



Devon Family History Society
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DEVON RECORD OFFICE

PETTY CONSTABLES

1867

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Before the introduction of a professional police force in the mid-19th century, policing was done on a local basis by part-time constables appointed at meetings of the vestry. These were known as petty, or parish, constables. They had no training and were not paid for their services. Often, their duties as constable conflicted with their personal and business interests because they served in the parish where they, and their family and friends, lived and worked. Also, the numbers of constables were small and in cases of civil unrest, for example, the magistrates had to call on the regular army or local militia for help in keeping the peace, which meant that the time taken to respond to a major incident was quite slow.

The Rural Police Act of 1839 gave counties the power to set up a professional, paid, police force, but this was not adopted everywhere because many magistrates saw it as being too expensive to operate. As a response to this reluctance, in 1842 the Act for the Appointment and Payment of Parish Constables was passed. This tried to revitalise the system of parish constables by making it more official. It specified that Petty Sessions had to hold a special court every year to choose constables for each parish from the male ratepayers aged between 25 and 55. A ratepayer who was chosen had the right to employ a substitute to take his place if he wished. Parishes also had the option of employing a paid constable instead of using an unpaid ratepayer. Parish constables in each division were to be supervised by a superintending constable, a trained policeman who was paid a salary from the county rate.

Devon set up its county police force following the Police Act of 1856, although the boroughs had their own forces from much earlier. Parish constables became less important as the professional police forces established themselves, until finally, in 1872, the Parish Constabulary Act put an end to their appointment.

These returns were sent from the petty sessional divisions to Devon County Quarter Sessions in March, April and May of 1867, listing the constables who had been sworn in that year. Some of the returns have been written on special printed forms and some have been written out by hand on a sheet of paper. This means that the information given in each one is slightly different. Some have only the man's name and the parish where he served, while others give his place of residence and his occupation. Returns from nine divisions survive. There are no returns from the boroughs because they all had their own courts of sessions, separate from the county Quarter Sessions.

The returns are interesting for family historians in giving that extra little bit of information about an ancestor which would not be possible to find elsewhere. Often, family history can become a mere list of names and birth, marriage and death dates, and anything which helps to shed light on the everyday lives of our ancestors and lets us know what kind of people they were, is very welcome.