ESSEX POLICE

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THE MAKING OF A CHIEF CONSTABLE

by Maureen Scollan, M.A.

The schooner HMS Pickle, commanded by Lieutenant John McHardy from 1st January 1828. Pickle had already played a small but memorable part in naval history when she brought back to England the dispatch describing Nelson’s death, and the victory at Cape Trafalgar on 21st October 1805.

[Photograph reprinted with permission from the National Maritime Museum, London]
A Chief Constable appointed today will assume responsibility for a large number of experienced police officers and support staff who will - by and large - know exactly what is expected of them by the public they serve and the government of the day. Present-day staff of the Essex Police follow legal and administrative procedures which do not need the close personal supervision of the Chief Constable, although he maintains an overall responsibility in law for the ways that such procedures operate. Delegation was less clearly defined in the simpler pattern of life followed in the early 19th century, and the first Chief Constable of Essex set the framework and standards for policing Essex: his influence also extended to forces in other parts of Britain through the county force to be formed, but was certainly one of the earliest, following Worcestershire, Wiltshire, Gloucester and Durham.

Essex Justices of the Peace who met at the Shire Hall in Chelmsford on 25th November 1839, had already decided that the county would benefit from having a full-time, paid police force, and when the Home Secretary's approval was received they advertised for a chief constable. Thirty-one applicants applied for consideration, and of the 19 who were short-listed for interview, many were military men or naval officers. Applicants had to be under 45, free of debts, and certified by a doctor to be in good health; their appointment was subject to the approval of the Home Secretary.

![John McHardy as a young lieutenant (left), and wearing the uniform of an admiral. McHardy became Chief Constable of Essex while a half-pay Naval captain, and therefore continued to be eligible for Naval promotions which were made according to seniority within rank. By the time he retired as Chief Constable in 1881, McHardy had passed through three stages of promotion within the rank of rear admiral, and three stages within the rank of vice admiral.](photograph.png)

The first Chief Constable of Essex was Captain John Bunch Bonnemaison McHardy, who was appointed by the Justices on 11th February 1840. Although only 36 years old, John McHardy already had a long career in the Royal Navy and the Coastguard behind him; his working life had begun at the age of 11, when he joined the Royal Navy from his home in the British-owned Bahamas. McHardy was the son of a Scottish migrant who left his home country to settle in New Providence, capital of the island of Nassau. John McHardy’s mother died when he was very young, and he went to live with his mother’s sister and her men he trained, and the advice he gave to various government committees of enquiry into the police.

The 1839 County Police Act gave shire counties like Essex the opportunity to set up their own full-time police forces if they chose to do so. As it was a relatively new concept to set up a police force which was intended to prevent crime, rather than reacting to what had already occurred, the men appointed as the first Chief Constables generally had very little direct policing experience to call upon; they therefore used their knowledge of other ways of life, and adapted them to a policing context. Essex was not the first
wealthy husband, who was Chief Justice of the Bahamas. It seems likely that the uncle and aunt were already acquainted with a Royal Naval captain named John Pasco, for when the future Chief Constable decided to join the Navy, he was taken on as a boy third class on Captain Pasco’s ship the Tartarus. The Admiralty had no part in the recruitment of volunteers like McHardy; they were taken on by an individual Naval captain who then had complete responsibility for every aspect of their working lives.

Captain John Pasco was already something of a Naval celebrity; he had been signal lieutenant to Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, and responsible for sending the famous signal which began ‘England expects that every man would do his duty’. It is a well-documented fact that Nelson’s original choice of words for the now famous signal had been ‘England confides... that every man would do his duty’. Pasco had suggested the alteration, because he knew that confides was not in the naval signal vocabulary.

Captain (later Admiral) Pasco shaped John McHardy’s early Naval career, and the future Chief Constable remained under his command until August 1815. Their relationship continued for much longer, however, for in December 1830 McHardy married one of Pasco’s daughters, Horatia Elizabeth Atchison Pasco, then aged 22.

In order to progress through naval ranks up to lieutenant, an applicant had to produce certificates showing that he had been on ships’ books for at least six years, and had spent at least two years as a midshipman. Midshipmen without ability or patronage could sometimes remain as ‘middies’ until they were well into their thirties. McHardy served as a midshipman on seven different ships and acquired a wide variety of practical nautical experience, before being promoted to lieutenant on 19th August 1824, when he was 23 years old. Influence and patronage were important elements in the early Navy, and Nelson himself is said to have owed his rapid promotions to a well-placed uncle. It is impossible to say that no one helped McHardy in his Naval career, but he does seem to have achieved a certain number of promotions through his own efforts, a fact of which he was very proud and to which he made reference on several occasions while Chief Constable of Essex.

Cloew’s printed History of the British Navy refers to McHardy as being ‘the terror equally of pirates and of slavers in the West Indies’. While acting as lieutenant on the Icarus prior to his promotion, the future chief constable was involved in the capture off Havana of the pirate schooner Diaballo. On 1st January 1828 McHardy was given command of his own ship, the schooner HMS Pickle, which was manned by 30 men and six boys. On 6th June 1829 the Pickle captured a famous slave ship called Boladara, which had 60 men and armed Negroes on board. After a severe action lasting more than an hour, and the loss of 11 of her own sailors, Pickle succeeded in capturing the Boladara. For the success of his men in that action, McHardy received a special promotion to commander in December 1830.

Having been married only two weeks before his promotion, McHardy might have welcomed the chance to live at home; and as a run-down in the number of sea-going ships coincided with his marriage, he began a new career in March 1831. As an inspecting commander of the Burnham (Norfolk) district of the Coastguard, many of his new duties were concerned with the control of smuggling; co-operation with other law enforcement agencies such as police was also encouraged. Captain Bowles, first Comptroller-General of the Coastguard, set high standards and issued frequent instructional memoranda to his officers; it has now been established that McHardy adapted many of the Coastguard rules, instructions and methods of working, when he became Chief Constable of Essex. He also supported the Home Secretary’s belief that police in maritime counties such as Essex should co-operate with the Coastguard, and one of the earliest places outside Chelmsford to be policed by county constables was the remote Foulness Island - then well-known as a smugglers’ paradise.

As an inspecting commander McHardy had been used to commanding men engaged upon revenue duty, but ‘occasionally assembled in armed bodies for the protection of the Public Peace, and in co-operation with the Civil Power’. His personal and professional qualifications for the post of Chief Constable were therefore considered to be ‘so perfect that you may obtain your wish’. Having been appointed on 11th February 1840 he began work almost immediately by purchasing a copy of Standing Rules and Regulations for the Constabulary Force of Ireland, and acquiring copies of Coastguard forms which he then adapted for police use; one example of this was a Form 50 for travelling and subsistence expenses that was still being used in the Essex Constabulary in the early years of this century!

McHardy held his first batch of selection interviews on 26th February 1840 in order to appoint the first 15 superintendents, on whose ‘zeal and activity the efficiency of the service depends’. Two of the first superintendents to be appointed were Henry Riom and Charles Greaves, both applicants for the post of chief constable; it seems hardly surprising that neither stayed long in Essex, although Riom was dismissed for ‘misappropriating county funds’.

Under McHardy’s guidance the Essex County Constabulary became a ‘... sort of nursery for policemen’ as men were appointed and trained in Essex before being ‘head hunted’ by newer police forces in other parts of the country. The first Chief Constable’s household also became a nursery for policemen and naval officers, as between 1832 and 1856 John and Horatia McHardy produced at least 15 children; although six are known to have died in infancy or youth, five sons and two daughters survived their parents. While Malvina (born 1834) continued the Naval tradition by marrying a Naval doctor named Francis Blaxall, many of her brothers received their schooling at the Royal Naval School at...
New Cross in south London. Several of the sons followed their father into the Royal Navy, but some took up alternative careers: Malcolm McHardy (born 1852) eventually became Professor of Ophthalmology at King's College, London, while his elder brother Coghlan McHardy (born 1838) was Director of Royal Naval Stores at the time their father died.

Two of John McHardy’s sons followed both aspects of their father’s career by serving first in the Royal Navy and then becoming chief constables of Scottish police forces. Hardy McHardy was promoted to Naval commander in 1870, and six years later became Chief Constable of Ayr amid a good deal of criticism about ‘undue influence’ being exerted on his behalf. His brother Wallace was promoted to commander in 1872, and in March 1874 became superintendent and deputy chief constable in Essex. Less than two years later - and amid criticism about ‘influence’ - Wallace McHardy became Chief Constable of Lanarkshire.

Contemporary newspaper comment suggests that he was not popular, and suffered from stress during much of the 20 years that he held the post. In January 1896 things grew too much for him, and he committed suicide by jumping from a steamer as it was leaving the harbour in Glasgow. A five pound dumb bell was found in each of his pockets, and the Glasgow Evening News remarked that ‘as a naval officer he was presumably able to swim, but made no effort to save himself’.

The influence of the McHardy family on the history of policing has been considerable, and for more than 70 years there was always a McHardy chief constable somewhere in Britain. It is thanks to John McHardy, the first Chief Constable of Essex, that the county’s police has ‘habitually been regarded as a pattern for others ...’ It is a tradition which continues.

The Chief Constable aged 76, in 1877. He was to remain in post for another four years, before dying in 1882. He is buried in the family tomb in Holy Trinity Church, Springfield.

MAIN SOURCES
Newspapers at the British Newspaper Library, Colindale; Quarter Sessions documents in the Essex Record Office and Naval records at the Public Record Office. Sworn to Serve: Police in Essex 1840-1990 (Phillimore 1993). Thanks are due to the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich for permission to reproduce two photographs.