

THOMAS WATSON
1869 – 1902
Judith Millar

Thomas Watson was born the seventh of eight children in 1869. At the time his father John Watson, a Police Constable at Small Heath Station, and his mother Elizabeth were living at 83 Back of Bywicks Lane Aston Birmingham. Sadly, however, when he was five, his mother died.

After leaving school Thomas was employed as a fitter by M.J. Hart and Sons and lived with his family at 165 Bradford Street.

He joined the Birmingham Police Force and was stationed at Small Heath on the 17th January 1889 and in March 1890 he was promoted to Constable Third Class at 26 shillings.

On the 5th March 1891 a number of boys were chased down Beak Street by four constables. During the chase a William Whittaker was hit on the head and later died.

In April, at the inquest held into his death Thomas Watson, together with three other constables attached to A Division, were charged with manslaughter and appeared at the Birmingham Police Court before Mr T. M. Coleman.

Several witnesses identified Thomas as the constable who had struck the blow and the coroner's jury returned a verdict of guilty of manslaughter against him. He was committed to the Assizes for trial. However, the Stipendiary said:

"It was perfectly clear that no jury would convict Watson. The evidence for the prosecution was contradictory and it was shown he was not there. The accused would be discharged" [The Birmingham Daily]

Thomas was released on bail of twenty pounds with two sureties of ten pounds each. The trial was heard at the Assizes in July.

The Prosecutor did not offer any evidence and the Lord Chief Justice said "there was no case against the officer" and as there was no evidence offered on the coroner's warrant the jury would return a verdict of "not guilty". A verdict of "Not guilty" was returned and Thomas left the court. [the Birmingham Daily] A much relieved man, I'm sure. The next year was a difficult year for Thomas as a police constable. He was disciplined a number of times. For being absent from his beat and being on licensed premises, misleading paperwork and on another occasion being on licensed premises during prohibited hours.

Never the less he was promoted to Constable fourth class in October. The next year he married Jane Swain from Castle Gresley Derbyshire. They lived at 110 Bordesley Park Road Aston and his father John lived with them.

Within twelve months a daughter, Hilda, was born and in 1896 Frederick Thomas arrived. From then on Thomas' career in the Police Force took an upward path and in March 1896 he was promoted to Police Constable First Class. He requested a transfer to E Division in 1898 and in January 1899 he was promoted to Constable first long service class. When Thomas, along with two other constables, stopped runaway horses in Arthur Street in August 1900, the Birmingham Watch Committee awarded him a gratuity of two guineas for his courageous action.

Then in July 1901 Thomas was awarded the third "Stripe of Merit for zeal and general efficiency" and in October the same year he was promoted to Sergeant fourth class at thirty four shillings and he transferred to B Division. Thomas Watson, however, was more than just a policeman. He had grown up to be an all-round athlete and as well as playing cricket and football

he was actively involved in organising local athletics meetings in Small Heath. Just after joining the Force in July 1889 he won a marble mantle clock at the Police Band Sports Day by coming a close third in the quarter mile handicap and first in the mile handicap.***

Then in August 1894 while playing cricket for Division A he took six wickets with six consecutive balls and The Birmingham Daily Mail wrote in 1902:

"it was in a great measure due to his bowling feats that E Division won the cup last year".

He also played football as an amateur for Small Heath (now Birmingham City F.C.) in the Football League and in the 1894-95 Season he deputised for the regular Goalkeeper against Blackburn Rovers and Derby County in the First Division. The next season he played for the Police Football team and used to police Small Heath's matches.* Ironically this commitment to his sport may have contributed to his death. As the story goes, he insisted on attending a football match when he was unwell and the weather was very cold and wet. He later contracted pneumonia and died in Queen's Hospital on the 10th April 1902 at the age of 33 years. He was accorded a funeral with full Police Honours and he was buried in Yardley Cemetery on Saturday the 12th April 1902.

The Birmingham Gazette April 12 1902 Page 6

The funeral of Police-sergeant Thomas Watson, who died at the Queen's Hospital on Thursday from pneumonia took place at Yardley Cemetery today. The deceased was accorded full police honours. The Chief Constable (Mr C.H. Rafter)

Deputy Chief Constable McManus, Superintendents Moore, Moorehead, Monk & Clark and about 200 constables & sergeants from various Divisions attended. The Police Band assembled at Small Heath Station and marched to the residence of the deceased 110 Bordesley Park Road and from there to the Cemetery. A large number of floral tributes from relatives and friends including beautiful wreaths from A.B. C, D, E and R Divisions and the caretaker of the City Arcade. Six sergeants officiated as bearers. Extract from the Birmingham Daily Mail Monday 14th April Page 2 Popular Officer Dead

"Sincere regret is expressed throughout the Birmingham police force at the death of Police-sergeant Thomas Watson. He was highly respected in the force".

He left a pregnant wife and five children, the eldest being 8 years old. My Mother was born after his death in July 1902. After his death three of his children attended the Southern Provincial Police Orphanage/School at Redhill in Surrey. Frederick Thomas in 1903 (who was known as Thomas after his father's death) aged 8 years, James in 1904 aged 5 years and Maud in 1908 aged 11 years. Maud and James were still there, at school, in 1911. At this time the rest of the family were living with their Mother and Grandfather John Watson at 154 Bordesley Park Road Birmingham. My Grandmother, Jane, was working as a general cleaner at the Law Courts, Hilda was a warehouse assistant at a Chemical Manufacturer, Frederick was an apprentice gas fitter and Herbert and Jane were at school.

By all accounts Thomas Watson was a good husband and father but because he died so young and left a very young family he acquired a certain amount of "legendry status" both as a Policeman and as a sportsman. One family story is that he was involved in helping Lloyd George escape the Birmingham Riots in December 1901 by dressing him in a constable's uniform. Whilst Lloyd George did escape dressed as a policeman and Thomas was certainly there, as were all the Birmingham Police, the truth of the story is open to question.

John Watson died in 1912 and in 1913 my Grandmother migrated to Adelaide South Australia with all the family where they all had successful lives and where the legend that is P C Thomas Watson lives on.

(Sometimes I can't help but reflect on the impact Thomas' early death had on the Watsons of Birmingham.

I can only imagine what its immediate effect on his family must

have been like, but it did not stop there, the long term impact on future generations was dramatic. Because my Grandmother chose to migrate to Adelaide with all the children (my mother was 11 years old) they began a new life in very different surroundings from those of Birmingham. Adelaide was less than eighty years old! A whole new and different set of descendants resulted from those who might have been.

I can't help but think my Grandmother was "one gutsy lady!" They made a good pair, she and Thomas.

Post Script

In 1915 Frederick Thomas joined the 10th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force. In Egypt, whilst on his way to Gallipoli, he was transferred to the 50th Battalion and sent to France. He was promoted to Sergeant in the Field and was "awarded the Military Medal for conspicuous bravery for his action against machine guns at Noreuil France on the 2nd April 1917".**

References

*Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia
Police Records

**Citation

*** The Birmingham Daily
English Census Records

Submitted by Grand Daughter, Judith Millar

THE BOROUGH POLICE WELFARE INITIATIVES

by
Richard Cowley

Because of a direct encouragement from the Inspectors of Constabulary, from 1856 onwards the police had been steadily assuming the administration of civil social legislation. And so 'successful' was this, that in some boroughs, the police seemingly came to be the major social agency in the town. For instance, in Godalming Borough in 1880, the Chief Constable, as well as being the Billet Master and Chief of the Borough Fire Brigade, was also Inspector of Nuisances, Inspector of Common Lodging Houses, Inspector of the Explosives Act, Inspector of the Petroleum Acts, Inspector of the Dairy and Cowsheds Act, and also Inspector of the Food and Drugs Act.

And so seriously did some borough Chief Constables take on this mantle of being the main civil social agency, that it was a natural follow-on to turn their attention to the poverty within their boroughs. Despite attempts by central government to relieve poverty by measures such as the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, by the 1870s and 1880s, the realisation came that the problem of poverty was still there, and was not going to be eradicated easily. This led to the little known phenomenon of the 1880s onwards, of the local borough police setting up and running boys' clubs, welfare schemes and benevolent societies, purely for the benefit of the poor within their boundaries.

The organisation of boys' clubs is perhaps understandable however, as by diverting the energies of bored youth into more acceptable channels, the possibility of them turning to crime is lessened. But for the police to see themselves as the main providers of shoes and clothes for the needy families within their boroughs, points to the conclusion that no other body was concerning itself with this problem, and therefore these police initiatives were needed - and needed until the emergence of the 'Welfare State' at a much later date.

Little research has been done on these welfare initiatives, so it is not known precisely how many of these there were. But these are the ones that are known at the present :

Birmingham Police Aided Association for Clothing Poor Children

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Blackpool Borough Police Poor Children's Clothing Fund

Burnley Police Youth Club

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Cambridge City Police Fund for Assisting the Poor and Needy

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Great Grimsby Police Boot Fund

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Hyde Police Lads' Club

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Hull Police Boys' Club

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Northampton Borough Police Good Samaritan Society

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Norwich Police Lads' Club

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Oxford Police-Aided Association (for clothing for poor children)

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Preston Borough Police Holiday Homes for Poor Children

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Shrewsbury Borough Police 'Boots for Bairns' Scheme

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If any member can add any more names to this list, or has any information on any of them, such as the starting and finishing dates, the extent of their influence, their funding, and so on, and so on, the author would be grateful to hear - e-mail address is :

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BRYNS PICS

Another shot from the Royal Gunpowder Factory. The gateman searching staff for matches. (Thanks to Bryn Elliott)

