

Memories of the Irish Land Boundary Patrol – George T Smith

The picture of two APO's watching somewhere on the Irish Land Boundary reminded me of my own service there 1953–1956. I think the APO with the binoculars is Mike Aubin who I believe was CPO Avonmouth towards the end of his career. They appear to be holding the microphone for a portable radio. This latter equipment was large enough and heavy enough to be carried in a large shopping bag.

I entered the Waterguard in December 1952 at London Airport where I had been a DCO in the Custom House there. After training in the still bomb damaged Custom House in Lower Thames Street I returned to LAP. During training we were taught such exotica as measuring 'excess of hatches' on a model of the ship *Holofernes* and were exposed to drugs on a visit to Home Office in Whitehall. Incidentally we were told that the badge with portcullis had been designed by the Inspector Generals DCO though it has much in common with the badge worn by uniformed staff at the Houses of Parliament.

Returning to LAP in Spring 1953 I was employed on Boarding on the apron and baggage duties in the Baggage hall which at that time was a large single storey prefab on North Side near the Bath Road. A move to Ulster attracted me as it offered 'mobile terms' a Crown transfer and a chance to learn to drive a car. After the Coronation in June 1953 (which ceremony I watched on a small black and white TV in the Boarding office in the Control Tower) I moved to Belfast. There I was taught to drive a civilian car, a Humber Hawk, and about a week later drove by motor cycle to Armagh where I had been assigned. I worked from the offices at 2 Seven Houses and later 1 The Mall until mid 1956. During my time in Armagh I spent some time on detached duty at Aughnacloy sub station which tended to be a more exciting area. One APO was shot by an IRA man (he recovered and moved to London Port) and smugglers were more daring there. I was myself injured in a conflict with a smuggler near County Bridge when he drove off with me still standing on his near side running board; when he drove close to a parked van I was rolled between the two vehicles and ended up thrown to the road. We got the smuggler a few weeks later for another offence and he went to prison for six months. Interestingly just before he was due for release his wife travelled from Belfast to plead with our CPO (Joe Davidson?) to find another crime to keep him in longer.

We occasionally inspected cross border trains (the booze cruise of their day) at Armagh station. The CPO spotted an old customer - a woman from Belfast - and asked her to come into the station for searching. We had no WSO available so I was sent to fetch our office cleaner. When we returned about twenty minutes it was to find an angry lady with melted butter running down her legs; the CPO had given her a chair close to the coal fire being aware of her record for smuggling goods in a double pair of voluminous knickers. Some years later I found this latter device was also used by our 'bottling girls' in a Glasgow bonded bottling warehouse to smuggle out 'Canadian Tall Quarts' – one to each leg – which they sold to augment their wages.

I enjoyed my time in Armagh despite the poor equipment provided. Much of our time was spent outdoors in inclement weather and uniform clothing was not suitable. Portable radios were an incumbrance and the cars were less powerful than those used by the smuggling fraternity. We had initially two A70's and the rest Austin 16 but eventually got Ford Zephyrs which proved skid prone on wet roads. The Irish Customs had American V8's which we envied. Occasionally we used seized vehicles for observation purposes.

Cross border live stock smuggling was rife as some sort of subsidy was available in the North. I had the good fortune to stop a donkey and cart near the border in Keady. The driver ran off over the border so we took the cart and animal into Keady where the PO decided to auction them off at the town cross. We got few offers but ended up selling both for £3/10/- (£3-50) to a man who looked very like the man we had chased over the border. Another time I drove a seizure back to Armagh; seventy turkeys in an open van gobbling down my neck. I drove them straight to the local poultry dealer as the Queens Warehouse had no suitable facilities.