Thomas Bottomley

Probably Bradford's Longest-serving Victorian Police Constable

By GAYNOR HALIDAY

Thomas Bottomley, my great great grandfather, first came to my attention through a book, *Street Characters of a Victorian City*, published in 1993 by Bradford Arts, Museums and Libraries. The book contained a selection of late-nineteenth century portraits by Bradford watercolour artist John Sowden which had been previously exhibited at various times in Bolling Hall Museum, Bradford.

Thomas featured in the book, and author Gary Firth's short description of him (from Sowden's scant diary notes) told of Thomas's quiet, sensitive form of policing, claiming he would whisper to the drunken man in the street: 'If tha' don't go home to thi wife and bairns ah s'al 'av to run thee in'. It stated he'd never had a case reach the courts in 30 years.

From the white hair, visible under his helmet, and full white beard, it's obvious Thomas was not a young man at the time of his portrait. In full uniform, slightly stern-looking, upright and smart, he looked the epitome of a Victorian policeman – albeit somewhat rotund. In contrast, Sowden's other subjects – Salt Jim, Fish David, Pot Mary and so on – were the stooped, ill-clad hawkers, pedlars, beggars and street musicians, well-known in the grimy streets of

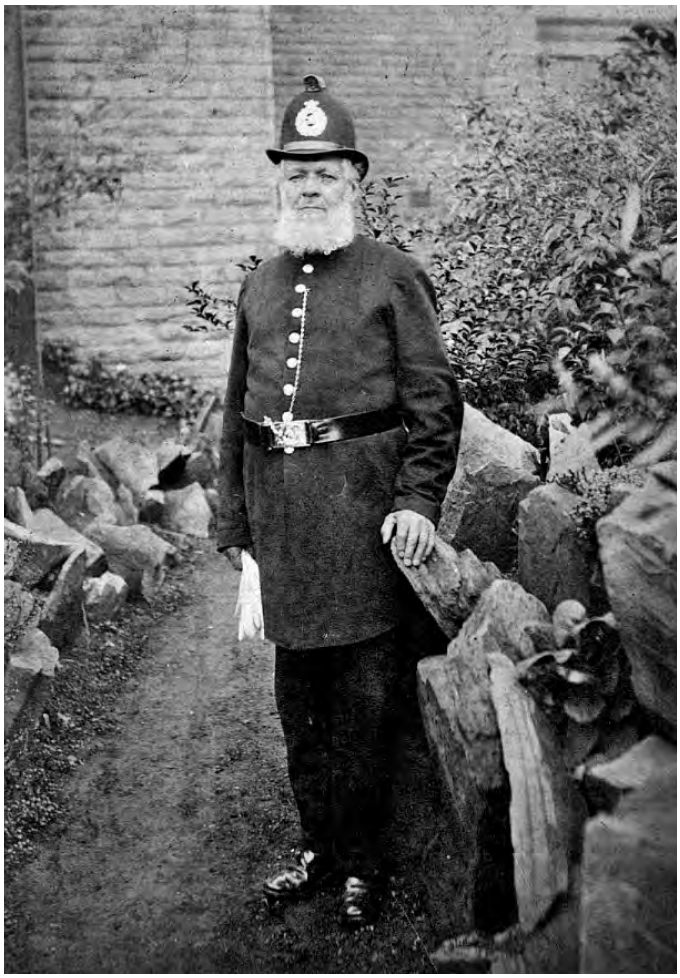
Author with portrait of PC 50 Thomas Bottomley

industrial Bradford.

So why, of all the policeman in Bradford, had he been chosen to sit (or rather, stand for a portrait? And what induced him to become a police constable?

Who was Thomas Bottomley?

Thomas was born in Bingley in the West Riding of Yorkshire on 15th May 1822. His father was a cordwainer or shoemaker. By 1841, the family had moved to Manningham in Bradford and Thomas was a woolcomber, an occupation that employed around 15,000 men working either singly or in small teams in combing rooms – often the upper room of a house. The woolcombing process consisted of forcibly pulling oily fleeces through metal combs which were attached to wooden masts and set five or six deep, until the wool became a soft mass of filament, to be then drawn into long slivers for further processing. With wool combs needing to be kept at high temperature by heating them in a central fire-pot, burning coke, coal or charcoal and giving off noxious fumes, the work was hot, dirty and dangerous. Life expectancy was low, and although woolcombers had earlier been able to earn reasonable money, employers gradually reduced wages to half what they had been.



Thomas Bottomley, photograph possibly taken at retirement
Courtesy of the Bradford Police Museum

In 1843, Samuel Lister of Bradford designed a woolcombing machine and by 1847, the hand woolcombers' trade was in serious decline, with no hope of revival. A meeting to discuss the woolcombers' deplorable condition and how to resolve it was held in Bradford's Exchange Buildings in December 1847. Woolcombers, anxious to hear what was to become of them, thronged to the meeting. The various dignitaries of Bradford, recognising that the number of men laid off was likely to be increased, shared their grand plan.

Dividing the woolcombers into three categories - the young, the middle-aged, and the old - they decided it would be cruel to remove the old from their present locality, so commended them to the Board of Guardians (who administered the Workhouse and distributed money to paupers). They banned the young from entering the trade, and suggested juveniles already working as woolcombers could be taken from the trade and trained as weavers and so on. However, nothing could be done for the older able-bodied woolcombers except send them to the colonies – not as convicts, but to find new work. How this economic migration was to be funded they hadn't yet worked out.

With newspaper reports stating that only five out of every twenty migrants ever arrived at their destination, and those who did were so debilitated that they could not work for their living and soon died on a foreign shore, emigration was never going to be a popular choice. Now in his mid-twenties and with few options, Thomas hung on as a woolcomber until at least April 1851. But with a reduction in income and the prospect of unemployment, the opportunity to work in a secure job, where it was unlikely there'd be any downturn in trade, must have been attractive. Thomas enrolled as a supernumerary constable on 7th February 1852, and unlike many others, settled into his new career. He was almost thirty.

Supernumeraries were those appointed to be on standby at 6d a night for constables who didn't turn up; therefore vital to keep strength of numbers on the dark streets. Any supernumerary who subsequently worked the shift was paid by the man whose shift he'd covered. Eventually, if he behaved (and many didn't), the supernumerary would be given a permanent position as a 3rd Class Constable, paid 17 shillings a week.

As staff turnover was high – ninety per cent left the police force with less than a year's service (either sacked for

misdemeanours such as drunkenness or resigning because the work was tough) – Thomas didn't have had to wait long for a permanent position to become available.

And so his long police career began.

Thomas's progress

Although set to attract literate semi-skilled workers, the 17s a week entry-level 3rd Class Constable's pay was probably little more than Thomas's woolcomber earnings. However, clothing (coat, trousers, cape, hat, gloves, belt, armlets and stock, as a protection from being garrotted), and a boots allowance, were provided.

Bradford's constables remained some of the lowest paid in the country and had no pay increases between 1848 and 1861, when they petitioned the watch committee. Although its response was that 'A man coming into the force raw to police duties is not worth more than 17 shillings a week for the first year's service', the committee did agree to a shilling a week increase for length of service, meaning a constable serving four years or more earned 20 shillings weekly. As further incentive, a Merit Class, paying 21 shillings a week, was created, to which men could be appointed at the watch committee's discretion.

Thomas was finally admitted to the Merit Class on 21st March 1872, after 20 years on his beat. Perhaps the chance to display the required diligence or exertion never materialised until a dramatic murder took place close to Manningham police station on 16th February that year. His attentiveness led to the discovery in a nearby brickyard of the tatty trousers discarded by the perpetrator. Conspicuously wearing new trousers, stolen from his victim, the murderer was swiftly apprehended.

Thomas in the press

This wasn't the only time that PC Thomas Bottomley's police duties caught the attention of newspaper reporters.

The first account of his police work was in October 1852, when at 4.30am one Sunday, on discovering a fire at one of Bradford's huge dyeworks, his swiftness in raising the alarm prevented the blaze spreading further.

Other reports revealed that far from never having had a case reach the courts in 30 years, PC Bottomley, on his Manningham beat, had made many arrests, and often been violently assaulted or knocked to the ground in the process. He'd worked diligently to uncover and apprehend petty thieves and housebreakers, been bitten and kicked as he removed drunk and disorderly women from the streets, and had discovered several sudden deaths and suicides.

His tough life as a policeman was not all work and no play though. *The Leeds Times* of 21st July 1877 reported that the 'Bobbies' had enjoyed a day out in Ilkley. Preceding the lavish dinner that all had enjoyed had been a sports day, in which PC Bottomley had won 5s for coming second – in a race for fat men. Clearly the portly figure depicted in his portrait had been a defining feature for some time!

Retirement

When the Police Act 1890 came into force on 1st April 1891, allowing constables and sergeants over the age of 55 to retire without need for a medical certificate, Thomas must have immediately submitted his required month's notice. He was superannuated on 30th April 1891, at 20s 8d a week – exactly two-thirds of his merit constable's salary of 31 shillings.

On 13th May his colleagues hosted a presentation evening for him at Manningham Police Station. The newspaper reported:

> *A very pleasant evening took place in Manningham Police Station, Bradford Borough when ex-police constable Bottomley was the recipient of a handsome black ebony walking stick with an ivory handle and a silver mount, upon his retirement from the force after 39 years' service. The stick was beautifully inscribed as follows: 'presented to ex-PC Bottomley by the officers and constables at the Manningham section, Bradford police force on his retirement May 1891.*
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> *Inspector Jackman, who had been asked to make the presentation, said it was indeed a very pleasing duty to him to have the pleasure of being present for the purpose of presenting one of his old comrades with such a handsome present on his retirement. He said it had been his lot some 30 years ago to work along with Bottomley and he was quite sure that none present would refute his words when he said that he had always been an honest and truthful officer and he thought that after doing 39 years' police duty as he had, without a single report against him, none would say but this truly spoke out the character of their old comrade. Inspector Jackman, in making the presentation, said it gave him great pleasure in asking ex-PC Bottomley for his acceptance of the small present which had been unanimously subscribed for by his comrades, some of whom had known him a great number of years. It was a pleasure because he felt sure it would remind Bottomley of the good feeling and esteem in which he had been held by his comrades. He trusted that the event would not only remind him of the present but also in future be a token of pleasant memories to him. And also that he would long live to enjoy the use of the stick which he then had the pleasure of handing him.*
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> *Sub-inspector Bentley, in suitable words endorsed what had been said by Inspector Jackson and hoped that he and his wife would long live to enjoy a walk with the stick together, which*

would not fail to remind him of the respect in he was held by himself and the men of the Manningham section.

Ex-PC Bottomley said he could scarcely find words to express his deep thanks for the very handsome present which they had given him. It was a very pleasant surprise and he should ever remember the kindness and respect they had shown him, and he hoped that many of them would live to enjoy a pension like himself and also be the recipient of such a handsome present and kind remarks from old comrades.

Photograph of Thomas with the presentation stick

Thomas Bottomley.
"Old Bott". Police Force.
Bradford 1889

Thomas was fortunate to enjoy a retirement of 14 years, with a comfortable pension, although sadly his wife Mary only lived for a year after Thomas retired. Measured against the high turnover of constables, who saw the position as only temporary until something better came along, his service of 39 years was extraordinary.

His obituary, after his death in May 1905, shows he was also held in some esteem by the local community he looked after for all those years:

Many Bradfordians will cherish a kindly recollection of old Tom Bottomley, an ex-Bradford police constable. He passed away yesterday at the ripe age of 83. Bottomley who was former hand woolcomber joined the Bradford Force in 1852. At that time Mr Leveratt was chief constable and had 69 officers and constables under his command. These comprised one inspector, 6 sergeants, 2 detective officers and 60 constables on the beat and doing clerical duty. The police offices were in Swaine Street and there were no district police stations [...]

In 1856, Bottomley was detailed for day duty in the Manningham townships including White Abbey, Manningham Lane, Lilycroft, Daisy Hill, Lady Royd and Four Lane Ends etc. How many times he went round this in the course of a day is uncertain as he had no sergeant to meet. The Manningham folks of those days were all familiar with Bottomley and it was said he knew nearly every resident in his wide district ...

And what of the portrait?

Eventually tracking down the original painting, held in archives at Bradford's Cartwright Hall art gallery, I was astounded by the detail, which emphasised my great great grandfather's facial features – warts and all.

On the reverse, Sowden had noted:

It appears Thomas had a nickname, "Old Bott", possibly bestowed on him by the local criminal fraternity who viewed him with grudging affection.

With Sowden's home in Manningham on Thomas's regular beat it's likely that Sowden observed him as he walked his regular route year upon year. Greatly differing from Sowden's other sitters, it must have been Thomas's visible longevity in his occupation that marked him out as one of Bradford's Victorian street characters.

Thomas Bottomley is certainly our family hero, with different descendants speaking of pride about the ancestor whose portrait hung in Bolling Hall. And I am pleased to relate that an estranged cousin got in touch, having read my book on Victorian Policing, to tell me that she was the custodian of the presentation stick – which I had believed lost – and had a photograph of Thomas with the stick.

I wish I could have met him!

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