



Friends of the Priaulx Library

Friends of the Priaulx Library Newsletter

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THE GUERNSEY POLICE FORCE 1853 - 1920 By Keith Pike

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Newsletter Contributors our
thanks to:

Keith Pike
Jenny Tasker

STOP PRESS

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**'Charting Guernsey's un-
known waters (mid 16th
to the mid 18th
centuries)'**

**Frossard Lecture
Theatre, Candie Gardens
at 7.30 pm**

Talk By Keith Fisher

BRIEF HISTORY

When looking at the Guernsey Police Force it is comparatively young, particularly when looking at the history of law enforcement in this Island.

It is known from the Dolmens and Menhirs which are found in various parts of the Island that the Neolithic people inhabited this island 5,000-6,000 years ago. Law enforcement was possibly undertaken on a tribal basis. Little is known of the culture of those far-off days.

The Romans were here, as found out from excavations carried out in the Island. Roman Law would have most certainly been enforced during that period.

The Island is divided into ten parishes, and are believed to have been formed in the 3rd and 4th Centuries, each of the ten Parishes (St Peter Port, St Martin, St Sampson, Vale, Torteval, Castel, St Saviour, St Pierre du Bois, Forest and St Andrew) is based around the Parish Church, and the origin of the Islands ten Churches dates back to at least the 7th Century.

Responsibility for law and order would possibly have been subject to a parochial system. The Franks, who conquered France in the 6th Century, also imposed their feudal system upon this Island during the course of their occupation.

In 1204 the Island formed part of the Duchy of Normandy. The Norman period of the Island's history will remain in perpetuity, by language, surnames, place names and not least, the basis of the Islands Common Law. The Island's Norman ancestors were able administrators and the Norman code of laws, known as Le Grand Coutumier, was certainly enforced in this Island. The Criminal Law of the Bailiwick has more than half of the Norman Common Law offences.

The system of law enforcement was under the powers vested in Seigneurs of the various Fiefs in the Island. Feudal Courts were held in these Fiefs. Some of the Fiefs had gallows rights, which shows a high degree of political independence.

In 1204 the Channel Islands became independent possessions of the Crown of England. From this time the power of law enforcement was passed to the Seigneurs, no doubt gradually, to the Constables of the Ten Parishes.

It is not known when the office of Constable of the Parish came into being. The earliest record which shows the existence of the constables is dated February 1438, and this deals with the action taken by Constables when any stranger may arrive on the Island without lodgings.



The first official record with reference to Constables appears in 1570 when the Royal Court insisted that the Constables must see to the implementation of the Ordinances passed by the Royal Court. It appears that the Constables might have been negligent in their duties, but it must be remembered that it was an unenviable task to be appointed Constable of the Parish, capable Constables being kept in office for exceptionally long periods.

In 1581 the Constables of the Parish were authorised to search for stolen property in suspects' premises, but could only do this if they were accompanied by two men of means. These Police functions were further strengthened in 1661 when victims of crime were recommended to apply to their Parish Constables for action to be taken.

Owing to the increase in crime and public disquiet, in November 1838 the Parish of St Peter Port appointed 12 Special Constables to act for a limited time because of the number of robberies which were occurring in St Peter Port. The services of the Special Constable had a marked effect in restoring law and order to the town.