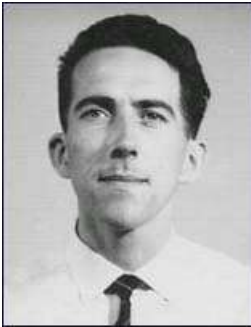


# MAIDENHEAD and THE MET – 1960-61

(By Barry Thorne)



My father's experiences in 1950 undoubtedly had a major effect on his attitude to business, and while determined to remain independent and self-employed, he had severely limited his expectations, vision and horizons. He had moved in with his parents at Burchetts Green, who were generous in allowing him the use of their garden to set up an office (a wooden shed) at the side of their house and a builder's yard at the bottom of the garden. When I joined him, he had built a fairly large garage-cum-store, where he kept much of his building equipment and stores, tools, stock of plumbing and electrical spares,

timber and bricks etc. His office was chaotic, and his method of filing comprised a metal spike on a wooden base on which he stuck invoices and statements, with piles of correspondence, catalogues and other documents spread all over the table and floor. Payment of any bills was very much a hit and miss affair, with the most threatening creditors being paid first. I took it upon myself to reorganise the office, sort out his bills, bank statements, letters and other papers into some form of order, with proper files and records. But forever after, my father blamed 'bloody Barry' whenever he couldn't find anything!

By checking and reorganising his papers, I discovered the main reason why he had a cash flow problem, which was clearly due to the large amounts (relative to his modest turnover) owed to him by customers and employees. The former were not paying or delaying settlement for work done, while the latter were not repaying loans made to them by my father (he was to say the least, a 'soft touch' to anyone with a hard luck story, but was unable to confront them to effect a repayment). My first task therefore was to collect these debts without bothering him too much by telling him what I was up to. I began by calling on one or two of his main customer debtors, who were not short of a penny or two and more than capable of settling his accounts. The first was a local newspaper wholesaler, who purported to be a friend; my father had built a large four-bedroom house for the man, but had not been paid the retention money normally held back for six months, but in this case it had been more than a year. The man knew me and was aware that I had recently left the army and joined my father in his business, so when I called on him one evening, was invited in and offered a drink in a very friendly fashion. But the mood soon changed when the purpose of my visit became known, and I was told that the reason for withholding the balance owed was due to certain work not having been completed, or unsatisfactorily finished. I had come prepared for this and produced a notebook and asked for details, and it soon became apparent that only a few minor faults remained to be attended to, such as cracks in some areas of the plastering (caused through the drying out process), some touching up of paintwork, and some loose window catches. I arranged for two workmen to call the next day to do the work, and followed up shortly after with another visit and asked if everything was now to the client's satisfaction, and with obvious reluctance was handed a cheque for the outstanding amount.

The workmen's loans were resolved when I took over the preparation and payment of wages, which instead of simply handing over cash, as had been my father's method paying them, I made out proper pay packets, indicating the amounts earned, less reductions for tax and national health insurance. When the packets were handed over, I received a chorus of complaints as to why they were short of a pound or so, whereupon I asked if I was correct in assuming that the men owed my father money, and when I

received answers in the affirmative, explained that a small deduction would be made each week until the loans were repaid. It quickly became clear that in many respects my arrival in the firm was not terribly popular!

However, reorganising the accounts and even opening a new one-room office in Maidenhead High Street, was not the net of my ambition. But my desire to expand and grow the firm was not supported by my father, which while not bringing us into any disagreeable arguments, did not encourage in me any thoughts of becoming a successful building contractor. But it did result in my thoughts once more being directed to my long-term ambition of serving overseas, if not in the army then in some other service-type role. The answer came when I was told that the Crown Agents were looking to recruit officers to serve in the Colonial Police in Nyasaland. I quickly applied and was invited to their offices in Millbank, London, where I was interviewed by a visiting Senior Superintendent from Nyasaland (with whom I later worked) and was accepted for training.

The smaller colonies (Hong Kong being an exception) had no training facilities of their own, so officers received basic constable training given by the Metropolitan Police. So in July 1961, I arrived at the Police Training School in Hendon, where I spent the following sixteen weeks learning the duties of a London Bobby, which in many respects would not appear to have been the ideal training and experience for a young man heading to Central Africa to take up the post as an Inspector of Police! Nonetheless, the background and ethos of all basic police work, especially those forces with links to English Law, provided an excellent start for my new career, as the training did in fact teach me to think and act as a policeman. On top of this, the experience had an additional interest for me as my great-grandfather, Edward Thorne, had served twenty six years in the Metropolitan Police from 1874, and had even spent some time at Hendon, so I felt an historical link existed for me with the 'Met'.

The course however, was no picnic, and demanded the study and passing of exams in Law and the Metropolitan Police Acts. Much of the learning was by rote and having to quote many definitions word perfectly and by heart, in what were known as 'A' reports and, to a lesser degree of intensity, 'B' reports. This ensured that constables gained a thorough knowledge and understanding of some of the important points of law, as well as some considered less so, by learning their definitions. Other skills imparted to us included self defence and how to make use of a number of police holds when dealing with violent or dangerous individuals, or simply those resisting arrest. Many of the lessons were put into practice by way of practical exercises, whereby certain situations were set up, and officers were expected to deal with them correctly and within the law.



One such test followed on from the training we had received on dealing with particularly violent individuals. I was told that while on patrol, I was to be called by a landlord into his public house where a customer was smashing up the bar. A number of issues were involved here, including the power of arrest within a pub, while bearing in mind the fact that having been invited in by the landlord, it was necessary to act and remove anyone causing actual damage. The scene was enacted by other training school instructors, and when I entered the 'pub' found a number of tables overturned, but others occupied by four or five men seated at them, all of whom were sound asleep! What was expected of course was that I did not simply walk away, but checked on the individuals; but when I did, one of them jumped up shouting abuse and threatening to do damage to me with a bottle. However,

the instructor playing the role was not expecting my reaction, which was immediately to put into practice the self defence lesson learned only the day before and I spun him round, placed him across my back and into a headlock. He kicked, struggled and made muffled cries, which thinking this to be all part of the act, I ignored and shouted at him to shut up and carried him across the threshold where a 'proper arrest' could be effected. But on doing so, the man collapsed on the ground, bleeding profusely from a split nose where my forearm had been instead of round his throat. Fortunately for me, but not the instructor, my actions were considered positive and I gained some good 'brownie points'!

Another moment of 'excitement' came when we were told that should the need arise, Metropolitan Police constables would be expected to jump into the river from a London bridge. So we were dressed in denims, sent to the swimming pool, and there told to go to the top of a high tower, built to the height of a bridge and ordered to jump. Never having done anything like this before, when my turn came to leap my brain said 'go', but my legs refused. But after a few seconds and bellows from the Inspector below to 'bloody well jump', I threw myself into space shouting 'Geronimo' and hit the water with legs and arms flailing in all directions. Emerging quite proud of my achievement, I was greeted (unfairly I thought at the time) with shouts of derision for not entering the water as trained, with legs straight and arms tight to my side!

Having been a sergeant in the army, I was often appointed squad leader and had to march my fellow students from place to place, but managed to do so with a degree of humour



and goodwill on the part of the other students. Being a Colonial Cadet, I was clearly identified as such by wearing a black, loose fitting battledress uniform and a peaked cap, instead of the Metropolitan Police uniform with its famous helmet, as was issued to the trainee constables. And the only indication as to where I would be headed after completion of the course was the Nyasaland Police badge in my cap.

Colonial Police Officers were expected to purchase their own equipment, such as badges, buttons and camp equipment prior to leaving the UK, and to have uniforms made for them on arrival in Nyasaland, all from an allowance paid prior to our departure. This in fact helped supplement the very meagre 'salary' of sixteen pounds per month which we were paid while training (trainee constables were being paid more than twice as much per week) and some of my fellow officers 'blew the lot' even before boarding the aeroplane! And even on arrival, our annual salary was hardly generous, with pay starting at £750 per year.



Quite separate from the training itself, the attitude and outlook of the Metropolitan Police, especially with regard to race, was very different to that of today's force. This was exemplified one day when my class sergeant instructor, a very nice, intelligent and able policeman, asked in the middle of a lesson why I wanted to go to the 'land of the jungle bunnies', when it was obvious that I could do well in the Metropolitan Police, and London had 'plenty of jungle bunnies here, so there's no need for you to go there'!

I completed the course by obtaining excellent results in the final examination and combined with my overall course performance, was awarded 'Honours', entitling me thereafter to wear the Metropolitan Police Honours tie, which I was told had not been awarded to any previous Colonial Cadet. So after a short break at home, I received my travel instructions and air ticket, and prepared to set off to a new life in Africa.

However, before actually departing, my mother arranged a farewell party at her home at Hillside, when my recent training actually bore fruit and the self defence instruction came in particularly handy. A little after midnight, with everyone enjoying themselves with dancing and ample drink available, I was told that a couple of uninvited and aggressive young men were at the front door demanding entrance. When confronted, they were very belligerent and again demanded entry to the 'club' and after a little discussion, I managed to persuade them to leave the premises, but on reaching the front gate they stopped and again demanded to be allowed in. By this time they were on the pavement and I told them that they were free to stay there as long as they liked, but would not be allowed to cross the line marking the limit of my mother's property. As I was saying this, the larger of the two fellows suddenly butted me with his head, opening a large gash above my right eye. At the time, I didn't feel this as my mind immediately switched to recalling what I had been told and practised at the training school when faced with such a situation. Much to the fellow's amazement, I grasped both collars of his coat and pushed against him and when he resisted, I suddenly stopped pushing, spun him round, put his head in an arm lock and threw my legs forward, so that combined with his forward momentum, we both landed on the ground with him face down and me on my back. In this position, it was not possible for him either to get up or to reach my head with his hands, and all the time I kept maximum pressure on his neck to ensure that I did not loosen the head-hold. After about a minute or so of this, one of my friends, many of whom had left the party to see the fun, said that I ought to let him go, and when I asked why, was told that the man's face was beginning to turn black! Not wanting to kill the fellow, I let go and got up leaving him gasping on the ground, but before I could do anything more, the other man charged at me with his head down and shouting 'I'll get you for that, you bastard'. I had just enough time to put out a hand and deflect his charge, and as he stumbled forward, my sixteen year old brother Ashley hit him with a well aimed kick to the head, sending the man spinning to the ground; an effective way of dealing with a violent trouble maker, but one I felt would not necessarily have been approved of at the Metropolitan Police Training School! I went inside to clean the blood off my face and clothes and attend to the cut above my eye, and when I re-emerged and asked what had happened to the two men, was told by my friend James that he and a couple of other of our friends had been bundled them into his Bentley. When asked if he had known where to take them, he answered in the negative, and said he had dumped them in Slough where he felt such people would have come from!