Chief Constables of Essex

by Maureen Scollan, MA., PhD

The chief constable is an important official in a county force like Essex Police. Obviously the role itself has changed as society has developed, and organisations such as the police have become more accountable. This history notebook will briefly examine the ways that chief constables in Essex were appointed and supervised, and then include mini-biographies of those officers who held the role between 1840 (when the Essex Police was established) to the present day.

Several different types of local policing schemes under various Acts of Parliament existed before the 19th century. The man in charge of a group of constables in a parish or manor might be described as the 'chief' or 'high' constable - sometimes in the same document! Few, if any, of their responsibilities would be recognised by a modern chief constable.

A law passed in 1836 was called the Municipal Corporations Act, and it gave towns with the status of a borough the opportunity to set up a watch committee of local residents, with constables and a 'chief constable' being appointed for the area. Several towns in Essex had the status of a borough (not directly comparable to the present-day use of the term). Four of those boroughs - Colchester, Maldon, Saffron Walden and Harwich - set up watch committees under the Act and appointed a handful of constables on a part-time basis who were only paid expenses. It was not compulsory to appoint such constables; so many communities continued their own arrangements under different Acts of Parliament. Harwich and Saffron Walden police were incorporated into Essex Constabulary in 1857; Maldon in 1889 and Colchester in 1947. British Airports Police at Stansted Airport became part of the county force in 1975. Other counties had similar amalgamations.

This history notebook will only refer to the chief constables of the Essex County Constabulary, which was founded in 1840. A compulsory amalgamation with Southend Borough Police in 1969 meant a cumbersome change of title to the 'Essex and Southend on Sea Joint Constabulary'. The name of 'Essex Police' was adopted in 1974.
Essex was one of the first county forces to be set up in 1840 before such bodies were compulsory throughout England and Wales; that only happened in 1857. Objectives for such police forces were less complicated than those today, and mainly included the prevention and detection of crime and the maintenance of public order. As there were not enough police officers to cover every part of Essex the older system of parish constables continued to run in parallel with the county force, before finally dying out just before the First World War.

An earlier history notebook (no. 12) looked in some detail at the setting up of the Essex force in February 1840, and the methods of the first chief constable who was a naval officer on half pay. Captain John Bunch Bonnemainson McHardy was Chief Constable of Essex for 41 years before retiring in October 1881; he died in December 1883 at the home of his married daughter and her husband in Bath, although he is buried in the grounds of Holy Trinity church in Springfield. A public house in Arbour Lane, Springfield, next to the original police headquarters, has just been renamed 'The Admiral McHardy' in his honour.

At the time of writing there have only been 12 chief constables of Essex Police, and their periods of service have grown progressively shorter since McHardy's 41 years. The introduction of fixed-term contracts for such chief officers means that nowadays most only serve for around five years. Several English forces now have women chief constables, but so far Essex has had three women who have held the rank of assistant chief constable.

In the 19th century chief constables were county officials who were responsible to a committee of magistrates, also known as Justices of the Peace. After county councils were established in 1889 a 'Standing Joint Committee' (SJC) of elected county councillors and JPs supervised the way the force was organised, although the chief constable retained operational control. A Police Act of 1964 renamed the SJC as the Police Authority, which was made up of two thirds elected councillors and one third JPs. In November 2012 all police authorities in England were abolished and replaced by an elected Police and Crime Commissioner in each force area. The Commissioner has wide powers which include setting the annual policing budget, and a five year police and crime plan based on local priorities. The Commissioner also appoints the chief constable and can (if necessary) dismiss him or her. It is a very new role which is still being developed.

**ABBREVIATIONS USED**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>assistant chief constable</td>
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<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>chief constable</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCC</td>
<td>deputy chief constable</td>
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<tr>
<td>SJC</td>
<td>standing joint committee</td>
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<td>JP</td>
<td>justice of the peace, otherwise known as magistrates</td>
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CHIEF CONSTABLES OF ESSEX

1. JOHN BUNCH BONNEMAISON McHARDY

2. WILLIAM HENRY POYNTZ

3. EDWARD McLEAN SHOWERS

4. JOHN ALFRED UNETT
   Born October 1868. Served in Third Hussars from 1889 until he was attached to City of London Police in 1905. Superintendent in Hertfordshire 1909-12; CC of Preston Borough Police 1912-15. CC of Essex 1915-December 1932 when he died in office.

5. FRANCIS JONATHAN PEEL

6. JOHN CYPRIAN NIGHTINGALE

7. ROBERT SIDNEY BUNYARD
8  JOHN HALCROW BURROW  

9  DAVID FREDERICK STEVENS  

10  ROGER BAKER  

11  JIM BARKER-McCARDLE  

12  STEPHEN KAVANAGH  
The present Chief Constable of Essex was appointed in May 2013, having been born in the county where his father was a serving officer. Mr Kavanagh joined the Metropolitan Police in 1985 and worked through the ranks becoming a Deputy Assistant Commissioner in November 2012.

FURTHER READING