

Farewell to Bruche

As the last of the Centrex residential police training centres close their doors, Tony Judge recalls his experiences at a centre in Bruche, Cheshire, during the early 1950s.



Photography: Centrex

Celebrations: the final recruits at a Centrex training centre say goodbye

On Saturday, February 21, 1953, I stood in the witness box in Blackpool Magistrates' Court, along with my fellow recruit, Frank Williams, to be sworn in by the chairman of the bench who said a few kind words and wished us well in our brand new careers. We were taken to the clothing store and kitted out with two tunics, two pairs of trousers, a greatcoat, which was a heavy military-style jacket, two helmets, one with black fittings for night duty, six collar detached blue shirts, a rusting pair of handcuffs, a whistle, a truncheon and a cape that weighed a ton.

Save for the shirts, everything was at least second-hand, my cape had a label which showed it was made thirty years earlier. We had to provide our own black boots, for which we received a weekly allowance of two shillings and sixpence, around 12.5p. Several sets of collar numerals were supplied, plus the all-important warrant card. I became PC 141, and Frank was to be PC 28. Our starting pay, thanks to a recent

successful pay claim by the Police Federation, was six pounds a week, plus fifteen shillings lodging allowance.

During this attestation procedure, a constable, a sergeant and a chief inspector all took pains to tell us to ignore what 'they' would try to teach us at the training centre, as it would all be fancy theory: nothing to do with 'real policing'. Pre-war officers had all been trained, after a week at Lancashire Constabulary's training school in Lancaster Castle, by fellow constables who they accompanied on night patrols for three months, after which they were considered fit to be seen in public. After the war, this time-honoured system could not cope with an influx of new entrants, although the numbers of recruits could not keep pace with the exodus of serving officers, all going to better paid jobs. This was why residential training centres were established in each police district. Bruche serviced the twenty forces in No1 region. It was on the outskirts of Warrington. Every fortnight, two

classes of thirty students commenced the thirteen weeks' introductory course. Even by early post-war standards, Bruche was an austere place. We lived in rows of wooden huts, partitioned into single bed/study rooms. Considering that rationing had just ended the food was quite good.

The male students were almost all ex-national servicemen in their early twenties. Most were single, as forces found it hard to recruit married men due to the post-war housing shortage. Although we may have joined in the expectation of being police officers for the next thirty years, the attrition rate was high, with about a quarter resigning before the end of their course.

One student, from Liverpool, suddenly disappeared from our midst when two CID men came to arrest him. The fingerprints taken from him on attestation matched those of a serial burglar. When we returned to Bruche for a short refresher course at the end of our probation, we found that more than half of the members of our course were no longer in the job.

All students were required to remain on the premises every evening except Wednesdays, when we could sample

the night life of Warrington, so long as we were back by 11pm. There was, apart from a small bar which opened for two hours after dinner, very little in the way of entertainment or recreation on the centre. We were expected to spend the time between dinner and lights-out, swotting up the following day's lessons.

Our studies were based on the police officer's Bible – *Moriarty's Police Law*, and a small booklet issued by the Police Mutual Assurance Society, which gave us the legal definition of a wide range of criminal offences, which we had to learn by heart. If pressed, I can recite the definition of murder and larceny, and about a dozen other crimes, all first committed to memory over fifty years ago. Learning by rote made up most of the course, making the final examinations a bit of a doddle, so long as you knew your definitions.

Practical training took the form of staged incidents, such as a street accident, where we learned how to question witnesses and make correct notebook entries. In the mock courtroom, we practised giving evidence and being cross-examined. It was all very basic and had nothing of

the sophistication that first came along with Centrex. We were being trained for a style of policing that was far more simple than that needed for the complexities of today.

One of the residential blocks was allocated to the small number of women students, and was strictly out of bounds to men. The commandant, a county superintendent, was distinctly eccentric. He was an evangelical Christian who saw himself as the moral guardian of all the students, especially the females. He was known to patrol the blocks at night to ensure that no 'funny business' was going on, and on Wednesday nights, he would wait by the main gate to question any returning couples as to where they had been. In the case of the man, he would ask what his intentions were towards his policewoman companion. More than one indignant constable was despatched back to his force after telling the commandant to mind his own business.

The commandant lectured every course on his speciality - fingerprints, and managed to take personal credit for the discovery of this, one of the few scientific aids available to the

PC141 Tony Judge sits in the front row, far right, with recruits in the 1950s



police at that time. He also told us that he and a fellow detective had, on one afternoon at a race course, booked 500 motorists for displaying Guinness labels instead of excise licences as both looked alike. At one time he had been chief constable of a borough force of thirty men, and was reputed to have made regular nightly visits to the mess room, where he personally cooked the bacon and eggs that the men had brought with them. Ahh, those mess rooms. What would today's hygiene

Closing ceremonies were held at Centrex's police training centres shutting its doors after 60 years of probationer training



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inspectors have made of ancient greasy gas stoves and blackened frying pan, and a table covered in worn linoleum? Our instructors were serving constables and sergeants, drawn from all forces in the region. The first aid tutor showed us how to locate the pressure points of the body, "There it is lad, feel that –it's pumping like a young Fresian bull."

Sgt Bob Dunlop of Rochdale Police was our class tutor, a down to earth, intensely human policeman with a store of anecdotes about life on the beat. He was at pains to emphasise that policing was less about the exciting, but the more occasional things, such as helping the public, most of whom in those days were supportive of their local Bobbies. Sgt Dunlop urged us to acquire as much local knowledge as we could, advice which I found hard to follow when I started on the beat in Blackpool, because our chief constable regarded 'gossiping' with members of the public as a cardinal sin.

In those pre-equality times, women officers did not work nights and performed a very limited range of duties, mainly to do with women and children and sexual offences, subjects in which they were tutored by female instructors. The average career span of women officers was less than three years. Until just after the war, women officers had to resign on marriage, and even after the statutory bar was lifted, those who married were 'encouraged' to resign.

Of my fellow students, some had distinguished careers, none more so than James Anderton who became a renowned chief constable of Greater Manchester, and my close friend Gerry Richardson GC, who rose to superintendent in Blackpool, and was shot dead by an armed robber.

Whether the centres were the best means of imparting basic policing skills to recruits is debatable, but time marches on, and the powers that be have decided that residential basic training is out of step with modern requirements. They could be right, but I suspect that with the passing of the centres, something indefinable, but closely connected to a sense of belonging to a unique profession, has been lost. Is this another nail in the coffin of the career constable?