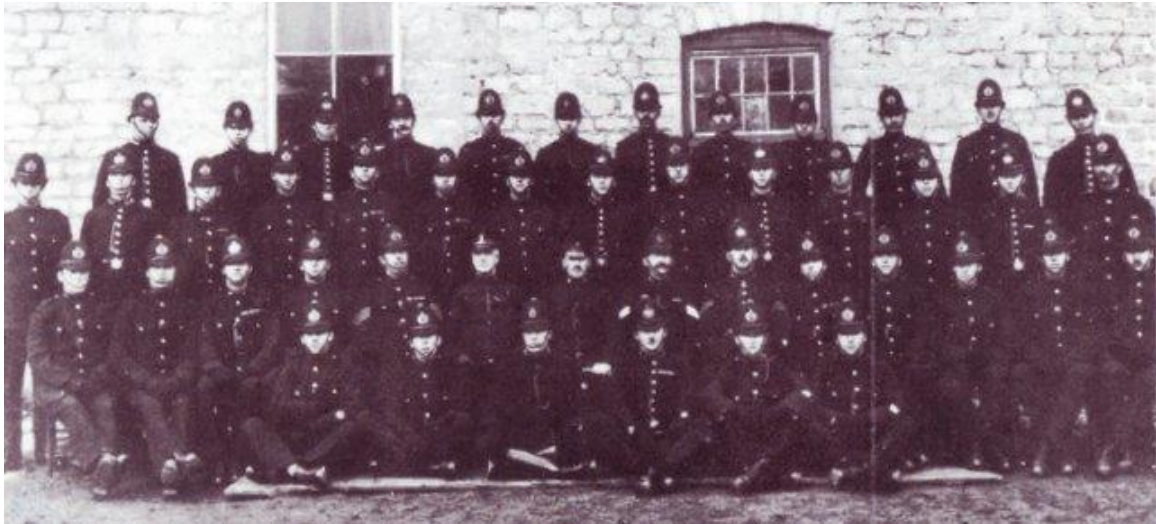


Coal Strike Derbyshire

1926 October: Bob Bartlett: Extracted in 1973 from papers in the basement of HQ: The miners were on strike and disorder had broken out in the coalfields, with local forces unable to cope with the violence and intimidation. The call went out and reinforcements were drafted into the pit towns and villages from police forces all over the country to aid the local constables. The year was 1926. In the archives at Mount Browne are a series of letters from Inspectors Greenaway and Gower, and from Sergeant Jackson addressed to the deputy chief constable reporting on mutual aid 1926 style. The duties and accommodation in many cases had a remarkable similarity to that to be experienced in 1994 and 1995 by the police support units. The Surrey Constabulary sent two inspectors, four sergeants and forty seven constables to Derbyshire. The first men left Guildford Railway Station on 19 October 1926 as the autumn chill turned to the winter cold as these men from the soft south east made their way to the alien land of heavy industry and coal mines. A culture shock awaited these rural policemen moving from where they were respected members of the community to stand between the warring factions of the coalfield. The Surrey men were to see no “action” in their time in Derbyshire, their duties being confined to endless, regular and monotonous patrolling in the winter cold, or the even colder static protection at the pit head. Inspector Greenaway and his contingent arrived in Alfreton later that day after a long but interesting ride through what for many in those un-travelled times was new country. The inspector in accordance with his seniority and status was given accommodation in a private house, the sergeants and constables being bedded down in the Assembly Rooms, which doubled as the court house. The men were issued with mattresses and blankets and they spread themselves around the building which they were sharing with colleagues from Birmingham and Manchester. The food was both liberal in quantity and high in quality, coming from the hotel next door. Meals were taken in the Assembly Rooms in front of a good coal fire, where after the meal the policemen were able to entertain themselves with a piano and billiard table provided for their use. The role of the men on aid was to ensure that the miners who wanted to work were able to do so, and this entailed escorting them to work through the pickets and guarding the entrance to the pithead. Three shifts were worked each day to cover wind down ties: 5.15 am to 7.15 am, 1.15 pm to 4 pm, and 9.15pm – 11pm. Inspector Greenaway, one of the sergeants and fourteen constables were required to cover each of the shifts, the remainder of the men were retained on reserve.



Some of the Surrey Contingent with members of other Forces

The reserve duty was rotated to ensure equal distribution of the work load, to reduce the amount of time men were on duty and to relieve the monotony of being confined to the Assembly Rooms. Upon his arrival, Inspector Greenaway reported to Mount Browne that “all was quiet”. The following day, the 20th October, Inspector Gower and twenty other Surrey officers arrived at Creswell near Derby. The Surrey inspector was given command of a further twenty constables and two sergeants from Birmingham and Derbyshire. These men were all billeted in the drill hall near the Bolsover colliery, being joined three hours later by four officers who had missed the train from Guildford. Creswell had a population of about six thousand nearly all mining families; the majority of men-folk were working although in the area there were three to four thousand strikers. The town was situated on the Yorkshire border and the police were there in case the “Yorkshire Gang” who according to the inspector’s letter is “Red Hot” came to Creswell to intimidate the miners into strike action. Sergeant Jackson and nine constables were detached from the main party to a place called Clowne where they joined up with the Buckinghamshire Constabulary. This contingent was billeted in an empty police house and issued with army mattresses and blankets. There was a good supply of coal provided for the fires as it became even colder. Again the food was excellent, with four meals a day being provided at 7.30 am, 12 pm, 5 pm and a supper at 9pm. Hours of duty at the gates were similar to the main party, 5.30-7.30 am, 1– 4 pm, and 9 – 11pm. Once a day at 9 am there was a roll call when appointments were produced and all the men briefed on the day’s patrolling. Patrol duties were not arduous, consisting of walking the roads in and through the coal mines and more importantly safeguarding the buses taking the working miners to their jobs when shifts changed. On Sunday 24th the twenty eight men from Bucks, plus the Surreys attended a church parade in the village church. The same day Inspector Greenaway reported that everything remained quiet. He was working from 5am to midnight, covering all the shifts, although his men could take a break on the reserve which as yet had not been deployed. Those off duty had entertainment provided in the Assembly Rooms by the Alfreton Glee party. A trip down the pit was organised for twelve men

accompanied by the colliery manager. Down the shaft for two hundred and fifty yards in the cage and stooped walking for one and a half miles to the coal face. The men saw pit ponies in their underground stables and cut themselves a piece of coal as souvenirs. Snow was falling on the surface but the inspector reported that the men remained in good health although their duties were becoming more arduous but by the 25th October miners were drifting back to work. Those still out hung around in quiet, sullen groups. Many of the miners were hungry, and two were arrested by Surrey officers PC Leigh and PC Wrenchall for larceny of pies from the butchers. The officers were on plain clothes patrol and were passing the shop as they ran out. One was sentenced to six weeks hard labour and the other discharged. Snow continued to fall but did not settle on the low ground in the towns and villages but could be seen from Alfreton covering the Pennines in the distance. The cold weather brought with it heavy colds for the men who were given inside duties and doses of quinine which proved successful. A problem that was beginning to be overcome by the men from the south was to understand the local accent and dialect. The locals found it difficult to understand the men from Surrey and the difficulty was certainly reciprocated. The adaptable country policemen were however, soon able to use the slang and mining jargon. The strike had been going for many months and coal was scarce in an area that should have had abundance. Demand increased as the weather deteriorated and man's ingenuity was stretched to provide a supply of coal and therefore warmth. Some people sunk small shafts in their gardens and meadows and mined coal a practice called "out-cropping". This coal was inferior quality but this did not stop a local butcher from buying a meadow of between ten and twelve acres near Alfreton for two hundred and fifty pounds and making thousands of pounds by "out-cropping" On the 30 October the Surreys were reunited briefly as they left their billets to move to a new area to relieve Wiltshire officers who had been on duty since August. The contingent was soon split again with Inspector Greenaway and his men going to Church Gresley and Inspector Gower and the remainder to New Hall about three miles away. Inspector Gower and his men drew the short straw having been posted to the most notorious spot in the county. Accommodation and food were the exact opposite of what they had left. The men were sleeping on the floor suffering freezing winter draughts from all directions. Eventually palliasses and blankets were provided, though these were tough men, some veterans of the Great War, they became disgruntled. A major concern was the distasteful toilet facilities, a canvas screen surrounding an open ditch with a pole strung across to sit on in the snow – recognisable to any old soldier! The water closet at home down the bottom of the garden seemed luxurious from Derbyshire. Mr Greenaway and his men fared better at their billet the Miner's Arms Public House at Church Gresley. Although much better accommodation than their comrades had to endure the new billet was a come down from Alfreton. It was also a far colder place to work and live a thousand feet above sea level. The people were described by Greenaway as "much lower class" than those at Alfreton who had in the previous August rioted. The disturbance needed several hundred policemen to quell. Since then Gresley had been quiet and the word was that the strike would soon be over. The Surreys were now the only force on aid in the area and it appeared to them that they would soon be going home. Trouble was however festering in New Hall, not from the miners but from the Surrey policemen. They were becoming mutinous over their accommodation in the Church Army centre. Their billet was in two rooms, the sergeant and inspector having beds in one, the constables on the floor in the other,

which was a room where they also ate. It was very cold in the centre and the toilet facilities remained primitive. To help improve morale the inspector's room doubled as a canteen store, under the elected management of Sergeant Stent. A large quantity of drink was purchased and resold to the men so they could have a drink as and when they required without the risk of visiting the public house. The men agitated for two rooms, less draughty ones at that, with one for sleeping and the other as a mess. Additionally the problem over toilets needed to be resolved. The chief constable of Derbyshire was made aware of the strength of feeling of the men at New Hall and visited the centre and spoke with Inspector Gower and PC 99 Jeffrey. The chief constable then addressed the men who gathered around him in their rooms and explained they were in the poorest part of Derbyshire where better accommodation was just not available. Men everywhere were sleeping on the floor and having just one room available to them. To help alleviate the problem, arrangements were made for the inspector to move to a private accommodation and his room became the mess. Following the chief constable's visit Mr Gower recommended that two of his contingent be returned to the Force which they were, followed on the 11 November by the remainder of the contingent. On the 19 November Inspector Greenaway telegraphed the chief constable that the remainder of his contingent would be returning the following day. There was concern that the men did not have enough money to pay their rail fare home a problem that was resolved by them staying until the 22nd, pay day! The reckoning was soon to follow as on the 24 November the chief constable of Surrey sent to Derbyshire a bill for £1334.3s.8d made up mostly of pay; for an inspector £6.2s.9d a week, a sergeant £5.7s.6d and a constable between £3.10s and £4.15s. There is little that is new.

CE Spriggs: Off Beat March 1977: At Chesterfield during the 1926 strike about twenty of us were sent to the mines and six asked to go down the pit to see what it was like. Believe me it was no picnic with about four inches of coal dust on the floor kicked up by the man in front and often crawling on hands and knees we were glad to see the light of day. We were in a mess as we had no overalls. How we got clean again I will never know as there were no pit head baths.