

THE STATIONS OF J DIVISION

WALTHAM ABBEY

Early in January 1840 the Metropolitan Police, formed in 1829, extended its boundaries to take over police duties in the Parish of Waltham Holy Cross, from the previous Parish Constables. Four Sergeants and thirteen Constables of the "N" or Islington Division, were allocated to the Parish Watch House situated opposite the Abbey Church. This building served the town as Police Station, Court House and Meeting Room until a new station was opened in 1876. The area served by the 'Peelers' was larger than that taken in modern times in that it included parts of Nazeing to the north and Chingford to the south. The lack of suitable stabling resulted in the mounted officers being temporarily stationed in Enfield, which because of the distances involved was a severe handicap.

In 1852 a stable was rented to provide accommodation for the horses that had been a feature at the police station since the beginning, providing the only means of transport and communication for many years. A small addition in 1860 was the arrival of the Bischoffen Hand Ambulance, a three wheel cart representing the only purpose built Victorian emergency vehicle for ill, injured, dead or merely the incapably drunken. Of these there were many. Until the 20th. Century this vehicle provided almost the only official means of attending hospitals. As the local hospital lay at Tottenham, more than ten miles distant, it might take many hours for a severely injured patient to arrive there. Many failed to survive such trips.

On April 1st. 1860 the Metropolitan Police became responsible for the security of the Royal Gun-Powder Factory, (RGPF) Waltham Abbey, and Royal Small Arms Factory, (RSAF) Enfield Lock, previously a duty undertaken by the army. This duty, which continued to make use of the cell facilities in the town station, was finally given up in 1923.

The search for a new police station to serve the town started in 1864, it being a further decade before the matter was finalised. In the same year the police in London started to change their style of uniform towards the more familiar to us today. Progressively, the 'Peeler' style of uniform gave way to the first experimental helmets and high collar coats that remained in use until the early 1950's. Even ten years later the changes were worthy of press comment as new ideas were brought forward. For a little over twenty years the head station for Waltham and Chingford areas was Woodford Green. Other stations in this grouping included Loughton and Chigwell.

With local people pressing for the building of a new police station a site was finally identified in 1872. Previously an orchard, alongside Sun Street, it was not to be completed and opened until January 1876. Although the building was a great deal larger than the old one, only a single room and three cells continued to be used for police operations, the rest of the building was for accommodation of police.

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The largest public event to take place within the Waltham Abbey Police area was the official opening of Epping Forest by Queen Victoria in May 1882. Around half a million people thronged the area between Chingford railway station and High Beach, this large number requiring the drafting in of 1,529 police to keep order.

The Electric Telegraph was installed in the Sun Street station in 1883. Connected to the RSAF Enfield Lock, Royal Small Arms Factory, police station, it also served the RGPF police contingent. The simple machine, although comparatively slow, was a great advance over the horse messengers.

In 1888, shortly after the building of a stable on the site, Chingford's first police station was opened for business at Kings Head Hill, leading to a large tracts of land being removed from the control of Waltham Abbey and Enfield Highway. At the same time a small 'High Beech' police station situated in Mott Street, close to the new border, was closed with the retirement of the constable in charge.

The widespread use of bicycles and the installation of the telephone at the turn of the century led to the withdrawal of the last of the two Waltham Abbey police horses to Chingford late in 1911. The need for the animals for communications was no longer necessary.

Over one hundred extra men were drafted into the station as unpaid Special Constables in the 1914-18 Great War. These men acted as the major part of the rudimentary local air defence effort. In the later, 1939-45 war their duties were performed by different organisations. The two government arms factories also enjoyed a massive, but temporary, increase in manpower as production expanded with the war effort.

Waltham Abbey joined the 'J' Division in August 1933, joining with Chingford as part of a Walthamstow sub-division. This was a time of many changes in the police service. Not only were motor vehicles finally being introduced to supplement the bicycles, and the hand ambulances withdrawn, but a system of police operated public telephone boxes was taken into service. Through the war years mobility was slowly improved in the local area. In the 1950's motor cycles were introduced, these being followed in 1968 by 'Panda' cars and their later variations upon mobility.

The use of the Sun Street police station as living space for police families ceased in 1965, a time in which some sections of land ceded to Chingford in 1888 were returned to Waltham Abbey (and Waltham Holy Cross) under boundary changes. A five year experiment in night time closing also finished at this time. It was not repeated.

The relatively young Chingford police station was pulled down in the mid-1970's allowing a new building to open in 1977 as the head of the three station grouping. Shortly after this Waltham Abbey progressively gave up facilities enabling it to deal with prisoners. The only major change since pedestrianisation has been the transfer of administration from Chingford to the Barkingside Division in 1988. A new police station site was purchased in Highbridge Street, Waltham Abbey, as long ago as 1965.