

Police Records

Introduction

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 introduced the idea of professional police forces. Before that, law and order was upheld in several different ways, including unpaid watchmen, parish constables, and Justices of the Peace. The Somerset novelist Henry Fielding created a group of men in London in 1750 who became known as the Bow Street Runners. The Somerset Constabulary was created in 1856, following the County and Borough Police Act, which made it compulsory for counties to establish police forces. A few areas had their own police force before then, including Bridgwater and Chard.

Until 1888, the Somerset Constabulary was under the control of Quarter Sessions. In 1889 its administration was taken over by the Somerset County Council, and a Standing Joint Committee was appointed.

Records

Please note that under the terms of the Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act, access may not be permitted to certain confidential records.

1. Quarter Sessions (1856-1889)

Civil order books (Q/AO): These include orders made by the county police, 1856-1889.

Somerset Constabulary papers, 1839-c.1900 (Q/AP): These include petitions against the creation of the constabulary, 1840, correspondence about its establishment, 1839-1841; and papers relating to the administration of the force, 1856-1888. The administrative records include minutes, financial papers, police rating records and salary details.

Papers relating to police premises include deeds for individual police stations, agreements for alterations to premises, plans and specifications. The papers also contain some returns of parish constables, criminal returns, 1859-67, and charge sheets, which give details of individuals charged, 1856-1867.

Other: The Quarter Sessions papers also include a complete set of *The Hue and Cry* and *Police Gazette*, 1811-1827 (Q/C/8/8), and draft minutes and reports of the County Expenditure Committee, including reports on the police force, 1856-1867 (Q/FA/27).

2. County Council (1889 onwards)

Standing Joint Committee papers (C/PO): These administrative records comprise the minutes, reports, agendas, standing orders and financial papers of the Standing Joint Committee, and its sub-committees, 1889-1965, and of the successor Police Committee, 1965-1971. The collection includes related correspondence and records about police premises, personnel and force organisation and reorganisation.

3. Avon and Somerset Constabulary and predecessors (DD/ASC)

This collection reflects the activities of the Avon and Somerset Constabulary and its predecessors from the mid-19th century to the mid-1990s. The force itself has had many changes over the years, which are reflected in the content and organisation of the records. The main records include:

- General administrative papers, mainly from force headquarters, including minutes, quarterly and annual reports, inspection records, correspondence and financial records.
- Papers relating to premises, including police stations, police houses and training centres.
- Personnel registers and files.
- Force instructions, including general and standing orders, byelaws and Home Office circulars.
- Divisional and station records, including occurrence and pocket books, patrol log books, and registers of missing people and lost property.
- Public relations records, including press cuttings.
- A few Court records including crime registers, papers relating to summonses, crime reports, petty sessions registers and minute books, and adoption court records.
- Papers relating to other force duties including policing special events.
- Papers about civil defence, including World War II.
- Records of activities and associations organised by the force.

Police Forces in the Somerset area

Bristol Constabulary (1836-1974): Formed following the Municipal Corporations Act (1835), and amalgamated into the Avon and Somerset Constabulary in 1974. Its records are held at the Bristol Record Office.

Bath City Constabulary (1836-1967): Formed in 1836, it voluntarily amalgamated with the Somerset Constabulary in 1967. Its records are at the Bath and North East Somerset Record Office.

Chard Borough Police Force (1839-1889): This force numbered two men, and amalgamated with the Somerset Constabulary in 1889.

Bridgwater Borough Police Force (1839-1940): The positions of two paid constables were approved in 1839. Unsuccessful attempts to join the Somerset Constabulary occurred in 1856 and 1922. This finally took place in 1940.

Somerset Constabulary (1856-1967): A force of 260 was formed following the County and Borough Police Act (1856). Headquarters were established at Taunton, and several reorganisations took place before it amalgamated with the Bath City Force in 1967.

Somerset and Bath Constabulary (1967-1974): This short-lived force was the result of amalgamation of the Bath City and Somerset Constabularies. Its Headquarters were at Taunton.

Avon and Somerset Constabulary (1974-present): Formed following the creation of the county of Avon, this force comprises the former Somerset and Bath Constabulary, Bristol Constabulary, and the Staple Hill Division of the Gloucestershire Constabulary. It has kept its name and geographical coverage even though the county of Avon was abolished in 1996.

Printed sources

- Clark, L. (1977) *A Concise History of the English police and the Avon and Somerset Constabulary*
- Hallett, P. (1986) *150 years policing in Bristol*
- Hart, J.M. (1950) *The British Police*
- Pringle, P. (1955) *Hue and Cry: The Birth of the British Police*
- Purnell & Sons, (1956) *Somerset Constabulary Centenary, 1856-1956: The history of the force*
- Waters, L. (1987) *The Police History Society: Notes for Family Historians*

Useful websites

The European Centre for the Study of Policing: The academic centre for studies into the history of policing and crime. <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/history/policing/>

The Police History Society: A forum for anyone interested in police archives and research. www.policehistorysociety.co.uk

Avon and Somerset Constabulary: For information about the current police force, and a brief background history of its origins. www.avonandsomerset.police.uk

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