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# ‘Police as Ploughmen’: Temporary Release to Help Farmers in the Food Crisis of First World War Britain

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## ABSTRACT

Police skills and manpower require occasional reassessment within dominant discourses. World War One saw huge urgent shifts surrounding patriotism. From late 1916, government prioritised agriculture to avoid impending starvation and food riots. Government helped farmers to increase and change production by substitution, initially from two groups, the army and civilians. Farmers rejected many early army substitutes as incompetent, while many policemen possessed latent agricultural skills. Despite intense pressure and many new duties, policemen loaned to farmers were widely welcomed and encouraged. Lending manpower to farmers provided a solution to the challenges of men of military age remaining in the police.

## KEYWORDS



First World War farming;  
1917 food production; 1917  
British police

## Introduction

Modern police services periodically review their administration, role and remit.<sup>1</sup> Situated in the discourses and culture of the day, the focus is frequently on manpower levels, the work and skills required. History can shed light on modern debates by showing past policing behaviour as a set of ideas circulating at the time.<sup>2</sup> This historical consciousness reminds us that the police are shaped by past social situations, as well as helping to shape these processes. As Loader says, policing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had much to do with ‘pacification of industrial and social conflict’.<sup>3</sup> This article shows one of these social situations, the crisis of Britain’s First World War food supply, situated within the dominant discourse of patriotism – everyone’s duty to their country to help in any way they could to win the war.<sup>4</sup> The discourse enabled temporary release of policemen with latent agricultural skills from police duties onto farms to help ameliorate feared population starvation by increasing home food production. Retired policemen were also encouraged to return to work<sup>5</sup>; the discourse therefore helped police workforce redistribution.

Temporary release of policemen into agriculture was first found in the widely read, influential journal *The Police Review and Parade Gossip*, Organ of the British Constabulary,<sup>6</sup> which headed its columns ‘Police as Ploughmen’. It showed the extent

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and locations in early 1917. On further investigation of local newspapers, Chief Constable's and police authority reports, this author found confirmation of dates and approximate numbers. National Service headed by Neville Chamberlain, initially encouraged and supplied farmers with manpower during the threat of mass starvation, when essential food imports were curtailed. In these crucial times, government took control of farming in the national interest to develop self-sufficiency including substituting manpower for farm workers who had left the land. Despite farmers being accused of profiteering, government and farmers combined to increase home food production<sup>7</sup> by substituting manpower and supplying machinery, horses and fertilisers<sup>8</sup>; agriculture became a top priority.<sup>9</sup> Civilians, mainly policemen, worked alongside men furloughed from the army to urgently plough and plant during six weeks March–April, leading to increases over 1916 in corn and root crops for the 1917 harvest.<sup>10</sup> This article shows how the dominant discourse of patriotism was maintained, enabling deployment of around 500 policemen with latent agricultural skills to help the population in urgent need. The social and cultural history of food shortages is shown, how they affected mainly the working classes and the extent and effects of manpower shortages in farming and the police. These social situations shaped the police service and its response.

### ***The food crisis 1917***

By 1913, farming was largely individual commercial businesses run by farmers, relying on imported grain.<sup>11</sup> Arable accounted for only 3,000,000 acres growing food for human consumption, whereas 36,000,000 acres grazed livestock<sup>12</sup> relying on imported concentrated feeding stuffs. Britain only grew one-fifth of wheat consumed in bread, a staple for the masses, whereas four-fifths was imported. The effects on around 80% of the population reliant on these imports is seen in working class diets.<sup>13</sup> While evidence is sparse, between 1887 and 1901 available surveys of 151 working class families around Britain suggest the poorest mainly ate bread and potatoes, while women and children consumed mostly bread and tea.<sup>14</sup> Evidence 1902–1913 shows bread consumption stabilised, while potato consumption nearly doubled,<sup>15</sup> this trend continued into the First World War. Despite steep food price inflation and temporary shortages requiring substitution in diets, little change was seen overall in working class diets during the war.<sup>16</sup> There were no general food shortages until the end of 1916.<sup>17</sup> However, from the mid-1915, imports were increasingly threatened by enemy action.<sup>18</sup>

To off-set impending shortages, from December 1916, government intervention<sup>19</sup> acted on the Milner Report<sup>20</sup> encouraging wheat growing and organising farming at district and county levels. Accordingly, the balance of land use between pasture and arable needed to change to promote self-sufficiency. Rowland Prothero, Minister for Agriculture from December 1916, claimed 100 acres of arable land could feed 150 people annually, whereas the same acreage of average quality grass fed less than 15, arguing that British farming could not feed the population.<sup>21</sup> From January 1917, increasing self-sufficiency became central to British government policy.<sup>22</sup> As shipping losses escalated, mid-September 1916 saw a net loss of 231 ships, outweighing increases in new and repaired ships, causing alarm.<sup>23</sup> A sudden shift when Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare from 1 February 1917 made home food production a top priority. Additionally, the 1916/17 wheat crop failed internationally with no surplus for export.<sup>24</sup>

The severe, lengthy winter, led British farmers to claim the potato crop rotted or was diseased although contradictory reports claim farmers withdrew them from sale to increase prices due to government price fixing.<sup>25</sup> Farmers needed to be appeased by providing manpower, equipment and fertilisers, rather than controlled by restricting their profits. The absence of potatoes removed a staple from the diet for many months. Portrayed as desperate circumstances, the capacity of British farming to feed the population with staple items became critical.<sup>26</sup> February 1917 saw soaring food prices and shortages, particularly in potatoes when prices more than doubled to the highest recorded since 1900,<sup>27</sup> leaving many whose traditional diet relied on potatoes in a parlous state.

### ***Agricultural manpower, 1914–1916***

Portrayed as patriotic, without help farmers were unable to change or increase production due to manpower losses.<sup>28</sup> Until late 1916 farm workers were voluntarily recruited into military and munitions. The numbers are contentious, as government kept no records. But estimates showed by July 1915, 15.6% of the permanent male labour force had left compared with January 1914,<sup>29</sup> others show losses of around 12%.<sup>30</sup> With the first Military Service Act setting conscription age 18–41,<sup>31</sup> losses increased to 22% (around 176,000) by July 1916, but according to Dewey this was after labour substitution, the real losses were 245,000 (30.6%), although The Board of Agriculture, Board of Trade surveys estimated 350,000 (around 45%) by October.<sup>32</sup> The National Registration Act<sup>33</sup> initially attempted to arrest the decline by starring skilled agricultural workers as indispensable; attesting their willingness to serve placed them on an army reserve list, but when called many declined, as the Liberal government under Asquith defended voluntarism. Unskilled farm labourers had no indispensable status and continued to sign up. Conscription, introduced under the 1916 Military Service Act, retained an exempted occupations list, but again excluded unskilled men. This declining workforce did not raise serious concerns in government until late 1916, when food shortages escalated.<sup>34</sup>

Farmers traditionally used substitutes at key times. From September 1914 education authorities agreed to release school children aged 12 and occasionally younger. To October 1916, England and Wales released 14,915.<sup>35</sup> Scotland also contributed although figures for only certain areas are readily available.<sup>36</sup> Children used at specific times for short periods, mainly planting and harvesting, were cheap labour welcomed by farmers. Pensioners returned to work,<sup>37</sup> further helped when the War Office released home defence soldiers for 2 weeks mid-1915. From January 1916 soldiers could be used occasionally for up to four weeks.<sup>38</sup> But shortfalls were evident: the 1916 harvest saw agreement to release 27,000, but from June to October farmers requested 61,805 with 30,690 supplied. Farmers criticised the scheme compounded by constraints on the hours soldiers could work. A fourth source, female labour, was patchy and increased imperceptibly until mid-1917 with the Women's Land Army; beforehand work by village women was part-time and selective. However, combined, these substitutes were sufficient to reduce manpower losses by around 6% in 1915, 9% in 1916; farming continued with fewer staff although some land was fallowed.<sup>39</sup> But from December 1916, when British

farming was portrayed as critical to feed the nation, the discourse of patriotism required larger substitution.

### **Police manpower**

By contrast to a more gradual loss from agriculture, the British police lost large numbers to the military on the declaration of war. Many recruited as reservists from the Boer War were battle-ready and called up immediately,<sup>40</sup> causing alarm as 1013 left the Metropolitan Police overnight, around one fifth, fewer regular policemen also volunteered.<sup>41</sup> The Police Review published the large cohorts recruited around Britain: 64 reservists, 18 volunteers from Bristol<sup>42</sup>; 17 reservist, 12 volunteers from Edinburgh.<sup>43</sup> From a workforce of 53,000 in England and Wales, most of military age, by autumn 1915 around 20% had left from the provinces, 25% from the metropolis. Around Britain forces showed alarm at this drastic, sudden reduction.<sup>44</sup> Gaining the Chief Constable's permission to enlist secured the police pension and family benefits such as a house, tying more experienced married officers to the service; failure to gain permission made unmarried new recruits with minimal pension contributions and no family to support more likely to volunteer. To reduce the impact of manpower losses, many forces called on patriotism to cancel annual leave and the weekly rest day or paid in lieu.<sup>45</sup> Workforces were supplemented by: (1) suspending the right to retire on a pension until after the war;<sup>46</sup> (2) recruiting Special Constables, usually respectable middle-class men working part-time, defended by the Home Secretary.<sup>47</sup> Recruited in large numbers, special constables performed regular duties on the beat; the workforce therefore became increasingly older with part-time volunteers. But special constables had other commitments, HM Inspector of Constabulary 1915 report estimated between 6 and 10 were needed to replace one regular policeman.<sup>48</sup> Although welcomed, their efficiency in serious disorder was doubted, some Chief Constables said they merely filled the gaps.<sup>49</sup> By late 1917, 118,332 were available throughout Britain, daily averaging 9092.<sup>50</sup> HM Inspector of Constabulary shows the effects: offences escaped notice resulting in fewer prosecutions. Furthermore, the Home Office placed many additional duties on police forces from the outbreak of war, leaving each to establish its priorities and determine what was involved, without central direction.<sup>51</sup> This led some to decline requests stating their numbers were too depleted:

FURTHER ENLISTMENTS IN LIVERPOOL. In view of the urgent needs of H.M. Forces, the Head Constable of Liverpool has been carefully considering the possibility and advisability of releasing a further number of the younger members of the Force for active service. Already 650 members have joined up . . . Owing to the extra work which the war has in innumerable ways thrown upon the Force the Head Constable feels that he would not be justified in allowing any more men to go. . . <sup>52</sup>

Chief Constables attempted to retain their experienced men through The Military Service Act (1916) tribunals which granted exemptions to conscription on employer application; The Police Review encouraged Chief Constables to apply.<sup>53</sup> The Act included a list of Certified Occupations (work of national importance)<sup>54</sup> giving Chief Constables responsibility 'Members of County and Borough Police Forces are not to be called up without the consent of the Chief Officer of the force to which they belong'. Pressure mounted, initially discontent over withdrawal of time off,<sup>55</sup> from mid-1918 with bitterness and

increasing resentment accusing the service of providing a hiding place from military service, and at the choices of who was released and who remained, as police forces were increasingly 'combed out'.<sup>56</sup> Recruits said to evade military service were shunned, portrayed as a disgrace and deeply unpatriotic. Some Chief Constables refused release<sup>57</sup> others failed to recruit sufficient Special Constables<sup>58</sup> both brought out into the open were vilified by the press. These increasing pressures to demonstrate patriotism by releasing men of military age while retaining sufficient skilled men to overcome social unrest was an ongoing struggle.

### ***Central government intervention to increase self-sufficiency in food***

The campaign for increased home food production began 20 December 1916 with Roland Prothero's speech to the Federation of War Agricultural Committees, as President of the Board of Agriculture.<sup>59</sup> To provide the most food in the shortest time, government intervened to extend arable cultivation starting with fallow land and ploughing grassland, decentralising government control of farming and, if farmers were unwilling, imposing compulsion. County Agricultural Executive Committees (CAECs), local arms of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in England and Wales and the Board of Agriculture in Scotland, derived powers from the Defence of the Realm Act.<sup>60</sup> CAECs assisted farmers to cultivate their arable land for the maximum crop, surveyed districts and reported on grassland more profitably ploughed and sown, penalising non-compliance. The Food Production Department, from 1 January 1917 collected and distributed labour, equipment, fertilisers and feeding-stuffs to farmers.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, farmers criticised government effectiveness: 'It is not any addition to the ranks of officials that is needed, but better organisation all round',<sup>62</sup> voicing their needs for equipment, horses, fertilisers and particularly manpower.

Farmers needed appeasing by substituted farm workers. Prothero retained responsibility for military substitution in England and Wales,<sup>63</sup> in Scotland it passed to National Service<sup>64</sup> along with recruitment of civilian volunteers across Britain. National manpower redeployment under government direction was urgently needed to supply the competing demands of army and essential home industries, while minimising manpower in industries such as commerce, not seen to contribute to war.<sup>65</sup> Redeployment was enshrined in National Service, launched 6 February 1917 to secure a voluntary mobile labour force for substitution; portrayed as restoring the nation's fortunes in the third year of war, characterised by war weariness, although the launch appeared to lack passion.<sup>66</sup> Grievies argues from 1 March Chamberlain developed ideas of local machinery obtaining substitutes through employers, but this emerged earlier,<sup>67</sup> in Chamberlain's visit to Glasgow from 26 February. Following the launch of National Service, Chamberlain visited five major cities: Bristol, London, Glasgow, Sheffield and Cardiff,<sup>68</sup> in Glasgow he explained his mission:

That was the main demand for National Service – to find substitutes not as efficient as those who went, because, after all, the men of the Army were necessarily the pick and flower of the nation – (cheers) – but they had to find men who would try to make up the patriotism, by determination to do all they could to help in winning the war.<sup>69</sup>

His rousing speech appealed to patriotism. Listeners agreed the army's priority for fit men aged 18–41, and government determination to provide for the Home Front by maintaining industrial productivity and helping farmers to feed the nation. Chamberlain entreated local authorities to help by establishing National Service committees, organising public meetings, canvassing and publicity.<sup>70</sup> In agriculture, a designated high priority industry, substitution was to provide 'a large number of men and women for work on the land'.<sup>71</sup>

The release of civilians skilled in agriculture was to supplement release from the home army, initially unable to supply suitable replacements,<sup>72</sup> which frustrated farmers. Initial help came from 11,500 CIII men: unfit for active army service, formed into agricultural companies from January 1917. When allocated to farms many were angrily rejected by farmers, grumbling at being asked to keep infirmaries and insulted that these replaced their skilled sturdy men. Farmers called them 'lazy and useless' or 'physically unable'.<sup>73</sup> From early March, with increasing urgency to plough and sow crops, 12,500 Home Defence soldiers were released, but from the combined 24,000, only 3000 demonstrated ploughing skills. Soldiers were found to resist mobilisation to fight by making false claims, also some highly unsuitable men were allocated, including lift attendants and piano tuners<sup>74</sup>; farmers ridiculed substitution.<sup>75</sup> This largely unacceptable workforce was supplemented by recalling all ploughmen in the Home Defence Force; by April 40,000 were released on furlough until 25 July but were unreliable as 18,000 were recalled before ploughing was complete due to operations in France. Furthermore, despite release, farmers continued to complain of manpower shortages.

The effects of food shortages were felt acutely by March 1917 with daily national publicity of lack of potatoes and calls for voluntary restraint on bread consumption, causing social unrest.<sup>76</sup> Portrayed as desperate circumstances and only 6 weeks to plough and sow crops for an autumn harvest, civilian substitution became essential.<sup>77</sup> The first report of police involvement was from Glasgow. The Police Review, a conduit for the discourse of patriotism, reported the Chief Constable was asked by the Corporation to report on the number of policemen with agricultural experience.<sup>78</sup> Minutes of 1 March 1917 show provost Sir Thomas Dunlop stating:

every man in their service with agricultural skill (ploughmen &c.) be granted leave during the next two months, and that the Corporation pay to such employees the difference between their present wages, and the wages and allowances received for such work.<sup>79</sup>

Local authority agreement to the minimum wage, travel and subsistence allowances helped labour mobility<sup>80</sup> widely publicised, it removed financial barriers. The Special Committee on Agricultural Produce asked heads of department to identify appropriate staff and communicate with National Service to ensure entitlement to subsistence allowances if working away from home.<sup>81</sup> The Corporation's early agreement coincided with increasing industrial unrest at the soaring cost of living with blame attributed to government failure to control the production, supply and distribution of food, resulting in the worst food queues in working class areas.<sup>82</sup> Accusations of steep food price inflation, profiteering and unequal food distribution were reported nationwide.<sup>83</sup> The crisis led to a near riot by working class women in Glasgow at the lack of potatoes and the patronising response by the provost to their requested deputation.<sup>84</sup> This increased pressure on local government to find a patriotic response to shortages by loaning labour and leasing space for, and encouraging horticulture.



A Glasgow councillor noted that thousands of British policemen had agricultural skills and could be released. Evidence supports this, agriculture was known as a popular recruitment source.<sup>85</sup> While evidence is patchy, in 1917 the Metropolitan Police employed 30–40% recruited from rural areas, more than 90% originating from manual jobs, the proportion from previous unskilled work higher than the population norm. Recruits from rural backgrounds were the most sought, said to be robust and amenable to discipline.<sup>86</sup> Cheshire showed similar trends.<sup>87</sup> Glasgow police records confirm this in [Table 1](#):

[Table 1](#) shows previous employment of Glasgow City Police. 398 represents 31.24% of the force. Although 171 were recruited into the military, they remained on the police role. Removing 171 shows 17.82% previously engaged in agriculture, the dominant group former farm servants, confirming the pattern in the Metropolitan Police and in Cheshire.

Chamberlain exploited this pattern by publicising searches of the National Register,<sup>88</sup> he identified ‘upwards of 12,000 men over military age who gave as their secondary occupation . . . some form of agricultural work’, currently in city jobs, a low priority in war-time. He appealed for their temporary release, to the delight and irony of Scottish farmers: ‘Mr Chamberlain was telling us on Monday evening that there are 12,000 men in Glasgow who can render invaluable service on the farm. Can quite believe it’.<sup>89</sup> However, 12,000 men in Glasgow age 16–65 was only around 4.86%, confirming the police employed a larger proportion than the city’s population.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, local authority employees were not subject to interview at a labour exchange to assess their suitability, so could be more speedily redeployed to agriculture than other civilians in working class occupations.<sup>91</sup> Despite searches of *The Police Review*, police authority reports, local and national newspapers, unlike army substitutes, no evidence was found of resistance by farmers to substituted policemen.

Patriotism in the police by helping agriculture was promoted by the journal in weekly columns throughout March and April 1917 showing the many locations.<sup>92</sup> Local reports also encouraged police release:

The Chief Constable . . . has notified to the Cheshire War Agricultural Committee that there are certain members of the Cheshire Constabulary who before joining the police force were engaged on farm work, and have some knowledge of ploughing. (He) has offered to release

**Table 1.** Previous agricultural experience, Glasgow City Police, February 1917 (available from the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, archives).

Previous agricultural experience on enrolment in the police service	Numbers in each type of work	Recruited into the military	Available in the police service
Farm servants	250	98	152
Ploughmen	33	18	15
Gardeners	26	12	14
Blacksmith	17	11	6
Shepherd	15	7	8
Farm labourers	13	8	5
Gamekeepers	12	4	8
Ghillies	6	5	1
Crofter	6	1	5
Farmer	5	3	2
Stableman	4	1	3
Groom	4	1	3
Others: include Cattlemen, Byremen, Royal Horse Artillery, Mechanics, Cartwrights, Groundsmen	7	2	5
<b>Totals</b>	<b>398</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>227</b>



these men for a time, provided that they can be given employment within reasonable distance of their own residence.<sup>93</sup>

This shows the urgency and confirms appropriate skills. Furthermore, where resistance was seen, The Police Review countered by publishing the steer by others:

POLICE FOR FARM WORK. THE BIRMINGHAM ARRANGEMENTS. The question of the temporary release for service on the land during the present sowing season of members of the Birmingham Police Force who have been previously engaged in agriculture came up for consideration at a meeting of the Watch Committee . . . leave of absence should be given to the Constables selected, and that any injury sustained whilst so employed should be regarded as having been sustained whilst on ordinary Police duty.<sup>94</sup>

Reports encouraged and shamed into release those appropriately skilled. Everyone could help, no force could escape, whether urban or rural, by examples of both: The Chief Constable of Roxburgh, Berwick and Selkirk agreed to release forty, most said to be ploughmen before recruitment, an example of help from a sparsely populated area.<sup>95</sup> Comparisons between contributions of urban and rural forces, publicised nationally, showed how all good police forces should behave.<sup>96</sup>

Patriotism was enhanced by publication of praise and undermining resistance. Despite publicity, others needed to be convinced of individuals' and the service best interests. The journal encouraged voicing concerns before release, including job security:

POLICE ON AGRICULTURAL WORK. *Conditions of service.* These questions are all matters of arrangement between the Police Authority in whose service the Constables are, and the agricultural organisation or employer engaging their services for work on the land. The proper course to pursue is for the Police concerned to put the questions to their Chief Constable. . . . The legal position is that the Constable will still be in the employment of the Police Authority by whom his services have been lent for occasions to the farmer. The Police Authority continue to be responsible for the wages and other considerations due to the Constable under the conditions of service in the Force.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, appealing to the good police authority and officers, encouraging similar behaviour elsewhere. In addition, portraying the national importance of release by a request from the Home Secretary:

The Chief Constable of Birmingham has received from the Home Secretary a request that as many Constables as possible shall be released for ploughing, as it was necessary that a great effort should be made to increase food production. There has been a very good response from all the divisions, there being many skilled agriculturalists in the Force, some of whom hold medals as winners of county ploughing competitions.<sup>98</sup>

The prestige associated with this letter appealed to its importance. The force and the employed award winners flattered by the publicity, aimed to encourage competition to release skilled agriculturalists nationwide.

Assessing latent skills and direct allocation to farms portrayed substituted policemen's good performance:

A letter was read from Constabulary Headquarters intimating that the following constables had been temporarily released for agricultural work:-

P. C. Bowyer Engaged by Mr G. Wilshin,

Kingsbury Farm, St. Albans.

P. C. Russell Engaged by Mr. A. G. Piggott,

Cell Barnes Farm, St. Albans.<sup>99</sup>

When time expired, both were asked to remain for a further week, agreed by the Watch Committee, showing their acceptance by farmers.<sup>100</sup> No detail in any records shows the work policemen undertook while on farms.

However, with no prior allocation, dissatisfaction was made known:

About 50 Edinburgh Policemen volunteered under the National Service scheme . . . A few were allocated to Aberdeenshire, and had rather unpleasant experiences. One tells that he had to tramp eleven miles to a farm only to be told that the vacancy there had been filled. Then he was sent to another farm, where the canny tenant professed his inability to pay the wages. . . . He was offered a few shillings per week by a widow on another farm.<sup>101</sup>

Lack of planning when sent a distance from home was said to result in poor job satisfaction and use of manpower, demonstrating misplaced patriotism.

The discourse of patriotism enabled reports from eleven police authorities in England and nine in Scotland, each released large proportions, totalling around 500 by April 1917 making the police one of the first civilian groups to help agriculture. Harvest 1917 found further release in Scotland, doubled to 500,<sup>102</sup> although no central figures are available for England and Wales, policemen categorised amongst 'miscellaneous' provided 20.3% of replacements.<sup>103</sup> One authority in Wales declined, saying their force was too depleted to help.<sup>104</sup> Release was in 3 forms: (1) Full time temporary release from police duties with return after around two months<sup>105</sup>; (2) Full time semi-permanent, release went beyond 1917, included 83 from Birmingham<sup>106</sup>; or (3) Encouragement to help in holidays and off duty time as in Liverpool.<sup>107</sup> At harvest, another 150 released from the Metropolitan Police helped Sussex farmers with manual ploughing,<sup>108</sup> recognised by the Board of Agriculture as an excellent contribution.<sup>109</sup> Many were portrayed as highly praised:

The hundred or so members of the Birmingham City Police who are now working on the land are giving every satisfaction to their employers<sup>110</sup>

Praise was likely to encourage continued release into 1918, indeed policemen were still found on the land into mid-1918, although their locations were not stated.<sup>111</sup>

However, resisting calls to patriotism brought direct pressure from both national government and local populations. Nationally, the War Cabinet intervened in February 1917 with instructions to call up all policemen under 22, publicised by The Police Review<sup>112</sup>:

*Mr. (Joseph) KING* (Liberal MP for North Somerset)

asked the Under-Secretary of State for War whether he is aware that the number of the police being men of military age in the county of Surrey is the subject of adverse comment, and that the Windlesham local tribunal has passed a resolution in condemnation; and whether combing out will be applied to the police forces in the United Kingdom, especially where special constables are so readily available and efficient as in Surrey?

*Mr. (James Ian Stewart) MACPHERSON* (Liberal MP for Ross & Cromarty, Under-Secretary of State for War)

**Table 2. Agricultural output in Britain 1917 compared with 1909–13** (adapted from Dewey, 1989 Appendix A).

Crop	('000 tons)			
	1909–13	1914	1916	1917
Wheat	1598	1706	1559	1634
Barley	1329	1367	1110	1189
Oats	2050	2033	2100	2280
Potatoes	3604	4031	3036	4451
Turnips & swedes	21,524	19,762	18,882	20,217

The resolution referred to was communicated to the War Office. The resolution of the Windlesham local tribunal was brought to the notice of the chief constable concerned. It was reported that he had already released a large proportion of his force. In accordance with the decision of the War Cabinet instructions have now been given to call up . . . all policemen fit for general service up to the age of twenty-two.<sup>113</sup>

Combing out the police continued unabated. The public also openly showed disapproval on the streets, 'Why aren't you in the Army? A young man like you ought to be ashamed of yourself going about in a policeman's uniform'. The incident was said to draw a large disapproving crowd.<sup>114</sup> Patriotism enabled fit men of military age to become increasingly pressurised by government and the public not to remain in the police service and be seen on the beat, and Chief Constables under increasing pressure to release them.

Reorganisation of policing saw experienced young officers required to maintain public order, while minor disturbances were the role for older policemen; duties on the beat increasingly conducted by Special Constables. Chief Constables released men of military age with latent agricultural skills into a high priority industry, demonstrating they supported patriotism by helping farmers. The police also benefitted as those loaned were out of public view, indistinguishable from others, able to provide welcome help to farmers and more likely to return to the police service unharmed afterwards. By their release, fewer younger policemen were noticeable on the streets. Furthermore, substitutes into agriculture remained under police control, usually allocated close to home, easily recalled in an emergency, which Special Constables were feared unable to control.<sup>115</sup>

Early 1917 substitution into agriculture saw the police as one of the initial civilian groups to respond. By harvest, when many policemen had returned to police duties, adult substitution had broadened to others: around 140,000 additional village women, most part-time and seasonal, 5000 Women's Land Army in July, mainly undertook dairying and field work, and a few prisoners of war. The numbers substituted into agriculture continued; 1 June 1918 saw an increase since January in labour under the control of the Food Production Department of 30,000 soldiers, 5000 Women's Land Army, 24,000 prisoners of war, 230 war agricultural volunteers and 430 other workers, including policemen, Danes and Colonial soldiers. Therefore, policemen helped farmers for more than a year. Dewey says this group of miscellaneous labour (other workers) has left little trace.<sup>116</sup> This study has traced one group: British policemen.

Government strategies of self-sufficiency led to the publication of results; 1917 total agricultural output is shown in [Table 2](#):

[Table 2](#) contrasts with average yields of British pre-war corn and root crops. 1914 increases were in all crops, except oats. Decreases in 1916 in crops apart from oats

confirms one reason for food shortages. Results from 1917 show increases in wheat, oats and potatoes compared with 1909–13, and increases from 1914 in oats and potatoes. Barley was not prioritised due to campaigns to reduce alcohol consumption.

## Conclusions

During the initial crisis of threatened food shortages, more than 500 policemen with latent agricultural skills were one of the first organised civilian groups to help farmers urgently prepare the ground for an increase in crops for the 1917 harvest. The discourse of patriotism – everyone’s duty to their country to help in any way they could to win the war – enabled substitution into agriculture of policemen with latent agricultural skills and mainly of military age, as the threat of population starvation loomed. *Police as Ploughmen* gives an example of the demands on local authorities and Chief Constables, industries of lower national importance, to help high priority industries in the national interest, and the struggles they overcame. Although fit men of military age had acknowledged priority for military service, mobilisation of adult labour into industries of national importance was portrayed as crucial.

Police forces were known to recruit from agriculture, leading central and local government to call on Chief Constables to release them. Many examined their workforce to establish those with appropriate skills. The widely read *Police Review* responded by encouraging release, publishing weekly reports of locations, numbers and how both urban and rural forces responded: none could escape. Barriers were removed by agreement to pay and conditions and where resistance was seen, it was countered with published advice from other forces, providing examples of how the good police force should contribute. Reports of resistance to combing out policemen into the military and public resistance to young, fit policemen on the streets, added to the discourse that the police should discontinue with men of military age. National and local publicity for maintaining them in civilian employment of low priority penalised non-compliance.

Chief Constables received many government requests to undertake new duties during the war. Despite the diminishing workforce and public pressure, the police balanced priorities by lending policemen to help farmers, although the work they undertook on farms can only be surmised according to seasonal requirements. Fewer arrests were made but policemen were seen by farmers, local authorities and the public to help the population in crisis. Police forces urgently adjusted to the many new assigned duties, mainly allocating police work to older experienced officers and part-time middle-class volunteers.

The temporary redistribution of police manpower into a top priority industry also benefitted the service, as those lent were more likely to return unharmed and helped to build community trust and confidence.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, as Chief Constables released men into agriculture on condition that they worked close to home, experienced manpower was available if needed to quell serious disorder. In the process, internal tensions over who was chosen for release into the military diminished, as fewer military-aged men were available for daily police duty.

‘*Police as Ploughmen*’ shows the set of ideas about policing within the call to patriotism, circulating at the time.<sup>118</sup> Following Loader, this article provides historical consciousness to the helping role of the police showing how they were shaped by the

social situation in 1917/18 and how resistance was minimised. The police shaped these social processes by developing strategies for release.

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