

The RIC in Limerick in 1916

by Tom Toomey

At the beginning of 1916 the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) in County Limerick, was commanded by, an English born, County Inspector named Henry Yates. The county and city were divided into nine police districts each of which was commanded by a District Inspector and a Head Constable.

Henry Edmund Wingfield Yates was born in Hertfordshire, England and was typical of members of his class who gained position more by connection than ability. In October 1912 he was singularly responsible for the outbreak of rioting after an anti-Home Rule meeting at the Theatre Royal in Henry Street, Limerick. At the end of the meeting as the crowd left the theatre, there was some cat calling and heckling from a pro-Home Rule crowd gathered on the other side of the street. All would probably have petered out but Yates made a decision to deploy 'his new toy' – a mounted police unit. It was a one sided deployment as he sent them in to push back the Home Rule crowd and a full scale riot then ensued. The rioting continued for three nights, despite the deployment of 300 RIC men. There was huge damage to property in the city centre and it was only the intervention of Fr Con Mangan director of the Arch-Confraternity that brought order to the chaos. Father Mangan gathered a number of young curates and they cleared the streets where the 300 policemen had failed. Testament to their success was that they were praised for their actions by the strongly pro-Unionist *Limerick Chronicle*.



Fr. Mangan

In January 1916 Yates was in command of 350 officers and men spread across 58 barracks. The records of the RIC for 1916 are very good with a result that it is possible to identify the RIC men who were present in each garrison at the beginning of January by reference to the Nominal Rolls for that year. Ironically it is the list of officers that are not so easily determined. Although Jim Herlihy did an extensive biographical study of every RIC officer he surprisingly did not list the districts in which they served. One District Inspector who served in Limerick during much of Yates' tenure was District Inspector George Craig.¹ Craig was born in Naas, County Kildare in 1869 and he served in Limerick for much of the period up to 1920, when he was promoted as County Inspector to County Cork.

One feature of the disposition of the RIC in County Limerick, in January 1916, was the absence of temporary police posts and huts, which was always an indicator of extensive agrarian agitation. This was especially true of counties, Galway, Clare and Kerry where temporary police posts and huts were a regular feature used in an effort to curb agrarian conflict.

The average RIC Barracks in a rural area held a complement of one sergeant and three to four constables. Each barrack garrison was required to carry out patrols in conjunction with



Policeman on duty

adjacent garrisons. For instance the garrison at Ballyneety would walk or cycle to a midway point between the Ballyneety and Caherconlish where they would meet the Caherconlish patrol before returning to Ballyneety. For garrisons in more remote areas the patrols were more rigorous because of the greater distances involved. Initially constables were required to live in the barracks which made matters very awkward if relations with the sergeant were not good as the sergeant and his family always had living quarters in the barracks. A prospective candidate had to be at least nineteen years of age, be at least 5'-8" in height, of good

character and be in the good graces of his local sergeant. His application would normally be signed by the local District Inspector who would also interview the applicant and if he was satisfied the applicant would be sent to the depot in the Phoenix Park for a six month course of training.

When he arrived at the Depot he would be assigned a constabulary number and listed on the RIC Register as a constable. Some days later he would be sent for a medical and should he fail he would be sent home.² Upon finishing his training the new constable would be assigned to a county other than his own. As the RIC was organised on a county by county basis inter-county transfers in the normal course of events were not that common. An exception to this was when the young constable got married and then the newly weds would be transferred to a county where neither of them had relatives. Even in the matter of choosing a wife the authorities also demanded a say. Firstly a young policeman could not marry until he had completed seven years service and his prospective bride had to be acceptable to his superiors. Upon leaving the depot a newly fledged police man was on a salary of £39 per year rising to £70 after twenty years service. The salary scales in vogue, in January 1916, had not changed since 1900 and this had caused a lot of resentment among the rank and file.

Life for an RIC constable in County Limerick in January 1916 was a relatively safe, if very dull and poorly paid posting. Some of the more ambitious and adventurous had taken leave to join the British Army but the vast majority had stayed at their post defying all blandishments to join in the madness that was taking place on continental Europe. All that was to change in a matter of a short few years, however, as the country policeman was about to be thrust into the front line of violent conflict and his cosy if poorly paid peaceful existence was to be put at an end for ever.



RIC station wall plaque

References

1. Craig was present with Divisional Police Commissioner Gerald Bryce Smythe in County Club in Cork on 17 July 1920 when Smythe was shot dead by an IRA unit under Sean Culhane of Glin. Craig was wounded in the attack but not fatally.
2. It is a peculiarity of the RIC that about 10% of those listed on the RIC Register never actually served as policemen because they failed the medical. While as many as 10 to 15% failed the medical, some later successfully re-applied. This practise led to the saying that in the RIC the "brawn test was much more stringent than the brain test."

Disposition of RIC in Limerick 1916

#	Barrack	Dist Insp.	Hd Const.	Sergt	Const	Total
1	Abbeyfeale	1	1	2	5	9
2	Adare	1	1	2	5	9
3	Bruff	1	1	1	4	7
4	John Street	1	1	1	7	10
5	Kilfinnane	1	1	2	7	11
6	Newcastle West	1	1	2	3	7
7	New Pallas	1	1	1	8	11
8	Rathkeale	1	1	1	3	6
9	William Street	1	1	17	39	58
10	Ardagh			1	4	5
11	Ashford			1	3	4
12	Askeaton			1	5	6
13	Athea			1	3	4
14	Ballinacurra			1	4	5
15	Ballingarry			1	4	5
16	Ballylanders			1	3	4
17	Ballyneety			1	4	5
18	Ballysimon			1	2	3
19	Blackboy			1	4	5
20	Boherbuoy (Edward St.)			2	6	8
21	Broadford			1	3	4
22	Bruree			1	3	4
23	Caherconlish			1	2	3
24	Caherdavin			1	2	3
25	Cappamore			1	4	5
26	Castleconnell			1	4	5
27	Castletown			1	2	3
28	Clarina			1	3	4
29	Croom			1	3	4
30	Docks (O'Curry Street)			1	6	7
31	Doon			1	4	5
32	Dromcollogher			1	3	4
33	Elton			1	3	4
34	Fedamore			0	3	3
35	Foynes			1	8	9
36	Galbally			1	2	3
37	Glenosheen			1	2	3
38	Glin			1	6	7
39	Grange			1	3	4
40	Herbertstown			1	2	3
41	Hospital			0	5	5
42	Kildimo			1	3	4
43	Kilmallock			1	6	7
44	Kilmeedy			1	3	4
45	Kilmurry			1	3	4
46	Kilteely			1	2	3
47	Knockaderry			1	3	4
48	Loughill			1	3	4
49	Mary Street			2	6	8
50	Mountcollins			1	3	4
51	Murroe			1	2	3
52	Oola			1	2	3
53	Pallaskenry			1	5	6
54	Patrickswell			1	3	4
55	Shanagolden			1	4	5
56	Strand			1	2	3
57	Thomondgate			1	5	6
58	Toumashilla			1	3	4
Total		9	9	78	254	350

* Note five men from the Limerick allocation were assigned to joint stations such as O'Brien's Bridge, Mitchelstown, Reihill and Lisvernane outside Limerick.

** A small pool of reserves (5 sergeants and 8 constables) was held at William Street.