



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
Devon Record Office



DEVON CONSTABULARY MONTHLY RETURNS

30th April 1871

DRO Reference – QS

DFHS Book Reference - D055

The 1856 County and Borough Police Act made the introduction of a police force compulsory in all counties and boroughs. It laid down a system of inspection with an Inspector of Constabulary in each county to oversee policing. If, after his annual inspection, the Inspector certified that a county force was efficient, the Treasury would pay a quarter of the annual costs of pay and clothing. The Act encouraged small boroughs to amalgamate their force with that of the county, thus reducing the number of very small police forces.

The police force in each county was put under the jurisdiction of the County Quarter Sessions, which was made responsible for appointing the Chief Constable. This remained the situation until The Local Government Act was passed in 1888 which established elected county councils and decreed that police forces were to be run by Standing Joint Committees made up of county councillors and magistrates.

In Devon, Exeter and the boroughs of Barnstaple, Bideford, Bradninch, Okehampton, South Molton, Tavistock, Tiverton, Torquay, Torrington, Totnes and Wolborough had their own police forces from 1836, following the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Devon County Constabulary was founded in 1856 and Gerald de Courcy Hamilton appointed Chief Constable by the justices at the County Quarter Sessions. By 1900, the borough forces had been gradually incorporated into the county police force, with two late additions, Barnstaple, joining the county in 1921 and Tiverton, in 1942; Exeter City Police remained a separate body until 1966. Plymouth had its own police force which did not merge with the county police until the creation of the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary in 1967.

In order to prove the efficiency of the force, Devon County Constabulary regularly submitted returns to the County Quarter Sessions of the number of 'apprehensions' for various offences. These are statistics only. Every month, returns were also made of all the serving police officers in the county and these give the names of the men, listed by division, with their rank and their collar number. There is a separate section for men who have resigned in the last month and there is a column on the form for notes to record that a man has just joined the force or has moved from another division.

These returns have never been used for any kind of research, mainly because, hidden among the Quarter Sessions papers, their existence has not been catalogued and they are not easy to retrieve. However, they are useful for anyone researching an ancestor

in the police force, as, by comparing the returns for each month, it should be possible to find out where and when an officer joined the force and where he was stationed. This index covers a sample month and year.

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