Marine Policing in Essex
Part 1
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Essex has always had a long association with the sea. The Romans established the fort of Othona at Bradwell on Sea; ports were established at Maldon, and Colchester and ship and boat building formed an important part of the local economy. Harwich was an important naval base during both World Wars; and many small boats sailed from the Essex coast to the beaches at Dunkirk. Today tourism and leisure pursuits have gained in popularity. Policing as a result has an important part to play on our rivers and coastline.

In 1798 the Thames River Police was brought into existence by the efforts of two Magistrates, Captain John Harriott from Stambridge in Essex and Patrick Colquhoun with the support and financial backing of the West India Company who wished to protect their cargoes of merchandise from the numerous bands of thieves who operated on the River Thames. The force consisted of a Chief Constable and fifty petty constables with Harriott as the resident magistrate and Colquhoun as the superintending magistrate. Harriott however was not content to sit in his office and he patrolled the river in a cutter in fair weather and foul, by day and night, until he became the terror of the river gangs. He continued his activities until his death in 1816 but he had established the Thames River Police as the oldest professional body of law enforcement officers in the country. They were incorporated into the Metropolitan Police in 1839.

Policing the Oyster Industry
The Oyster industry was important to Essex and at one time (1844) the Colne Fishery Company employed no less than five hundred smacks and two thousand men, whilst as many worked in the Blackwater.
for the Tollesbury and Mersea Company. Some 144 million oysters a year were being sold in the streets of London alone.

In 1891 the Colne River Police were formed as part of the Colchester Borough Police to protect the lucrative oyster fisheries on the River Colne. The force consisted of a sergeant, Thomas Poole and three constables, C.G. Simmons, C.F. Absalom and E.J. French. The cost being shared between the oyster industry (three-quarters) and the Borough rates (one-quarter). Poole was promoted Inspector in 1898 and remained in charge of the force until his retirement.

The force had a number of boats at their disposal including the “Alert” and “Brisk” which were built locally at Rowhedge and a steam launch, “Viking” which was replaced in 1902 by another, but much grander steam launch, “Edward VIII”. Other boats included the “Raven” built in 1892, “Victoria” commissioned in 1897, and “Prince of Wales”.

In 1899 Constable French was promoted to the rank of Acting Sergeant and at this time he commenced writing a diary until his retirement in 1919. The original diary is in the possession of his family, whilst a copy can be seen in the Essex Police Museum. The diary provides a fascinating insight into the day to day work of the Colne River Police during this period. Space does not permit more than a glance at some of the entries contained within it.

February 12th: ‘When relieving at 9pm in company with Pc Beales, Pc Simmons was very abusive to me on account of my promotion.’

May 24th: ‘A lad of East Mersea name Mole paid off for not attending to his work when painting the Police Launch.’

August 2nd: As Pc Wright was missing and his clothing found in a row boat... we grappled round her during the day. At 7.30pm in company with Pc Brand, Rumsey Driscoll we recovered the body of Wright and conveyed the same to the Hospital Ship and reported the same.’

August 3rd: ‘Attended Inquest which was held on the Hospital Ship to give evidence of recovering body of Pc Wright. The Jury returned a verdict of Accidental death.’

1901

February 2nd: ‘Attended divine service at old church. Paraded from Forsters hall, Brightlingsea, in company 7 Constables, Insp Poole Coast Guards, Navy Reserves, Customs Officers, Clergymen, and Urban Council, Freemasons, and many others of the town, Shops and Public Houses were closed. This being done when H.M. the Queen was buried.’

November 20th: ‘Cautioned Pc Dye about smoking a large wood-pipe whilst rowing on the river, passing yachts etc.’

1903:

January 30th: ‘Visited by Mr Midgely C.C. and was promoted to the rank of Sergeant at £1.14s.5d per week.

August 9th: ‘At 1.45am whilst cruising on the Colne in company with Pc Reynolds we were called to the Yacht “Lorena”. When Capt Jones meet us at the gangway & reported eight of his men & a ferryman
drowned whilst attempting to row on board last night....

1905:
March 25th: 'Reported to Inspector Poole that a submarine that had been built at Wyvenhoe may escape from the River Colne. Coast Guards are under orders to keep a strict watch for her.'

1911:
October 22nd: 'Pc Brand and Fisher arrested Fred Coppen for stealing punt's sail, oars, rowlocks, map cover. I ordered Mr Norfolk to drive prisoner to Colchester the charge for hire was 12/-'

[Note: spelling/punctuation as written in the diary]

The Colne River Police were to exist until 1947 when Colchester Borough was forced to amalgamate with the Essex County Constabulary.

The Burnham Oyster Company employed Inspector Andrew Rome, who had joined the Essex Constabulary in 1840 (promoted Inspector in 1842) and who was to serve for 57 years before retiring on pension in 1897. He lived at Burnham and in the 1851 census was shown as being the Master of an 8 ton boat, "The Spy". Rome died at the age of 85 in 1905 and his obituary was reported in the Burnham on Crouch and Dengie Hundred Advertiser, Rome being described as 'one of the best known inhabitants of the Dengie Hundred and deservedly the most highly respected.'

The Tollesbury and Mersea Oyster Company employed three officers, Sergeant William Fletcher, Constables 188 Alfred Slack and 189 Thomas Poole, who were paid for as 'additional constables' to police the oyster beds owned by the company.

In 1914 The Port of London Authority suggested that Kent, Essex and the Metropolitan Police should link up to police the lower reaches of the Thames from Dagenham to the sea which at that time were unsupervised. However Essex resolved that in the absence of statutory authority the matter should be allowed to rest, and it was not until 1948 that the Chief Constable, Captain Peel decided to consider the use of a launch on the River Thames.

In January 1949 a conference was held and it was recommended that a police patrol
be established. In May of that year it was agreed to purchase an ex-RAF sea-plane tender, "Karroo" from Cowes in the Isle of Wight. This vessel was a flat-bottomed craft, with a length of forty feet, a beam of nine feet and drawing only two and a half feet. Powered by twin 100hp Perkins diesel engines, the boat was capable of a top speed of 20 knots. She was fitted out at the Metropolitan Police river station at Wapping and handed over to Essex in the July.

In September 1949 she commenced her first duties as the "Vigilant", the first of a number of vessels to bear that name. Her first coxswain was Sergeant Sidney Cranfield, ex-Merchant Navy, who had served as a constable with Colchester Borough River Police and the crew consisted of Constables Bruce Howard, Evelyn Cant, William Lemon and Phil China. In 1950 the Vigilant assisted at the scene of the disaster to the submarine HMS Truculent, which sank in the Thames Estuary with the loss of 64 lives.

As a result of experience gained it was found that the Vigilant was not entirely suitable for operations in the wider reaches of the river where she became unmanageable in heavy weather and in 1959 it was decided to replace her. The Vigilant II was designed and built specially for our purpose, the first time in this country that a boat had been designed for Police duty. Built by James Taylor of Shoreham, Sussex, she was 42' in length, constructed of mahogany and teak and powered initially by twin Perkins engines she had a top speed of 17 knots. She cost £9000 and was officially launched on the 5th August 1959. The coxswain was Constable (later Sergeant) Howard, with Constables George Thurkle, Arthur Wilman and Robert George as crew.

Based at Tilbury the Vigilant II was to take part in many rescue operations in the River Thames and remained in service until 1978.

In 1966 it was agreed in the interests of safety and to prevent a rise in crime in coastal waters to purchase a second patrol boat and a naval architect was engaged to draw up specifications. As a result in June 1967 the Police Authority agreed to purchase a twenty-one and half-foot Tod Tuna motor launch to patrol the River Blackwater. She was named Alert after the boat used by the Colne River Police in 1891.

In part two of this history we will continue to look at the development of marine policing from 1966 to the present day, including the Southend Sea Rescue Patrol, established by Southend Borough Police in 1956.

References:
1. "Marine Section of Essex and Southend on Sea Constabulary", by C.H. Waller, A.C.C. Essex.
2. "Diary of Sergeant French."
3. "Once Upon a Tide" by Harvey Bentham.
5. "Sworn to Serve" by Maureen Scollan.