

VILLAGE HISTORY LESSON PART 10

The position of Parish Constable derived from ancient ways to keep order in small communities and was traditionally elected by parishioners. From 1617 they were appointed by magistrates until 1839 when counties were formally given the power to organise policing as we know it to-day.

The position was obligatory and unpaid though expenses could be claimed, such as “for changing horses to carry the King’s baggage 1s 6d.” Duties included confining criminals and delivering them to courts, putting vagabonds and beggars in the stocks for three days then whipping them out of the parish and punishing poachers, drunks, hedge damagers, prostitutes, church-avoiders and fathers of bastards. They were also expected to monitor trading standards (short measures in the Star & Garter?), catch rats, control buildings, attend inquests and collect the parish rate. Any volunteers?

Also included in vestry minutes for the parish are duties of a more compassionate nature that we would now consider a social service: “given to a wounded soldier 1s 6d” and “given to a soldier taken by the Turks 6d” (presumably after his release). Then there were duties of a more military nature: “for searching for a company of soldiers (deserters?) and going to Knaresborough 2s 0d.”

One has to wonder who would volunteer for such a multitude of responsibilities and it is not surprising that the change to properly funded county police forces was forced by the variability of enforcement of the law in rural communities. But this did not stop some heinous crimes going undetected. A stone in the graveyard in the church bears the following inscription:

“Remember me as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you will be
Prepare in time to follow me!

To which around 1900 some wag chalked:

“To follow you I’m not content
Until I know which way you went!

The elders of the village were outraged, the school headmistress had to question all likely candidates, the policeman made door-to-door enquiries and the deed was denounced from the pulpit. But no-one was ever found. Would Jim Bennett and other worthies on to-day’s PCC take a more relaxed view or ring 999?

Next time: Victorian times.

Part 9 quiz question: where was the village laundry? In the days before launderettes and washing machines just off a ginnel at Rosemary Cottage on Barrowby Lane there was a water pump (recorded in 1888) and an area for washing clothes, presumably used by village women.

Part 10 quiz question: where did you go to get your shoes repaired?