

## The Village Constables

Nowadays, maintaining law and order in a village is principally the responsibility of external agencies but this was not always the case: before the Buckinghamshire Constabulary was formed, villages elected constables from the local population. Typically, there were between three and six part-time constables in any given year. They were unpaid but could claim expenses. Records show that frequently, the same men were re-elected year after year.

The Constables were elected by the "Vestry Meeting" ....the equivalent of the parish council... from the late 1600s until the late 1870s, when the first county constabulary officers were assigned.

The Parish Constable was a law enforcement officer and had significant authority; the staff that he carried was no empty symbol. He had a host of responsibilities: executing magistrates' warrants, apprehending law-breakers and attending the Petty Sessions at the County Court. The constables also had the responsibility for maintaining the village stocks (where minor law-breakers would be held on public display) and looking after the pound, where stray livestock would be held until the owner paid a fine.

In addition, the Constable was expected to prevent vagrants becoming a charge upon the parish, sometimes paying small sums to help homeless people to return to their parish of origin. In both North Marston and Granborough, this also meant dealing with problems associated with the gypsy community living on the parish boundaries. A record of expenses claimed by one of the constables in Granborough included "Moving Gypsies out of the road" in 1817 and "Moving Gypsies from Dead Man's Gate" in 1820. And, just to add variety, another Granborough constable was paid seven shillings and sixpence a year "for Mole Catching".

Having local men as volunteer constables brought the advantages of local knowledge, but also the risk of them "turning a blind eye" for a friend or relative. Consequently, when they were eventually replaced by a county constabulary officer, the constabulary made a point of regularly moving the officer and his family between parishes to reduce the risk of the constable "going native".

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