The History of the Essex Police Dog Unit

"Because of his peculiar sense of loyalty and acute sense of smell, the dog has for many centuries been used by man to guard his home and property. In war and peace his use has been amply justified. Many continental countries have a large and extensive use for police dogs and very advanced training establishments".

This extract was taken from 'Handling Police Dogs' by Godfrey Kent. Essex Police Magazine Summer 1954.

There is a sharp contrast between the original Essex Police Dog Unit, formed in 1953, and that of today. Originally there were only two dogs, a Doberman, called Remoh, and Senta, a German Shepherd, plus the two officers, Pc Pete Cousins and Pc Dan Hare.

In 1954, the two officers were sent to train as handlers at the Mount Browne Dog Training Centre, Guildford, Surrey. At the time the Dog Unit was based at police headquarters in Chelmsford and the small team of two dogs and two officers shared one dog van. It was only a year later that they made their first arrest. In June 1955, Pete and Remoh attended a burglary at the Cherry Tree Public House, Mersea Road, Colchester. The dog and handler tracked across a field to a local army camp where they arrested a serving soldier. This was the first, many more followed.

Both dogs were entered for the competitive trials organised by the Associated Sheep, Police and Army Dog Society. Out of 23 entries Senta came second and was the only dog to receive maximum marks for tracking and seek back, with Remoh coming seventh.

In 1956, three years after the first two dogs had been trained, the dog unit was increased to ten dogs and handlers. This proved the effectiveness of these wonderful animals and the skills they could bring to the organisation.

In 1968 the unit was split up to cover stations at Brentwood, Harlow, Colchester and Thorpe, this reorganisation gave better coverage of dogs across the county. A year later in 1969 when the Essex Constabulary amalgamated with the Southend Borough, one sergeant and a further eight constables joined the dog unit. Pc 213 Mashen was the first Southend Borough
The first new recruits
Remoh the
Doberman and
Senta the German
Shepherd

talents, except at their own
Open Day or in competition.

Since January 1988 the
majority of training has been
carried out at the Regional
Police Dog Training School in
Guildford, where the original
two police dogs were trained.
All the dogs receive refresher
training and this is
undertaken at the Essex
Police Dog Unit Headquarters
at Sandon.

The Unit continues to move
with the times and, in 1999
two handlers were the first to

handler to join the unit, he had previously
served with both the Essex Constabulary
and the Metropolitan Police Service. Still
they only had one mini van between
them, with the majority of patrols being
carried out on foot. All of the dogs were
kennelled at home with their handlers.

All the handlers demonstrated a high
degree of professionalism, and several of
them attended the National Police Dog
Trials.

In 1970 the expanding unit was desperate
for more room. A purpose built office
block with kennels was provided just
outside Chelmsford, at Sandon. The unit is
still based there today.

For many years the Essex Police Dog Unit
gave a display of their work at the
Colchester Tattoo, which was one of the
largest military displays in the country.
Most of these displays were carried out
under searchlight, and the dogs and
handlers loved showing what they could
do. The last display given was the 150th
anniversary of Essex Police in 1990. Today
the Essex Police dogs rarely show off their

Remoh with P.C. Pete Cousins
complete a firearms course allowing them to carry weapons, while attending firearms incidents with their dogs.

THE DOGS

Some dogs are purchased, although most are received as gifts from the public. They are accepted for training at about a year old, but are never accepted if they are over aggressive, timid or nervous. The dog should be about 23" tall at the shoulder, quite bold, but friendly, with even temperament. If a dog is accepted it will attend an 8 week training course, where it will be taught obedience, agility, retrieval techniques and how to search buildings. Dogs are also trained to track, chase and detain a fleeing criminal, by circling the person, and to keep barking even if the person is armed with a stick or gun and quite determined to get away. Police dogs can track a person up to three or four hours after the ground was disturbed. On completion of the course the dog is licensed to work, for 12 months, this is reviewed annually. For general police work the German Shepherd is the most popular dog, this is mainly due to availability, temperament and its trainability. Other breeds have been used in the past including: Riesenschnauzer, Bouviers and Rottweiler.

The trained dogs live with their handlers and go to Sandon Kennels if their handler is on holiday or sick. The dogs usually retire from work between seven and eight years old, although some dogs have still been fit and active at ten or eleven.

In 1998 Pc Malcolm Fish received a Home Office grant to trial the use of bloodhounds in the service. These dogs are bred to track people but have not been used by any police force in the United Kingdom for 60 years. To bloodhounds, human scent is as individual as DNA and their sense of smell is so good, they can follow a trail even when the target is not touching the ground. Pc Fish was researching the possibility of training a dog to follow a specific scent, even in very busy areas. Human scent lasts many days so it is possible for the bloodhounds to track 24 hour old trails, in urban areas, and trails over one week old in vegetation. The two Essex Police bloodhounds arrived as 14 week old puppies and were named Sherlock and Morse. Pc Fish was responsible for their training with their handlers Pc Chris Houlding, based at Sandon, and Pc Terry Smith, based in Harlow.
Today the dog unit has 42 German Shepherd dogs, eight of which are trained as tactical firearm dogs, five explosive search dogs, 10 drug/weapon recovery dogs, two bloodhounds and 2 specialist tracking German Shepherds. To move the dogs and handlers around, the unit currently has; 21 Ford Mondeo estate cars, one Vauxhall Astravan and a six cage Ford/Iveco truck used for training.

The current sections within the dog unit are based at; Sandon, Harlow, Colchester, Thorpe, Laindon, Rochford and South Ockendon. The most recent addition to the unit was in 1996 when the dog section at Bocking, near Braintree was created. This spread gives excellent coverage across the county.

The dog section attends up to 15,000 incidents a year often looking for missing people and items of property. The handlers arrest up to 1,000 prisoners and assist in arresting many more. Drug dogs attend incidents every day and have recovered millions of pounds worth of drugs over the years.

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The Essex Police Museum is open to the public. To organise a visit contact the curator on 01245 491491 ext. 50771.