

CAMBRIDGE BOROUGH / CITY POLICE IN THE POST WAR YEARS

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The origins of the police in Cambridgeshire date back to 1836, when the first police force was established with thirty police officers, in what is now known as the City of Cambridge. At this time, the City of Cambridge was known as the Borough of Cambridge, as City status was not granted until 24th March 1951. As the period studied covers a time when both Borough and City were used for Cambridge, I have referred to the force as the Borough / City Police Force.

Outside the Borough/City, there was no organised police force established under the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act or the 1839 Rural Constabulary Act, until the Cambridgeshire County Constabulary was set up in 1851. The Isle of Ely had its own force established in the mid-nineteenth century, as did Huntingdon (Huntingdonshire Constabulary) and Peterborough (Peterborough Combined Force). Each of these police forces had their own Chief Constable up to, and during, the post-war period and therefore collected and recorded crime statistics for their own force. In 1946, the Police Act was introduced with an aim of reducing the overall number of independent forces. By 1948, the 183 existing forces had been reduced to 131, and by 1960, this number was reduced further to 125.¹

Cambridge Borough / City Constabulary remained an independent force until 1st April 1965 when it merged with the Cambridgeshire County Constabulary, the Isle of Ely Constabulary, Huntingdonshire Constabulary and the Peterborough Combined Police Force to form the Mid Anglia Constabulary. In 1973, following the re-organisation of county boundaries, Cambridgeshire Constabulary was formed.

During the post-war period of 1945-1960, there was one Chief Constable of the Cambridge Borough / City Police Force, a Mr B.N. Bebbington OBE. On an annual basis, the Chief Constable would prepare and produce a report detailing the performance of his force.

The Reports were published in the early spring of the following year, and were presented to the Chairman of the Watch Committee of the Borough / City of Cambridge and members of the town council. The annual crime figures were presented and showed the number of complaints made to the police per month under each crime classification, followed by the number of complaints found to be 'no crime' after investigation, and finally the number of crimes recorded. In addition, each report included an account where any issues concerning the force or the Borough / City of Cambridge were presented.²

The post-war period was considered the 'Golden Age of policing'. It was a conceptual period when people thought there was less crime and felt safe in the belief that there were more police around. In reality though, crime levels rose and police pay was not enough always

to recruit the correct number of officers. However, compared with today, the level of recorded crime was very low. At the outset of the Second World War, many forces had been below strength, whilst 'emergency measures' filled the gap during the War. By the late 1940s the shortage of officers had become serious. The Oaksey Committee reported that

"There was a deficit of just under 12,000 officers in England and Wales, which was mainly due to resignation, in particular during the middle years of service. Comparisons with other employments show that the police have fallen behind relatively in pay, and particularly in hours of work, while full employment and social security have diminished any advantage in security of tenure."

Manpower levels and the lack of recruits were obviously priorities for the majority of forces, and recruitment and salaries were topics that Chief Constable Bebbington felt strongly about. They feature prominently, and with regularity in his annual reports.³

"It has been exceedingly difficult to obtain suitable candidates, due mainly to the unfavourable pay and conditions of service when compared with other occupations. However, early in November the Government increased the rates of pay, and it is hoped that this will result in more men being attracted to the service."

In his report for the year 1947, Chief Constable Bebbington felt that the lack of police recruits was due to the poor rates of pay, which he quoted at £5 and 5s per week including rent and boot allowance. He compared the salary of a female civilian in a clerical position in Government being paid:

"3s 1½d per hour at the age of thirty two, whereas a married man joining the police at twenty nine would be receiving 2s 9½d per hour when he reached the age of thirty two. (Figure includes boot and rent allowance.) If the civilian clerk was male then he would receive 3s 10d an hour or 1s 1½d per hour more than the constable."

Approval for increased number of staff was received 16th January 1950. In his annual report for that year, Chief Constable Bebbington described the recruitment situation and the standard of candidates. There was a considerable improvement in the recruiting situation during 1950.

Total enquiries received were seventy nine. Seventeen men and two women were received as against eight men and one woman in 1949. In addition, four constables (men) transferred from other forces. Of the applications, ten failed the educational exam, sixteen were below the physical exam, fifteen were rejected for other reasons and fifteen were not proceeded with.⁴

Severe crime was low in Cambridge Borough / City

during the post-war era, with only two murders being reported and recorded throughout the fifteen year period. The first had taken place in September 1945 and the other in January 1948. What particularly interested me was that neither of these murders were recorded in the Chief Constable's reports, other than as statistics. At a time when murders were rare incidents, both crimes were detected and yet none of the officers who dealt with the crimes were mentioned, or received a commendation as other officers had, who had solved more 'minor' crimes such as apprehending youths who had run away from an approved school. During the post-war years, recorded crime in Cambridge Borough / City appeared to follow the same trend as the recorded crime figures for England and Wales. Interestingly though, from the start of the post-war period in 1946 to the end in 1960, the total number of recorded crimes by Cambridge Borough / City Police virtually doubled from 917 to 1810, an increase of ninety seven percent; whereas nationally this figure rose from 472,517 to 743,713, an increase of fifty seven percent.⁵ It was during the post-war period when the public first began to change in their response towards the forces of law and order. This applied particularly to the young. Generally, on a daily basis, juveniles did not seem to have created much of a problem with the police.

According to Chief Inspector Eyre of the Glamorgan police,

"We only had occasional trouble with youths. Mind you, they always respected the police, you were a force in your own right, you could always clip them if you wanted to".

There is no evidence that any officer in Cambridge Borough / City Police dealt out 'clips' to juveniles. However, Chief Constable Bebbington admitted concern over the number of offences caused by juveniles in his annual report for 1945. The increase of seventy nine over last years figures is certainly alarming, more especially as the increase is mostly in respect of indictable offences which have increased from thirty three in 1944 to eighty eight in 1945. Thirty seven juveniles were proceeded against for breaking into houses, shops, warehouses. I hope that with more stable family conditions returning, considerable improvement will be seen in the juvenile statistics for 1946.' Mr Bebbington clearly believed that the effect of wartime conditions caused the rate of juvenile crime to rise, and estimated that juvenile crime would eventually stabilise and improve with the return of a more consistent family environment.⁶

In 1948, the number of juveniles charged for indictable crimes had virtually doubled compared to the previous year (fifty one crimes in 1948 compared to twenty six crimes in 1947). Chief Constable Bebbington offered an explanation as to why this increase occurred.'

"Fifteen juveniles went to court for stealing wood, a crime initially began by adults. I do not think they can be classed as criminals or even potential criminals. In seven other cases the boys concerned came from a local hostel in the town, and were not really Cambridge boys."

However it might not be surprising that the boys were stealing wood, as this could potentially have been used for fuel, as in 1948 rationing was still in operation. Post-

war Britain had a fascination for crime and criminals, even though the majority disapproved of criminal behaviour. *Dixon of Dock Green* was a 'remarkable broadcasting phenomenon and a significant symbol of British policing'. It was in the 1950 Ealing film, *The Blue Lamp* (1950), that the character of Dixon first appeared, and Cambridge Borough / City Police took the opportunity to undertake some crime prevention activity to coincide with the opening of this film.⁷ With a view to stimulating public interest in crime prevention, a Police exhibition was arranged in February at a local cinema in conjunction with the showing of the film "The Blue Lamp", "*which depicts a story of Police work.*" Exhibits from other forces were loaned for this occasion, and leaflets were distributed to members of the public advising them on the precautions they could take to safeguard their property. Later in the year, when the film returned to other local cinemas, members of the force addressed the audiences for short periods, appealing for co-operation and assistance from the public. Local crime being reported in the *Cambridge Daily News*, whilst not of national importance, appeared to be given column space dependant upon how it affected the majority of the people in the Borough / City.

Occasionally Chief Constable Bebbington submitted a few comments to the *Cambridge Daily News*, and on 10th January 1948, a column contained details of a brief talk by Chief Constable Bebbington to the members of the Cambridge Inner Wheel, which was part of a national club established in 1934 by the wives of Rotary members, on 'his pet subject' civic responsibility. Mr Bebbington stressed that what he really wanted was for ***"People to realise their responsibility as citizens, and give the police the chance to see that everybody enjoys the liberty which is given to them in the law of the land."***⁸ Every year in November a traditional event called 'Town and Gown' took place in Cambridge Borough / City. This event had its origins approximately 700 years earlier when conflict arose between the persons of the town of Cambridge and the undergraduates of the universities.⁹ With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, all 'Guy Fawkes Rags' ceased, which made many believe they had seen the end of the usual 58th November frivolities. However, on 5th November 1945, the Town and Gown Rag resumed and seemed as popular as ever. The *Cambridge Daily News* reported that there were attacks made on both the cinema and the street lights, causing the police to make six arrests. During the 1950s, the majority of Town and Gown events passed off without any untoward incidents and Chief Constable Bebbington reported in his annual review of 1951 that, 'The title "*University and Town Disorders*" given to this occasion in the past may in future prove to be a misnomer'.⁹

As the crimes that were being committed in the post-war era altered to become more sophisticated by the late 1950s, police techniques and equipment changed to meet the increasing need of crime enforcement. The forensic reports reviewed annually by Chief Constable Bebbington, altered from reporting on sexual offences and drunken behaviour, to those of fraud and forgery. In 1952, forensic services were used when fighting broke

out and blood was left as evidence on an American jeep, whilst in 1959, forensics were used in order to identify cheque-use fraud. The V.H.F. wireless scheme came into operation in Cambridge Borough / City Police on 14th April 1949; all except one motor vehicle were fitted with the equipment. The efficiency of wireless scheme was demonstrated in the following report of the same year.

“At 1.42 pm on 26th November a report was received that a motor cycle had been stolen from Brampton Road. Particulars were radioed to a patrol car and within eight minutes the thief was arrested with the stolen motor cycle.” Technology in police work had begun to advance, as evidenced in the Chief Constable’s Annual Reports. In addition, more motor vehicles were being acquired by Cambridge Borough / City Police in response to the increasing activities of criminals with vehicles; which in turn created more jobs for both police and civilian staff.¹⁰

Throughout the post-war years Cambridge Borough / City Police suffered the same problems as other forces in respect of low recruitment figures, rising crime rates and youth crime. Chief Constable Bebbington refers in most of his annual reports to the difficulties of recruiting officers when the salary is considered low; interestingly, as the number of recruits increased so did the crime levels. It could be argued that instead of more crimes being committed during this period, more criminals were able to be caught as there were more police officers available to apprehend them.

Youth crime is still a major concern for police forces, and also a phenomenon that many believe arose out of the post-war era. In spite of this, the Chief Constable of Cambridge Borough / City police remained in his post throughout the entire fifteen year period of this study, and was made an OBE. Whilst I do not believe it could be said the post-war years were necessarily a ‘Golden

Age’ for the police officers of Cambridge Borough / City, looking back though, I’m sure many people today would say it was.

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