



Devon Family History Society
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GREAR TORRINGTON MEMORIAL - POLICE PETITION

1870

DRO Reference – QS Michaelmas

DFHS Book Reference – D111

The 1856 County and Borough Police Act made the introduction of a police force compulsory in all counties and boroughs. At that time there was no police force for the county of Devon, but the city of Exeter and the boroughs of Barnstaple, Bideford, Bradninch, Okehampton, South Molton, Tavistock, Tiverton, Torquay, Torrington, Totnes and Wolborough had already established their own police forces, following the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Devon County Constabulary was founded in 1856 and the boroughs were encouraged to amalgamate their forces with that of the county, thus reducing the number of very small police forces.

In the autumn of 1870, it was proposed that the police force in Great Torrington should be amalgamated with the county force. Representatives of the county Police Committee met the Mayor and Town Clerk to explain the proposals and the Town Council agreed to them. The Council then recommended at the Michaelmas Quarter Sessions that the town police be incorporated in the county force and that the Chief Constable appoint three constables for the town. However a minority of the Councillors objected to this and they presented a memorial, or petition, to the Sessions, which was signed by 536 of the 750 ratepayers. They wanted the matter to be deferred to the Epiphany Sessions in January 1871, giving the magistrates three months to consider it. The Earl of Devon was one of the magistrates who opposed this; he said that the two constables in Great Torrington could not effectively keep order and that the Borough police should be absorbed into the County police in order for the force to be run efficiently. His views seem to have swayed his colleagues and it was agreed that the recommendations of the Police Committee be carried and that the Great Torrington police should become part of Devon County Constabulary.

The petition was signed by rate-payers of the borough of Great Torrington, both men and women. They wrote their names on sheets of paper which were then pasted together to make one long strip. For anyone researching Great Torrington families, this document will be invaluable. Many other lists of inhabitants at this period list men only, and it is unusual to find women's signatures as well. As the 1871 census was taken just six months later, it should also be possible to link families in the census with the names in the memorial.