

A FORGOTTEN SOURCE FOR RESEARCH?

The Minutes of the Standing Joint Committees

The Standing Joint Committees were the epitome of good old British compromise. After the passing of the Local Government Act of 1888, county management was taken away from the hereditary magistrates in quarter sessions, and given to the new, politically elected county councils. But the quarter sessions had also been the police authority for the county, which then raised the question, 'who controls the county police?' Was it to remain with the local gentry - the bench of magistrates in quarter sessions? Or was it to be in the hands of the new county councils with their (inexperienced) local politicians of all social classes? It must be remembered that magistrates in quarter sessions were not abolished by the Local Government Act, they still existed, but only with their judicial function, having had their administrative powers stripped from them.

Tempers were heated in Parliament when the question of police supervision was decided. It became obvious that both sides were entrenched : on the one hand those who saw the management of the police as a judicial matter (the magistrates); and on the other hand, those seeing it as an administrative (the county council) affair.

Compromise had to be reached. The proposal that control of the police should be divided equally between the magistrates and the county council met with hostility from both sides. But this proposal was adopted - it had to be, for there was no other solution. The control of a county police force therefore passed into the hands of a committee consisting of equal numbers of magistrates and local politicians, and so, under Section Nine of the 1888 Local Government Act, was known henceforth as the Standing Joint Committee.

It is no doubt that because of the great British genius for compromise, that a body so universally disliked at its birth, should then have continued unchanged for well over a century. However, the concept of equal number of magistrates and local politicians became eroded over the years, as successive governments have pursued their ultimate aim of complete political control of the police, and gradually increased the committee's ratio in favour of local politicians over magistrates. And in 2013, this ultimate aim became inexorably one step nearer, when the Standing Joint Committee (or Police Authority as it was then known) was abolished entirely, being replaced by one elected politician, grandly called the Police and Crime Commissioner.

But be that as it may, whilst they were in existence, the Standing Joint Committees left behind Minutes of their meetings. And these SJC Minutes are like gold dust, recording as they do, not only the momentous decisions of the committee, but also the trivia and minutiae that these bodies must also deal with, complete with all the middling resolutions in between. So comprehensive are these SJC Minutes, that a perusal of them would possibly provide a complete history of its county constabulary, without recourse to any other documents. Yet all these Minutes appear to be largely ignored by police historians. Why this should be so is unknown, perhaps efforts can be made to make more use of them in future.

Consider these Minutes of the Standing Joint Committee of the Somerset Constabulary, held at the Town Hall, Wells on Monday 25 March 1935 : as well as the deliberations of the full committee, reports were received from, the Police Buildings Sub-committee; the Shire Hall Committee; the General Purposes and Finance Sub-committee; the Police Transport Sub-committee; the Police Accounts for the quarter ending 30 June

1935; and also the Chief Constable's* Report containing a complete breakdown of all the crimes committed in the county for the year ending Monday 31 December 1934, the strength and distribution of the force, as well as a full report on an experiment for rural officers to be given motor cycles rather than pedal cycles. These are not boring committee reports - they contain more wheat than chaff.

Consider also the Minutes of the Standing Joint Committee of the Northamptonshire Constabulary, held at County Hall, Northampton on Saturday 8 May 1926, which details all the steps being taken in the county to deal with 'the emergency which had arisen owing to the stoppage of work in the coalfields and by railway and transport workers' (otherwise known to history as The General Strike). This included the possibility of making 'arrangements for Magistrates to attend at villages, remote from places at which Petty Sessional Courts are held, for the purpose of swearing in men desirous of serving as Special Constables'. This is followed in the SJC Minutes of Saturday 3 July when it was reported that '1,514 Special Constables had attested.' The strength of the regular force at the time was a mere 200.

Using the list contained in the excellent Police History Society Monograph, number 2, *A Guide to the Archives of the Police Forces of England and Wales* by Ian Bridgeman and Clive Emsley, Standing Joint Committee Minutes are preserved in the archives of the following county constabularies :

Cambridgeshire two volumes 1889-1901 and 1901-1921
Derbyshire two volumes 1889-1911
Glamorgan six volumes 1843-1892
Huntingdonshire 1897-1913
Kent 1856-1922
Leicestershire twenty-three volumes 1840-1976 (and Index 1974)
Lincolnshire five volumes 1937-1964
Northamptonshire 1912-1964
Northumberland 1913-1914
Oxfordshire two volumes 1922-1941
Somerset two volumes 1884-1896 and 1899-1906
Sussex 1943-1947
West Riding of Yorkshire three volumes 1889-1896
Worcestershire 1843-1855

Note : there may also be SJC Minutes preserved in the relevant county record offices.

* **Herbert Charles METCALFE**



[1] Chief Constable West Suffolk Constabulary 1902-1906

[2] Chief Constable West Riding of Yorkshire Constabulary
1906-1908

[3] Chief Constable Somerset Constabulary 1908-1939

Awarded KPM LG 1 January 1931 p 14

Educated St Paul's College, Stony Stratford; RMC Sandhurst

Career Army service 1885/1902 (2nd Bn Northamptonshire Regt; Hong Kong 1886-87; Dep Cmsr of Police, Perak 1892-93; Insp of Musketry, Scotland 1899-1900, Ireland 1900-02) - [1] - [2] - [3] (recalled to Army 1914-19; LtCol; DSO and Bar 1918) - Retirement (DL of Somerset)

b. Monday 9 May 1864, Upwell, Norfolk

m. Dorothea Knight, 1s2d

d. Thursday 18 January 1940, Taunton