In 1840 Essex was one of the first counties to establish a police force under the provisions of the Rural Constabulary Acts, with Captain John Bunch Bonnemaison McHardy as its first Chief Constable. From the outset McHardy had to contend with widespread distrust, but gradually he won the support of the magistracy and the local communities. In many respects his contribution to the establishment of county police forces throughout the country was comparable to that of Rowan and Mayne in the establishment and development of the Metropolitan Police.

Resistance to the establishment of police forces in the country was founded on a number of deep rooted fears: the traditional fear of a standing army; of the political uses which might be made of such a force; of the effects of police intrusion upon daily neighbourhood life; and the fear they would be used to enforce the new Poor Law. Middle class people often objected out of rate consciousness, whilst those living in rural areas could see a need for policing in cities, but felt the expense of keeping them in the countryside far outweighed their potential usefulness. The cost of the Essex Constabulary in 1840 amounted to £9,330.

The first recruits to the Essex Constabulary in February 1840 had to meet certain standards: Under 40 years of age, to stand 5'7" without shoes, to read and write and to keep accounts, to be free from bodily complaint, of strong constitution and generally intelligent.

The applicant was also required to provide a certificate of character from one or more respectable persons who had personal knowledge of him during the last 5 years that he was "sober, honest and of good temper, that his connexions and associates were respectable." If he was passed ‘fit for police duties’ by the police surgeon, the applicant was then sworn in as a constable before the magistrates at Shire Hall in Chelmsford.

Initially 100 Constables and 15 Superintendents were appointed, the former receiving a salary of 19 shillings (95p) per week; Superintendents £80 per year, whilst McHardy as Chief Constable warranted a salary of £400. It was not until the October of 1840 that the rank of Inspector was introduced and there was a further wait of 15 years before Sergeants were to appear.

On the basis of local knowledge, the county was split up into 15 divisions based on the old Hundreds system, detachments, and sub-divided further into guards. Thus Superintendent John McInnes, a former
First Uniform worn by Members of Essex Constabulary

sergeant in the 2nd Battalion Scots Fusiliers found himself in charge of the Ongar Division. His command consisted of 3 constables at Ongar with a further 2 at Blackmore. They were responsible for carrying out a regular system of patrols on foot.

Constables were provided with a basic uniform, which included a blue dress coat with embroidered collar, dress trousers, 'undress' trousers, waterproofed greatcoat, cape, pair of boots, pair of shoes and a black stove pipe hat. It was not until the 1870's that the familiar helmet was adopted. Anyone who resigned had to pay 5 shillings (25p) to have the uniform altered for the next recruit. In addition the constable was issued with a rattlet, truncheon and a pair of handcuffs. Constables were also required to supply themselves with 2 pairs of white drill trousers which were to be worn ‘...whenever the Superintendent may direct, between 1 May and 1 October.’

The style of uniform changed over the century, the dress coat being replaced by the frock coat, as seen in the photograph of Walter Newell [1871] and then by the more familiar uniform worn by Charles Wood [1891].

The force purchased a number of cutlasses for use by constables, but only if two magistrates certified that it was necessary for the officer's personal protection in the performance of his duty. The cutlass however could only be worn at night time, or when rioting or serious public disorder was taking place. In 1885 following the murder of Inspector Simmons, the force supplied firearms to allow constables on beats adjoining the Metropolitan Police area to carry loaded firearms on night duty, if they so requested, so great was the felt danger from armed and dangerous criminals in these areas.

From the outset stress was laid upon securing the goodwill and co-operation of those living in areas where the police had to operate. An early instruction stated ‘Constables are always to take the outside of the footpath, and when walking along the streets should not shoulder past respectable people but give way in a mild manner, for the more respectful and civil the Constabulary are, the more they will be supported and respected by the public.’

The Constable worked long hours often under difficult conditions. The average working day was between ten and twelve hours, split into two shifts. A day shift of three or four hours was followed by a night shift between 10pm and dawn. This was performed seven days a week a rest day not being granted until 1914. Even then a constable was still not allowed to leave his station without permission. By 1918 officers could go out on a rest day if not required to work but only if 2 days' notice of their whereabouts and the address, if staying away, had been given to their superintendent. A week's annual leave each year was granted – unpaid of course.
All patrols were on foot and it was not uncommon for a constable on a rural beat to walk over 20 miles each day.

Horse patrols were avoided where possible, except for supervisory purposes, since McHardy considered them 'most inefficient in the detection of crimes; the very noise of a horse's feet upon the road will disturb a depredator, and he will conceal himself, it is a beacon for him to avoid.' A horse and cart was however provided in every division for the conveyance of prisoners and the use of constables who were being posted.

Attendance at Divine Worship was also encouraged by McHardy “duties would be so arranged as to allow the attendance of the Constabulary at Divine Service, and Constables are expected to show an example of due respect for the observance of the Sabbath day.” Officers in the Rodings, near Dunmow were instructed by the justices to prevent horses and wagons, cattle drovers and coal sellers from working on Sundays.

There were no refreshment breaks and it was left to the ingenuity of the constable to obtain refreshment where he could – often in a beer or public house. This led to high incidents of drunkenness amongst police officers, resulting in many dismissals from the force. By the end of 1840 some 40 men had been dismissed from the force, many for drunkenness.

If the constable hadn't enough to do he was given a variety of other tasks to keep him occupied. Inspectors of Weights and Measures, Inspectors of Nuisances, Inspectors of Common Lodging Houses, Assistants to H.M. Revenue Officers, Relieving Officers for Casualls under the Poor Law, Inspectors under the Explosives Acts and many others.

A Constable who wished to get married had to request permission from the Chief Constable and the character of his future wife was examined to see if she was of a good character.

A superannuation scheme was introduced from the outset, but a pension was not granted as an automatic right; only men recommended by the chief constable and approved by the justices received one. After 15-20 years' service an officer was entitled to a half-pay pension; a two thirds pension being received after 20 or more years' service. The superannuation fund was to be established from deductions from wages, selling off cast clothing and fines imposed for disciplinary offences.

McHardy was totally dedicated to the formation of an efficient and disciplined force and as a result a strict discipline code was maintained.
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with many constables falling foul of even the slightest misdemeanour.

In 1871 the Merit Star was instituted and awarded to Constables and Sergeants for 'highly distinguished and discreet conduct in the discharge of duty, particularly when accompanied by a risk to life.' The award was to be limited to only 10 sergeants and 20 constables at any one time. Those receiving it were allowed to wear the badge on their uniforms and received an extra shilling a week (sergeants two shillings). However, badge and pay increase were subject to forfeiture for misconduct.

Gradually over the course of the century conditions improved and there was a gradual if not reluctant acceptance to the idea of a professional police force in this country.

Acting Sergeant Charles Wood (circa 1891)

a The story of McHardy can be found in History Notebook No 12
b Radzinowicz – “Towards a National Standard of Police” [1968]
d The budget for Essex Police in 2000/2001 is £174 million.
e Scollan – “Sworn to Serve – Police in Essex” [1993]
f Whistles were introduced in 1889.