

Dorset's First Chief Constable and the COX family of Beaminster

The County Police Act 1839 gave County magistrates the power to appoint a Chief Constable and create a County wide police force for the first time. Wiltshire were very quick off the mark and appointed their first Chief Constable on 28th November 1839. It took Dorset another 18 years, and another Act, the County and Borough Police Act 1856, before they saw the need to make an appointment.

In Wiltshire there had been protests by landowners at the extra costs of the new police force, estimated at £11,000 per annum, and a County wide petition held in every parish was raised in 1841 to revoke the police force, but it was 'too late then to turn the clock back' and the petition failed.

The early years of the 1830's were a time of civil unrest and protests amongst some of the population of this country. In the north, it was poverty, very low wages, and unemployment in the industrial towns, whilst in more rural areas such as Wiltshire, it was the same reasons amongst agricultural workers. There were attempts to form trade unions petitioning on workers' rights, such as the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834, and also the aims of the Chartists were growing, a group petitioning for the right to vote for all males of aged 21 and over.

At that time, keeping the peace was the job of Constables appointed by the Justices of the Peace, but they were largely unpaid, and not always very effective. In rural areas, large landowners, estate managers and gamekeepers were active on their own estates, almost as a private police force. The biggest deterrent against crime was the very severe punishments then in force if you were caught - some 200 offences carried the death penalty, such as stealing a sheep or goods worth more than five shillings (25p) from a shop.

Did the magistrates of Dorset feel they did not need a police force in 1839 and in the intervening years to 1856 - or was it that the landowners were not wishing to pay the extra costs involved?

The issues of a new police force and a Chief Constable were eventually discussed in June 1856 at a Police Committee meeting chaired by Henry FRAMPTON, then at the Midsummer Quarter Sessions. Subsequently on 14th October 1856, they appointed ex-Army officer Lt. Colonel Samuel Symes COX aged 39, who came from a long-established family at Beaminster, as their new Chief Constable for Dorset. Were there other applicants / candidates, and were any interviews held - I don't know.

Samuel was a Dorset lad; he had been born to Samuel Snr. and Virtue COX at Chedington, Dorset on 4th September 1817. Holden's Directory on 1811 records Samuel Snr. as a sail cloth manufacturer and Deputy Lieutenant for Dorset, a post he still held listed in the Post Office Directory of 1859, as well as being a Justice of the Peace. The 1851 census has Samuel Snr. living in North Street, Beaminster with his wife Virtue, six grown up children, along with five servants, describing him as a Landed Proprietor and a J.P.

COX connections at Beaminster as Freehold Landowners in Dorset can be traced back at least to three brothers Robert, William and Andrew COX in 1585, but the earliest known direct family link to Samuel Symes COX is a Lancelot COX around the 1660's.

Samuel Snr. was born at Beaminster on 9th September 1790 after his parents had married on 23rd March 1790. His parents were another Samuel (1758 - 1822) and Ann SYMES (1769 - 1863). Ann was the only daughter of a wealthy Barrister at Law in Beaminster Richard SYMES. There is a story that Samuel and Ann eloped to Gretna Green in the middle of the night to be married as their parents objected to the marriage Ann being underage, having been born 16th December 1769 at Beaminster. There is a parish record of the marriage at Beaminster on 23rd March 1790 so, if the story is true, then maybe the elopement spurred her parents to give their formal consent.

In the mid-18th century, the Cox family were suppliers of linen sail cloth to the Royal Navy, with local rumour that some were used for the sails on Nelson's ships at Trafalgar. They managed the trade, buying both local flax and flax from elsewhere, managing local artisan weavers to weave the flax into sailcloth, and selling the processed sailcloth to be made into sails elsewhere. This complemented the Bridport rope making business and enabled the Coxes to become one of the wealthiest families in Beaminster.

Richard Hine's History of Beaminster records that in 1790 Messrs. Cox and Co. employed about 600 people in their sail cloth business. Samuel Snr. sold the Yarn Barton spinning mill and sail cloth factory at Beaminster in the 1800's before the sharp decline in the flax industry which fed the mill and, as a result, the later family seemed always to be able to live on 'family capital and income'.

Money from textiles enabled the family in 1767 to buy the land on which The Manor House in North Street was built - it remained in the family, used by successive generations, until sold in 1911. They also bought large tracts of surrounding farmland, partly hoping the railway would come to the town, and need land - but it never did.

In addition, The History of the parishes of Netherbury and Beaminster records that 40 acres of land owned by Maximillian MOHUN and his son Francis passed to Richard SYMES Barrister at Law at Melpash, then to his son Richard SYMES at Beaminster. From there it passed to his daughter Ann SYMES, on to Samuel COX when they married, and eventually to his grandson Samuel Symes COX.

It further records that another parcel of land in East Melpash with a dwelling house and 47 acres owned by a Nicholas SYMES passed via the same route, also to Samuel COX and on to his grandson Samuel Symes COX.

In 1833, Samuel Symes COX was at Rugby public school, where he was preparing to join the Army, which he did on 11th November 1835 with 11th Regt. of Foot, purchasing a commission as an Ensign, the lowest officer rank.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries it was possible, and very common, to purchase a commission or promotion in the Army, thus avoiding having to wait for promotion on merit or seniority. The practice was abolished in 1871.

He was promoted to Lieutenant in June 1840, and in April 1844, he was still with the 11th Regt. of Foot when he was promoted to Captain, both thought to be using the purchase scheme. Then, in August 1844, he moved to the 56th Regt. of Foot who were stationed at Wellington Barracks at Elton, Bury, Lancashire. It seems likely that was where he met his future bride to be as, at Bury on 2nd September 1846, he married Elizabeth Jane Grant TAYLOR (1825 - 1856). Her father James TAYLOR was described as a Merchant. Early

in 1847 the regiment moved to Gibraltar where their first children Samuel James Russell COX was born in July 1847 and Jane Marianna COX in 1850.

In May 1851 Samuel left Gibraltar with the regiment and moved to Bermuda and whilst there was promoted to Major. Elizabeth then gives birth in Manchester to another son John Russell COX in September 1851, and a year later at Chatham, Kent to Peter Henry COX. Before he left Bermuda, Elizabeth gave birth there to their last son William early in 1855, then on 15th May 1855, he sailed from Bermuda with the regiment to Ireland en route to the Crimea.

He was promoted to Lt. Colonel on 13th July 1855, and on 9th September 1855 was recorded with his regiment at the fall of Sebastopol in the Crimea. On 31st March 1856, Samuel was given leave of absence from the Crimea, noted as for 'private affairs'. Is that because Elizabeth had been taken ill as, on 22nd November 1856, she died at their residence 14 Gloucester Row in Weymouth? Her death occurred just five weeks after he had been appointed as Dorset's first Chief Constable on 14th October 1856 - a very sad time for him.

Happier times occurred when, on the 19th of April 1860, Lt. Colonel COX married Mary FEETHAM (1826 - 1909) at Marylebone, London. Her father Samuel FEETHAM was described as an 'Esquire'. On 22nd October 1860 his father Samuel Snr. died, from whom he inherited the title Deputy Lieutenant of Dorset and Lord of the Manor. In the 1861 census Samuel and Mary were living at 1 Somerset Place, Melcombe Regis, Weymouth with Samuel's youngest son William aged 6, and three servants, from where, no doubt, it was convenient for him to commute by the newly opened train service to his Police H/Q in Dorchester, even though he was allowed £50 per annum for 'the keeping of a horse'.

When Col. COX retired as Chief Constable in November 1867, the County Police Committee noted: "Your Committee, having been for so many years officially connected with the Chief Constable, feel themselves bound to add their conviction that the County is deeply indebted to Colonel Cox for the zeal, economy, discretion and judgement which have, from the creation of the Office, marked his exercise of its duties." He was also presented with a gold watch and chain, which sadly were stolen from him at an event at Beaminster Racecourse in 1870.

On his retirement, Samuel and his wife Mary moved into the Manor House, North Street, Beaminster. He had grown up living in the House with his parents; in the census of 1841 there he was aged '20' and listed as 'in the Army'. The reasons for his retirement aged only 50 are unclear, but in moving to the Manor House, commuting to Dorchester would be very difficult. With his new titles of Deputy Lieutenant and Lord of the Manor, did he and Mary also wish to play more of the role of County Squire, seeing the need to live in the town? Both he and Mary were always very supportive of town affairs. In 1871 Col. COX was elected Chairman of the Board of Guardians of the new Beaminster Union. Then in 1872 Col. COX was elected one of the Governors of Tucker's Free school in the town, and he had maintained an active role since 1868 as a local magistrate. Col. and Mrs. COX then lived at the Manor House together with five or six servants until Samuel died on 22nd October 1884 and he was buried in the town churchyard.

Mary continued to live at the Manor House and left a lasting legacy to the town by paying for restoration and re-roofing work on the Hillary chapel at St Mary's church in 1898 which is commemorated by a brass plaque therein. The reroofing cost £190. Mary had been a long-term benefactor to the town before she died at the Manor House on 3rd June 1909

aged 82. In 1911 a window in the north aisle was dedicated to Mary's memory, designed by A.L. Ward of London.

Samuel had four sons with his first wife Elizabeth. Three of them went abroad to seek their own fortune; Samuel was sent to Stubbington School in Hampshire, called the cradle of the Royal Navy, but went instead to Australia where he died in 1872 just before his 25th birthday. William and Peter both went to Ontario, Canada; William is thought to have died sometime before 1891 - he would have been aged 36 then, and Peter died in Ontario in 1911 aged 59.

Samuel's other son John Russell COX was born in 1851, and in the 1861 census was away at school in Taunton aged 9 with his brother Peter. He is missing in 1871 and likely away at sea, as he had qualified for a 2nd Mate's ticket for the Merchant Navy dated 29th March 1870. I have not found any M N records where he went, or on which ships.

In July 1880, at Melcombe Regis John Russell COX married clergyman's daughter Marianne LEIR, describing himself a 'Gentleman and a J.P.', although when he was appointed as a J.P. is not known. They had three girls and, in 1884 on the death of his father, he inherited the Manor House, the Lordship of the Manor, and other property interests. The family lived in London on his 'private means' and he died in London in 1926. The Manor House was lived in by his mother until she died in 1909, and then had been sold back in 1911.

To end, I would like to record the considerable help with facts and putting this story together from Brian Earl, a researcher at the Museum, Matthew Kirkman, Chairman of Beaminster Museum and Ian Swatridge and his Blog on the Dorset police force.

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19 July 2024