

Leamington Spa Borough Police Special Constabulary



Special Constables are not the relatively new institution that many people suppose. They date back as far as Anglo-Saxon times, when communities policed themselves, hundreds of years before the Police Force that we know. The modern Special Constabulary was created by Act of Parliament in 1673, but in Leamington and district it wasn't until 1824 that one of the first uses of 'Specials' was recorded, when Constables were sworn in for duty for a single event, their expenses and those of the swearing-in being paid by the Parish Committee. The 'event,' almost the 'flash mob' of its day, was a balloon ascent by Charles Green the celebrated Aeronaut, from the Bowling Green Inn on Tuesday 18 May 1824, where by midday a crowd of about 14,000 people had assembled to watch the ascent. (The balloon passed over Southam later that afternoon and landed eventually at Milton in Northamptonshire). Given the size of the crowd and the excitement a balloon would have generated, it is fair to assume that the Specials were on duty most of the day. Details of other use of Specials at this time are hard to come by, but it is likely that they were employed whenever there was an election, when feelings between opposing parties often ran high, with predictable results.

In 1911 there was a nationwide railway strike. The then Home Secretary, one W S Churchill, suggested to various Chief Constables that they should prepare a reserve force. To this end, archive documents show that Leamington Borough Police ordered in 21 sets of equipment, – a badge of office, a truncheon, a whistle and handcuffs, – but only 11 men were sworn in on 27 March 1912. Whether these 11 men did any duties or were given any training has been difficult to discover. At the beginning of WW I, 17 members of the regular police force were called up for service, and owing to the increased duties and shortage of men, Chief Constable T T Earnshaw issued an appeal to members of the public to come forward and join the Specials without pay. Of the original 177 volunteers, 44 subsequently enlisted or were called up. A system of patrols was drawn up and the remaining men worked in pairs, on duty for four hour shifts. Three men were detailed to report to each of the Sub-stations in Union Road and in Lillington. First and foremost, the Specials' duties were to watch vulnerable points such as railway bridges, the gasworks, public buildings, and generally assist the regular police force. They were also required to man the fire engines, based at High Street Police Station, whenever the siren sounded.

In 1929 a medal presentation acknowledged "duties most loyally carried out in all weathers and often at great personal inconvenience until the termination of the war." Amongst those receiving medals were a number of prominent local businessmen, – G H Budd of A T Tomes Printers, H J Dawson, Funeral Director, P H Woodward, H J Wackrill, George Bradford, Charles Southorn, Charles Burridge, Roland Salt and Leonard Tustain. At the end of the war, many Specials had carried on to form a Reserve, continuing to assist the regular force. Other than a cap, they were not yet issued with uniform, as can be seen from the 1921 photograph of a Special on duty in St Mary's Road, supervising local scouts as they prepared to leave for their annual camp, and the 1930s image below, showing Specials at the far right of the uniformed regulars .

img003 (800x509)At the beginning of WW2, further specials were recruited and again gave valuable assistance to the Borough Police. Training classes were held and uniform slowly issued.

GIn 1945, Chief Constable Mr W Rees (1943 -1947) reported that "In 1939 the call went out for recruits. 369 came forward but it was decided that a maximum of 110 was sufficient. Early in 1942 it was decided to make the Specials a self operating unit and appointments were made, including Lt-Col A G Leach as Commandant. They worked a total of 222,097 hours and 23 Specials exceeded 2000 hours of duty. The Specials were always ready and willing to assist in the policing of the Borough. They have provided escorts on special occasions, some have given assistance to the CID, while others placed their cars at police disposal."

img003 (800x471)A mobile section was formed, including Percy Johnson the Garage owner and the Blackwell brothers who were fishmongers in Regent Street. From 8pm until midnight the mobile section patrolled a prescribed route, half the section on odd dates and the other half on even dates. A group photograph taken in 1944 includes Commandant Lt-Col Leach, Inspectors Prue, Renwick and Tustain, Sergeants Dennis, Gould and Rickett, and Messrs Bentley, Blackwell, Budd, Bullock, Chalk, Collins, Devis, Griffiths, Gulliman, Langley, Nathan, Pither, Reader, Starr, and Wells. After WW2, a core stayed on. Under the Police Act of 1946 Leamington Borough Police became part of Warwickshire Police. Commandant Leach resigned on 31 March 1947, and the division then became Warwickshire Special Constabulary, Leamington Division, as from 1 April 1947 with Mr A Harvey as Commandant.

Terry Gardner

(Commandant Leamington 1991-1996)