

# The Police in the Great War

By PETER HINCHLIFFE

**The First War changed everything in the way of British life. Until that point, in 1914, the British people were a class-conscious society, with each man and woman “knowing their place”, with the entire country divided into those who were educated, the rich, and the uneducated poor. Basic, elementary education was free, but higher education had to be paid for.**

Although the railways had brought some degree of movement, the population was virtually static; you lived where you were born, worked for the local enterprise, and saw your days out being respectful to the same employers, as your predecessors had.

Through Victoria’s reign and the Industrial Revolution, the working man had, if anything, become more subservient. The start of the new century saw the rumblings of discontent amongst the common man, and strikes began to occur. Men demanded a share of the wealth they were creating for their employers. The owners invariably withstood the demands of the workers, and the situation deteriorated to confrontation.

The police were controlled by committees drawn from the people who represented the owners; sometimes the owners themselves

were on the committee. In many cases, the police were used to break the strikes. Discipline in the police was “draconian”, and wastage rates high. The majority of constables did not serve long enough to receive a pension; police pay was below that of a skilled artisan, but there were always plenty of men to recruit from.<sup>1</sup>

In 1911, with the war clouds gathering, meetings were held to discuss the establishment of reserves for the police. One favoured answer was the establishment of the unpaid Special Constabulary, and some planning was undertaken to form a reserve should war break out.<sup>2</sup>

In 1912, the Plymouth Corporation decided that all its employees, including policemen, should have one day off each week. This was around two years before most police forces granted their men one rest day in every fourteen.<sup>3</sup>

In 1913, the Government appointed the General Officer Commanding the Fortress. Initially this was Major General Arthur Penton, who commanded the strategic port and Garrison of Plymouth and the Coastline adjacent to it. The First War was anticipated for some time before it was actually declared.

In January 1914 Penton claimed that the three towns of Plymouth,

Devonport and East Stonehouse should be amalgamated into one local authority, for reasons of military efficiency. There was some initial opposition to his plan. After war was declared on 4th August the General became more forceful, and the unification occurred on 30th November, 1914.<sup>4</sup>

General Penton had far-reaching powers and authority over the Chief Constable, who enforced the General’s orders. In August 1914, the General closed all the pubs in the Plymouth area and they stayed closed for six weeks. When they re-opened, he placed further restrictions, allowing them to sell alcohol between 9.00am and 9.00pm.<sup>5</sup>

In October 1914 Penton ruled that women could not buy drinks after 6.00pm. No civilian could buy drink for a serviceman, and no pub could sell to a serviceman for consumption off the premises. He also created the ‘no treating’ rule, which prohibited the practice of purchasing drink for any other person. In effect, women could not drink after 6.00pm. These rules became nationwide in 1915, enforced by DORA.<sup>6</sup>

There were 185 separate Police Forces in England in 1914. They were really two differing types, City and Borough Forces, comprised of



*The port of Plymouth was the point of landing and embarkation of Empire troops, on their way to and from the Western Front, and was also a major centre for VAD Hospitals treating the wounded and injured*

'professional policemen' and County Constabularies often formed of men with a 'background in the county'. This is illustrated locally by the selection policy of Senior Officers. In Plymouth and Exeter the Chief Constables were career policemen who had served through the ranks of Leeds and Bradford respectively, whilst in Devon there had been a policy of appointing 'gentlemen' (usually military types) directly as Superintendents, to impose their more 'feudal style' on the Constabulary.<sup>7</sup>

The HMI's Annual Report for 1913 shows the strength of the Police in the West Country:

CORNWALL 252 (Specials 208)  
Penzance 15 (Specials 30)  
Truro 12 (Specials 60)

DEVON 440 (Specials 924)  
Barnstaple 14 (Specials 29)  
Devonport 92 (Specials 45)  
Exeter 67 (Specials 58)  
Tiverton 11 (Specials 40)

Plymouth 146 (No Specials recruited at date of report)<sup>8</sup>

It is estimated that about 10% of

all constables in 1914 were former soldiers and military reservists. The declaration of war came after a slow build up, on Tuesday, 4th August 1914, and on this day all the military reservists travelled to rejoin the colours. Every Force sent men; eleven (of the total strength of 67) went from Exeter.<sup>9</sup>

The War Office had issued plans in the event of war that vulnerable buildings and railway installations should be guarded, day and night, by armed policemen.<sup>10</sup>

In Exeter, this posed two problems: they did not have any arms, and there were insufficient constables to man the places that required supervision. The Chief Constable was ordered to buy 12 pistols, despite the national emergency; he could find only two (I think that these two weapons were still in the safe at Heavitree Road in 1966!) To solve the manpower situation, he employed Boy Scouts and paid them a shilling a day, which might have been the start of "Bob a job".<sup>11</sup>

In Cornwall, the Chief Constable advised the force that he had acquired 20 revolvers and 25 rifles from HM Coastguard, and invited

any member of the Constabulary who thoroughly understood the use and care of either of these weapons, and believed he required one, to notify the Superintendent of his division.<sup>12</sup>

The Chief Constable of Exeter was prepared for the war. On Tuesday, 4th August, he cancelled all leave and had every man on duty for the full 24 hours. This continued the following day, and the day after that - three days without a moment's rest! I have been unable to find any documentation to show how the policemen were employed on those days, but assume they were guarding the vulnerable buildings and railways.<sup>13</sup>

The shortfall of men was resolved by recruiting 'Temporary Constables', who were employed on a month's notice. Exeter City recruited 20 men, Cornwall took 17 men, Plymouth 26, Tiverton Borough 6 and Devon County 28 men. These men were paid about the same amount as Constables, with an annual increment. They came with a different view of discipline, and were an early sign of things to come.<sup>14</sup>

1 Ron Peters thesis (SW Police Heritage Collection: 2016.0021.001)

2 Plymouth Borough Watch Committee Minutes for 22nd November 1911

3 Plymouth Council minutes 20th December 1911

4 Plymouth Museum pamphlet ([www.plymouth.gov.uk/4](http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/4))

5 Plymouth Museum pamphlet ([www.plymouth.gov.uk/4](http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/4))

6 Plymouth Museum pamphlet ([www.plymouth.gov.uk/4](http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/4))

7 *Out of the Blue: History of the Devon Constabulary* pp 195-198 by W J Hutchings

8 HMI Reports for 1913 (SW Police Heritage Collection: A2004.04708)

9 *Express & Echo*, 5th August 1914

10 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 25th August 1914

11 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 14th September 1914

12 Cornwall Constabulary General Orders p391

13 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 4th August 1914

14 "One and All", PWC minutes (SW Police Heritage Collection: 1975.00311.001)

The Devon Standing Joint Committee met on 7th August 1914, when they agreed to allow the Chief to recruit 200 of his Specials at 6 shillings a day to guard bridges and tunnels until the Railway companies made their own arrangements. He was later to use Boy Scouts to assist in patrolling the railways, receiving payment for their assistance.<sup>15</sup>

All Magistrates' Quarters Sessions and County Courts were adjourned for two months and closed on 4th August 1914.<sup>16</sup>

The very first casualty of the war in Exeter was PC33 Gilbert Parker, a mounted officer. On 6th August he was supervising a parade of the Highland Light Infantry in Fore Street when his horse was startled by the bagpipes, and threw him off before rolling on him. Parker was off work for several weeks.<sup>17</sup>

The Exeter Temps discovered they were working 67 hours for 27 shillings pay, whilst the Devon Temps were paid 42 shillings for 56 hours. The Exeter men complained to the Chief Constable who tried to resolve the situation, but he could not provide more money. The men did not go on strike immediately, but one turned up for his next shift drunk. He was arrested and placed in the cells. Another was found to be asleep at his post; he too was arrested and both appeared before the City magistrates, where the drunk was given one month imprisonment and the other man warned as to his future conduct, and both were dismissed from the Force.<sup>18</sup>

The use of pedal cycles by police to patrol their beat became official, and men were paid an allowance to use their cycles. In Exeter, all men were paid this allowance and this remained the policy until the amalgamation in 1966.<sup>19</sup>

When a man enlisted in HM Forces as a reservist, volunteer, conscript etc, he was required to resign from



*The Special Constables recruited were not issued with uniforms, they wore an armband and a lapel badge as illustrated*

the Police force (except in Plymouth, where the council agreed that any employee serving HM would be retained, and his military pay subsidised to the equivalent sum of his council pay until he was able to resume his council duties. (I think this enlightened policy came from the influence of the Co-operative society on the Borough Council).<sup>21</sup>

At the start of the War the reservists, in particular, were suffering great hardship. Police pay at that time was about 30 shillings a week. When recalled for active service they were paid the same rate they had achieved before demob, or at the usual rate of 7 shillings a week (whichever was the greater). Most of the men were married with children, and many lived in police houses which their families were forced to vacate.

On 14th September the Exeter Chief Constable called a special meeting of the Watch Committee to express his concern for the welfare of his reservists and their families, who were struggling financially. At the end of a long meeting, the Committee agreed to pay the wives of reservists a subsidy of 12 shillings and each child 3 shillings per week. This was still a shortfall, but a much better result than achieved in Cornwall, where the Standing Joint Committee declared that as the men were no longer policemen their welfare was not of

their concern!<sup>22</sup>

The same day the Committee also issued a warning to any of its constables considering volunteering for military service. They were warned that if they did so they would lose their job, their pension, their seniority, there would be no re-entry to the police until a vacancy arose, and finally, if they were in a police house, their wife and children would be evicted!<sup>23</sup>

In November 1914 the Devon Standing Joint Committee agreed to subsidise their reservists, but they also left the men very much out of pocket.

In 1915 the Exeter Chief was having difficulty in recruiting men for the force. He reported that he had advertised in the *News of the World* and successfully recruited three men. He also reported that he had allowed one Constable to ply his former trade of chimney sweep to subsidise the cost of his growing family.<sup>24</sup>

The Police (Emergency Powers Act) 1915, part of Defence of the Realm Act 1914 (DORA), was brought into force in June 1915 with far-reaching effects on the police. It decreed that all police serving in the military would be paid the equivalent of their police rate of pay. It seems also to have protected their home, if that was police accommodation. The act prevented any man leaving the force, or retiring,

without the permission of their Chief Constable. Later, when conscription was introduced, it allowed Chief Constables to decide which men could be spared from the force, because police forces were becoming seriously depleted.

We have a certificate relating to PC102 William Broad of the Cornwall Constabulary who had volunteered to enlist in December 1915, but the police refused to release him. It is actually signed by the Deputy Chief Constable, because the Chief, Hugh Prothero Smith, had himself been recalled to the Colours as a reservist.<sup>25</sup>

Contrary to the writings of Hutchings in *Out of the Blue*, page 106, I have found that very few, if any, Constables volunteered to join HM Forces before the 1915 Act; most 'transferred to the military' after their pay and future was assured, but still the majority of those who joined the armed forces waited for conscription from March 1916.

The 1915 Act also allowed Chief Officers to nominate suitable men for commissions in the military. The Plymouth Chief nominated six of his men and promoted each of them to Police Sergeant, when they were appointed Second Lieutenants in the army. One man, William Wyatt, he promoted to Police Inspector whilst he was serving at Ypres. Wyatt had never performed duty as a police sergeant.<sup>26</sup>

The war was taking place on the near continent, and it seems that very little was happening in Devon and Cornwall except for a drive to recruit volunteers for Kitchener's New Army. The reality of recruiting was very different from the accounts we now hear of the thousands of men rushing off to get part of the action, before it was all over by Christmas!

The young men in Devon showed little inclination to join the King and Kitchener. The only county to

show less enthusiasm to serve was Cornwall. A recruitment drive was held in Exeter between 7th and 12th December, 1914, when the Mayor had hoped to raise a 'Pals Battalion' of 250 men, to be called "Exeter's own" and part of the 2nd Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment. Although supported by stage productions at the Hippodrome, many parades and the promise of the coming Christmas at home, the week's patriotic effort produced only eight volunteers.<sup>27</sup>



*New 'recruits' coming from the County Grounds sports arena in Exeter?*

The War Office Analysis of Recruiting shows the results for the period until 1915. In Devon, 0.062% of the target population volunteered, whilst in Cornwall it was 0.028%. By comparison, the figure for Warwickshire was 3.72%, which was about the national average.

I wonder if the photos we see of 'enthusiastic' crowds of men queuing to enlist at recruiting offices are genuine, or were they in fact propaganda. Consider the state of photography at that time: such pictures would have to be posed using tripod and cover, not a quick operation as today.

There is also a well-known photograph of 'recruits' coming from the County Grounds sports arena in

Exeter, giving the impression that they had just volunteered. On close examination you can see the men in civvies are keeping a formation that would credit the Brigade of Guards. This would not have been achieved without practice. I cannot believe that they had been enlisted a few moments earlier.

The shortage of police manpower was a problem throughout the war and exacerbated by the introduction of conscription, because the majority

of constables fell into the category of men liable for conscription. Cornwall,

15 Devon Standing Joint Committee minutes for 7th August 1914

16 *Express & Echo*, 4th August 1914

17 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 25th August 1914)

18 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 14th September 1914

19 Ibid

20 Plymouth Borough Watch Committee minutes for 10th August 1914

22 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 14th September 1914

23 Cornwall Constabulary General Orders pp393-394

24 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 25th February 1915

25 SW Police Heritage Collection: A2004 03512

26 Plymouth Borough Watch Committee minutes for 23rd December 1914

27 *Express & Echo*, dated 14th December 1914

Devon and Exeter City lost all their Temporary Constables and many other men. Exact numbers are not available, but it is estimated that over a third of the strength were called up for military service.

The Chief Constable of Exeter attended a London meeting where they discussed the use of police dogs as a solution to the manpower shortage. They were told that the most suitable breed for police work was an Airedale terrier. The Chief reported that he had a mature Airedale and would donate it for use by the Force. Neither the dog or its many handlers received any additional training. Opposite is a photograph of the dog and a PC Bullen on patrol in 1915.<sup>28</sup>

In Plymouth, the General Officer Commanding was concerned that the port and borough may suffer bombing or bombardment, so a scheme was devised so that policemen, using long bamboo poles (a stock of which had been strategically placed around the town), could rush around and extinguish the gas streetlights at the first sign of attack.<sup>29</sup>

When conscription was introduced it was known as the Derby Scheme. Men between 18 and 41 years were required to register, but for varying reasons they were not called up immediately. As they went about their ordinary activities they were sometimes set upon, mainly by young women, and subjected to the 'white feather treatment', implying that they were cowards, avoiding their patriotic duty. Such men could wear an armband to show that they had registered. Young Plymouth constables were issued with a black armband bearing a red crown, which was worn on the left arm.

There was some reluctance to register for conscription, and some men did their best to avoid the call up. It was not uncommon for the police to be involved in actions to

ensure that men had registered. In September 1916, the Truro City Police were involved in such an operation. They attended a film show at The County Picture Theatre in the town. At the conclusion of the film the Chief Constable told all men to remain in their seats; all the doors were locked and every man interviewed to establish whether he was registered for conscription.<sup>30</sup>



The War and the many Orders enacted under DORA were a new challenge for the policeman on the beat. He was required to ensure that such things as the Bread and Cakes Order were complied with. We have an undated newspaper clipping relating to a case initiated by PC Mentry of Topsham, who had visited a local tearoom in plain clothes and ordered afternoon tea. He was served with six slices of bread and butter, clotted cream and jam at a cost of nine pence! The regulations specified that he should have received only two slices of bread and butter. The tearoom proprietor was duly summoned to appear before the local magistrates, where he was fined 3 shillings for breach of the order.<sup>31</sup>

Another offence under the DORA regulations was committed by the upper classes, who were often summoned for "employing a manservant of conscription age".

The X Division of the Devon Constabulary faced an age-old problem that occurs amongst soldiers taking 'Rest and Recuperation'. There was a tented camp close to Kenton to which troops returned from Flanders. It was occupied by various regiments, including at one time some Portuguese soldiers. Nearby there was another camp accommodating some Prisoners of War and some Canadian Military, this camp was engaged in Forestry, supplying timber for use in the frontline trenches. The Canadians had been *in situ* for some time before the Portuguese arrived, and had struck up relationships with the local village girls and were not pleased when the Iberians showed interest in their girls. There followed several incidents which led to a major confrontation between the Portuguese and Canadian soldiers which required several policemen to cycle from their normal beat to Kenton in to assist the military in keeping the peace.<sup>32</sup>

In 1917 the War Office expressed concern about the mainly German monks at Buckfast Abbey, asking the Chief Constable to take action to ensure that the resident monks were in fact *bona fide*, and not some "fifth column".<sup>33</sup>

The industrial scale of slaughter and casualties began to be felt at home. Men were returning with broken bodies and other effects of the conflict which had not been previously considered. Fit young constables were returning on demob as 'broken old men', seeking to take up where they had left off, and some were quite incapable of continuing to perform police duty.

The first man I have found in these circumstances was PC188 Dalling, who had joined the Devon force in 1907 as an Army reservist. He had been recalled in August 1914 but was injured in action and discharged



*Hospital train brings more casualties to the V A D Hospitals in Exeter*

from the Army on 15th March 1915. By 27th April 1916 he thought he was fit enough to return to police duty, but on 22nd January 1918 he resigned due to ill health. He made some recovery and passed a medical examination to rejoin the force on 25th February 1919, but five years later, on 30th September 1924, he was forced to retire on pension due to 'war wounds'.<sup>34</sup>

PC Alexander Rigg returned to Exeter City on 25th January 1916, in receipt of a War Disability Pension of 20 shillings and 9 pence, and sought to rejoin the force. At his medical examination the Police Surgeon decided that he was not fit, but should be given a few months to recover. The Watch Committee gave him 5 shillings and 3 pence a week. After six months he was deemed fit to return to duty, but he was not fit enough to continue and was discharged "unfit through war wounds". He died in 1917.<sup>35</sup>

More than 280,000 men were discharged from the Army as "Invalids" (not including amputees) before November 1918. There are no obtainable figures to show how many of those men died before 1925 (when most war memorials were

consecrated). They are known as the 'Totally forgotten'. Some suggest that the facts and figures have been manipulated by the Government to keep the declared 'War dead' at no more than one million.

Late in 1918, the Government realised that many men returning from the War would be less fit than they were at the outset. The Home Office pleaded with Police Forces to re-employ, wherever possible, suggesting the less fit men be used for supporting roles within the service.<sup>37</sup>

I have found only one example. Devon Constabulary re-employed PC68 Albert Clements, who had originally joined the force in 1912 and volunteered for the Army in December 1915. He was wounded in 1917 and had a foot amputated. He rejoined the force and served at Torquay from 29th January 1918 until he retired on pension in 1938.

At the outbreak of the war, Plymouth Council was generous towards its men who had joined the colours. This generosity did not stretch to its Temporary Constables or to the men who had completed their pensionable service but were

not allowed to retire due to the war.

In most police forces, these 'time served' men were treated as Temporary Constables, paid their pension and re-employed at the rate of a Temporary.

In Plymouth, these men were paid the rate for the rank they held, and could not draw their pension. From February 1918, the 'time served' men were paid an extra 8 shillings a week. In Plymouth the Temporary Constables did not often receive the war bonus paid to policemen at various times through the War.<sup>38</sup>

As the war progressed, many people were engaged in the manufacture of equipment needed by the military, and production was relentless. Wages increased and police pay was left behind, and with the added restriction of not being able to resign and take up a job with better remuneration, discontent within the police mounted. The Government were forced to give more war bonus payments to the police to ensure their co-operation. These were regularly given from 1915 onwards, sometimes amounting to an extra week's pay.<sup>39</sup>

On 8th January 1918 the Home Office called a national meeting at the Castle, Exeter, to discuss discontent

28 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 25th February 1915

29 Plymouth General orders 5th October 1917

30 *Cornwall Gazette*, 16th September 1916

31 Undated newspaper clips in SW Police Heritage Collection: 2017.0009.013

32 Undated newspaper clips in SW Police Heritage Collection: 2017.0009.013

33 Devon Standing Joint Committee minutes for 1917

34 Devon Standing Joint Committee minutes for 31st March 1916

35 Exeter City Watch Committee minutes for 17th February 1916 and SW Police Heritage Collection: A2004.04473

37 Home Office circular 27th November 1918

38 Plymouth Council minutes 7th July 1918

39 Several recorded in Plymouth and Exeter Watch Committee minutes

caused by the pay and conditions in the police forces. It was chaired by the Conservative Marquis of Bath.<sup>40</sup>

By 1918 the country was in turmoil; there was great unrest amongst workers and strikes were commonplace. Much of Plymouth was on strike. Newton Abbot was effected, the clay industry was closed down, the railway was at a standstill, dockers and Council workers all stopped work. Much of Europe had suffered revolution and Britain seemed to be heading in the same direction.

Plymouth had the second largest Co-operative Society in the UK, with numerous retail outlets, and were involved in every aspect of trade and life. They had recently built warehouses and other installations on their own quay and harbour. The Co-op was the major importer of coal for the town, and most industry was dependant on it for supply. They were the largest employer in Plymouth except for the Royal Naval Dockyard. In 1918, in an unprecedented action, the Co-op staff went on strike. Plymouth came almost to a standstill.

On 7th July 1918 the Plymouth Chief Constable advised the Watch Committee that there had been a meeting of all ranks of his men to discuss their pay and conditions, and he had agreed to the formation of a committee to further their cause.<sup>41</sup>

A Police Union had been formed. It initially had difficulty in recruiting members, but by August 1918 it had about 6,000 members in the Metropolitan Police and some in the major cities. On 30th August there was a strike at a police station in London. It was reported in the press that the strike was restricted to one station, and all the men who had taken action had been dismissed. This was an example of manipulation of the truth by the press, and proved to be lies.<sup>42</sup>

The Metropolitan Police at that time were 12,000 strong, and the following day several thousand were 'not available for duty'. (Press reports vary between 6 and 10 thousand). Prime Minister Lloyd George was forced to intervene. The Met's Commissioner Sir Edward Henry resigned immediately, and all police were granted a 'war bonus' of about a week's extra pay. All the strikers were re-instated.<sup>43</sup>



*Striking Police Constables*

By the end of September 1918, the membership of the Police Union had reached 50,000. In the Heritage Collection, we have personnel records for Exeter City, which indicate that the majority of Constables were subscribing members of the Union.<sup>44</sup>

The strike led to the establishment of the Desborough Commission, which examined all aspects of the police. In effect, it brought the service into the modern era, introducing national standards of pay and conditions. It gave the police a substantial pay rise.

Because the records are not available, I cannot say exactly how many policemen from Devon and Cornwall served in the military forces during the Great War. Several men served as Drill Instructors on secondment from their police force. I estimate that over 350 West Country policemen enlisted. 27 were killed. I cannot establish how many men were unable to continue their police career due to injury sustained in the war.

The Special Constabulary in Plymouth was abolished on 1st February 1919.

Several men recruited as Temporary Constables returned to the police force after military service and continued to serve as policemen; one in Exeter became the Deputy Chief Constable.

At the start of the war Plymouth had no policewomen; the wives of constables were employed on an ad-hoc basis to search and oversee detained female offenders. Representations were made to the Council that women should be appointed to serve in the Police. Foremost in these came from the Womens Co-operative Guild.

When the Watch Committee decided not to employ women, various other women's organisations joined the campaign, advocating the need for a female presence in policing. Some Christian groups, and others concerned with morality, were providing ladies to accompany the police on patrol, "to give advice to young soldiers found in the company of prostitutes, or to offer guidance to young women of the flapper type."

In June 1919 two women were appointed by Plymouth Borough Police, they were Inspectress Carney and Policewoman Taylor.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Express & Echo*, 8th January 1918

<sup>41</sup> Plymouth Council minutes 7th July 1918

<sup>42</sup> There is much information online

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> *Cornwall Gazette*, 16th September 1916

<sup>45</sup> Plymouth Council minutes 22nd December 1915; 24th January 1917; 20th June 1917; 19th June 1918; and 9th February 1919



**PETER HINCHLIFFE is a volunteer at South West Police Heritage Trust, a retired Policeman who served with Exeter City, then Devon and Cornwall Police.**