



The British Police and Home Food Production in the Great War

Police as Ploughmen, 1917–1918

Mary Fraser

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To Peter and Jane who have always been so supportive

PREFACE

Interest in the history of the British Police is developing apace. Embedded in the social and political culture of the time, police work is often surprising and shows their compassionate nature as well as their tough character. They are unique individuals, and as a service they illustrate how to manage the population in times of crisis, calming frightened and distressed people without adding to the trauma of the situation. The police are autonomous from government, responding to national emergencies by understanding the public mood. This explains why one of the best-known phrases about their role is: the police are the people, and the people are the police.

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During preparation of this book many people have offered an opportunity to present the initial findings and I have gained valuable feedback from the interactions, they include The Social History Society conference 2019; The Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow 219th lecture

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ABBREVIATIONS

DORA	Defence of the Realm Regulations
FPD	Food Production Department
HC Deb	House of Commons Debates
HL Deb	House of Lords Debates
MP	Member of Parliament
POW	Prisoner of War
TNA	The National Archives at Kew
WAC	War Agricultural Committee
WAEC	War Agricultural Executive Committee
WWAC	Women's War Agricultural Committee

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

This book introduces the social and political background to the release of British policemen from their everyday police duties to help agriculture during the last two years of the Great War. It was a time of national crisis not least of which was potential population starvation, to this extent I show how the police managed the population on the Home Front. It reveals why policemen were needed in the developing crisis and the gulf in the agricultural labour force that they helped to fill. Whereas the social and maintenance of good order aspects of British police work has been identified since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, mainly with the economically underprivileged whose behaviour they tried to control to maintain social order and align with the morality of dominant groups [1], the police role in pacifying a frightened population in times of national crisis is novel. Police work during the First World War continued to focus on those in poverty, the majority of the population despite full employment, but it changed during the last two years to become pacifying and controlling, working in the national interest to win the war. In total war, it is not only institutions that are involved, but also everyone who is persuaded, cajoled and pressurised into carrying out the state's aims to provide for the population in distress, individual's personal interests are mitigated or side-lined. Indeed, when individuals resist, they are brushed aside by the state systems which deem their protests unworthy, as we see

in Chapter 6 with farmers who refused to plough their land to increase crop production.

This book demonstrates how the rise in importance of home food production to combat the fear of national food insecurity gave rise to the establishment of state control of agriculture, enabling the police to work closely with local agricultural committees by providing practical help to farmers. Police presence and their help on farms were welcomed, as they showed competence in the work, therefore allowing close surveillance of farming to carry out the aims of the state. But as well as their close work with farmers, the police were also ready to quell potential or actual rioting, if the population's fears of starvation ran high due to threats to themselves, their families and communities, confronting disorder directly. This example of police as ploughmen extends police work far beyond law enforcement [2, 3] into the protection and fostering of social order by working alongside those providing help for the population in distress; the police become an institution of administration of the population, rather than of the exercise of law [4].

The police role in helping the population in distress while providing a service is not only seen during the First World War, it is an enduring role in British policing, an historical continuity [5], it helps to explain the present, most recently during the pandemic when the police were again released, this time as ambulance drivers, although the nature of their help, the strategies to provide it and the demands on them changed over time.¹ These examples bring policing by consent closer to the people, while enhancing British police legitimacy and effectiveness [6, 7], allowing early detection of points of conflict and potential unrest. The continuity of lending police help to other services in times of crisis informs today's police that this role remains a valid use of resources, despite the test of time.

This book shows how the police, by working closely with people affected by a national crisis, provide a valuable service, in this case to farmers, to prevent or minimise unrest where rioting due to food deprivation was already seen in reports from other combatant nations. I use the definition of crisis as a time when the population looked to government to solve the shortages of basic foodstuffs which appeared to be escalating out of control with no end in sight, threatening to lead to

¹ This will be developed further at the end of Chapter 9.

population starvation [8]. This kind of police help is best shown in a snapshot or micro-historical social history [9] at a turbulent time. We see how policemen² worked within the dominant discourse of patriotism to help not only their local population in crisis within the boundaries of their area, but also more distant populations in some instances. The police, as first responders, acted before most other groups and made a prior assessment of their skills to ensure appropriate help was given melding into the service, so that those who they worked alongside welcomed their intervention.

Today the repeating theme of helping the population in distress is learned early in modern police training, when recruits progressively appreciate that their role is more about protecting citizens and society and maintaining social order, than about catching criminals [10, 11]. Indeed, the College of Policing in 2015 found that calls on police help were increasingly about incidents that involved public safety and welfare [12].

This book provides the detail of the historic response by the police to the national crisis of food shortages with the widespread fear of population starvation in 1917, mid-way through the war in the year characterised by war weariness. By 1917 the war had dragged on for more than three years with huge loss of life in battle and little progress being made in struggles to contain or win ground against the enemy. The fierce battles in Europe were based on killing the enemy by close combat in trench warfare, with atrocious land conditions, such as in the latest battle, the Somme (July to November 1916), one of the costliest battles of the First World War in which Britain suffered 57,420 casualties in the first day alone, the largest loss of life to date by the British Army in a single day. It was the first battle fought by many of the men recruited into the new army in 1914,³ therefore would have had many repercussions at home. Reports from the front, along with pacifist protests and conscientious objectors at home insisting the war was unnecessary, advocating immediate peace negotiations, contributed to increasing war weariness in a population fatigued by war and wondering if, and when, it would end, while mourning their dead in battle [13]. Consequently, the threat of food insecurity, mainly due to blockading of food imports, added to the

² At this time the police was an all-male occupation.

³ <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/key-facts-about-the-battle-of-the-somme> (accessed 2/3/2024).

population's distress and became a national emergency with the urgent need to increase home food production reaching crisis point in March 1917, as Offer says "agrarian resources decided the war. So not only a war of steel and gold, but a war of bread and potatoes" [14]. This reflects Lloyd George's statement in the third volume of his memoirs "the food question ultimately decided the issue of this war" [15]. Without rapid intervention, food riots would have increased, as they did in other combatant nations, such as Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and France [16]. With a speedy response in Britain in Spring 1917, policemen were allocated temporarily to farms to help farmers increase crop production in the national interest, some forces continued this help until the end of the war, often at intervals of maximum need, such as Spring ploughing and planting and autumn harvesting.

The initial escalating emergency was prominently reported daily in national and local newspapers in February, March and April 1917 increasing the alarm in the population by the urgency of reports that there was only six weeks remaining to plough and plant for an autumn harvest, if national food shortages were to be avoided, as shown in Fig. 1.1.

National government-led mobilisation was quickly developed to help agriculture: the army released soldiers from the Home Front and the Department of National Service requested local authorities and employers to temporarily release their staff with agricultural skills to help farmers. Policemen were an ideal group to target, as in the second decade of the twentieth century the backgrounds and previous occupations of many were from agriculture, and it was generally known that many policemen possessed the required skills:


The Chief Constable of Glasgow has been requested by the Special Committee on Agricultural Produce to give a return of the number of Policemen in the City who have had agricultural experience. ...

MR. WHEATLEY (a Glasgow councillor) said the Police was partly a Government Force, and as the Government were appealing to other employers to release their men, surely the Corporation might approach the government and point out that there must be thousands of policemen all over the country who might be released [18]

This quotation from a meeting of Glasgow Corporation during discussion of how the local authority could help to increase home food production shows the widely held view that the police possessed the skills

Fig. 1.1 National service advertisement [17]




NATIONAL SERVICE

Only Six Weeks

to sow the seed for
this year's harvest

An urgent call to all who can PLOUGH.

Come *at once* and help your country. To cultivate the land is to defend it.

Tremendous issues are in your hands. Victory must be won on the harvest field as well as on the battlefield.

Only six weeks remain for seeding operations on which the food of the country depends, and perhaps the issue of the war. Don't waste an hour. You will be found work *at once*.

EMPLOYERS:

Lend your men to the Country for six weeks.

Employers are asked to *enquire immediately* if there are any of their staff who understand horses or agriculture, and to release such men for six weeks during this critical seeding time. Men who have been at the plough, grooms, coachmen, carters, draymen, *all* are urgently needed. No employer can keep back a man of this experience without incurring the gravest responsibility before the Nation.

ACT AT ONCE before it is too late.

Send your Name and Address to the
AGRICULTURAL SECTION,
National Service Department,
St. Ermin's, Westminster.

and abilities to provide appropriate help to farmers. Indeed, it had been generally known in rural communities since at least the mid-1800s that men who desired social advancement entered the police force [19].

Recruitment patterns into the British police during mid to late nineteenth century confirm the targeting of men between 20 and 27 years of age from rural communities due to their strong physique giving them a commanding appearance, conspicuous on the streets as a symbol of

British authority and a deterrent to law-breaking. An important recruitment criterion was minimum height and chest measurements [20]. These had been enforced around Britain since at least the turn of the century:

7634. R. B. – We know of no Force that accepts candidates under 5ft. 9in. in height or with a chest measurement of less than 34in. [21]

Furthermore, the minimum age requirement in all forces was under 30, making police recruits above average in height and strength. These physical characteristics and previous work history made policemen ideal for ploughing the wet Springtime soil, when ploughing was predominantly with hand ploughs that needed strength to keep the ploughshares in the ground to turn the soil in preparation for planting crops. Policemen with previous experience of hand ploughing would also be able to control horses needed to pull the plough. But it was not only previously tilled ground that needed to be ploughed for Spring sowing, government decreed disused land and pastureland also needed to be ploughed to increase crop production, so that great strength was needed on these types of land to turn the soil with a hand plough, due to root depth. Apart from physical skills, policemen with previous agricultural experience would understand the culture of farming, important in appeasing farmers when government attempted to increase arable production by providing manpower, equipment and supplies, not all of which were welcomed.

Working-class unskilled and semi-skilled men from rural areas with these physical characteristics were attracted into the police by the increase in social status, as police work was classified as lower middle class, and by permanent employment with regular pay and the opportunity of a pension and other benefits, such as a police house. During the early twentieth century the prospects for agricultural labourers with no private means were poor, with little chance of a pension and resorting to the workhouse as the main option when they became too old for strenuous work [22].

Studying police personnel records from different forces confirmed the trend of recruitment from agriculture into the police. The Metropolitan Police disproportionately attracted the lower social classes, particularly agricultural labourers and gardeners, the majority of whom were recruited from the south-east of England. These features of a policeman meant he had a better physique and better health than the average working-class man in London. Recruits from rural areas were also ideal as they were said to be more likely to have the aptitude to accept authority and

would bow to strict discipline and be easily moulded due to deference and perseverance.

Statistics from the Metropolitan Police are consistent with other police forces around Britain: the principal previous trades of recruits 1901–1930 were agricultural employment in 11.5% in the Metropolitan Police; 14.9% in Hull; 38.5% in Ipswich; 18.6% in East Suffolk and 17.9% in Worcestershire. In the Metropolitan Police, Ipswich and East Suffolk, agricultural work was the most frequent previous employment [23]. A search of the Glasgow City Police personnel records also showed that in 1917 of the 1,274 posts filled, 398 (31.2%) gave their previous occupation as agriculture of which 250 had been farm servants, 33 were ploughmen and 26 gardeners [24, 25]. These data help to confirm the national trend identified by Councillor Wheatley in Glasgow, found in other major English cities [26] and known since at least the County and Borough Police Act of 1856 [27].

The organisation of the British police, by 1914, had stabilised from the reforms of the mid-nineteenth century so that “The Bobby was now firmly established as a part of the model British Constitution” [28]. The new British police was organised and managed, each as a separate force with its own pay structures, in three major institutions with their establishments identified:

1. The Metropolitan Police with a workforce of 21,500 in 1919 were under the direction of the Home Secretary, 18% born in London, while 24.2% were from counties bordering London.
2. 58 County Police Forces in England and Wales with a workforce of 18,000, and 31 County Police Forces in Scotland covered the rural areas. Each was under the control of a Chief Constable who appointed, promoted and dismissed policemen. The Standing Joint Committee of the County had general governance of their police force, but under the 1839 County Police Act the Secretary of State had the power to rule on the governance of County forces and their pay. The involvement of the Secretary of State followed their obligatory creation in 1856 with separate arrangements from the traditional City and Borough Forces. The origins of men recruited into the County forces are largely unknown, apart from three-quarters in East Suffolk who were born locally, while a half of the Worcestershire force were also born locally [29, 30]. Recruitment patterns in rural Scotland particularly the County of Inverness

recruited largely from Inverness or from the bordering counties of Ross, Moray, Sutherland and Caithness. The county of Caithness, Orkney and Shetland's recruits were even more local, born within the district itself. The picture differed in Glasgow where recruitment was largely from the highlands, and the north-east with largely farming communities, and from Ireland, making up around three-quarters of Glasgow City Police between 1900 and 05, although local recruitment increased from 1909 [31, 32]. The County Forces in England were less than half of those who released policemen into agriculture in 1917 and 1918 as we see in Chapter 6. But their role in both England and Scotland assigned by government to distribute and collect censuses by hand, as in the 1916 census of farm labour and 1917 survey of horses, (see in Chapter 3, p. 48–49 and Chapter 4, p. 89) increased their acquaintance with individual farmers; and.

3. The City and Borough Police Forces numbered 128 in England and Wales with a strength of 19,000; they covered the towns and cities. In Scotland there were 29 City and Burgh police forces. Between 1889 and 1920 only towns and cities with populations above 10,000 were permitted to have a police force, smaller forces were amalgamated into County constabularies in the Local Government Act of 1888 [33]. Each City or Borough (Burgh in Scotland) Force was managed by the Town Council's Watch Committee responsible for appointing the Chief Constable and policemen. Their independent status from the Home Office or Secretary of State was jealously guarded by local authorities. Recruits to the Birmingham force were largely born outside the city, while in other more remote areas such as Ipswich, more than 50% were born locally. Birkenhead was notable in recruiting nearly a half who were born outside the bordering counties with over a quarter born in Ireland. In Scotland the combined establishment of County and Burgh police was 5,953, with Glasgow containing the largest establishment of 1,996 [34, 35]. These recruitment patterns show the likelihood of policemen allocated to agriculture in 1917/18 being known to farmers and is discussed further in Chapters 6–8.

On the outbreak of war in 1914 police manpower was mostly of military age and contained military reservists who were called up immediately. Others volunteered in the national fervour of recruitment during the

first year of war. Initially replacements were employed temporarily for the duration of the war, but they became largely ostracised by their colleagues as war progressed claiming they were using the police as a way of evading conscription, so were deeply unpatriotic. We see in the example of Birmingham in Chapter 8, how they were the first to be released into the army in early 1917. But the service was not allowed to recruit to fill vacant posts from 1916, due to the increasing need for national manpower planning and competition with the army for fit young men of military age [36].

The early withdrawal of policemen into the military had depleted forces by around one in five in the provinces and approximately a quarter from the Metropolitan Police by the end of 1915. In addition, the police lent a few constables to the army as drill instructors [37]. The diminution of regular policemen raised alarm in the service, with protests and claims by Chief Constables that their force had lent as many men as could be spared, by 1917 the loss of men had inevitably increased:

SUPT. MEARS said the full strength of the Force in his division was 54. He had lost 20 men since the outbreak of war, and was still 16 short. The Chief Constable was tied down in this matter by the War Office and the Home Office. [38]

This example shows a loss of 37% of the Chertsey division. The numbers recruited into the army from larger forces were in similar proportions; Glasgow had released 745, 37.2% of its force by mid-June 1917 [39] and smaller borough forces such as Reigate lost 32% recruited into the army[40].⁴ As well as these losses, periodic combing out of policemen continued from the implementation of conscription in the Military Service Act 1916, so it is initially surprising that any further policemen could be spared for release into agriculture in Spring 1917.

Despite these huge losses and under pressure from the discourse of patriotism, the police service did not collapse with the weight of recruitment into the armed services, nor was it prioritised and protected as an essential service, with Chief Constables and local authority police committees left to decide how to maintain their numbers; how individual forces did this was often contentious and will be shown in Chapters 6–8. As with most war services, attempts at substitution were made with

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