



CHIEF CONSTABLE J. D. SOWERBY.

*From a Photo. by Kelley, Old Town Street, Plymouth.*

## **‘AN ENGLISH GENTLEMAN’**

**Joseph Davidson Sowerby**

**Chief Constable  
of  
Plymouth  
1892-1917**

by

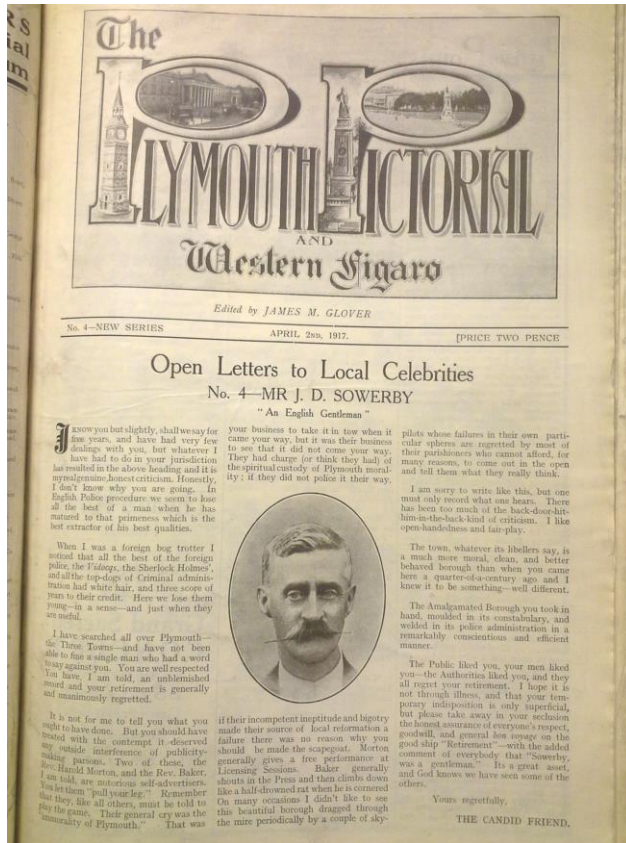
**Kim Stevenson**

Following on from the item in issue twenty-nine of the *Journal* ‘Who was the Youngest Chief Constable?’ Plymouth’s Joseph Sowerby is certainly a contender for one of the youngest; appointed Chief Constable of the Plymouth County Borough Police and Superintendent of the Fire Brigade on Wednesday 13 July 1892 aged twenty-nine years. For twenty-five years he retained the confidence of the Watch Committee and town council, as well as the respect of his men, and was well regarded by the local press. He died in 1919 just two years after retiring, having overseen the 1914 amalgamation of the Three Towns’ police forces : Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse.

A temperance advocate and moral campaigner, he made it abundantly clear on taking up his post that his mission was to tackle drunkenness, prostitution and gambling. In 1906, concerned about the presence of young girls and women in local brothels, Sowerby was one of the first to recruit women into the Special Constabulary to look after the morals of young girls found wandering the streets at night. As Chief Constable of Plymouth Dock – then the equivalent of Heathrow as the main gateway for the reception of visitors and travellers to the UK - he helped receive the survivors of the *Titanic* and, on her return from New York, famously arrested Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst in 1913 on board the *MS Majestic* in Plymouth Sound.

On his retirement in 1917, the *Plymouth Pictorial* published an Open Letter on the front page entitled ‘An English Gentleman’ eulogising Sowerby’s leadership. ‘I have searched all over Plymouth’ it said ‘and have not been able to find a single man who had a word to say against you...your retirement is generally and unanimously regretted.’ Sowerby’s initiatives and moral campaign to clean up the town and tackle everyday offending are acknowledged : ‘The town, whatever its libellers say, is a much more moral, clean and better behaved Borough than when you came here a quarter-of-a-century ago –

and I knew it to be something – well different.’ (*Plymouth Pictorial*, Monday 2 April 1917). Sowerby was most definitely ‘somebody different’: a ruthlessly effective law enforcer, he was also a remarkable diplomatic and politically astute evangelist and temperance supporter who genuinely believed in social change and equal justice for all.



*The Open Letter in the Plymouth Pictorial, Monday 2 April 1917*

### Plymouth's Youngest Chief Constable Ever

Born in 1863 in Everton, Liverpool, (later naming his house in Lipson Road, Plymouth ‘Everton’), Sowerby moved to Leeds in 1881 when his father, a carrier, became a publican. He joined the Leeds City Police that year as an eighteen year old Clerk, and was promoted three years later to Chief Clerk with the rank of First Class Inspector. That same year, he married Frances Stringer. Described in the *Leeds City Police Applicants Book* as ‘5 feet 10 inches tall, grey eyes, brown hair, fresh complexion, born Everton, recommended by Percy Middleton Esq. of Leeds’, Sowerby cut a dashing figure. He was promoted again in 1886 to Chief Inspector, the Leeds Watch Committee ‘selected [him] in preference to

others with much longer service’ enhancing his salary ‘in testimony of his ability and devotion to his duties’ (*Plymouth Comet*, Saturday 1 July 1893).

In 1891 he proved that he had warranted such confidence when he secured the conviction of Walter Lewis Turner, aged thirty-two years, who was executed for cutting the throat of six year old Barbera Waterhouse at Horsforth near Leeds. And during his time in Leeds, Sowerby attended some 400 fires, but in January 1892, he nearly died, in the worst fire ever seen in Leeds, which engulfed the Dark Arches underneath the railway station, causing £200,000 of damage to buildings, bridges and carriages.

According to *The Leeds Times* headlined ‘IN CONSIDERABLE PERIL’ (Saturday 16 January 1892), as the fire raged, Sowerby and a colleague were forced to dive into the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. Fortunately Sowerby ‘being an expert swimmer, managed to keep afloat, in spite of the fact that the conflagration raged all around him, and that the water had somewhat the consistency of ink.’ Hauled out, and with a quick change of clothes, he is portrayed as a hero, returning immediately to manage the disaster and the numerous fire brigades which had responded from all over the North of England, while his less heroic colleague is reported to have remained at the Infirmary to rest.

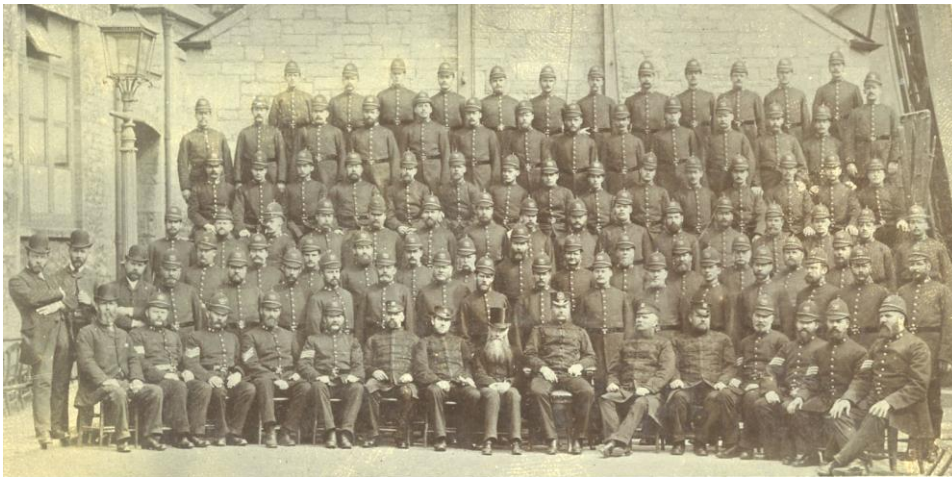
Sowerby was keenly ambitious, refusing further promotion to Superintendent at Leeds when he was short listed for the post of Chief Constable of Worcester. Although not selected for Worcester, when the previous Chief Constable of Plymouth, Arthur Wreford, unexpectedly died in 1892, Sowerby was offered the position on a salary of £300 with £10 annual increments for the first five years. On hearing of his appointment, the Chief



Constable of Leeds commented that 'he will be greatly missed' acknowledging that although Sowerby was relatively young with an unusually short length of service, 'he had gone through all the requisite grades' (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, Wednesday 13 July 1892).

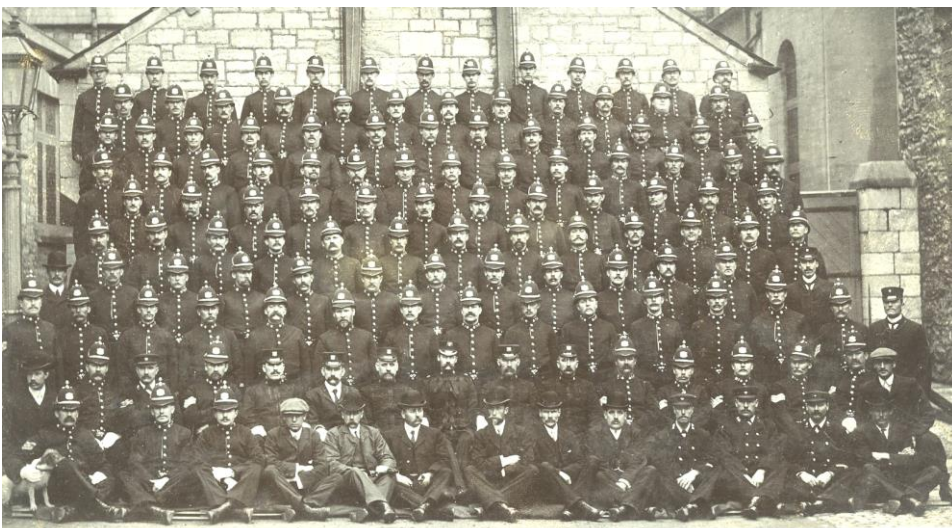
The *Plymouth Comet* noted that 'his testimonials were of the highest possible character, and his appearance and general behaviour told much in his favour'. Sowerby quickly earned the respect of his men. On the day he was appointed he removed the common practice of taking back one shilling from the nineteen shillings constables were paid a week for the first forty weeks of their service, in case they ran away with their uniform, reportedly re-distributing £500 amongst his men. [3 and 8]

On finding that handcuffs were not issued, and there were insufficient lamps, he also ensured his constables were properly equipped to carry out their duties. He also encouraged the Watch Committee to provide some entitlement to leave securing their generous support to introduce a form of rotary leave in 1903. In 1910 he visited the Home Office with the Mayor and a deputation of constables to lobby for the Police (Weekly Rest Day) Bill. The Watch Committee eventually agreed to a weekly rest day in 1911, but it was not implemented until amalgamation in 1914. [1/54]



*Plymouth Police with former Chief Constable Wreford front centre*

*Plymouth Police Force. 1890.*



*Plymouth Police with Chief Constable Sowerby centre second row from front*

*Plymouth Police Force. 1907.*

### A Moral Crusader

Operationally, Sowerby quickly made his presence felt in the town, instigating an early form of zero tolerance policing. Living in a public house in Leeds clearly influenced his strategy to curb drunkenness and prostitution, as did his association with the Leeds City Police which had a reputation of employing a zero tolerance approach to drunkenness, initiated by one its former Chief Constables, James Wetherell. [7/288] Sowerby ordered his constables to fill the magistrates' courts and petty sessions with charges of alcohol related and licensing offences, including drunk and disorderly, drunk and incapable, unlawfully permitting drunkenness and harbouring thieves and prostitutes. He personally visited over 300 licensed traders (notably entering forty premises on the same day) because, as he later informed the Royal Commission on Liquor Licensing Laws, licensees were supplying liquor to his constables while on duty: 'I do not entirely trust to the men I have the honour to command, to get my information'. [5/215] Unsurprisingly, the local licensees were not happy about themselves and their customers being continually prosecuted. In August 1892 arguments raged at town council meetings between teetotalers, temperancers and the Licensed Victuallers' Protection Association who claimed its members were suffering financial loss. Sowerby openly confirmed his sympathies - and bias - when he joined the Plymouth Methodist Temperance League. Of the seventy-nine licensees he prosecuted, the magistrates immediately closed sixty public houses, but he informed the Commission that there were still too many pubs in the town.

Plymouth's elite welcomed Sowerby's strong leadership. On Saturday 1 July 1893 to mark his first twelve months in office, the *Plymouth Comet* reported that 'In connection with the suppression of immorality in Plymouth, and in other ways where law breakers are concerned, our Chief Constable has shown himself equal to any emergency'. The editorial confirmed that 'the local papers have on several occasions highly eulogised Mr Sowerby for his zeal and discretion' with the Mayor of Plymouth predicting a

'most successful regime; this, up to the present, has been thoroughly fulfilled for Mr Sowerby has made himself thoroughly conversant with local affairs. He is on the best terms with the police force, and he has the thorough confidence of the magistrates and the watch Committee.'

As a temperance advocate, Sowerby, was as equally concerned about the causes of alcohol as its effects, and made no distinctions across class boundaries. After securing a ten day prison sentence for Thomas Connelly, an old lag with eighteen previous convictions for being drunk and disorderly, Sowerby asked the magistrates to impose a custodial sentence on Caroline Falcon, the respectable wife of a retired Captain, found drunk and disorderly, and the subject of many complaints in Greenbank, 'one of the better class streets'. The magistrates refused, and fined her £1 (*Exeter Flying Post*, Saturday 2 December 1893).

Sowerby was also astute enough to realise that on occasion a less heavy handed approach was more likely to achieve results. Later that month he asked the magistrates to release on bail all the 'ordinary Saturday and Sunday "drunks"' arrested the weekend before Christmas Day so 'they might spend Christmas "out"', or more likely to ensure they could attend Church (*Exeter Flying Post*, Saturday 30 December 1893). But his main aim was to reduce the consumption of alcohol believing this would in turn diminish the problems associated with immorality and sexual impropriety.

In 1903 Sowerby published an extensive survey and audit of all 347 fully licensed premises providing evidence to support his claim that 'that during the year 1902 drunkenness has considerably decreased in the Borough' [6/1] despite the fact that nationally the number of convictions for drunkenness between 1885-1905 was generally increasing. [2/162] The number of public houses in the town had reduced by fifty-nine since 1875, the conviction rate for drunkenness was now one of the lowest nationally,

although the average population per licensed premises was one of the highest. Sowerby modestly informed the Royal Commission when he was summoned to appear as a witness, that he attributed these successes to the 'improved social condition of the people' brought about by the police supervision of the public houses and 'enlightened attitudes of the young'. [5/217] Licensees were now more co-operative in managing their houses and responsive to police advice - in 1893 Sowerby had prosecuted twenty-eight publicans, but in 1897 just nine.

He continued to introduce innovative ideas, and as a keen photographer, after the Licensing Act 1903 gave the police more powers to deal with intoxication, personally took photographs of all habitual drunkards (those convicted more than three times a year) which he then confidentially distributed amongst the licensed victuallers. However, even Sowerby struggled to manage Plymouth's notorious Union Street; its eighteen public houses, twenty-two beer-houses, six off-licences and numerous brothels being an irresistible magnet for sailors and marines on shore leave, describing it as 'the most difficult street in Plymouth to manage' (*The Western Times*, Wednesday 6 April 1904), a reputation it is only just starting to recover from today.



*Union Street, Plymouth in 1896*

Sowerby was deeply troubled by the social problems he found when visiting licensed lodging houses, particularly the practice of 'Rack-renting' where licensees rented out one or two rooms to whole families not as lodgers but as permanent residents, some housing between twenty and thirty adults and children. Licensees argued they were compelled to sub-let any rooms or living space to pay the exorbitant rates of their brewery masters and with the town's growing population there was insufficient affordable accommodation. In this unhygienic and overcrowded environment the police were unable to monitor the populace or distinguish the poorer respectable classes - sailors, fisherman and artisans - from the drunkards, prostitutes and petty offenders. Sowerby was concerned about the children he found living in these cramped conditions and that to access their rooms they had to enter and pass through the bar and could peer into the 'snugs' where men and women engaged in sexual activities beyond the gaze of the landlord. There had been attempts to prosecute beer-house and brothel keepers in the past but many 'unfortunate' and 'immoral' women had lost their husbands at sea and had no other means of financial support.

Sowerby started a campaign prosecuting the keepers and owners of such disorderly houses by-lined in the local press as 'The Sowerby Crusade', the 'Plymouth Purity Crusade', and 'a Policy of Worrying' and 'the Plymouth Agitation'. [4] This was associated with the National Social Purity Crusade 1901 and the new moral activists - middle-class

Liberals and Conservatives - who invoked the concept of the Christian crusades to fight immorality, indecency and intoxication, to turn the tide of 'degeneration' at the end of the nineteenth century. In one such 'crusade' Sowerby and the Mayor visited his home town Liverpool, his former workplace Leeds, and Cardiff, Manchester and Portsmouth to see how other forces dealt with the suppression of vice. For example, in Liverpool, Sowerby found that sixty-four plain clothes constables were employed to watch houses of accommodation, with the result that no brothels were visibly evident and any prostitute who simply accosted three or more men was immediately convicted by the stipendiary magistrate. Sowerby did not have such manpower, and in Plymouth a conviction required proof that a prostitute had made an invitation of an improper character, this not only required the police to enter a house to obtain evidence to show it was a place resorted to by known prostitutes, but witness statements to confirm the solicitation. In Cardiff, for the past fifteen years, the police had exercised strict vigilance and prosecuted every case they could. 'Localities that were hotbeds of vice and crime have been entirely cleared of both', Sowerby informed the Watch Committee and suggested that Plymouth should adopt similar strategies, but that the current force was inadequate and needed to be strengthened in order to do so. [4]

### **Reformer or Spoilsport?**

With drunkenness and prostitution now largely under control the next target in Sowerby's sights to make licensed houses less attractive to the public, was betting and gaming. He invoked the Suppression of Betting Houses Act 1853, which had not been used for over thirty years, to conduct a number of raids to arrest licensees and punters and seize racing chronicles, guides and sporting papers as evidence of 'illicit' activity. These raids were widely reported, enhancing Sowerby's reputation nationally. In April 1894 he led sixty plain clothes officers to raid twelve premises, including a chemist, tobacconist and bowling alley. All the proprietors and fifty men who had laid bets were arrested (*Nottingham Evening Post*, Thursday 19 April 1894). The following week a further eighteen men were arrested after Sowerby gave two undercover agents money to place bets in public houses to secure evidence on which to prosecute. In court the defence accused him of using 'underhand' tactics especially when Sowerby acknowledged that he had allowed one of the men to keep his winnings in lieu of wages.

Those arrested were not the usual criminal types, but ordinary respectable people whose confidence Sowerby needed to retain. The defence lawyer of Philip Curzon, landlord of the *Spirit Vaults*, convinced the magistrate that no citizen of Plymouth was now safe from indiscriminate arrest. The magistrates agreed and dismissed the case amidst much applause. Sowerby also offered an apology to a man called Brock who was handcuffed by one of his officers when he tried to destroy some gambling papers during a raid on his tobacconist shop :

'It was not my wish that violence of any kind should have been used to anybody, but from what I have heard, you have been greatly to blame in this matter. The matter, however, shall be inquired into, and you shall have an opportunity of being present at the inquiry. I am sorry that the handcuffs have been used at all' (*Western Morning News*, Wednesday 9 May 1894).

The Watch Committee accounts also note that Sowerby's campaign against betting was a significant financial drain on the prosecution purse. In 1894 the costs were £50 but by 1895 had increased to £490 18s 10d. [1/48] Betting and gambling have of course always attracted concern - but whist drives? In the early twentieth century, winter whist drives were enormously popular, with many societies hosting them to raise money for charitable causes. Sowerby even tried to ban these, announcing that he would prosecute



anyone who organised a whist drive where there was a fee for entry or participation, saying he had no choice but to enforce the law and apply it literally.

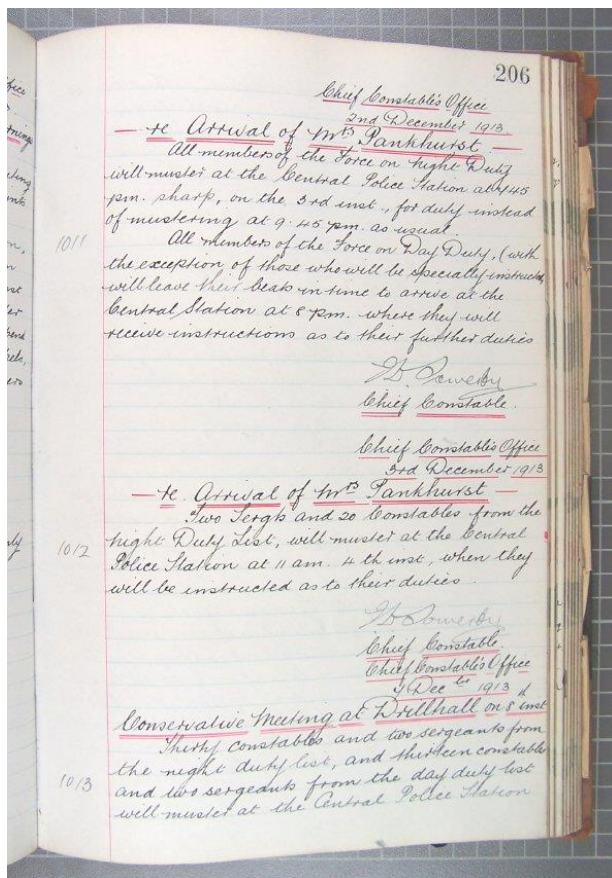
### Sowerby's 'Clever' Arrest

Arguably one of the highlights of Sowerby's illustrious career was his 'clever' arrest of Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst in December 1913. As portrayed in the 2015 film *Suffragette*, Mrs Pankhurst had been arrested, released and re-arrested four times under the 'Cat and Mouse Act' for inciting her followers to set fire to Lloyd-George's golf-villa at Walton-on-the-Hill. She had then gone on campaign to America, raising funds on a lecture tour, which broke the conditions of her licence. She returned to England travelling with an American friend, Mrs Rheta Child-Orr, on the MS *Majestic* which was due to dock at Plymouth. News of the impending arrival had attracted thousands of suffragistes and their more militant sisters, the suffragettes, to Plymouth, and they gathered at various embarkation points around the town to welcome the suffragette leader. The potential for public disorder and protest was high. The Home Office had warned Sowerby of Mrs Pankhurst's arrival and officers from the Metropolitan Police had been sent down to assist the Plymouth force in her arrest.

On Thursday 4 December 1913, the ship dropped anchor in Plymouth Sound. Rather than wait to arrest Mrs Pankhurst as she stepped ashore, Sowerby's plan was to sail out to meet the *Majestic*. He requisitioned a pilot boat from Bulls Point further up the Tamar estuary and accompanied by Metropolitan Police Detective Inspector Hitchcock, two police officers and a wardress, they set sail. Once in the Sound they were followed by a motorboat commissioned by the Women's Social and Political Union whose occupants shouted to Mrs Pankhurst who was leaning on the railing on the upper deck of the *Majestic* warning her 'The cats are here!' According to newspaper reports two

dreadnoughts quickly manoeuvred into position (though it is questionable whether they were actually responding to this incident) and members of the press were informed that they would not be allowed into the vicinity.

Sowerby boarded the ship and approached Mrs Pankhurst who demanded 'Who are you? Have you got a Warrant?' to which Sowerby replied 'We do not require one for arresting you, you know that.' She asked if Mrs Child-Orr, who had sewed \$20,000 (approximately £1 million today) raised by supporters in the United States into her gown to prevent its confiscation by the police, could accompany her. Sowerby agreed and the two women were taken to a quiet point up the River Tamar from where Mrs Pankhurst was taken by motor car to Exeter Gaol, accompanied by the Scotland Yard detectives. Sowerby's handwritten orders in respect of 'The Arrest of Mrs Pankhurst' dated Tuesday 2 December 1913 mustering all night and day duty officers, can be viewed in his General Orders



available at the [South West Police Heritage Trust Archive](#), the former Devon and Cornwall Police archive which is currently being re-launched as a new charitable organization.

Local press headlines immediately praised Sowerby for his actions in frustrating Mrs Pankhurst's supporters, and denying them the opportunity of seeing her and causing trouble in the town. 'How Police Tricked her Bodyguard' and 'All Plymouth is laughing' (*Bristol and Exeter Journal*, Wednesday 10 December 1913); 'The "Clever" arrest at Plymouth' (*Western Times*, Friday 5 December 1913); 'Suffragettes Eluded at Plymouth' (*Devon and Exeter Gazette*, Friday 5 December 1913); 'Mrs Pankhurst at Plymouth: Arrested on Arrival' (*Derby Telegraph*, Thursday 4 December 1913).

However, a few days later the Suffragettes wreaked their revenge on Sowerby. On Friday 19 December, a timber yard on Richmond Walk, Devonport, which had been under surveillance since the arrest, was set alight. The fire caused £12,000 damage (£600,000 today) destroying the yard and adjacent Hancock's pleasure fair. Incendiary devices were found at the site and a witness remembered seeing two women wearing nurse's uniform walk by. A copy of the *Suffragette* was found tied to nearby railings with posters, 'To the Government : How Dare you Arrest Mrs Pankhurst'; 'Votes for Women : An answer to the cowardly arrest of Mrs Pankhurst here'; and 'Revenge on the Government for the arrest of Mrs Pankhurst' (*Somerset and West England Advertiser*, Friday 19 December 1913). As a result, Mrs Pankhurst, who was visiting her daughter in Paris, was re-arrested on her return to London.

Sowerby was now more than ready to retire and spend some time with his wife and family. In 1903 he had managed to secure a salary increase from the Watch Committee to £512 but on condition that he remain in post for another seven years. In 1910 he negotiated his pension and was also relieved of the need to attend all fires personally, other than those of a 'serious nature', such as the suffragettes' arson. However, having served for thirty years, he found the Committee less than receptive in terms of accepting his retirement proposal and future remuneration if he did stay. In 1914 both parties agreed that he would be appointed as Chief Constable for the newly amalgamated Plymouth force from Monday 9 November 1914, with his period of tenure terminating on Saturday 31 March 1917.

He eventually retired having devoted twenty-five years of his life to the people of Plymouth, but was somewhat indisposed and died two years later on Saturday 5 July 1919 leaving his widow Frances. A recent photograph of his gravestone at Ford Park Cemetery hardly reflects his exemplary service to the City and devotion to duty.

Sowerby's broad police experience and qualification, as administrator, firefighter, manager and prosecuting officer in court, is very different to that of his modern day counterparts. As a case study, Sowerby offers a useful comparator in respect of the contemporary and ongoing debate about whether it is necessary and/or desirable that ACPO ranks be required to work their way up from the 'uniform copper on the beat' or directly parachuted in at senior levels from other internal departments and external organisations.





*Sowerby's final Resting Place, Ford Park Cemetery, Plymouth*

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*Each publication has a unique Reference Number, which is quoted in the text, thus [3]; page numbers within each publication are indicated thus [3/12]*

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