

empty your pockets: the archive in a police constable's greatcoat

What's in your pocket right now? Your wallet, a few receipts; maybe even a subway ticket or two? Perhaps your heaviest winter coat contains a few more remnants from your everyday life – a tissue, some gum, or a flyer you were handed for that new restaurant. You're not deliberately collecting these items so that a social historian can pore over their relevance in fifty years' time, and you likely aren't consciously reviewing what stays in there and what goes, except perhaps on the basis of utility. This is my reason for finding a recent donation to the police historic collection and archive where I work (in Devon, England) so fascinating



The greatcoat. Catalogue number 2015.0033.017

The donation

In winter 2015, a box of items was forward to the office. A note attached to the items stated that they related to the donor's father, who served in the Devon County Constabulary in the 1950s, in the British Transport Police in the 60s and 70s, finally becoming a Traffic Warden Supervisor until his retirement in the 1980s. Donations of this kind are not uncommon, and often we find that boxes like this have been sent in to us with no note about the provenance, or a return address. Sometimes we can use identifiers unique to each police constable – the so-called collar-, or shoulder-number is only ever assigned to one PC at a time. In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries smaller provincial forces kept handwritten nominal rolls listing all the information about their constables (even down to their complexion). With this donation, catalogue number 2015.0033, there are 21 object records, including a Devon Constabulary greatcoat (heavy winter overcoat with multiple pockets, including one for a truncheon), trousers and leggings, cap badges and buttons and insignia.

What was fascinating about this particular donation was what was discovered in the pockets of the greatcoat.

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The greatcoat

It was as if the donor's father had taken the coat off on his last day of work, pockets full of thirty years of work and personal documents and boxed it up, only to be opened by myself and an archive volunteer thirty years later. Elastic bands, sweet wrappers, a diary, a book of matches (from a long since closed nightclub in Torquay, Devon), a diary from 1976, pay slips and insurance documents, a Drill Book dating to 1900, and a poem scribbled on the back of a risqué cartoon. The receipt for the purchase of an Austin Seven Tourer was found in a breast pocket and I couldn't help but wonder when the PC had put it there - in the 1950s? Or was he still running a 1928-made vehicle in the 1980s? Was it his first car and he kept the receipt for sentimental reasons, or did the multiple pockets of the large coat offer him some form of personal archiving space for documents he might one day need to refer to?



2015.0033.012 The receipt for a 1928 Austin Seven Tourer, purchased 2 July 1940, found in one of the breast pockets

Particularly interesting to me was a folded up piece of paper that appeared to have a drawing on it. Upon unfolding, it appeared to be a cartoon entitled 'Lady Chatterley's Lover', and it was of a stylised pheasant hunter holding a gigantic erect penis in place of a shotgun. Turning the paper over, I found a handwritten poem that at first appeared gentle and sweet, but ends in abrupt violence; police humour, I was told. The poem is reproduced below, but for reasons explained further down may not be the exact version written on the piece of paper that came in with this donation.

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The poem (remembered; found online – original author unknown)

When I woke up this morning
the dawn was soft and still
A little robin came and sat
upon my window sill
He tipped his head and looked at me
his eyes so bright and clear
He chirped a little melody
My morning thoughts to cheer
His song he sang so sweetly
Without a moment's lull
I gently closed the window
and crushed his fucking skull

The risk of subjective value

When I came to write this piece, I sought the objects and documents in order to place back together the archive in the police constable's pocket. Upon realising that some of the objects and documents I had viewed when the donation first came in were missing, I spoke to the volunteer who had catalogued them. They informed me that things like the book of matches and, more devastatingly, the handwritten copied-out poem above were of no use to the archive so they had disposed of them. Their reasoning was that the poem was not an original, and the matches were junk, so why would we want to keep them, what historical use were they?

The police constable had prepared an archive of mid-twentieth century policing for us in his pockets, however unconsciously.



Still in the greatcoat (not catalogued but also not taken out and thrown away) - a wrapper from a fruit chew, a ticket from 1970 and two elastic bands