

Mike Barton

Doctor of Civil Law

Durham Cathedral, 1st April 2022

Mike Barton recently retired as Chief Constable of Durham Constabulary, a role he held for 7 years. But it was far from inevitable that Mike would go into policing.

Mike grew up with his five siblings on a dairy farm in North Lancashire. It was a happy childhood, driving tractors and shooting things before the days of health and safety. After passing his 11-plus and enrolling in Lancaster grammar school, his childhood dream of being a farmer started to fade away. In its place was the excitement he saw in policing dramas such as Z Cars, and Dixon of Dock Green - influenced by his Auntie Sarah who had just joined Merseyside Police. Lured by the bright lights of the city – specifically the blue flashing lights of the city - Mike did a law degree and joined the police in 1980.

He joined Lancashire Constabulary and was posted to Blackpool – his birthplace. He soon became a detective, known as ‘Mike the Bike’ due to the number of kids pinching BMXs he caught. But there were more serious, more mundane, but also more satisfying jobs as well - sitting down with a mum who is struggling with her teenage son’s behaviour, talking to them both separately, then receiving a Christmas card saying ‘I don’t know what you said to him, but you’ve changed our lives.’ There were the flurries of excitement, but one-half hour episode of Juliet Bravo contained a year’s worth of ‘the exciting bits’ of policing. There were also the devastating times, and the mass homicide of the cockle pickers was one of the last jobs Mike did at Lancashire, not returning home for three days in that case.

He arrived in Durham in 2008 as Assistant Chief Constable and was struck by how good the people were, how bad the computer systems were; but saw a place where he could make a difference. He quickly connected with frontline staff visiting stations around the clock and identified with the wider public of County Durham. In 2009 he was promoted to Deputy Chief Constable and by 2012, Chief Constable.

He describes his later career as more like Inspector Morse or Frost – losing his early naivety, growing grumpier, but still retaining a sense of optimism. Talking tough, but tough talk born from empathy was his trademark at Durham. Moving people from anti-social behaviour to pro-social behaviour.

He found it personally rewarding meeting university staff – nuclear physicists, astronomers, criminologists, cleaners. He liked being challenged, indeed this is what started most of our own conversations and research projects – including restorative justice and the checkpoint programme – Mike’s flagship projects.

Being open to challenge, being bold even when his own officers described him as ‘a little bit mad’, feeling uncomfortable and listening to create improvement, ultimately led to his success though. Against a backdrop of severe funding cuts to policing, Durham Constabulary under Mike Barton’s leadership was the only force in 2018 to receive a rating of ‘outstanding’ by HMIC, the police watchdog, and the only force that retained that outstanding rating for four years in a row.

Chancellor, I present to you Mr Mike Barton to receive the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.