

'J' Division Police Stations

Bethnal Green

With additional text by Paul Dew



The police station sites in Bethnal Green are, perhaps, the most confused of all the one time 'J' Divisions stations. There is a reference in some old papers held in the Public Record Office that a plot of land was purchased in December 1860 for the purpose of erecting a police station at 243 Bethnal Green Road in London's East End. Although a police station was built in the area it is not known whether it was upon this particular plot.

Police Orders of January 11, 1864 showing the distribution of the Metropolitan Police Force at that time placed the station at Bethnal Green on the 'K' (Stepney) Division. One inspector, nine sergeants and sixty six constables were posted for duty at the station.

According to later correspondence on the police in Bethnal Green, in 1868 the police station for the area was, as later, at 458 Bethnal Green Road, Shoreditch. The building had been erected at a cost of £9,000 on an uncertain date, the freehold of the site being bought by the police in 1869. Any hope that this reference might clear up the true location of the police station were dashed by Police Orders issued on January 6, 1871. Announcing the not unusual, taking into occupation of a new police station, this document stated:-

“The police of 'H' Division are to take charge of and occupy the new police station at Church Street, Bethnal Green, on the 9th.”

A later note added, on August 23, 1935, the explanation for this state of affairs: -

“Apparently in 1974 the Receiver owned two Bethnal Green Police Stations”

This matter was not further pursued in the papers, but it was presumably referring to the premises in Church Street which was operating in some lesser role much as old police stations became used as accommodation or as a base for such as traffic police bases in modern times. It would seem that the writer wasn't referring to the near permanent, much mentioned, post at the Bethnal Green Museum in Cambridge Heath Road which remained manned well into the 1930s, having even acquired a direct telephone line to the head station as early as July 1902.

Being assigned to the museum was an unusual aspect of duty at Bethnal Green. Metropolitan Police officers were assigned to a range of public establishments including museums, dockyards and factories. In 1872 the building in Cambridge Heath Road opened as the Bethnal Green Museum.

At the time a Home Dept letter about Local Constables in London being assigned to the Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum in Kensington said there are about 540 including 'some at the South Kensington museums'. They were regular Metropolitan Police employees not Local Constables.

A short while after the main V&A museum opened, in November 1858, security of the museum was transferred to police 'who continued to work at the museum into the next century'.

In 1875 the agreement for the South Kensington building included a part time Superintendent, an Inspector, three Sergeants and 54 constables. In addition, at Bethnal Green branch of the V&A was employing the same Superintendent, two Sergeants and 19 Constables.

The amount of money involved increased as more police were employed and in fact doubly so as police

pay rates increased. Metropolitan Police Order of January 9, 1878 gives new rates for police employed by Depts (this includes museums) or private individuals as follows: -

Inspector £4 0s 7d per week

Sergeant £2 8s 0d. pw

Constable £2 1s 0d pw

For the V&A this gave a projected cost for 1878 of £7,406 6s 4d with another £2,168 for Bethnal Green.

On a lighter note also in 1878 application was made, and approved, to purchase 51 pairs of slippers for three sergeants and 48 constables: - *'to enable them to patrol the museum quietly during night time for the better protection of property therein than at present with heavy boots'*.

1883 saw the retirement and death of ex PS Buckley - he'd been the 'money taker' at Bethnal Green and previously for 11 years at the local police station. Of particular note and indicative of the value of police and ex police it was noted he was *'especially acquainted with local thieves'*.

In 1884 the sergeants at Bethnal Green asked to be allowed to work 8 instead of 12-hour shifts - like the constables - and this was granted but required an additional sergeant. The total cost at Bethnal Green the same year was £2,500.

Next year - 1885 - arrangements were made to employ plainclothes constables operating from the museums; 16 at South Kensington and 6 at Bethnal Green.

The telephone, which became widespread in police stations by the turn of the century, was preceded by the wire telegraph, a simple morse code transmitter. Bethnal Green received the equipment along with some of the other stations on 'K' Division in January 1872. To ease the workload of the operators each station was given a two letter code to replace the full name of the building. In this case it was a simplistic 'BG' but it would change in style over the years.



The ABC Telegraph

With the formation of the new 'J' Division in 1886, the station took on the mantle of heading the Bethnal Green Division in August 1886 (Police Orders July, 22 1886), the Divisional Headquarters of a nine station re-organisation that brought about a change in telegraphic code to 'JD' (J Division Divisional station). The other stations were Barkingside, Chigwell, Dalston, Hackney, Leytonstone, Loughton, Wanstead and Woodford.

In Police Orders dated February 7, 1894 it was stated:-

“J. The new Section House at Bethnal Green Police Station is to be taken into occupation on the 19th. The lodging assessment will be 24 single men at 1s. Each per week and revised lodging assessment at Bethnal Green Police Station for 1 married inspector at 5s.6d. per week.”

In 1904 the position of Bethnal Green as the head station of J Division was ceded to the newly built Hackney police station and it reverted to its former telegraphic code of 'BG.' It was only to be a short time after this that a new police station was built on the 458 Bethnal Green Road site.

By the turn of the century pressure from the Treasury to reduce costs included the suggestion Commissioners could be employed. The museum authorities in an internal document accepted the inevitable but insisted *'police at entrances must be retained'*. *'Reductions in cost would not be very much but would show Treasury we had done something'*. A careful way of just managing to comply!

Costs were rising and the moves to remove the police presence continued. In December 1909 Sir Edward Henry of the Metropolitan Police wrote to the V&A to suggest *'the whole matter of police warding be discussed'* - and a meeting took place later that month.

At this meeting Sir Edward Henry said in respect of men at the museum 'no reduction could be made unless the hours are shortened during which the museum is open'. In addition, he thought 'the force must consist of police alone and not an admixture of police with Commissionaires or others'. At the same time the ex-constables were mentioned who for admin purposes are under the control of the Inspector of Police.



The police station in 1907



The police station in 1983

BETHNAL GREEN POLICE

Two further issues of Police Orders in 1917 referred to the new station at Bethnal Green. On April 28, 1917

“J. The administrative portion of Bethnal Green new police station is to be taken into occupation and business commenced therein 30 April”

And on June 30

“J. The new married quarters at Bethnal Green police station are to be taken in occupation. Lodging assessment 2 sets at 10s.6d per week each”

In August 1933 another major reorganization of parts of the Metropolitan Police took place north of the River Thames. Bethnal Green was removed from the 'J' Division it had once been Divisional Station for. Transferred to the 'H' (or Whitechapel) Division, as a sectional station under Bow, it retained its telegraphic code until 1938 when all Metropolitan Police codes were changed to a system based on Divisional identities. It then became 'HB.'

During the 1939-45 war an emergency exit from an air raid shelter belonging to the British United Shoe Machinery Company emerged into police station yard, remaining there until being blocked in 1948.

During the April 1, 1965 re-organisation of police boundaries to align with new local authority boundaries created by the London Government Act 1963, Bethnal Green became a sectional station to Commercial Street in part of the new London Borough of Tower Hamlets. When Leman Street police station was closed for rebuilding in early December 1967 the area was policed from Commercial Street and Bethnal Green, the latter assuming sub-divisional status.

A new police station was erected at 12 Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green, E2 9NZ closed for refurbishment in 2020 and was officially re-opened by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick in September 2021.

