save a great waste of time in travelling by train...." Since then it had been replaced no fewer than four times until in 1915 the county had actually purchased a car for him - a 12 h.p. Belsize Tourer, with Constable Mattheams as his chauffeur.

The new Chief Constable set about persuading the Police Authority to approve the transfer of the Belsize to Braintree where Superintendent Lindsey Fulcher could spend a year assessing its capabilities for divisional work, with a long term view of equipping each division with a similar model. It is perhaps not surprising that a glowing report was produced, which effectively spelt an end to the use of horses within the force.

By the end of 1919 four Ford cars, costing £300 each, were ordered for delivery to divisions. There was however a 12 month delay before delivery, brought about by the effects of the war. But from receipts still on file it is apparent that, in the meantime, superintendents were allowed to hire motor vehicles and submit accounts to Headquarters for payment.

What is still unclear is why, when they professed to be so overworked, did so many take long periods of annual leave that summer, and at the same time as each other? Could it be that they were unsure what the views of the new Chief Constable would be about them taking time off at such a dramatic time in the nation’s history?