

Charles James Cuming (1938 - 1945)



1940s
Silver Gelatin Print
42 x 58cm

Charles Cuming was born in Jersey on June 22, 1876. He attended St. Paul's school and when he left became a butcher, running a shop in Charring Cross, which he later sold to the Co-op. Mr Cuming spent ten years in the Jersey militia, he also got involved with the honorary system of the Parish, becoming a Constable's officer in 1902 and then a Centenier in 1908. Before becoming Constable in 1938 he had been the Chef de Police for a number of years and so was acting Constable at the time of Mr Ferguson's death.

Unfortunately Mr Cuming's first term as Constable did not get off to the best start as he was caught up in a legal technicality with the Parish. The new Constable was letting out some of his own property in Old Street to the Parish Roads Committee, without (it would seem) the appropriate approval, this was regarded as unconstitutional without the consent of the Parish assembly. The 'Gossip of the Week' column recorded that "*the general atmosphere appeared to be one of trying to put the new Constable in his place, and in this respect certain remarks were made*" (30/05/38).

Still it was generally understood that Mr Cuming had made an honest mistake and overall he “presided over his first parochial meeting with tact and patience”. However, throughout the course of his Constablenesship, Mr Cuming seemed to be under the scrutiny of Jurat Pinel (former Constable) who tended to keep a watchful eye on his position. On July 22 the Critic recorded that;

“Mr C.J. Cuming is not finding the Constablenesship a bed of roses, to use a common, if not particularly correct metaphor. It was made clear at Tuesday’s Town Hall meeting that Mr J.E. Pinel is still after his blood, although, no doubt, he still professes that he is doing it out of kindness”.

Despite some misgivings certain people had about his suitability for the post, soon after entering office Mr Cuming impressed the electorate by introducing the somewhat revolutionary proposal of granting all Parish outdoor employees one week of paid holiday per year. Additionally he pleased parishioners by organising a soup kitchen in Lemprière Street, in December 1938, purely for the benefit of the poor in the town. Mr Cuming’s organised changing the Parish Assembly minutes from French to English and he was also the Constable who saw the Parish sell off its horse and cart equipment.

In June 1938 St Helier were facing problems finding the funding to complete the destructor in Bellozanne valley. The Constable requested extra funding to the value of £5,500 because the original loan for completing the destructor was not sufficient. The main arguments at the meeting, predominantly between Mr Cuming and Judge Pinel, focussed on the shortcomings of the new furnaces and the budget problems the project was facing. However, largely under the direction of Mr Pinel, the full grant was rejected and only £2000 was approved and a full report was requested of the situation.

A peculiarity of Mr Cuming’s reign was that he remained Constable of the Parish for six and a half years after only being sworn in on one occasion. All local elections were prohibited after Nazi forces invaded the Island on July 1, 1940, which meant that for the first time since 1657, the parish Constables would not be re-elected every three years and were set to be in office until re-elections could be held post war.

After the de-militarisation of the Island on June 18, there was widespread panic within the population over whether or not to evacuate to England. If people decided to go they were told they needed to register their name at the Town Hall. This resulted in huge queues of people lining the street outside, in order to get the relevant documentation, many of whom went through the process only to decide to stay. The Constable reported to the States that a total of 8,775 people wanted to leave on the evacuation ships which left between the 19th and the 21st of June.

Before the Island was occupied the Government had already taken measures to prepare for invading forces. Britain declared the Channel Islands a demilitarised zone and the Lieutenant Governor was withdrawn on 24th June and the Bailiff, Sir Alexander Coutanche, took charge (as a civil governor). The States were reorganised into a Superior Council consisting of eight departments so that, in the time of emergency, decisions could be made faster. The invading forces were quite happy to allow the existing administration to function, so the local Parish authorities largely remained the same, providing that they cooperated with the Commandant. The government was only satisfied with this structure as it allowed them to provide a buffer for the rest of the population from the direct rule of German forces.

Each department in the Superior Council had a president who could choose (with approval) two other States members as part of their department. This restructuring meant that not all of the existing States members got a new role in the Superior Council, but they were still allowed to attend the (rare) full States meetings. The Constable of St Helier sat as one of the two Deputies on the Public Health Committee. Public Health was responsible for drainage, sanitary and medical services, all of which were major concerns for the densely populated Town area. One of the problems the department faced was with the shortage of supplies, namely; clothes, shoes and medicines like insulin.

The panic that came with the optional evacuation meant that many houses had been abandoned with supplies and sometimes even animals left locked inside.

The twelve Constables were given the power to collect the keys to these empty properties in order to enter and sort out what the occupants had left behind, collecting items like tinned food that could be of future use and confiscating any spirituous liquor that they found.

The Public Health Committee consented to a request from Mr Cuming, in his role as President of the Civil Protection Committee, to lend the Motor Cesspool Emptier for firefighting in St Ouen. The telephone link to the Parish had been cut off and they urgently needed some means to fight a fire if one broke out.

The minutes of the Public Health Committee show that the Constable of St Helier's responsibilities included the authority to order the admission of people to the Mental Hospital (on the advice of two doctors). He had the duty of clearing out housing in the town (on the orders of the Committee) that was no longer fit for human habitation and making the important decisions with the other members on the issues regarding public health. The minutes also show that the Constable and his wife donated a piano to the nursing staff at Overdale hospital, in March 1942, as it was no longer used in his own home.

Charles Cuming was on the King's Honours list published on December 12, 1945, and was one of only 3 Islanders to be awarded an O.B.E. for services rendered during the German Occupation. However when the time came to hold the long overdue elections in 1945 he decided not to stand again, cutting his forty four year record of service to the Parish, although it was thought if he had decided to stay on he would not have been opposed.

On the 24th of December 1945, when the new Constable Henry Grant was sworn in to office, Mr Cuming was presented with a silver hot water jug and a travelling bag to thank him for his services. He said;

"I am very appreciative for your gifts...for they are what I wanted, the jug will be treasured in my family and I hope if I am spared to use the bag very often. In the days to come I hope we shall meet as friends; officialdom is behind me now but I shall always be grateful for the help you have been to me". December 1945.