

THE COLLECTOR'S TALE

M.H. Simms

A retired police officer, who now possesses one of the largest private collections of memorabilia in Britain

"Oh my God, not another load of rubbish."

That is my wife Jean, from the kitchen as I struggle from the car with a load of "Police Gazettes", circa 1910, "Police Reviews", (1875) and the pocket books of a Camarthen constable of the 1870's. I've got to admit that they do look a bit scruffy, having just been rescued from a coalshed in the wilds of Gwent! I can't blame my wife for her thoughts; after all, they were the thoughts of most Chief Constables and senior officers of the police force in the past, hence the disappearance of a large chunk of police history into the yard fire at headquarters stores.

Who am I? I consider myself as a police officer (albeit retired) who is interested, nay, passionate, about police history and about collecting those items which will be the police history of the future. I have been more fortunate than most, inasmuch as I have been able to open my own Police Historical and Modern History Museum. It started many years ago - (is it really thirty-two?) - with an exchange of a Leicester City helmet plate and like the proverbial Topsy, it "just grew and grew." When I married in 1969 the Metropolitan Force Newspaper, "The Job", ran the lead line in half-inch letters - "Marry me, marry my uniforms." I was known as a bit of a nut-case collector in those days; a cry from a contact in Bradford City, or some other town, "Better be quick - they're burning all the old uniforms." - sent me North, paste-haste, in the hope of rescuing another bit of history.

A lot of our history has been destroyed in this way and I now get weekly calls: "Can you help us with our exhibition - we've got nothing left, and we want to put on some kind of show." This gives me hope that the most humble P.C. and the most senior officer are beginning to take an interest in police history; after all, what better public relations exercise is there, than having an "open day" at the police station, with a few old uniforms, belts, handcuffs, etc., scattered about the place? The public,

especially children, start asking questions of the P.C. on duty. They have never spoken to a policeman before, and when he gets into his stride they find him quite human.

My collection, now partially housed in the Winchcombe Police Museum, is estimated to have raised over £38,000 for charities since its inception, and it has travelled throughout Europe, America, Japan and Australia, as well as to many functions in this country; it normally returns a little worse for wear, and has to be cleaned, repaired, etc. The postman calls regularly at my home, or at the museum, with another parcel - the chap who visited the collection last month from Los Angeles, (or Germany, or New Zealand, etc.) has sent his uniform! My store room at home (a converted cow-byre) is once again starting to look like the Quartermaster's store; the question is, has anyone got a spare museum going free?

It is surprising how many Townswomens' Guilds, Womens' Institutes and schools are now requesting evening lectures and talks about the police and police history, because they have visited the museum, and want to know a bit more, This always brings forth the call, "My grandfather had a police truncheon (whistle, pocket book, etc.), I'll dig it out and drop it in at the museum." It does, however, also achieve the object that a member of the public has spoken to an (albeit retired) member of the police force and has come away with the impression that "they are just like us after all" having heard a few stories of the horrors of night duties when the cat knocked off that dustbin lid, or your first sudden death, and THAT post-mortem.

"So what's this all about?" I hear you say. Remember that holiday/conference/trip you had to Germany/France/Italy a few years ago and you had a few drinks with the local constabulary and they later gave you a badge or cap? What have you done with it? It's on the top of the wardrobe, isn't it? Why do you keep it? Just for memory's sake? So YOU are a historian/collector too. Remember, I started just the same way all those years ago!