

# Women Policing the Area of Avon and Somerset Constabulary, 1916-1945

By CLIFFORD WILLIAMS

**During the First World War, the idea of women police was promoted by people such as Margaret Damer Dawson (1874-1920), a wealthy philanthropist and campaigner on women's issues. She set up women's patrols to deal with two issues arising out of the war. The first was an influx of Belgian refugees; the second was prostitution and molestation of women and girls around the army camps that had sprung up in Britain.**

Damer Dawson established the Women Police Volunteers in 1914, changing the name to the Women Police Service (WPS) early in 1915. The government utilised the WPS to police the munitions factories.

In addition to the WPS, Voluntary Women Patrols were created and organised by the National Union of Women Workers, later called the National Council of Women. These voluntary patrols sprung up all round the country, including in Bath, Taunton and Bristol, during World War One. They often worked with the approval of the local Chief Constable, but they did not wear 'police uniform', usually just an armband. The patrols concerned themselves with girls and young women; protecting their

decency and preventing molestation by soldiers. In some towns and cities they provided clubs for young women and girls to meet in safety. As such they were not policewomen, but many of those who took part on such patrols went onto become policewomen.

The voluntary 'preventative' patrols in Bristol were organised by Geraldine Cooke (lent by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies; NUWSS). Flora Joseph was involved in organising and promoting patrols in Somerset and in particular in Weston-super-Mare and Bath. One woman on patrol was Miss Lenny Smith, an artist, who patrolled Taunton and Bristol. Miss Joseph was clear that the patrolling women were 'neither Rescue workers or Detectives', and that 'one of our duties is to walk up and down the danger zones of the places we are in and by the mere fact of our presence avert evil.'<sup>1</sup>

The preventative 'social work' of the NUWW and similar groups was not seen as police work as such. Only when women were involved in investigating offences and taking action according to the criminal law could they be viewed as 'police'. However, they did take on a 'quasi police' role and some patrols pushed

the boundaries and identified themselves, or were known, as 'the women police'.

Lock (2014) and Jackson (2014) describe the political differences between the women's organisations and the complexity of women's involvement in policing during and after the First World War.

Whether or not a police force employed policewomen was usually down to the wishes of the Chief Constable and the Watch Committee. Some were happy to have the patrols of the NUWW preventing nuisances and crimes against women and girls, but did not feel the need for women to be involved in dealing with women and children as witnesses. Others saw the usefulness of having policewomen to take statements from women and children, particularly in matters of indecency. Many forces resisted having policewomen, and it was not until the Second World War that the government required each force to at least have a Women's Auxiliary Police Corps (WAPC). The majority of police forces did not employ any policewomen until the Second World War. Many Chief Constables argued that policemen's wives and matrons could do the work which otherwise

would be done by more expensive paid police women.<sup>2</sup>

Bristol is important in the national history of women police. A training school for policewomen was set up in Bristol (BTS) in 1915 on the initiative of Flora Joseph, who had already founded the Somerset District Nursing Association, and who from her home in Bath was involved in advising on women's patrols. Flora Joseph, Dorothy Peto and the Bristol Patrol Committee found a suitable small house in Bristol for training.<sup>3</sup> They appointed Mrs Gent as director of the school. They approached Miss Margaret Damer Dawson (based in London), and took many of the ideas for the BTS from the WPS in London.

However, the WPS and the Bristol Training School did not see eye-to-eye and split in 1916. The BTS continued to train women for patrols but did not actually supply the Bristol Constabulary with their first policewomen. They provided shorter courses for voluntary patrol women. Some of their students ran women's patrols in Somerset, and although these patrolling women were neither officially appointed or sworn in, they wore a police-type uniform. They were known as 'the Lady Police' in Taunton, Weston-super-Mare and Clevedon, and were referred to as 'Super Patrols'.

The Training School's Annual report of 1917 states;

*We have already trained and placed the following women, 23 in all;*

*Bath 2 Policewomen members of the City Force.*

*Coventry 2 Policewomen " " " .*

Others listed are either Munitions Policewomen or voluntary women patrols. Taunton, Clevedon and Weston-super-Mare were provided with trained patrol women.<sup>4</sup>

Miss Dorothy Peto, who later served in Birmingham City Police,

went on to become head of the Metropolitan Police Women. In her memoirs, she described the voluntary patrols she took part in as 'having no police powers to deal with crowds, we learned to combine bluff with discretion'.<sup>5</sup> Many prominent early policewomen trained in Bristol.



*Bristol P W Doris Denbury 1921.  
Doris married Walter Montague in 1922.*

*Photograph reproduced courtesy of  
Avon and Somerset Constabulary History  
and Heritage Group*

### Bristol Constabulary

The first policewoman appointed in what is now the area policed by Avon and Somerset was Mary Richardson. She was appointed by Bristol Constabulary on February 10th 1916. She was followed soon after by Patience Lawrence and Alice M. Robinson. All three were appointed as 'Lady Detectives'. During the course of the next few war years, the Bristol force employed another 29 'Lady Clerks', including Ethel Gosney, Elsie Wagland, Doris Denbury and Kathleen Richardson.<sup>6</sup> 'The first

uniformed woman constable appears to have been employed on August 10th 1917 and by the following year there were eight of them.'<sup>7</sup>

They formed a separate police unit and it was said that the Bristol policemen 'did not look upon the women police as part of themselves, though they have every respect for them. The women police are a sort of force apart.'<sup>8</sup>

Woman Superintendent Jesse Ferguson of the Bristol City Police submitted a written statement to the 1920 Baird Committee. She was one of the first women Superintendents in the country. The Baird Committee concluded; 'We consider the experience of the War has proved that women can be employed in the performance of certain police duties which, before the War, were exclusively discharged by men.'

Many police forces who had employed police women during the First War decided that they no longer needed them when the war ended.

1 Miss Joseph also recommended carrying whistles 'as they do in Bristol' but 'never to use them except in case of extreme emergency'. Letter from Miss Flora C Joseph to Mrs Carden 11 February 1915. (Metropolitan Women Police Association Archive). Extracts are reproduced by permission of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime.

2 See Derek Oakensen (2015) 'Antipathy to Ambivalence; Politics and Women Police in Sussex, 1915-45' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 153 pp.171-89. Also Williams 2016 p 34.

3 The Bristol School was set up in September 1915, first at 77 Queen's Road and later based at 6 Berkeley Square (Burlton and Byrne 2014; page 109; and page 111 of this book shows a class in progress).

4 *Bristol Training School for Women Patrols and Police Annual Report* for year ending August 31st 1917, page 2.

5 Peto 1992 pp.10-15 'On the Beat in Bristol'.

6 Bristol Record Office ref POL/St/4/4. Ethel Gosney served for five years, retiring to get married in 1922. CID officers presented her with an oak biscuit barrel as a wedding gift on her retirement (*Western Daily Press*, 1 July 1922).

7 Burlton and Byrne (2014); p.108.

8 Baird Committee 1920: Committee on the employment of women on police duties (Cmnd 877).



*Bristol Constabulary Policewomen around 1919 including Florence Beatrice Kathleen Rawlings (rear row on far right).*

*Florence Beatrice Kathleen Rawlings, known as 'Rawlie', joined Bristol Constabulary on May 1st 1919 and served until August 1950. At her retirement she was the longest serving policewoman in the country. She earned the British Empire Medal.*

*Photograph reproduced courtesy of Avon and Somerset Constabulary History and Heritage Group*

The employment of policewomen dropped again after nationwide police budget cuts of 1922.<sup>9</sup> Bristol Constabulary, however, continued to employ policewomen in the inter-war years. In 1919 they had 13 unattested police women, rising to 14 the following year. But following the 'Geddes cuts' the numbers dropped.

In 1930 Bristol Constabulary were employing five policewomen at a time when only seven police forces in England were employing five or more policewomen. Somerset had none. Gloucestershire had eight (the highest number outside London). The following year, Bristol had six policewomen.<sup>10</sup> In February 1932 the Bristol policewomen were given the power of arrest.

In 1935, Bristol still had six policewomen; four in uniform and two plain clothes. There were also four female warders at the Central Station.<sup>11</sup>

The *Western Daily Press* of Thursday, 25 August 1938 reports of a case where WPC Daisy Horner visited

a fortune teller to collect evidence. The fortune teller, Mrs Stella Street, who told Daisy she would live to be over 90, was successfully prosecuted. Before she was sentenced, Mrs Street complimented WPC Horner on the



*Bristol Constabulary Policewomen in 1936; there were six policewomen - four in uniform, two in plain clothes.*

*(from The Policewoman's Review Vol 9 no 12).*

way she gave evidence, and said that she 'was too young and pretty for the police force'. There was laughter in the court house. Mrs Street was fined £3 with 10s costs.<sup>12</sup> The use of policewomen undercover to detect offences such as this appears quite common at the time.

### Gloucestershire Constabulary

During the First World War, Damer Dawson's Women's Police Service reached an agreement with the government to provide police women for the munitions factories around the country. When the war ended, many of these munitions police women joined police forces such as Gloucestershire, where the Chief Constable was a strong supporter of policewomen.

Gloucestershire then included parts of what are now Avon and Somerset's police area. For example, from 1928 until 1936 Miss Rosa Rouse was based at Staple Hill, Bristol, headquarters of the Bristol Division of the Gloucestershire

force. Rosa originally served in the Bristol Constabulary but was attracted to Gloucestershire because of the opportunity to patrol on motor bicycles (and they also paid more). Her work consisted mainly of taking statements in all cases of indecency, and offences against women and children, and attending to, and conveying, all female prisoners. Her advice was often sought by 'mothers and mistresses in respects of daughters and maids who are uncontrollable or in trouble.'<sup>13</sup> She travelled round her district by motorbike, for which she received a petrol allowance. Miss Rouse later wrote up her memoirs, and extracts of these were published in *Police Review* in 1984.<sup>14</sup>

### Somerset Constabulary

I have referred earlier to the voluntary 'Super Patrols' which covered parts of Somerset during World War One. The patrolling women wore a form of 'police uniform', although they were not officially policewomen.

In 1921, the Somerset Chief Constable reported that 'it would be doubtful economy to employ police women generally' and that he felt the police men could do any work policewomen might do ('with or without the assistance of their wives').<sup>15</sup>

In 1933, the Chief Constable of Somerset 'allowed the appointment of a member of the Woman's Auxiliary Service [name by which the WPS was known after 1921] to assist the worker for the Society of the Welfare of Women and Girls of Weston-super-Mare during summer holidays. She will be engaged mainly in patrol work and will wear uniform.'<sup>16</sup>

In 1934, when Somerset had no official policewomen, the County Federation of Women's Institutes passed a resolution urging their appointment 'in the interests of



*Believed to be a member of one of the Somerset voluntary 'Super Patrols'*

*Photograph reproduced courtesy of Avon and Somerset Constabulary History and Heritage Group*

women and children.'<sup>17</sup> By the beginning of WW2 Miss Alice Baker was serving in Somerset.<sup>18</sup>

### Second World War

The Home Office gave authority for the appointment of Women's Auxiliary Police Corps (up to 10% of the approved establishment of a force) in 1939. At this time, few women were appointed Special Constables.

Gloucestershire and Somerset were quick to create WAPC sections. Somerset decided to have a full strength of forty-two in uniform

(10% of the force).<sup>19</sup> The Bristol Constabulary also employed Auxiliary Police Women.

The WAPC was created by the Home Office to allow women to replace men in clerical, telephone, wireless, driving, vehicle repair and maintenance tasks in police stations and force headquarters.<sup>20</sup> Auxiliaries were not sworn in as constables, although as the war progressed a number were sworn in as temporary constables.<sup>21</sup>

Mabel Hephzibah Cowlin, a Bristol woman and former schoolmistress who had been involved in women police in Liverpool (up until 1927), was back in Bristol during the Second World War campaigning to get more women police in Bristol. In a letter dated 2nd July 1943 to Mrs Peel of the National Council of Women, she wrote; 'Two of our 7 policewomen have been working for 20 years here and not one of the policewomen has

<sup>9</sup> Cuts known as 'The Geddes Axe'. The Geddes Committee on National Expenditure recommended disbandment of women police (see Lock 2014 ch 16).

<sup>10</sup> *Policewoman's Review*, February 1931 Vol 4 no 46.

<sup>11</sup> Annual Report of the Chief Constable for the year ended 31 December 1935.

<sup>12</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 25 August 1938.

<sup>13</sup> *Policewoman's Review*, March 1930 Vol 3 no 35. I am grateful to Sue Webb, who was working 'for the Record' Project of Gloucestershire Constabulary, for details of her service record.

<sup>14</sup> Rosa Mary Rouse born 15th August 1903, joined Gloucestershire Constabulary in 1927 and served until 1941. *Police Review*, 14 September 1984 and 21 September 1984. A scrapbook kept by Rosa Rouse from 1928-1932 is held at Gloucester Archives (Ref Q/Y/1/28), along with a photo album (Q/Y/1/29).

<sup>15</sup> *Wells Journal*, 7 January 1921.

<sup>16</sup> *Policewoman's Review*, August/September 1933 vol 7 no 4 /5 (joint edition).

<sup>17</sup> *Policewoman's Review*, June 1934 vol 8 no 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of 2 September 1939 announces that Miss Baker, already serving with the Somerset Police, is appointed to serve in Bath.

<sup>19</sup> *The Police Review*, 20th October 1939.

<sup>20</sup> Ingleton (1994) p.179.

<sup>21</sup> Ingleton (1994) p.180.



*Bristol Constabulary WAPC 2nd World War.*

*Photograph reproduced courtesy of  
Avon and Somerset Constabulary History and Heritage Group*

been given the rank of a sergeant.<sup>22</sup> The following year the strength of women police in Bristol improved and more APW were appointed.

After the war, both Somerset and Bath City police forces recruited policewomen.

Marion Stewart, who was a Land Army girl during the conflict, joined the Somerset Constabulary at the end of the war. In 1955 she transferred to Hampshire and had distinguished service there and in Cyprus.<sup>23</sup>

### **Bath City**

Bath City Police was a separate force until 1967. The force had employed some notable policewomen during the First World War.

Florence Mildred White (1873-1957), who became Salisbury's first policewoman, trained at Bristol and then served briefly in Bath. She joined Birmingham City Police in 1925.<sup>24</sup>

Ethel Gale, who was born in Bristol in January 1885, served (unattested) in Bath (May 1917-May 1918) before transferring to Gloucestershire where she became the first woman Sergeant in that county. She served in Gloucestershire until July 1929.

Florence Glover was appointed as an unsworn policewoman for Bath in 1916, and later went to Coventry.<sup>25</sup>

Quite why they did not stay long in Bath needs to be examined by more research. During the inter-war years Bath had no women police. In 1925 the Watch Committee examined the issue, and concluded that there is 'not sufficient duties appropriate to women to justify the appointment of a policewoman.'<sup>26</sup>

Bath did employ policewomen during the Second World War. In 1939, they advertised and had 20 applicants for two posts.<sup>27</sup> In 1943 Policewomen Coombs and Spriggs

were serving.<sup>28</sup> In November, the number of policewomen was doubled from two to four, and by September 1944 there were six policewomen (including APW).

### **Conclusion**

The early years of women policing presents a confused and very fragmented approach across England. Avon and Somerset's current police area demonstrates the variety of types of women police and 'quasi police', as well as the differences between police forces. This was often due to the personal views of Chief Constables. Individual forces such as Bristol Constabulary and Gloucestershire Constabulary were very supportive of having policewomen as part of their organisation. Somerset County were less supportive, and Bath City appears to have been partially supportive (only employing policewomen during

the war years).

Bristol Constabulary distanced itself from the First World War Women's Training School, but the fact that the school was set up in Bristol, and trained many women who went on to become policewomen elsewhere, is another reason that the City is so important in police women's history.

Much research is still to be done in this field. Archive material is still coming to light, and like so much police historical material is often uncatalogued and sometimes inaccessible.

22 Letter from Mabel H. Cowlin (1877-1960) of Park Cottage, Cleve, Bristol, to Mrs Peel at the National Council of Women, London. In a further letter of 1st June 1944, Mabel Cowlin reports that 'the town clerk has now informed me that the Watch Committee has decided to increase the numbers of regular policewomen to 17 (includes one with the rank of Sergeant or Inspector) and the number of attested WAPC from 2 to 6. That is a great step forward'. This correspondence is held by the Metropolitan Women Police Association Archive and I am grateful to Sioban Clark for allowing me access to it. Extracts are reproduced by permission of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime.

23 Williams (2016) p.44.

24 Brazier and Rice (2017), and *The Reflection in the Pond; A Moonraking Approach to History* by Dr John Chandler (The Hobnob Press, 2009) page 93.

25 *The Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of 5 August 1916 reported that Miss Glover had recently been appointed. Peto (1992) p.20 mistakenly states she was appointed in 1918.

26 *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 3 January 1925.

27 *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 3 June 1939.

28 *The Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of 10 April 1943 reported a case where PW Coombs and Spriggs (on special duty) detected three women stealing from shops. In all 200 items were recovered and one of the women was sentenced to 4 months' imprisonment.

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### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Alan Vowles of Avon and Somerset Constabulary History and Heritage, Sue Webb (Gloucestershire) and Sioban Clark (Metropolitan Women Police Association).

Avon and Somerset Constabulary History and Heritage Group have a impressive collection of digital images on Flickr.

Gloucestershire also have many photos and associated information on a new website: [gloucestershirepolicearchives.org.uk](http://gloucestershirepolicearchives.org.uk)



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## WRITING POLICE HISTORY

### The joys and sorrows of writing a book on the British Police during the First World War

Dr Mary Fraser, Honorary Secretary at the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow, has started writing a blog to record progress on a book she is currently writing about the British Police during the Great War.

Entries to the blog so far have included food shortages in 1917 and police involvement, the struggles of the policeman's wife as she attempted to feed her family, as well as related topics such as Mary's experiences of researching and obtaining copyright permissions.

Follow Mary's progress at [writingpolicehistory.blogspot.co.uk](http://writingpolicehistory.blogspot.co.uk)

