The History of Thames Valley Police

THAMES VALLEY POLICE
formerly known as Thames Valley Constabulary
Formed 1 April 1968

Reading Borough Police
(1836-1968)

Berkshire Constabulary
(1855-1968)

Buckinghamshire Constabulary
(1857-1968)

Oxford City Police
(1869-1968)

Oxford County Constabulary
(1857-1968)

Berkshire Constabulary
Abingdon Borough
(1836-1889)
Maidenhead Borough
(1836-1889)
Newbury Borough
(1836-1875)
New Windsor Borough
(1836-1947)
Wallingford Borough
(1836-1856)
Wantage Borough
(1828-1856)

Oxfordshire County Constabulary
Banbury Borough
(1836-1925)
Chipping Norton
(1836-1856)
Henley Borough
(1838-1856)

Buckinghamshire County Constabulary
Buckinghamshire Borough
(1826-1889)
Wycombe Borough
(1849-1947)

Visit Thames Valley Police Museum at www.thamesvalley.police.uk
BERKSHIRE Constabulary was formed on 4 December 1855.

Constables were given a greatcoat, cape and badge, coat with badge, two pairs of trousers, one pair of boots, one hat and one stock. Small cutlasses were distributed for personal protection.

Constables were disciplined for misbehaviour, in particular drunkenness. The Chief Constable had to dismiss one constable for being drunk in the company of prostitutes, and in the first 10 years of the Force, 85 men were disciplined for drunkenness.

Constables were expected to attend at least one religious service every Sunday, duty permitting. “as it should be remembered that among a rural population the Constabulary exerted a great influence by setting a good example which they could not do if they neglected the first duty of man.”

1862 saw the introduction of a new system of night patrolling. This year was an unlucky one for PC Newhook. He lost his staff, handcuffs and watch in a drinking booth at Ascot. He did not tell his Inspector and unfortunately for him the Chief Constable found out they were in the possession of a man in Surrey. PC Newhook had to buy a new staff and could not be promoted for 12 months.

In 1880 Metropolitan Police were sent to help Berkshire Constabulary with large numbers of robberies and burglaries. The initiative led to an embarrassment during the Jubilee celebrations; a policeman guarding Queen Victoria’s carriage was directed to precede the procession from Slough to Wallingford police

Windsor police in 1904
Windsor and clear the road. When he arrived at Eton High Street he saw well dressed people on Windsor bridge and rode his horse straight at them, preventing the Mayor and VIPs from welcoming the Queen.

In 1888 some businessmen in Abingdon were defrauded of £600 worth of goods. The culprit was traced to Tasmania, but Supt Robotham was not deterred by this and went to Tasmania to bring the offender back. He called at Rio de Janeiro on his return and the prisoner escaped. Crestfallen, the Supt returned to England as he had left – alone. He was not blamed by the Watch Committee and when the Abingdon Borough Force amalgamated with the Berkshire Constabulary, he became Deputy Chief Constable, so his prestige had not suffered unduly.

In 1914 Berkshire had its first visit from the London Suffragettes who burned down a church in Wargrave. At 3am in the morning on Whit Sunday the church was found to be on fire and only the walls and tower were left standing. Supt Goddard and his men found postcards from the Suffragettes which said: “A reply to torture” and other Suffragette slogans lying around in the church.

In April 1949 Sulhamstead House and grounds were sold to Berkshire County Council for use by Berkshire Constabulary as their headquarters. They moved into the ‘White House’ in May 1952, having spent 96 years in Reading. Buying and adapting the property was estimated to cost £53,000. Sports grounds and 30 police houses were built.

In 1968 Berkshire Constabulary joined four other forces to become Thames Valley Police.
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE Constabulary was founded in 1857 and Captain Willoughby Carter was the Force’s first Chief Constable.

Captain Carter was a strict disciplinarian and soon made his mark on the Force. A man arriving one minute late at his conference point was fined two shillings and sixpence.

Officers were required to properly observe the Sabbath. Every officer was expected to attend a church service at least once on Sunday and to record the fact in his weekly diary – a practice that didn’t cease until 1934.

Captain Drake was appointed Chief Constable of Buckinghamshire Constabulary in 1867 and experienced problems with officers’ drunkenness. Officers once took over an inn on their way back from pay parade, locking the doors against the public. The Chief Constable urged his superintendents to point out to their men the evils of drink.

The Weekly Rest Day Act was passed and Buckinghamshire officers were shocked to be given one out of every 28 days off. Officers were flabbergasted – some said that they would lie in

Bucks motor patrol 1929

Amersham police office

1915 – Supt John Pearman of Aylesbury on the Force’s first motorcycle
bed for most of the day, enjoying this unaccustomed luxury to the full. This eventually led to officers being given one day in seven off when the Act came into force in 1914.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Buckinghamshire Constabulary began to use forensic science. In 1910 William Broome murdered an old woman in order to steal the money she carried round in her apron. When he strangled the victim, she kicked and scratched and dug her fingernails deep into the murderer’s face. The traces of flesh found under the woman’s fingernails were crucial in convicting the murderer.

Buckinghamshire Constabulary officers were well supported by members of the public. Local inhabitants gave retiring and transferring police officers generous gifts. This reached a peak in the early 1920s and the practice was discontinued by order of the Standing Joint Committee. The matter came to a head when a public house was found to display the following notice:

“...please give the price of half a pint to this policeman who has looked after us drinking boys very well and we know very well and we know we shall miss him very much. All donations over the counter with your name and address if you like.”

During the Second World War Two, Buckinghamshire Constabulary’s headquarters security relied on a dozen officers with limited military experience. The constables were issued with rifles and told to man the windows, shooting invaders from the sky. During one of the surprise tests things went wrong. A member of the public was about to enter the main doors when they were suddenly slammed in his face, bolted, barred and barricaded. The irate man was told that this had been done out of necessity, not rudeness.

In 1968 Buckinghamshire Constabulary joined four other forces to become Thames Valley Police.
OXFORD City Police was formed on 1 January 1869. Mr Charles Head from the Metropolitan Police was appointed Superintendent in charge of the Force of 25-30 men.

Previously the city was policed by two different forces: the “Watch and Ward” set up by the Watch Committee policed during the day, and the University Force took over at night. Their main duty was to prevent intruders entering the colleges and apprehending students who returned late to college.

Oxford City’s first headquarters was at Kemp Hall, Carters Yard, High Street. They moved again at the turn of the century to premises behind the Town Hall and their entrance was on Blue Boar Street.

The Force had to tackle the problem of tramps who frequented the city. They were attracted by the university, begging from the rich undergraduates and scavenging from the colleges. In 1909 the Chief Constable’s report shows that 14,772 tramps were admitted and discharged from the casual wards in the Workhouse. These “homeless wayfarers” accounted for the numerous charges of vagrancy and posed a significant problem to the Force.

The police also had to mediate between the Town and Gown. One of the oldest recorded battles was in 1355 when there was a riot between the two factions.

It began with a brawl at a tavern in Carfax, with the townspeople ringing the bell at Carfax tower and students ringing the bell at St Mary’s Church, which then led to violent disorder.

Thousands of wild country people swept into town, buried students in muck heaps, scalped chaplains,
attacked a procession of friars and killed 63 students. Town and Gown riots have continued. The most recent riot was in 1980, resulting in several students appearing in court. During the riot the Fire Brigade was called to Turl Street, hemmed in and pelted with flour – there was no fire. None of the students were found guilty.

Oxford’s first policewoman, Miss Grace Costin, joined in 1917. Miss Costin was used to working primarily with women and girls, although the Chief Constable insisted she was trained in general police work as well.

Oxford City Police was one of the first forces to pioneer motor patrols. In May 1928 they took to the road with a Sunbeam long stroke motorcycle. The motorcycles, bought in 1929, were reinforced with locally bought Morris and MG Midget cars.

Oxford’s most famous case was a kidnap attempt in 1938 on Lord Nuffield, owner of the Morris plant in Cowley.
The kidnapper, John Thornton, needed an accomplice but made the mistake of choosing one who, when he heard the plan, went immediately to the police and worked as an informer for them.

Thornton planned to arrange a meeting with Lord Nuffield and hand him a letter with strict instructions. Nuffield, having read and obeyed the letter, was to be driven away, blindfolded, gagged and later padlocked and chained. He was to be taken to Pin Mill in Suffolk where Thornton had a hired motor yacht. On board the yacht Lord Nuffield would have been forced to write a letter authorising Thornton to collect the ransom money from Nuffield’s bank. The plan was foiled by the police who arrested Thornton. He was later sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment.

The demands on the police grew in Oxford and an operational unit was established in Cowley in 1966.

In 1967 the Chief Constable established the first ever Drug Squad in the country. A drugs problem had arisen in the university and it was the squad’s job to stamp it out. The squad not only carried out investigations, but its members gave lectures on the problem to all kinds of outside organisations.

In 1968 Oxford City Police joined four other forces to become Thames Valley Police.
OXFORDSHIRE Constabulary was formed on 25 March 1857.

The Chief Constable was responsible for a Force of 88 officers – three superintendents, seven inspectors, six sergeants and 72 constables. The Chief was paid £300 a year with an extra £100 for travelling expenses. The constables were paid 17 shillings a week.

Charles Mostyn Owen from Shrewsbury was the first Chief Constable, and Constable No. 1 was Frederick Grey who was stationed at Headington village.

Oxfordshire Constabulary was organised into three divisions – ‘A’ division included Headquarters, Bullingdon, Henley and Watlington; ‘B’ division comprised the areas of Ploughley, North and South Wootton, Banbury and Bloxham; ‘C’ division was made up of Bampton East and West, Chadlington and Banbury South.
There were also inspectors stationed at Bicester, Chipping Norton, Neithrop and Woodstock, with sergeants working from Burford, Deddington, Henley and Thame. The first Oxfordshire Constabulary headquarters was based in New Road, Oxford.

Conditions of service were hard. An extract from the Chief Constable’s Instruction Booklet at the time said: “Every constable, when his usual hours of patrol are over, will at once return to his own quarters to take necessary rest. Unless his services are required elsewhere…he will be expected to be found at his quarters until the hour for patrolling returns.”

The Chief Constable also directed that all members of the Force should attend ‘divine worship’ on Sundays and state in their journals when and where they had done so, or their reasons for non-attendance.

Mr Owen retired in July 1888, aged 70, after serving 31 years as Oxfordshire Constabulary’s first Chief Constable.

During the early years of the Force there are records of officers having to deal with striking farm workers, a ‘plague of tramps and vagrants’, rioting in Bicester and supporters of the Suffragette Movement.

Between 1917 and 1920 the beginnings of a traffic department were formed by replacing horses and carts with motorcycles and side cars. Telephones were installed in police stations and houses, electricity replaced gas lighting at headquarters and oil lamps carried by constables were swapped for electric torches.

During the Second World War the work of the police increased. There was a rise in crime, a greater number of road accidents and more work in connection with military operations.
But peace brought its problems too. Immediately after 1945 there were difficulties in recruiting new officers and a housing shortage. Crimes and road accidents continued to increase at a time when retirements and resignations constantly exceeded new appointments. A training department was set up to cater for the changes from war to peace.

To improve efficiency, a photographic and scenes of crime section was created, a central registry filing system for information was introduced and an accelerated building programme approved.

Over the next two decades there was a series of Force reorganisations until 1968 when Oxfordshire Constabulary joined four other forces to become Thames Valley Police.
**Reading** Borough Police was formed on 21 February 1836.

The Force consisted of 34 officers – two inspectors, two sergeants and 30 constables. Constables were paid two shillings a day.

In 1836 the population of Reading was about 18,000, so each constable was a guardian of the peace for about 600 residents.

Patrolling officers were issued with lanterns to probe the darkness of doorways and alleys where the criminals lurked, rattles for sounding the alarm and summoning assistance, and staffs for clouting rowdy offenders.

A Chief Constable was appointed after Reading Borough Force had been running for three years in 1839. He was Sergeant Henry Houlton from the Metropolitan Police. One of his first tasks was to rid the Force of undesirable elements –
people who had joined to take advantage of the “perks” like free drinks from publicans.

The Force’s police station was at 6 Friar Street. Prisoners were kept in the decrepit nave of Greyfriars church, which was divided lengthwise by a wooden wall, with male prisoners on one side, female on the other. They lay on bundles of straw and were fed on bread and water. In 1846 minor offenders were still being put in the stocks in the Butts and pelted with eggs. Public hangings were occasions of gruesome amusement.

By 1862 Reading was changing, prisoners were no longer kept in Greyfriars Church and they were more or less humanely treated. Prisoners were given cells that admitted light and air and had beds and blankets.

The new century saw a new problem, traffic. Before only horse transport had been a problem. Now the Chief Constable’s reports made reference to bicycles, electric tramways and even the occasional motor car. Gradually the volume of traffic rose so its regulation imposed yet another duty on the police.

Technological developments also changed the service. The Chief Constable had a telephone installed in his house in 1897 (although communication between him and his clerks was still by speaking tube). In 1904 the first typewriter was installed for the clerk’s office and in 1906 a system of photographing prisoners was introduced.

In 1912 the Valpy Street station was bought from Reading University. It had accommodation for 27 policemen and a magistrate’s court in the same block.
The First World War depleted the Force considerably. In 1918 there were 30 officers left out of 113. Yet in 1920 Reading Borough Police was given a further duty and became the official film censor. Officers were responsible for watching and reporting on large numbers of films and whether they were suitable for the Reading audiences.

During the Second World War there were further reductions in the strength of the Force, as officers went to fight in Europe. The reduction was dealt with by the First Police Reserve and the Police War Reserve.

Peace brought problems too. There was a shortage of men and a shortage of houses to put them in. Many of the officers returning from war were married and had been apart from their wives for a long time. They didn’t want to be separated any longer, so if there wasn’t a prospect of a house in Reading they looked for a job in a place where there was one.

In 1961 Reading’s dog section began with two Alsatian puppies which were trained and then began work in January 1962. Their job was tracking, searching and standing guard when cash was being delivered at banks.

In 1968 Reading Borough Police joined four other forces to become Thames Valley Police.
Thames Valley Police has a museum at the White House, Sulhamstead (near Reading, Berkshire), formerly headquarters of the Berkshire Constabulary and now the Force’s training centre.

The museum has displays on the history of Thames Valley Police and the five police forces that merged to form it: Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxford City, Oxfordshire and Reading Borough. The museum collection also includes costumes, photographs, police memorabilia and other items of interest, such as material from the Great Train Robbery. The museum curator organises visits to the museum and is also available to visit schools and other organisations throughout the Thames Valley with material from the collection.

To find out more about the museum log on to: www.thamesvalley.police.uk/aboutus/aboutus-museum.htm

The museum is open from 9am to 3pm, Monday to Thursday, or any other day by arrangement with the curator. **Visits to the museum are by appointment only.**

To make an appointment email: corporate.communications@thamesvalley.pnn.police.uk, or telephone on 01865 846578, or write to:
The Curator
Thames Valley Police Museum
Sulhamstead House
Sulhamstead
Reading, RG7 4DU

The museum does have a charging policy in order to cover some of its costs. Details are available from the curator.
In the early part of the 18th century the Manor of Sulhamstead, surrounded by 1,800 acres, was owned by the Earl of Abingdon. The manor was once part of the Royal Forest of Windsor and Hungerford. It was sold to Daniel May and he built Sulhamstead House in 1744. The building has evolved over the years into today's white neo-classical mansion, with its distinctive portico of Ionic columns.

In 1800 the house was sold to the Thoytes family who remained there until 1910 when Sulhamstead House was sold to William George Watson. The Watson family lived there until 1940 when the War Office occupied the building for a short period for the initiation of the Commando Troop Headquarters. Late in 1941 it was taken over entirely by the Air Ministry for use as an RAF Elementary Flying Training School.

Parts of the estate were auctioned off in 1943, 1948 and 1949, when Sulhamstead House and 13 acres of grounds were sold to Berkshire County Council. In 1952 Berkshire County Constabulary took up residence on the estate after 96 years based at Reading.

Sports pitches were soon laid out in front of the Georgian mansion and 30 police houses built. In 1968 when the Berkshire Constabulary and four other forces from Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire merged, the house passed into the possession of the new Thames Valley Constabulary (later Thames Valley Police).

The White House, as it is affectionately known within the Force, has been a landmark police building for over 50 years. It is now the Force's training centre and also houses Thames Valley Police's museum.