

Constable Frederick Thomas Gibbs

On the 11th April 1880 at St.Peter's, Shaftsbury, Dorset Frederick Gibbs was born. His first employment was as a baker, but at the age of 18 he joined the army to serve in the South African War against the Boer's. His Regiment, the 7th Dragoon Guards, saw action in some battles, for which his subsequent medals bear testimony.

Under Field Marshall, Lord Roberts, in June 1900, the Battle of Diamond Hill took place against the troops of the Boer General Botha, who held a section of railway line some twenty-five miles east of Pretoria. In this, the last of the set piece battles between the British and Boers, the Boers slipped away during the night and avoided defeat.

The majority of the war was however to be confined to skirmishing - long forgotten actions of no less danger to the individual but barely worthy of recording in the history of the war. The two medals earned during that war, a Queen Victoria with bars for Cape Colony, Orange Free State, Johannesburg, Diamond Hill and Belfast, and a King Edward with bars for 1901 and 1902 bear testimony to dangerous times and many privations.

Frederick Gibbs left the army after serving 5½ years and changed uniforms. On the 8th February 1904 he was transferred to become PC486H in East London, hiding his sandy coloured hair - under a helmet of similar shape, but a different hue to that worn in Africa. Later reports suggest that he never wore that number but took up 306H instead.



The war and police medals

In September 1907 he married Jane, a Stepney girl, five years his junior, and at just five feet tall, some 8¾ inches shorter than himself. The following year saw not only

the birth of Frederick junior, but a move from Shadwell to the more pleasant surroundings of Waltham Abbey.

On the 3rd July 1908 he was transferred from 306H to 326N and Waltham Abbey. It is doubtful that he ever wore the number 326N, it being one of those inevitable clerical errors that occur in transfer notices in Police Orders even today. A far more memorable number of 600N was to be associated with him. Very shortly after his arrival, he happened, as policemen do, to be standing outside the "Welsh Harp" public house surveying the busy Market Square scene when a cameraman plied his trade, recording for the future generations the arrival of PC Gibbs in the town.



If Constable Gibbs had formed any fond opinion that Waltham Abbey and its surroundings were to be a quiet back-water, these impressions were soon to be shattered by events in Tottenham on 23rd January 1909. Although some miles distant, Frederick, and the greater part of N division was stirred into action by the murder of a policeman and a young boy outside Tottenham police station in broad daylight. The subsequent chase of the killers across the marshes into Walthamstow lasted for two hours, so long that a great many men from distant stations managed to arrive in the area before the terrorists were run to ground. Frederick Gibbs was one of many officers who were commended upon their efforts to close with the quarry in the final report into the incident.

In the years before the Great War, Jane Gibbs gave birth to three more children, Mabel, Dorothy and Robert, until the war clouds proved so ominous that Frederick was recalled to his former regiment; leaving Jane with four young children and an uncertain future.

The war was kind to the Gibbs, and 1918, filled with sorrow for many, saw added joy with the addition of another boy, Lesley to the ever growing family.

Returning to pick up his old number, held reserved in his absence, Frederick saw out another eleven years police service and added another daughter, Marie, to his family then living at 23 Woollard Street.

He resigned on 10th February 1929, after twenty five years and two days (the military break counted), with a pension of £153.13.5d per annum. He died on 16th April 1941, a day when London was receiving the onslaught of yet another war with Germany. He is buried in plot 164 of the Sewardstone Road cemetery, where he was laid to rest on the 21st April that year.

The family remained in the town and close to their roots in Woollard Street. Lesley Gibbs, forever proud of his father and his connection with policing Waltham Abbey, lived his life out in Milton Street a modern development just yards from where his family had been decades before. One of his greatest pleasures was to pore through the archives of the police historical collection on the rare open days to find the people his father had worked with and to soak up the history.