

Tracing police ancestors: a basic guide

Essex County Constabulary.	
RECORD OF SERVICE.	
NAME <i>Robert George Simpson</i>	Number <i>101</i>
Date of Appointment <i>1st January, 1896</i>	<i>& joined rank on 1st September 1896</i>
Age on Joining <i>20 years</i>	Previous Occupation <i>Railway Porter</i>
Place and Date of Birth <i>Bank, Kentham 20th February 1876</i>	Title of Marriage <i>1st October, 1896</i>
Height <i>5 feet 11 inches</i>	Children: M. <i>2</i> F. <i>2</i>
Chest <i>36 inches</i>	Particulars of Public Service <i>Essex Police 1st January 1896 to 1st March, 1900</i>
Complexion <i>Fair</i>	Length of Service <i>10 years</i> <i>Essex</i>
Eyes <i>Grey</i>	Date of Discharge
Hair <i>Black</i>	Date of Discharge from Service
Religion <i>Anglican</i>	Where and with Whom last Employed <i>Essex Railway</i>
Amount of Weekly Wages <i>4/6</i>	Medals and Decorations
Next of Kin <i>Wife</i>	Pledges from Service
Address <i>14, Kentham Road, Kentham</i>	Special Qualifications
Education	Date of Ambulance Certificate
Police Surgeon's Certificate.	
I hereby certify that I have examined the above Candidate as to his health and bodily strength, and consider him fit for the Constabulary of this County.	
Signed <i>E. B. G. Surgeon.</i>	
Date <i>1st January, 1896</i>	
Approved of and Sworn in before me:	
Signed <i>E. B. G. J.P.</i>	
At <i>Essex</i>	
Date <i>1st January, 1896</i>	



Tracing police ancestors

The first point to note is that there are no national records of police officers' service: each force was, and still is, independent. It is therefore essential to know in which force, or at least in which area, your ancestor served. Second, only the Metropolitan Police and Royal Irish Constabulary files are subject to the *Public records Act*. For other forces, any surviving records will be held either by the present-day force for the area or by the local record office. Third, all these records are subject to a closure period of up to 75 or 100 years, usually counting from the officer's date of birth or his date of joining/leaving

Metropolitan Police

The records are not complete but those that survive are at the National Archives (TNA) ¹. They include registers of officers joining and leaving the force. Met pension registers are available online at <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/metropolitanpolice/>. There are no comprehensive files giving an officer's entire police career: each register only records a specific event (eg his joining the force), so you need to search them all for the most complete information. TNA produce a research guide to these records ². The link between them is the officer's warrant number, issued to him when he joined and, when he left, never re-issued. If he re-joined, he was given a new warrant number. A constable or sergeant also had a collar number, originally worn on the uniform collar and, from the 1950s when the uniform changed, on the shoulder. It included the letter of the division to which he was attached and each division used its own set of numbers, so there would be a PC 99A, 99B etc. If he transferred to another division, he got a new collar number and his original number would be re-issued to someone else

The Metropolitan Police Museum ³ has other records, including Police Orders recording commendations and dismissals, and Divisional Ledgers for some divisions. It also holds Central Record of Service sheets from the 1930s to the 1980s onwards, but these can only be accessed by the officer or his/her next of kin, due to Data Protection regulations

City of London Police

This force's personnel records are almost complete from 1832 and are held at the London Metropolitan Archives ⁴. Warrant books list name, age, marital status, collar number, division to which posted, dates of joining and leaving and reason for leaving. Personnel files include address, parish of birth, parents' names and addresses, physical description and details of any previous military, police or railway service. A short guide gives more information about these records ⁵

Royal Irish Constabulary

The RIC existed from 1816 to 1922, when it was split into the Royal Ulster Constabulary (now the Police Service of Northern Ireland) and Garda Síochána. TNA hold service records for all officers and men of the RIC and produce a detailed guide to them ⁶. They usually include the man's full name, age, height, religion, native county, dates of appointment and retirement, and counties in which he served

The Royal Irish Constabulary ⁷ is an index to these records, giving each man's service

¹ Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DU. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

² <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/london-metropolitan-police-british-transport-police-railway-police/>

³ Marlowe House, 109 Station Road, Sidcup DA15 7ES. policemuseum@met.police.uk

⁴ 40 Northampton Road, London EC1R 0HB. www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma

⁵ *Records of City of London police officers. Information leaflet 43*

⁶ www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/royal-irish-constabulary/

⁷ Herlihy, Jim. *The Royal Irish Constabulary: a complete alphabetical list of officers and men 1816-1922*. Four Courts Press, 1999. ISBN 978-1851825028

number, by which they are arranged. There are also pension records from 1873 to 1922

Other UK forces

Survival of records from other police forces is more patchy. There have been over 500 separate police forces in the UK since 1829, around 300 at the peak in the 1850s. Many were small, sometimes less than a dozen men, and short-lived, being merged voluntarily or compulsorily with a neighbouring borough or county. Smaller forces are unlikely to have had any detailed personnel records. Fortunately, in city and borough forces, the formal appointment, promotion and discipline of constables was a function of the Watch Committee and the minutes of their meetings often contain the only record of individual officers' careers. These minutes can usually be found in the local record office but may need a lengthy search: they probably won't be indexed by name. County forces were managed by a police committee of the magistrates in Quarter Sessions until 1889 and by a standing joint committee of magistrates and county councillors after that. However, these committees did not have the same powers over appointments etc (this was all done by the chief constable), so their minutes seldom mention individual officers

The personnel records that do survive tend to vary according to the size of the force. Small forces often simply had a bound ledger, with printed spaces for name, dates of joining and leaving etc, with each man on a separate page, usually in numerical order. Large forces were more likely to have individual forms or files, as well as or instead of numerical registers. The numbering system also varied. Large forces often used unique warrant or register numbers (similar to the Metropolitan Police), with or without re-usable collar numbers. Cities such as Liverpool and Manchester also had divisional letters. Small forces generally only used collar numbers

Where to start

As mentioned above, you have to know the force or area in which your ancestor served: without this information, you have no chance of finding anything. If the force no longer exists, you can check which force now covers the area by consulting *The British police*⁸ which lists all 500 forces, with dates of formation and abolition and the forces into which they were merged. For contact details for the current force, go to www.police.uk which has links to the websites of all forces. The force website will give an e-mail or postal address for enquiries and may have pages on the force's history. Some forces have transferred their records to a force museum, which may be run as a separate organization: the website should tell you this. Others have passed them to the local record office: for their addresses, go to www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon

Boundary changes

As well as the mergers of whole police forces that are listed in *The British police*, most parts of mainland Britain have seen major and minor changes to local authority boundaries. For example, as cities and boroughs grew in size, they frequently expanded to take in parts of neighbouring areas. When that happened, responsibility for policing those areas usually passed to the enlarged authority. A police officer based in the area taken over may have remained with his original force (but moved to a different place) or may have transferred to the new area's force. In the latter case, the record of his service with the original force will probably have remained there. It will certainly have done so if it was in a bound volume with other officers' records. You may, therefore, need to check the records of more than one force. A detailed list of local authority boundary changes up

⁸ Stallion, Martin and Wall, David. *The British police: forces and chief officers 1829-2012*. 2nd ed. Police History Society, 2011. ISBN 978-0951253861

to 1974 was published in *Guide to the local administrative units of England*⁹. There do not appear to be any equivalent lists for Wales and Scotland

Contacting forces and record offices

Having identified the force in which your ancestor served, you should make a *brief* enquiry to the current force or record office, giving the officer's full name, date of birth, warrant or other number and where he served. Resist the temptation to recite all the family stories about him or a list of everywhere you've already tried, still less a full family tree: the person dealing with your enquiry will not have time to read it. If they need more information, they will ask for it

What you can expect

1. Service records. If you are lucky and a full service record survives, it will contain a wealth of information. Personal details usually include full name, date and place of birth, physical description (colour of hair and eyes, height, complexion), previous occupation, parents, wife and children. Career details will cover pay increases and promotions, postings to different divisions or stations, commendations for good work, disciplinary offences (*eg* being late for duty), training received, reason for leaving (being drunk was a fairly common reason in Victorian times) and possibly pension details and date of death. It may even include a photograph

2. Myths debunked. "Grade inflation" seems to be very common in family history: no police ancestor was ever just a PC, they were all sergeants or inspectors! Those who really were sergeants or inspectors are "remembered" as superintendents or chief constables. In fact, only about 1 in 10 police officers ever rose above the basic rank of constable and fewer than 3 in a thousand made it to the top rank of chief constable

3. Charges. If you are unable to do the research in person, you will probably have to pay for research time. You will certainly have to pay for copies of documents and photographs. Many police museums are now run as charities and are not funded by the force: their charges may include a contribution to running costs, as well as the actual cost of copying

What you should not expect

1. A rapid answer, especially from a police force. Your enquiry will be one of hundreds received by the force each year and will understandably have a lower priority for them than preventing and detecting crime. It may well be dealt with by an officer or staff member with an interest in police history, working voluntarily in his or her own time

2. "Casebooks". Only fictional detectives keep casebooks. In real life, each crime will have been recorded in a ledger or a separate set of documents, filed or indexed by the offender or type of crime, not by the names of officers involved, and, unless of special interest or importance, eventually destroyed. In any event, only about 10% of police officers ever became detectives and most of their cases will have been for theft, burglary etc. For uniformed officers, the cases will have been even more humdrum: shoplifting or riding a bike without lights. If your ancestor's name is unusual, you may be able to trace local newspaper reports, *eg* of court cases in which he was involved. The British Library has two websites with digitised and searchable full texts of 19th century newspapers. You can use the *British newspaper archive*¹⁰ free in their Reading Rooms or at home on subscription (*eg* £6.95 for 2 days). *19th century British newspapers* is managed by Gale

⁹ Youngs, Frederic A. *Guide to the local administrative units of England. Vol 1: Southern England.* Royal Historical Society, 1979. ISBN 978-0901050670. *Vol 2: Northern England.* RHS, 1991. ISBN 978-0861931279

¹⁰ www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

Cengage: your local public library may subscribe to it, giving you free access in the library or at home

Men only?

Until the end of World War 1, the only police officers were men. During that War, there were two groups of unofficial policewomen: the Women's Police Service and the Women Police Special Patrols run by the National Union of Women Workers and other organizations. Most forces wanted nothing to do with them but a few employed women from one of these groups and you may find brief references to them in force or Watch Committee records. At the end of WW1, some of these women were taken on as "proper" policewomen, although they did not get full police powers until the 1920s. Some forces, such as Essex and East Riding, did not employ policewomen until after World War 2

Other police staff

As well as full-time, regular police officers, most forces had a number of other employees, but records of them will probably be much less detailed, if they still exist at all

Special constables are part-time, voluntary police officers. They are unpaid, but during the two World Wars some forces employed full-time, paid specials. The special constabulary within a force has its own rank structure, although the names have changed back and forth over the years: sometimes the regular rank titles were used with the addition of "special" (*eg* special inspector), at others there were titles such as divisional officer

During WW2, the loss of men to the armed forces and the added burden of war-time duties led to the creation of four uniformed, auxiliary services

War reserves: temporary police officers who joined for the duration. They rarely had any previous police experience and there was no rank structure: all were constables

First Police Reserve: recently retired regular officers, who volunteered to return at their former rank and pay

Women's Auxiliary Police Corps: mostly did office or switchboard work but some did street patrols, although they had no police powers

Police Auxiliary Messenger Service: youths aged 16-18 who used their bicycles to carry messages during air raids and did office work the rest of the time

Cadets were introduced after WW2, originally boys only but later girls were eligible. The minimum age for a police officer was 19, so many potential recruits who left school at 16 found other careers and the police service needed to avoid this loss. Cadets wore uniform and did clerical work in police offices and stations, as well as receiving training in police duties

The Metropolitan Police employed **civilians** from the very beginning: the first clerk was appointed before the first police officer. In other 19th century forces, the only civilian employees were manual workers such as cleaners or grooms and matrons to look after female prisoners. Paperwork was dealt with by police officers, often with special ranks such as Clerk sergeant. Later, there were typists and switchboard operators but it was not until the 1960s that forces outside London employed large numbers of civilians as administrative and technical staff

Private police forces

Many commercial organizations and local authorities had their own police forces, although their powers usually only extended to their own premises and the surrounding area. Most **railway companies**, of which there were hundreds in the 19th century, had at least a few police officers, originally to act as human signals at the lineside but later to do

more conventional policing duties such as preventing theft from trains and goods yards. These forces were gradually merged as the parent companies were amalgamated and they now form the British Transport Police ¹¹. Staff records of many pre-nationalisation railway companies, including their police officers, are now at TNA. However, each company's records are separate, so you need to know which railway employed your ancestor. *Railway ancestors* ¹² lists the TNA references of any staff records for over 900 English and Welsh railway companies

Other private police forces existed for *canals, ports, harbours, parks and markets*. Many of the canal, port and harbour forces became part of the British Transport Police; others remained independent and some, such as the Port of Tilbury Police (formerly the Port of London Police), still exist. If the parent organization no longer exists, their records may be in the local record office

Finding out more

Two good guides to researching police ancestors are *My ancestor was a policeman* ¹³ and *Tracing your police ancestors* ¹⁴. To learn more about the general history of British policing, try *The great British Bobby* ¹⁵ and *A history of the British police* ¹⁶. *The British police* ⁸ lists about 750 histories of individual forces. Police officers' biographies and memoirs can help to give a picture of life in the job. *A life of crime* ¹⁷ lists over 500 of them, including force, rank and date

There are police museums in all regions of the UK, both official force museums and general museums with a significant collection of police material. They have displays and stores of uniforms, equipment, documents and photographs, which can all add to your background knowledge. Sixty of them are listed, with their addresses, opening hours, facilities etc, in "*Appointments!*" ¹⁸

© 2014 (revised 2020) Martin Stallion. Not to be copied or reproduced without the author's permission

¹¹ Force website www.btp.police.uk. British Transport Police History Group www.btphg.org.uk

¹² Hawkings, David T. *Railway ancestors*. History Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0750950589

¹³ Shearman, Antony. *My ancestor was a policeman*. Society of Genealogists, 2000. ISBN 978-1903462003

¹⁴ Wade, Stephen. *Tracing your police ancestors*. Pen and Sword, 2009. ISBN 978-1844158782

¹⁵ Emsley, Clive. *The great British Bobby: a history of British policing from the 18th century to the present*. Quercus, 2009. ISBN 978-1847249470. *Paperback* Quercus, 2010. 978-1849161978

¹⁶ Cowley, Richard. *A history of the British police: from its earliest beginnings to the present day*. History Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0752458915

¹⁷ Stallion, Martin. *A life of crime: a bibliography of British police officers' memoirs and biographies*. 3rd ed. The author, 2013. ISBN 978-0957676015

¹⁸ Stallion, Martin. "*Appointments!*": *a guide to police museums in the UK*. The author, 2012. ISBN 978-0951818480

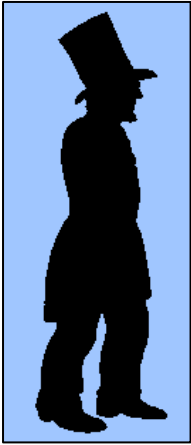
UK police forces and their addresses

Website *

These are postal addresses and may not indicate the location of the HQ building

Avon and Somerset Constabulary, P O Box 37, Valley Road, Portishead, Bristol BS20 8QJ	avonandsomerset
Bedfordshire Police, Woburn Road, Kempston, Bedford MK43 9AX	bedfordshire
Cambridgeshire Constabulary, Hinchingsbrooke Park, Huntingdon PE29 6NP	camb
Cheshire Constabulary, Clemonds Hey, Oakmere Road, Winsford CW7 2UA	cheshire
City of London Police, Guildhall Yard East, London EC2V 5AE	cityoflondon
Cleveland Police, Shared Service Centre, Ash House, Ill Acres, Princeton Drive, Thornaby, Stockton-on-Tees TS17 6AJ	cleveland
Cumbria Constabulary, Carleton Hall, Penrith CA10 2AU	cumbria
Derbyshire Constabulary, Butterley Hall, Ripley DE5 3RS	derbyshire
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, Middlemoor, Exeter EX2 7HQ	devon-cornwall
Dorset Police, Winfrith, Dorchester DT2 8DZ	dorset
Durham Constabulary, Aykley Heads, Durham DH1 5TT	durham
Dyfed-Powys Police, P O Box 99, Llangunor, Carmarthen SA31 2PF	dyfed-powys
Essex Police, P O Box 2, Springfield, Chelmsford CM2 6DA	essex
Gloucestershire Constabulary, No 1 Waterwells, Waterwells Drive, Quedgeley, Gloucester GL2 2AN	gloucestershire
Greater Manchester Police, Openshaw Complex, Lawton Street, Manchester M11 2NS	gmp
Guernsey Police, Hospital Lane, St Peter Port, Guernsey GY1 2QN	guernsey
Gwent Police, Croesyceiliog, Cwmbran, Torfaen NP44 2XJ	gwent
Hampshire Constabulary, Police and Fire HQ, Leigh Road, Eastleigh SO50 9SJ	hampshire
Hertfordshire Constabulary, Stanborough Road, Welwyn Garden City AL8 6XF	herts
Humberside Police, HQ, Priory Road, Hull HU5 5SF	humberside
Isle of Man Constabulary, Dukes Avenue, Douglas IM2 4RG	<i>iom.police.im</i>
Jersey Police, La Route du Fort, St Helier, Jersey JE2 4HQ	jersey
Kent Police, Sutton Road, Maidstone ME1 5 9BZ	kent
Lancashire Constabulary, P O Box 77, Saunders Lane, Hutton, Preston PR4 5SB	lancashire
Leicestershire Police, St Johns, Enderby, Leicester LE1 9 2BX	leics
Lincolnshire Police, P O Box 999, Lincoln LN5 7PH	lincs
Merseyside Police, P O Box 59, Liverpool L69 1JD	merseyside
Metropolitan Police, New Scotland Yard, Victoria Embankment, London SW1A 2JL	met
Norfolk Constabulary, Jubilee House, Falconers Chase, Wymondham NR18 0WW	norfolk
North Wales Police, Glan-y-don, Colwyn Bay LL29 8AW	north-wales
North Yorkshire Police, Alverton Court, Crosby Road, Northallerton DL6 1BF	northyorkshire
Northamptonshire Police, Wootton Hall, Northampton NN4 0JQ	northants
Police Service of Northern Ireland, Brooklyn, 65 Knock Road, Belfast BT5 6LE	psni
Northumbria Police, Middle Engine Lane Police Station, Wallsend, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE28 9NT	northumbria
Nottinghamshire Police, Sherwood Lodge Drive, Arnold, Nottingham NG5 8PP	nottinghamshire
Police Service of Scotland, P O Box 2460, Dalmarnock, Glasgow G40 9BA	scotland
South Wales Police, Cowbridge Road, Bridgend CF31 3SU	south-wales
South Yorkshire Police, Carbrook House, 5 Carbrook Hall Road, Sheffield S9 2EH	southyorks
Staffordshire Police, Weston Road, Stafford ST18 0YY	staffordshire
Suffolk Constabulary, Martlesham Heath, Ipswich IP5 3QS	suffolk
Surrey Police, P O Box 101, Guildford GU1 9PE	surrey
Sussex Police, Church Lane, Lewes BN7 2DZ	sussex
Thames Valley Police, Oxford Road, Kidlington OX5 2NX	thamesvalley
Warwickshire Police, Newbold Terrace, Leamington Spa CV32 4EL	warwickshire
West Mercia Police, Hindlip Hall, Hindlip, P O Box 55, Worcester WR3 8SP	westmercia
West Midlands Police, P O Box 52, Lloyd House, Colmore Circus Queensway, Birmingham B4 6NQ	west-midlands
West Yorkshire Police, P O Box 9, Laburnum Road, Wakefield WF1 3QP	westyorkshire
Wiltshire Police, London Road, Devizes SN10 2DN	wiltshire

* All force website names (except Isle of Man) are in the format www.name.police.uk.
Example: www.avonandsomerset.police.uk



POLICE HISTORY SOCIETY Registered Charity 295540

The Police History Society was formed in 1985 and now has around 250 members in the UK and overseas. They include serving and retired police officers, academics, writers, as well as organisations such as police forces and museums. The Society welcomes anybody who has an interest in police history

Although not an official police organisation, it does receive considerable enthusiastic support and encouragement from members of the police service. Our Patron is Lord Stevens (former Metropolitan Police Commissioner) and our President is Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

Our aim is to promote a general interest in police history and to act as both a focal point and network for anyone with an interest in the subject. For those interested in police museums, there is a specialist section with its own activities

We publish four *Newsletters* a year and an annual *Journal*, which contains articles on a wide range of subjects: force histories, famous cases, biographies etc. We actively support research and offer small grants for relevant projects. Projects supported in the past include oral history interviews, digitisation of Victorian photographs and a study of police harassment

We hold an annual weekend conference which includes the AGM, a formal dinner, the presentation of several talks, the chance to meet and talk to other members, and a visit to a local museum

For more information about the Society, write to the Secretary, 42 Pepper Street, Inkberrow WR7 4EW or visit our website at www.policehistorysociety.com. For membership enquiries, the Membership Secretary is at 4 Glenlea Close, West End, Southampton SO30 3FD

