

# Light Duties *or* Ebenezer Scrooge and the Cheshire Hoard

By ELVYN OAKES

**In the early 1960s Beatlemania spread quickly from Merseyside, hitting Cheshire and the rest of the UK like a huge tsunami. As a young detective constable in the Cheshire Constabulary stationed at Altrincham, I soon became aware of the Fab Four fame.**

There were wholesale thefts of Beatle memorabilia in the town, particularly at the local branch of Woolworths. I ended up reporting an entire class of the local grammar school for theft; they were all duly cautioned. Shortly afterwards I was taken ill with mumps; whether it was connected with the youngsters or not I shall never know. Many people in the area, both young and old (including our young daughter, my mother and some friends) contracted the disease, which was a particularly strong strain.

Along with three police colleagues I then caught orchitis which was very worrying and painful; I lost 21lbs in three days and was quite poorly. After a couple of weeks my sergeant and chief inspector came to see me. They said they were short staffed and appealed to me to return to work, promising to put me on light duties.

I returned to duty after three weeks against the advice of everyone, including my doctor and my wife. We were living in a police house, and that

Monday morning a firm were arriving to decorate the house throughout. That may have influenced my rash decision; one which I have regretted all my life.

I arrived for duty at 9.00am and was detailed to drive to Nottingham, where three youths had been arrested after absconding from our local Probation Hostel. It was about 80 miles away and I drove there in my new black Morris 1000 CID car, registered number 1617TU. It was icy cold with a light covering of snow; there was a problem! Cheshire Constabulary green Rover motor patrol cars were fitted with heaters; CID cars were not. The only way to clear the windscreen was by using anti-freeze from the radiator, rubbing it with a raw potato or putting a piece of wood under the edge of the bonnet to allow hot air to it. My companion was a brand new CID aide.

After an uneventful journey we found the police station where the three teenagers were held. The chastened absconders were obviously Beatle fans. They were all dressed in white satin shirts with lace at the collar and wrists, velvet jackets and trousers. They looked fantastic, just like three of the Fab Four; straight off the record sleeves selling in our local shops. It had cost a fortune to

dress them. Their purchase of such expensive clothing had brought them to the attention of the police.

At first they were a little reluctant to talk about their escapades, but once we started the journey home they began to unwind. They had been working on farms in our area and admitted breaking into a number of premises to steal. Their main source of income had been a large hoard of cash they found in a secret cave on a farm. I was rather sceptical; our part of Cheshire was rather short of caves. They talked in great detail about their escapades, promising to show us all the scenes of their crimes.

On return to Altrincham (after refreshments), the youths directed us on an evening tour of the premises they had burgled and stolen from. Their working knowledge of the area was very good. This became very evident as they pointed out the various scenes of crime. It was midnight when we finally arrived at a farm way out in the countryside, where they claimed they had discovered the hidden hoard of cash. It was freezing, with snow on the ground and we were all tiring. As we entered the farmyard dogs began to bark and all Hell broke loose; fortunately the dogs were chained. I banged loudly on the farm door, working on the premise that if

I was up, so should everyone else be. Eventually a very low light came on and the back door slowly opened. I was confronted by a very large man dressed in a long white nightgown, complete with a nightcap and tassel. He looked just like Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. I would have laughed out loud but for the fact he was pointing a massive blunderbuss at my chest. In the dim light of the oil lamps it took a little time to persuade him that we actually were the police.

I explained the reason for the visit; the farmer and his sister, the sole occupants of the farm, denied any knowledge of a hidden cave. They reluctantly agreed we could search and the boys led us into an orchard at the rear of the house where I saw a great mound surrounded by trees and bushes. They took us into the bushes and inside they showed us a hole in the side of the mound. After a great deal of thought, I carefully climbed through the hole and found myself inside a large cavern.

As my eyes became used to the torch light, I realised I was standing inside a large Nissen hut, similar to our billets in the Royal Air Force. The structure had obviously been covered over with soil many years before to disguise its presence. I saw that there were shelves fitted all round the room; the shelves contained packets of soap flakes, brushes, donkey stones, bars of soap, nylon stockings

and all manner of similar stores. It was obviously a 'Black Market' hoard left over from the Second World War. Down one side were a number of seed potato trays partly full of coins, some silver; mainly shillings, sixpences and three penny 'joeys'. The vast bulk consisted of pennies, half pennies and farthings. It was still a sizeable amount of money.

I saw no point in disturbing the large amount of property, which appeared to be very old and in poor condition. We collected the cash into old sacks and returned to the farmhouse. In those days we always took written statements at the time; it took quite a while to persuade the farmer's sister to make a statement regarding the theft of a nominal amount of money from the farm building.

We returned to the police station to complete the paperwork, charge the prisoners and get them to the cells. We were using the recently-introduced Theft Act 1960 instead of the old Larceny Act 1916. We then drove home to get changed, eat and return to duty. I have no recollection of going to bed or having a rest.

When I took the boys before the court that morning the Prosecuting Chief Inspector remonstrated with me in front of the magistrates; in his opinion I had kept them waiting a few minutes. He was fully aware of all the circumstances. The thought did

occur to me that whilst he, and they, had had a good night's sleep followed by a warm breakfast, my partner and I had been working for over 24 hours with very little in the way of creature comforts. The fact that we had arrested three persistent thieves, cleared up a number of burglaries and thefts of property seemed to go unnoticed. I suppose we were young, keen and eager to please.

In due course the youths were given custodial sentences, Borstal I think. There was no publicity in the local press.

At the end of the case I took the money back to the farmer's sister, who was still denying any knowledge of the hidden hoard. I told her that the property, including the money, must belong to her and her brother. Eventually she reluctantly agreed to sign a receipt for the cash; before doing so she said, "Were there any banknotes?"

My answer is written on this piece of paper your Worships!



ELVYN OAKES served with Cheshire Constabulary and Greater Manchester Police, mainly in the CID, from Detective Constable to Detective Superintendent. He was Deputy Commander of Salford Division, GMP at retirement. For 20 years he was the representative for Stockport Branch and later Chair of Manchester East Branch of the International Police Association. For the past 17 years he has been a volunteer with the National Trust.

## WRITING POLICE HISTORY

### The joys and sorrows of writing a book on the British Police during the First World War

Dr Mary Fraser, Honorary Secretary at the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow, has started writing a blog to record progress on a book she is currently writing about the British Police during the Great War.

Entries to the blog so far have included food shortages in 1917 and police involvement, the struggles of the policeman's wife as she attempted to feed her family, as well as related topics such as Mary's experiences of researching and obtaining copyright permissions.

Follow Mary's progress at [writingpolicehistory.blogspot.co.uk](http://writingpolicehistory.blogspot.co.uk)

