

'It seems a most inopportune time to use up manpower'

by Philip Toms

In May 1944 a letter arrived at New Scotland Yard addressed to the Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis. It was written by the Clerk to Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council and asked for advice about how the local authority could appoint special constables under the Middlesex County Council (General) Powers Act of 1938. Included in the letter was a list of fourteen people who the Council wished to appoint – eight from Ruislip, five from Northwood, and one from Eastcote.

The Commissioner's staff deduced that the men were park keepers because the Section under the Act that had been quoted related to parks, 'pleasure joints' and open spaces. They concluded that the Council could go ahead without needing the consent of the Commissioner. They knew, however, that 'specials' under the Act had no powers of arrest and that the advantage of swearing in the men was not therefore very apparent. Furthermore, the appointment of police officers with limited powers had never been regarded with much favour. So the question was raised: should they try to discourage the Council going ahead with their plan? So they decided to ask whether the local police division (X Division in the case of Northwood) could throw any light on the matter.

The Inspector at Northwood police station confirmed that the men were park keepers, groundsmen and a golf professional. Some two months previously Ruislip-Northwood's deputy clerk had contacted him saying that the Council wished to appoint them as constables under another act (the Public Health Amendment Act, 1907) but as nothing had been heard since it had been presumed that the idea had been dropped. He went on to say that although the men would have to be provided with uniforms,

some, especially the golf professional, would not wear them in the course of their work and therefore their appointments as constables would be useless. There did not appear to be any necessity for the appointments as there was (1) little cause for them to exercise the slightly increased powers, and that (2) the little knowledge the men would have about the duties of a constable could lead them to exceed their powers.

The Superintendent at 'X' added a further note: crime in the locality was very light and there had been no increase in other matters calling for police action such as rowdiness or wilful damage. The strength of the force at Northwood was well above that of peacetime and the reason why the UDC wished to make these appointments could not therefore be attributed to a lack of ordinary police supervision.

Back at New Scotland Yard the Assistant Commissioner sent a bland reply back to the UDC: we do not know why you want to appoint these men and we cannot accept any responsibility if you do so; no doubt you appreciate that the additional powers conferred would be of a very limited character.

A reply came quite swiftly. The Council wanted to make the appointments because of an increase in the amount of damage occurring to its property, and the obvious shortage in the numbers of police able to patrol the district.

This caused an order to be sent to the Superintendent at Northwood. 'Let me know if there has been any increase in damage to property within the last year or so.'

This elicited three replies from Northwood:

The first, from the Inspector, stated that apart from small fires of undergrowth,

bracken and grass in the local woods there had been no increase in damage to 'open spaces' property. Nor had there been any increase in damage to air raid shelters, and crime such as the theft of tools from huts had actually decreased. Also, since the end of May 1944, policing had been increased by a 24 hour motor cycle patrol covering a large part of the roads running through the open spaces.

The second, from the Inspector's Assistant, provided a summary of complaints that had been received about damage being caused to Council property in parks and recreation grounds over two years. Complaints had crept up from five in 1942/3 to eight in 1943/4 while the number of crimes had remained the same at five. Complaints about damage to shelters had gone down from six to four in the same years.

The third, from the Superintendent, remarked that it was significant that two of the complaints had been sent in by the Council since the correspondence about the appointment of 'specials' had started, and 'they may be attempting to justify their proposal by referring more frequently to damage to their property.' Northwood currently had 30 constables and auxiliaries compared to 21 pre-war while Ruislip had 30 compared to 18.

Back at New Scotland Yard the thinking was that the less they said to the Council the better it would be. 'It would be a pity to get involved in any acrimonious correspondence.' And so a letter was sent explaining that local police records showed no increase in damage to Council property and that police numbers were greater than in pre-war.

This elicited a bit of a broadside from the Clerk. 'I am instructed by my Council ... to express surprise at the statement that there is no appreciable increase in damage to the Council's property. [We] know that such damage has increased [and] the type of complaint [we have received] is shown in [the enclosed] letter. With respect [to police

numbers] I would point out that the population of this district is several thousand greater than that of pre-war.'

The letter he attached was from an Eastcote resident and it cited three complaints: (1) children were playing bat and ball in the street to the detriment of cyclists and pedestrians and causing broken windows and damage to front gardens; (2) crab apple trees were being battered ruthlessly with sticks to obtain the apples; (3) bags of sand from the shelters were being emptied on the grass and scattered over the pavement and the road.

New Scotland Yard asked the local Superintendent to investigate. He reported back that he had interviewed the complainant: his road was a quiet residential one with ornamental trees planted on the greensward. The crab apple tree which was just outside his house had had a few twigs broken but it still had a large quantity of fruit on it. It appeared that evacuees had been billeted in the road and that the complaint was mainly against their children. He commented that RNUDC 'appear to have made up their minds to have the employees sworn in as constables and are prepared to put forward any sort of trivial complaint in support of same... In view of the attitude adopted by the Town Clerk it may be considered desirable for me to call and discuss the whole question with him ... the opportunity would be taken of pointing out to him some of the difficulties which may arise if they make the appointments.'

To which New Scotland Yard agreed: 'When the opportunity arises you might please call and discuss the matter with him.'

So finally, on the 27 July, a meeting took place between the local police, the Clerk and his deputy during which the police explained the powers of arrest given to owners of property under the Malicious Damages Act 1861 and it became apparent that the Council had overlooked the powers in this Act. The police explained that they were sufficient to meet the Council's requirements and the Clerks agreed with this

and stated that they would not proceed further for the time being.

That is the note that was put onto the file at New Scotland Yard at end of July 1944, and as there is no further paperwork on the file it is apparent that the Council did not continue in its bid to make those fourteen special constables!

Explanation

It sometimes happens that while you are researching one topic you come across something else which, although unrelated, seems to offer something of interest. I was searching for information in the National Archives about a man who had been a police special in both world wars when I came across a file (MEPO 2/6078) with a rather long title:

*Urban District of Ruislip-Northwood
Middlesex County Council (General Powers) Act
1938 - Appointment of constables under Section
74 of the above Act: asks advice as to procedure*

As it was in a sequence of files about police specials I decided to take a look at it.

The file was started when the first letter from the Town Clerk arrived. It was given its title, the letter placed on it, and a minute sheet placed before it. It would then have been passed to a member of staff who would decide how to act on it. He recorded his ideas on the minute sheet and passed the file to his superior (and so on) until some action was taken.

The procedure continued with each consecutive piece of correspondence and so it becomes possible to 'eavesdrop' on what

the police were thinking and how they were reacting to the Town Clerk's letters. It was tempting to embellish the story a little by giving various people a little personality but this would go beyond the historical record.

What a pity that a corresponding file belonging to Ruislip-Northwood UDC does not exist! If it had been constructed in the same way a little drama could have been played out about how both sides approached the matter. Unfortunately, the only record I could find was in the minutes of the Council meeting of the 18 October 1943 when it was resolved to adopt a recommendation that recreation ground attendants and staff should be sworn in as constables. The fact that this action was not actually taken does not appear to have been subsequently recorded.

It is curious that the letter to Scotland Yard was not written until six months after the Council agreed to the men being made constables and that the Deputy Clerk had not approached the Inspector at Northwood until four months later. Perhaps the Clerk had tried to do things without conferring with the police or perhaps he had more pressing matters to deal with.

Indeed, the title I have given this article is a quotation from the minute sheet of the file, and it reminds us that the period May to July 1944 was a significant one. The bombing of Greater London continued, the 6 June saw D-Day, and the first V1 flying bomb hit London on the 13 June. So it was not the most opportune time to worry Scotland Yard about this little local matter!