

## ***Beats, Boots and Thieves***

A book about police history requires an enormous amount of research, this book is no different and it is the culmination of Sharnbrook Local History Group's efforts over the last two and half years.

It is the fifth project undertaken by the Sharnbrook Local History Group which is well supported by residents of Sharnbrook and the surrounding villages.

How did the history of policing in the village become a target area? There was probably no one reason but the contributing factors certainly included the fact that the old Police Station/Court House is still very prominent every time you drive down Sharnbrook High Street. Also relevant was the fact that there are examples of police officers in local family histories hence this occupation jumps off the page when researching census data or other family history sources. Finally, there was the fact that there was a recently written a history of the Bedfordshire Constabulary to celebrate their 150th anniversary.

What is the scope of the project? It was clear the location could not be restricted solely to Sharnbrook because Sharnbrook was the focal point for many of the surrounding villages. The geographical scope of the project needed to cover a wide area north of Bedford.

It was realised that all officers who served in this newly defined area should be included and also any residents/people born in Sharnbrook who served in police forces elsewhere.

The project team identified three main parts of the research:

- **Organisation:** the structures that supported law and order over time and the ease or difficulty of transition from one structure to the next
- **Events:** primarily the crimes committed and the response of the justice system
- **People:** the individuals who served in these organisations, what roles/functions they performed and what responsibilities they had.

Initial background research showed that this type of project targeting a specific and narrow part of the history of policing in the County had been done for the two Boroughs, Bedford and Luton, but had not been done for any of the villages of North Bedfordshire.

Contact was made with the Police Museum and Archive Unit at the Bedfordshire Constabulary HQ in Kempston. They were aware of what records relating to Sharnbrook had already been deposited and whenever they found anything new over the last 18 months they have kept the Society informed.

This led to the County Record Office where there was expertise on Military/Police history, expertise in Sharnbrook history and a partially indexed catalogue of police records. Some of the records from Sharnbrook Police Station survived both the closure of the station and the previous non-systematic handling of old records at County HQ. What proportion of the records survived can only be surmised when we get to the end of the project!

The stories of individual officers, including some from Bedfordshire, highlighted both the comradeship between officers and the complex relationship with the general public. The 'copper' could be both hated and appreciated. Later in the project, crime data was collated and analysed for patterns, and advice and assistance was sought from academia and there was the help and encouragement from the villagers themselves and the various inputs from the descendants of the police officers.

**Published by Sharnbrook Local History Group. ISBN 978-0-9574154-0-9, 146 pages, price £10, and obtainable from 24 Loring Road, Sharnbrook, Bedford MK44 1JZ. Further information:**

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