

## Constable Robert Kent

Born in 1926, Robert Henry Kent – ‘Bob’ Kent - came of age fighting for his country in the latter stages of the 1939-45 war so it was not until late in the summer of 1947, by which time he was aged 22 and married, that he was able to join the Metropolitan Police.

On August 27 a letter was sent to him requesting his attendance, for one or two days, at the MP Recruiting Centre, then situated at 40 Beak Street, London W1 two weeks later.

On Tuesday September 9 he duly presented himself at the centre for medical examination. Having passed this hurdle he again presented himself the following day to sit an educational examination set by the Civil Service. The results were not given immediately at that time so, in trepidation, he returned home to await the results.

It was a seemingly long, but worthwhile, wait. Weeks later a letter arrived to direct him to undertake three months training at the MP Training School, then sited at Peel House, Regency Street, Pimlico SW1 in the October of 1947. He was to attend the imposing school building located close to Victoria Station in possession of his birth and marriage certificates, Nation Health contribution card, P45, ration book and - if he had them - a pair of stout black boots.

Three months training as PC 755TS in the stark and overbearing regime at Peel House ended in January 1948 and to mark the sixteen survivors of the class attaining that milestone the ritual of the standard class photograph with nine of their instructors took place in the yard there on January 10, 1948.

He reported to the head station of the 'J' Division in those days, Hackney, and exchanged his TS training school identity for the numbers he was to wear for the rest of his police service - PC 480J. In his interview with the superintendent of the day he was told for the first time that he was posted to serve out his street apprenticeship at Walthamstow police station.

After three years walking the beat in all weathers he was sent on a motorcycle training course at the MP Driving School, Aerodrome Road, Hendon. Motorcycle Course 107 lasted from February 19 to March 11, 1951 and, having ridden prior to his arrival for training in the police manner, Bob passed out as a Class 3 rider.

With a bubbly forceful nature, with three years' service he was almost an old sweat and Bob was already a first class public relations man able to "mump" cheap or free goods with the best of his elder colleagues. Upon his return to the streets of Walthamstow (to ride rather than walk around in all weathers!) he was soon able to talk a local photographic dealer into taking his picture riding the maroon station patrol motorcycle past the shop. The image became a much prized one.



Bob was to return to the police driving school on many occasions. His next visit there was in March and April 1954 to undergo training in the vagaries of motor cars. He passed from this first course as a "Class 4", which was as high as he could expect on his first visit. This classification allowed him to drive the General Purpose, or GP, class of saloon car - usually the Hillman Minx. The driving school remarked upon his "*lack of restraint*". This comment was to prove somewhat prophetic in view of the manner in which the students driving developed.

It was shortly after the completion of this four wheel training course that, having been a police motor-cyclist for some three years, Bob was among a group of officers invited to Hendon to assist the MP Research and Planning Branch in trials of the new low powered motor-cycle intended to replace those larger bikes already in service for patrol at station level. The group gave their opinions of a number of motor bikes, mostly relatively noisy air cooled engine driven and one water cooled like most motor cars and clearly quieter. The water cooled machine evident at Hendon and undergoing its initial user trials was an early example of the Velocette LE solo. Technically the machine assessed was still a long way from the Velocette LE200 that was to enter service as a light weight motor cycle (LWMC) nicknamed the "Noddy Bike" in the late 1950s but externally it looked the same. Although its acceptance was slow, it generally found favour at that trial showing in spite of some pretty startling, eccentric, mechanical features for its size, such as the water cooling and a hand gear change rather than a foot change. Many alterations were made to the design – including the removal of the hand gear change – before it entered service and swept aside the maroon motor bikes that Bob had so proudly ridden at the start of his police riding career.

In August and September Bob was again at the Driving School as he sought the kudos to be gained from becoming amongst the best as a "Class 1" police driver via the Advanced Car Driver Course. He failed to reach the coveted classification because his instructors thought him to be "harsh" and "unsympathetic" to his vehicle and liable to be found "misusing the lower gears", but the resultant "Class 2" was close enough to allow him to drive with the best.

Like the greater majority of 1950s police families, the Kent family, eventually of wife, Beryl, two boys and a girl, had lived in digs since becoming involved with the police and, in order to meet the need for better living accommodation, on January 5, 1956 Bob and his family picked up their lives and moved to take up accommodation above the police station at 35 Sun Street, Waltham Abbey. Until then there had been two sergeants and their families living at the police station, but when Sergeant Wood retired and moved out to Upshire Bob saw his chance and requested the flat. He took the rear flat, the other then being occupied by Sergeant Warner and his family. The Warner's had been in residence since 1938 and left to live in Suffolk when he retired in 1959. The vacated flat was taken over for a short while by another Waltham Abbey PC and his family, Colin Densham.

In September of the same year, 1956, after a further visit to Hendon Bob attained a "Class 1" on motorcycles. A further attempt at the car "Class 1" in 1959 was again thwarted by "over confidence" and a "lack of concentration".

In the event the tide of change overtook the hard won motorcycle "Class 1" when the fleet of LWMC "Noddy" bikes arrived on the scene in 1958/9. The new bike only required a classification of "Class 4" to ride, the better riders being expected to transfer to full time Traffic Patrol duties – something that did not interest Bob.

As the driving school in Hendon had prophesied, whatever mode of police transport used Bob was always much the same in operating and maintaining it. Each was used with a wholly characteristic "lack of restraint". He will always be remembered for what must be considered his trade mark when driving to emergency calls of all sorts. The police cars were typically crewed by a driver, radio operator and plain clothes observer, it being usual for the crew to vacate the car upon arrival at the scene in the reverse order allowing the driver few first arrivals upon scene and arrests. With Bob in the driver's seat however the rest of the crew found it extremely difficult to get out first, let alone second. Bob's overbearing eagerness to get out of the car on arrival resulted the driver's door opening and emitting the driver whilst the vehicle was still travelling at walking pace, Bob's last actions being the final heaving upon the brake handle and the switching off and removal of the ignition key - this of course being in the days before the keys also operated the steering!



To someone unfamiliar with the driver it might be expected that all this effort was directed towards releasing the driver from the car to enable him to engage himself directly in making an arrest or saving life. No, that was not the purpose he had in mind at all. It was soon recognised by his colleagues that the ploy was merely to allow Bob the chance to play with the cars. Although he appears never to have applied to work with the traffic police, Bob was a traffic warden at heart. Ever since his days at Walthamstow and Chingford, and at every opportunity, he found himself furiously directing traffic. Accidents were the best because they always needed traffic direction, but almost every other incident could be turned into a bit of arm swinging for the benefit (or otherwise) of the motorist. All this burst of frenetic energy was designed to ensure that Bob Kent undertook the duty that suited him - and left it possible to skirt around any aspect of duty that required any writing!

On occasion, usually those when Bob was riding the motor bike solo (and therefore relegated to arriving first) arguments over who was to put pen to paper would erupt between him and some of his colleagues. Bob rarely lost these altercations. He had spent so long successfully avoiding the writing task that it seems he had all but forgotten HOW to write a decent legible report!

On May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1960 the town celebrated the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the parish church in Waltham Abbey by King Harold II. The Saxon King had undertaken this notable service to the area some little while prior to his fatal encounter with an arrow

at Hastings. This anniversary resulted in great pains being taken to spruce up the town in support of the civic celebrations to be held. The police station received a major cleaning of its brick facade on to Sun Street, which removed almost a century of coal fire grime and gave a brighter fresher appearance to the yellow bricks that continues to the present day.

A further aspect of this occasion was the great pains undertaken to improve the condition of the station gardens. Up until the previous year, when Sergeant Warner retired, the rear gardens of the station had reached untold heights in productivity from vegetables and livestock with which Bob had assisted. Now alone, the surviving member of the police horticultural team set to provide the police station with the best possible flower display for the special event. He built flower boxes for the front windows and drove far and wide to beg and borrow flowers suitable for display.

Without readily available finance, all improvements had to be as a result of donation, or short term loan, from the still extensive local plant nursery industry. The interior gardens, visible through the constantly open vehicle gates on to Sun Street, were the site of the main displays; additional shows of colour involved the construction of the window boxes for the front, using donated timber which had once served as the casing for firearms at the RSAF. These boxes were adorned with hard-to-come-by helmet plate badges acquired from the J Division central stores at Hackney police station. The arrival of the station's first Austin-Morris J4 light van in that period assisted the proceedings considerably. This vehicle saw greater use as a foliage transporter in 1960 than as a means of carrying criminals.



*Family Life for the Kent's: Above wife Beryl and daughter Lorna by the Sun Street gates and right one of the sons Alan in the rear gardens of the police station in 1962. Both of Bob's sons joined the police.*

In spite of some traumas, including a prized standard fuchsia on loan from Harker's Nursery in Sewardstone being decimated by the seekers of cuttings, the effort was a success. Not only was the town assisted in its decoration, but Waltham Abbey won a prize in the annual police gardens competition, an attainment which was to be repeated a further three times up until 1965. All his efforts in the garden had been directed toward the upkeep of what was in effect his domestic garden.

In common with the majority of police stations, the accommodation in the police station in Sun Street was closed in the mid-1960s. The police residents in Waltham Abbey were

moved out to recently built police housing situated on one side of a quiet street in The Gladway, off Farmhill Road. The two vacated former flats were quickly converted to serve as offices for the latest new method of policing, the Unit Beat System, which was brought in under the glare of much publicity in 1965.

In 1966 the UK hosted the World Cup, an event that was to be remembered (and remembered, and remembered) by all future generations of the media as the year that England won the treasured prize. As part of a team of twelve police officers, one a woman, with a total of 15 languages on call, Robert Kent was cast into the role of interpreter. Bob's chosen language skill was Dutch (though many colleagues claim that it was more like Double Dutch to both Brits and Netherlanders alike).

The team was based in a mobile police station variously sited at the White City and Wembley stadiums offering their services to alien visitors. In a contemporary news report on the police team's efforts carried by the "Daily Mail" it was inevitable that a number of the salient facts were messed up, including a smashing, word for word, quote from one Sergeant David Wilson who resided in Waltham Abbey "I'm not particularly interested in football, but I expect this new police station to be a most interesting place". It was fascinating just how this sergeant (who never lived or worked in Waltham Abbey) mirrored Bob's words exactly!



The arrival of the first, and thus far the only, traffic control lights at the double junction of Sun Street and Farmhill Road with Sewardstone Road in 1972 was a belated boon to the others working in Waltham Abbey. Prior to the arrival of these wonders of modern engineering the junction had provided Bob with continuous employment in arm swinging, the junction was constantly clogged with traffic confused by a none too successful one way system put in place around the narrow streets of the town centre in the mid-1960s. As was to be appreciated in later years when police attempted to direct traffic at the junction when the lights failed, it is a very difficult junction to operate using hand signals. As a rule today the police sensibly stay away as the traffic flows are such that it can operate with a reasonable chance of there being no accidents. Back in the 1960-90s there was an inbuilt assumption by senior officers that police would have to work traffic junctions because they always had done. It was appreciated that undertaking traffic control was a skilled task that in some instances required two or more skilled policemen working in close cooperation, unfortunately sometimes there was not that rapport between some officers that allowed for a slick and smooth operation to take place. By repute it was evident to all who attempted to work with Robert Kent in the frame that he simply was too much of an individual to work with others - everyone dreaded being teamed up with him.

On retirement Bob and Beryl retired from police life and left the police accommodation to live in a house just around the corner in Halfhides. For the next 15 years, he took up a job with Edmonton County Court as a bailiff, finally retiring from this in 1987. In full retirement now Bob spent a greater part of his time in working for the Methodist Church, situated quite near to his home in, Farmhill Road [now the Catholic Church]. On this occasion, he gained no prizes from his efforts, it was a large and demanding garden that, with the assistance of rubbish and other debris cast into it by passing pedestrians succeeded in finally defeating him.

The close family believe that Bob's defeat by the garden and work was hastened by a series of operations he underwent in 1984-5. Ostensibly minor in nature it is believed that these operations were undertaken so close to each other as to lead to the onset of cerebral hypoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain), a condition which became particularly evident in the early 1990s. In his 60s, this once ebullient officer was residing in a wing of the Claybury Hospital suffering from a condition with effects similar to Alzheimer's disease.

Blind and uncomprehending Bob died in a care wing of St. Margaret's Hospital, Epping, on July 25, 1998. Cremation took place at Parndon, Harlow on July 30.