

Old Police Station, Coach Lane

This essay was written and illustrated by DC Parsons and published in a Local Paper. Date not known, but thought to be late 60s.

Faringdon became part of Oxfordshire in the Local Government boundary reorganisation of 1974. Police moved to the new station in Marlborough St in the 1970s. The old police station in Coach Lane was sold and redeveloped into private residences.



Faringdon, otherwise Great Faringdon is situated in a valley beneath the shadow of the Berkshire Downs, in particular the White Horse Hill. From this outpost of the old Berkshire Constabulary many young men have gone forth and aspired to great heights in the service of which we are members. Those early pioneers of the Constabulary would feel quite at home at Faringdon Police Station- for this was the very building that our forerunners occupied so eagerly in October 1858. No other building in use in the force has stood the wind of change quite like the ancient monument in Coach Lane, Faringdon.

If you enter the courtyard of the station, you first pass under the high archway built specifically to give access to the horse transport of that day. Once in the courtyard you will feel, with little effort, as if you are observing a bygone age. Yet how this monument of stone, brick and limestone came into existence is a story which signalled also the start of the policing as we know it today.

Such was the world situation in 1855 that this country of ours found itself overburdened with homeless and destitute people whose only hope of survival was through crime. Berkshire Quarter sessions were made aware of the serious situation and, in October 1855, some people protested about the inadequacies of the then keepers of the peace. So followed the setting up of committees to go about the task of recruiting a police force. One of the recommendations to come from this astute body of men called for the setting up of further committees to deal with the building of police stations to house the new champions of law and order. And so it was that in May 1856 a committee was elected to deal with the building of a police station at Faringdon for a sum not exceeding £1000.

At this time other elected men were eagerly going about the business of planning police stations at Newbury, Wantage, Iffley and Abingdon. The next meeting of the Quarter sessions held in October 1856 was told of difficulty in procuring a suitable site at Faringdon while those for the other stations being planned had already been purchased.

The estimated cost of the forthcoming buildings was, like today, steadily multiplying. To offset this growing cost the court ordered a Police Rate of 2 farthings in the pound. In April 1857, the site on which Faringdon Police station now stands was purchased from a Thomas Belcher for £300.

The other 4 police stations were by then complete and occupied, but the cost of building had continued to rise and further loans were made by the gentry to the authorities. The rise and fall of the country's economy slowed up the progress at Faringdon and it was not until August 1857 that Malache Bartlett, a builder of Witney, was elected to commence the work. He named a banker and ironmonger from Witney as sureties for the proper execution of the work at a cost of £786. He did not complete the building until October 1858 and then presented his final bill to the Treasurer of the Police Fund of Berkshire - £1572 10s 0d. It was during this same year that consideration was given to the purchasing of a site in the Forbury at Reading on which to erect what is the present day Reading Police Station.

In 1859 Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabularies wrote in his report of his attention being 'especially attracted by the new station at Faringdon. This was being ably policed by a superintendent and two constables. There were sergeants at Shrivenham and Stanford-in-the-Vale, and constables policed Buscot, Buckland, Coleshill, Longworth, Ashbury and Uffington. These men made up the North Western Division of the Berkshire Constabulary which comprised six divisions on formation and which, within two years, became nine divisions. This new system of organised policing proved to be a far superior method of dealing with the overwhelming number of vagabonds that were wandering abroad.'

Many were originally soldiers who had fought in the Crimea. A great number of these men, home to the green fields of England, found themselves homeless and destitute. Their only apparent means of survival was by crime, or alternatively by seeking accommodation in workhouses. Faringdon had a workhouse. Built of stone, as was the rest of the town, this monstrosity was U shaped and three storeys high, having a large cellar, a large paved courtyard in the middle and a big iron bell high on the wall for calling forth inmates.

Every policeman who served Faringdon from the inception of the Constabulary until the famous Ferndale House was finally laid to rest by a bulldozer in 1968, knew the place as a regular maze of stairways and doors. Our predecessors maintained law and order in the workhouse as well as coping with their normal work. This workhouse duty was known as 'relieving' and included ensuring that the tasks for the day were completed by the lodgers.

Policing wasn't quite the job that it is today. The hours of work were mostly unsocial and physically exhausting. In the 1920s, for instance, the hours of work at Faringdon would include 3am – 8am, then 10am to 1pm. A day off, when such a thing occurred, was just that: it meant 12noon one day to 12 noon the next, irrespective of the fact that your tour of duty was not until 3 am the following morning.

The inspector was a married man living in the flat above the front of the station and the men lived over the enquiry office. Permission to leave the station at any time had to be obtained from the inspector. An officer wishing to get married had to have at least four years' service and the permission of the Chief Constable, who would consider whether the prospective wife would be 'fit and proper person to become the wife of a police officer'

Once out on duty, an officer would make a point outside some prominent building in the town or, if further afield, probably under the Great Oak or a predetermined field gate. This point was for 15 minutes duration. In 1929 the Post Office set up telephone kiosks around the country and at last the policeman could be reached without the need for the poor old sergeant to pedal all round the district giving out messages or allocating enquiries. It was apparent that the only reasons a man would have for wanting to be a member of the police force were a sense dedication and the fact that the money 'wasn't bad'

Conditions continued to improve and eventually police houses, as we know them today, were built, but this wasn't until the post-war period. Even as late as 1950, men were glad of a couple of rooms over the police station in which to live with their wives.

During the war, Faringdon took delivery of a morse code transmitter-receiver which put them in contact with Wantage in case of bombing. It is interesting to note that the Metropolitan Police were by this time on verbal air transmissions.

Berkshire's proximity to the South Coast made it an ideal area for the setting-up of numerous wartime airfields. This meant the importing of labour to build runways, and with their heavy drinking bouts and fighting over local lassies these labourers added greatly to the burden of the local officers.

After the war, the morse code transmitter was removed from Faringdon and contact with the station was by telephone only. This state of affairs continued until 1967 when at long last the Faringdon A60 van was fitted with a force radio and contact with the outside world was made. But this made little difference to the attitude of the old timers, who declared it too complicated to operate. And in any case should be locked away with the can after 10 pm

In 1954, the oft remembered Insp Tizzy Combes retired at Faringdon. The Chief Constable took advantage of this heaven sent opportunity to move the billiards table, which the late Inspector had made famous, from Faringdon to Newbury. Unlike the story of the ravens at the Tower of London, the police station did not fall down.

In the 1950s, Faringdon became mobile with the introduction of an Austin Somerset car. It wasn't long before it landed up in a ditch. Vincents of Reading soon supplied another one, and this was eventually followed by an old 350cc Enfield. Since then the station has had a noddy bike, a modern one with foot change and a radio. Amalgamation brought about big changes at Faringdon. No longer was this station to be the outpost of the old Berkshire Constabulary, but an integral part of the Witney division. This forced a truce between Faringdon and Bampton over the business of objects in the Thames.

But time marches on. The noddy bike and the A60 van have gone, to be replaced by numerous Ford section cars. The big black Westminster divisional car has gone to the scrapyard and the new white tornadoes now patrol the roads. Someone has pushed back the county boundary and made Faringdon, once unique as the only stone built town in Berkshire, a part of Oxford County. Yet the policing of this country market town continues, and its largely agricultural populace still tell the magic stories of folklore and tradition

Local Police at Faringdon

© D Parsons