omen officers are now seen as an integral part of every police force, but it was not always so. When the Essex Constabulary began in 1840 female prisoners were supervised by policemen’s wives, and later by police matrons. Right into the mid-20th century such arrangements were often considered perfectly adequate, but real police work was regarded as a job that only men could perform. This article will briefly trace some of the factors which eventually gave women their equal role and status within the Force.

In the years before the First World War there were a number of organisations in London which were agitating for women to be given the vote and a greater role in society. By early 1914 some of that pressure was focused on getting women involved in police work, and the case was strengthened by public concerns about immorality between soldiers and women after the War began. After the Metropolitan Police refused to employ female officers two of those organisations - the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW) and the Women Police Service (WPS) - set up their own independent patrol schemes which included both paid and trained women as well as volunteers, but neither had any legal powers. Members of the WPS were contracted to the Ministry of Munitions, to supervise the behaviour of the large numbers of female workers in armaments factories all over the country. Such work helped reveal the potential values of a policing role for women, and in 1916 the Criminal Law Amendment Committee recommended that ‘fully qualified women with proper powers and status’ be appointed in all police forces. Unfortunately it was not made compulsory!

Some police forces - including the independent Colchester Borough Force - contracted for the use of one or two full-time members of the NUWW or WPS, but many chief constables were against giving women any policing role; they were only tolerated while the War lasted.

But in 1918 the Metropolitan Police employed a small experimental squad of women officers as part of that Force, specifically to deal with females and children, but they did not have a power of arrest until several years later.

Two members of the NUWW worked in Romford (then policed by Essex) from August 1918 until October 1919. Dora Jordan was 26, and the daughter of an Essex policeman; Alice Wilson was a married woman in her 40s with...
much previous experience; the two were not constables but were designated as ‘Women Patrols’. They were based at Romford police station, worked under the divisional superintendent, and were paid a small sum by the NUWW; the Force contributed to the cost of their uniforms. The Police Museum has Alice Wilson’s pocket notebook and a photocopy of Dora’s, so we know the sort of work they did. Their main role was to deal with women and children, and the Women Patrols therefore did a lot of walking the beat, advising girls about their behaviour and liaising with other welfare organisations.

The Women Patrols continued their work in Romford until most of the soldiers billeted locally had been demobilised. Then, despite protests from Romford magistrates and other local residents, their contracts were terminated by the Chief Constable of Essex and his Standing Joint Committee of county magistrates and local councillors, which was the forerunner of today’s Police Authority. Image of Dora Jordan and Mrs Wilson.

By the early 1920s some police forces (not Essex) were employing a few women constables, some of whom had been sworn in. From 1926 onwards the county’s Women’s Institutes repeatedly asked the Chief Constable to appoint two policewomen in Essex. Surviving letters reveal his strong objections, and he was adamant that police work was a man’s job.

Deadlock was reached until the start of World War II in 1939, when the Home Office proposed the creation of a Women’s Auxiliary Police Corps (WAPC), but allowed each force to decide for itself - unsurprisingly Essex declined. The Force changed its mind in 1941 after many policemen were called up for the services, and so 21 full-time, paid women were taken on for the WAPC and trained as clerks and telephonists. They were also given basic training in first aid, self defence and air raid precautions, but they were not attested constables. The WAPC members were later issued with a tailored jacket, skirt and hat so at least they looked like policewomen.

Demands for operational women with full police powers continued, and the Chief Constable eventually agreed that suitable auxiliaries could be trained for outside duties but they had to be supervised by an attested woman officer. As there was no such person in the Force, Woman Sergeant Dorothy Jordan (no relation to Dora) was seconded from the Metropolitan Police in 1944.

It was only after Home Office pressure that Essex eventually agreed to appoint women police. In January 1946 a newspaper advertisement invited applications from single women or widows between 26-35 who wished to become police constables with full powers, but specialising in women and children. Joan Hurley (still alive in mid-2008) had been one of the auxiliaries and was the first successful candidate, closely
followed by Olive Butler who eventually became a superintendent (died 2007). Miss Jordan transferred to Essex as Inspector in charge of the new Women Police Department, and later became its chief inspector. In 1951 she changed her name to Hodges when she married Superintendent George Hodges who worked at Police HQ.

With an eye to future recruitment, the first three 16-year-old girl cadets were appointed in 1963. Cadets lived at home and worked at local police stations until the residential School (now Essex Police College) was opened in 1969. By 1970 there were 20 girls but they were not allowed to live in the School until 1973.

After the Essex and Southend forces amalgamated in 1969, 81 female officers were authorised, including a superintendent. The first woman superintendent in the Force was Helen Welburn, who transferred from Cheshire in March 1970 to run the Women Police Department which comprised a chief inspector at HQ, inspectors at Colchester and Southend, and women sergeants and constables who were based mainly at divisional stations and were also supervised by the male officers of supervisory rank at those stations.

Superintendent Welburn was answerable to the Chief Constable for everything to do with women police and girl cadets. With the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 on the horizon, she was keen to get her new charges involved in the full range of police duties - as she had been accustomed to do in her home force. WPc Jane Pepper (later Reece) became the first Essex woman to qualify as an advanced driver and work full-time on traffic patrol. Soon afterwards every divisional CID office found itself with an experienced woman officer among its detective constables. In 1974 Vera Bayliss became the first Essex woman detective sergeant when she joined the Fraud Squad, and is still enjoying life in 2008. Meanwhile uniformed female constables alternated between continuing their traditional role, and working full shifts with their male colleagues, an experience which helped ease the transition to equality.

Despite attempts to exempt police forces from the Sex Discrimination Act, it became law on 29 December 1975, and policewomen’s departments and the use of a ‘Woman’ prefix became illegal. Female officers’ collar numbers were adjusted to start with a 3, and women sergeants and inspectors also supervised male constables. Superintendent Welburn had already returned to Cheshire, and Superintendent Olive Butler became the head of Women Police just before the Act took effect. Even after integration the Chief Constable had the discretion to exempt female officers from certain duties, such as public order and firearms. But many women sought such opportunities, and in 1977 a course at Police HQ to train selected women to use firearms generated so much media attention that it over-ran by three days.
Further Reading


One of the participants, Julia Foster (later Jeapes) became the first woman firearms instructor and was in charge of armed officers at Stansted Airport; she subsequently reached the rank of chief superintendent.

In the years after 1975 there was a succession of ‘firsts’ as women took on new specialist roles for the first time such as dog handlers and divers. Now, however, there is no need for celebrations as women compete on equal terms for both jobs and promotion, and although there are still relatively few female officers in the highest ranks this will inevitably change with time. In 1970 just over 4% of serving officers in Essex were women, while in 2008 the corresponding figure is nearly 28%. Women have demonstrated that they can rise to the challenges of a police career and have certainly earned their equal status.

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**What we offer**

Essex Police Museum is an informal and friendly place to find out about the police and what they do.

**OPENING TIMES**

Wednesdays, 1 - 4.30pm
1st Saturday of each month, 10.30am - 3pm

**GROUP VISITS**

Adult and children’s groups are welcome to book daytime or evening visits. Please contact the curator for details. Group visits are free but donations are gratefully accepted.

**SCHOOLS SERVICE**

School visits are free. We provide an education service linked to the requirements of the National Curriculum and QCA Schemes of Work. We offer sessions for groups of 30 children; other activities can be arranged to accommodate larger groups. Please contact the curator or see our website for further information.

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**Where to Find Us**

**DIRECTIONS**

Bus no. 47, 54 or 56 from the bus station in the town centre (opposite the train station).

**PARKING**

Parking is available on Saturdays only. We recommend you park at the public car parks in Wharf Road or at Riverside Ice and Leisure (Victoria Road) on Wednesdays.

**CONTACT US**

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