

The Policeman and The Sheep Stealers

Police Constable 273 Robert Walker, West Riding Constabulary

By COLIN JACKSON

The West Riding Constabulary dates from November 14th 1856, the day the Magistrates, meeting in adjourned Quarter Session at Wakefield, appointed the first Chief Constable, Colonel Charles Augustus Cobbe.

Immediately Colonel Cobbe set about appointing further members of the Force, equipping them and posting them to their various stations throughout the whole of the West Riding.

One of the early constables to be appointed was Robert Walker, a 31-year-old farmer's son from Swillington near Leeds. Unmarried, a tall and powerful man, he had been born in the village of Newsam Green in 1825, and had worked on the estate of Sir John Lowther of Swillington Hall.

Walker joined the police force on Christmas Eve 1856 and a month later was posted to Staincross (Barnsley) Division for Wombwell. Although there were more coalmines at Wombwell than there had been at Swillington, no doubt Walker still felt quite at home, as much of the area was still given over to farming.

Most of the police work at this time consisted of patrolling at night, "to prevent robberies and other

felonies." And so it was on Friday, March 20th 1857, only two months after Walker had arrived in the area, that he set out on his beat at about 11 o'clock. Although the night was dark, and there were no street lights, it was still possible to move about with comparative ease because of the flames from the gas "burn off", and the coke ovens at the collieries which lit up the area for some distance around.

From Wombwell, Walker made his way past Wombwell Main Colliery to a remote district known as Smithley, going through Mr Walton's farmyard and across his fields. The time was by now about 20 minutes after 11, and as he walked along he heard noises coming from a field about 100 yards away. Walker knew at once that all was not well, his farming knowledge told him that these were sheep which were obviously disturbed and distressed. He crept across the field until he came up to a low stone wall and here he crouched. Over the wall was a turnip field on which there was a flock of sheep, and Walker could make out three men moving about amongst the sheep. He was also close enough to pick up their conversation.

"Where must we take them to?" asked one. "Take them down to the corner," answered another. Walker

then watched as two of the men lifted a sheep up onto the back of the third man and then, picking up a second sheep between them, made their way to the corner of the field. Walker followed on the other side of the wall. Two of the men then began to bind the legs of the sheep, as though preparing them for slaughter, whilst the third man moved some distance away, presumably to keep watch and ensure that they were not disturbed, as they were only 100 yards from John Walton's farmhouse. They were not to know that these were not Walton's sheep, nor indeed his turnip field.

Walker decided that now was the time for action. He removed his oil lantern from its place on his belt, then took off his belt and overcoat and placed them all on the ground. Grasping his heavy walking stick firmly in his right hand he vaulted over the wall, at the same time calling out, "Hello, what are you about?"

"What the hell dost thou want to know for?" was the reply. Immediately all three men broke off what they had been doing and came towards him. Two of them carried life preservers in one hand and a butchering knife in the other, the third man carried a stick.

Without waiting Walker took the

initiative and struck out at the nearest man, knocking him to the ground, but at the same time breaking his stick into several pieces.

Walker then struck the second man, who promptly dropped his life preserver and the officer quickly snatched it up to use himself. For the next few minutes a fierce struggle ensued, during which the three men fell over the wall into a ditch. Walker followed and slowly got the upper hand, until finally he had two of the men on the ground, holding them down with a knee on each of their chests, and a vice-like grip on the throat of the third.

With his free hand Walker now tried to take out his handcuffs. Whilst trying to get these on the first of his attackers, the man let out a loud yell and almost immediately, as though from nowhere, four or five more men arrived on the scene and immediately fell upon Walker. They took the life preserver from him and beat him about the back with it, at the same time trying to pull him off the two sheep stealers. But Walker held on tight and eventually they had to pull all three men over to get Walker off.

Whilst he was down it seems the eight men systematically beat, stabbed, cut and kicked Walker until he was almost unconscious. They then left him with the comment, "There, we have killed the bugger."

Walker had sustained several deep cuts to his face (one of which was later described as two and half inches long), head and neck. The first two fingers of his left hand had been completely cut off near the second knuckle, and his third finger was only hanging by a small piece of skin. His body was bruised all over. Despite the fact that he had sustained serious injuries and lost a lot of blood, Walker recovered sufficiently to drag himself to the Walton farmhouse, where he had to rouse the occupants from their

beds.

The time was now almost midnight. The Waltons did what they could for the policeman, including giving him a drink of watered-down brandy, before harnessing a horse to a light cart and having the policeman conveyed to his home at Wombwell.

John Walton then went to his field adjoining the turnip field and here he found the constable's coat, belt and lantern. In the turnip field he found the broken remains of Walker's stick, his hat, a life preserver and a piece of horse-rug.

The incident was reported to Superintendent Green at Barnsley and he sent Police Surgeon Richard Alderson to Wombwell to treat Walker's injuries. It was to take all the doctor's skill and the help of two colleagues, Dr. Wainwright of Barnsley and Dr. Burman of Wath-upon-Deerne, to pull Walker through his injuries.

In daylight a further search of the scene was made by police officers. A large area of turnips had been trampled and the area was heavily bloodstained. Amongst it all were found Walker's two severed fingers.

By Thursday week, April 2nd, Walker's colleagues had arrested eight men on suspicion of being involved in the attack. But Walker was the only one who could identify them, and he was still confined to his bed. So, under the supervision of Superintendent Green, Inspector Wetherell and a number of constables, the eight men - George French of Worsborough, George Carr, William Cherry and Edwin Fairclough of Barnsley, Samuel Moulton alias 'Painter Sam' of Rawmarsh, Charles and John James Addy of Chapeltown and Henry Waller of Thorp Hesley - were escorted to Wombwell to be seen by Walker. But the officer could only identify Henry Waller as the first of the sheep stealers he had encountered

in the turnip field. He was absolutely sure about Waller because he had seen him clearly in the light from the gas flare from Wombwell Main Colliery, which was only about 200 yards away from the scene of the attack.

The eight men were taken back to Barnsley and the seven who had not been identified were taken before a Magistrate. No evidence was offered, and they were discharged.

By Monday, April 20th, Walker had recovered sufficiently to give evidence in Court, although he was unfit to return to normal police duty and was still receiving treatment from Dr. Alderson. On that day the Barnsley Magistrates, after hearing Walker's account of the incident, John Walton's part in the affair, Dr. Alderson's description of the policeman's injuries and John Bashforth, who said that the sheep in the turnip field belonged to him and that the following day he had found two of them to have cords around their necks, committed Waller for trial at the next York Assizes on a charge of cutting and wounding Walker with intent to resist arrest. The Magistrates had also heard from Inspector Caygill that he had searched the turnip field and found Walker's two severed fingers, and from Inspector Wetherell who had arrested Waller.

Before the case was to come to trial two things were to happen with regard to Walker. First, because of the severe injuries which he had received it would seem that he was entitled to a payment from the police superannuation fund, although the amount is not given. His colleagues in the Force made a special collection which raised £36, of which Walker asked that £6 be spent on a silver watch, and this was inscribed, "Presented with the sum of £30 to P.C. Walker by Colonel Cobbe and the members of the West Riding Constabulary, as a mark of their

appreciation of his courage on the night of 20th of March 1857, at Wombwell."

Local farmers also presented Walker with £33 and magistrates and gentlemen in the Doncaster area made a further presentation. In all, Walker was to receive a total of £109, more than twice his annual salary at that time. (Third class constable's pay was 2s 7d per day; £47 0s 4d per year).

The Chief Constable immediately advanced him to First Class constable and awarded him his 'Merit' badge, both of which represented an increase in pay - First class constable, 3s per day; Merit badge, 2d per day. An advance of almost 23%.

Secondly, on June 3rd 1857 Walker was transferred from Wombwell to Harrogate, in the Claro Division of the Force.

The York Summer Assizes took place in early July, and on Friday 10th Henry Waller, a 25-year-old coal miner, appeared before Mr. Baron Channell. Waller pleaded not guilty, his defence being that Walker had been mistaken as to his identity. He called witnesses to say that he did not wear clothes as described by the policeman and that his lameness had been caused in a fight shortly before this incident, and therefore that alone would have prevented him from being involved. The jury, however, did not accept his story and found him guilty. A previous conviction for felony was then proved, but for what is not given, and the judge deferred passing sentence that day.

The following day his Lordship said that the prisoner had been convicted of a very grave offence, and he did not want people to get the idea that it was an offence which could be committed

with impunity. The prisoner had been found guilty of a most ferocious and brutal attack upon the prosecutor, whose valour had been seldom equalled and never excelled. He had, by his gallantry, subdued the three men who were engaged in an awful transaction, but on the other five coming up, the constable was overcome, and the prisoner and his companions then proceeded to extremities. He should give him such a punishment that, he trusted, if the prisoner ever came again to this court he would be taught that he must not follow the violent courses he had been following, and that he and all others, when discovered would be severely punished. The sentence of the court was that he undergo penal servitude for fourteen years.

The Judge went on to commend Robert Walker and to recommend that he should be rewarded with a payment of twenty guineas.

It would be interesting to know if the witnesses called by Waller in his defence were any of the men originally arrested on suspicion of being implicated in the attack.

Walker was to spend the remainder of his police service in the northern half of the West Riding, staying at Harrogate and then Ripon for a period of seven years. During this time he was disciplined for a minor indiscretion and reduced to Second Class constable for a year, and presumably lost his Merit badge pay as well. It is possible that it was as a result of this matter that he was moved to Ripon. During this time Walker married and started a family.

In October 1864 he was transferred to Horton-in-Ribblesdale, in the Ewcross Division in the Yorkshire Dales, and here he was to stay until

his retirement. But even this idyllic area was not without its difficulties, because in June 1867 Walker tangled with a poacher named Thomas Thistlethwaite at Bentham, and was thrown to the ground, dislocating his right elbow and causing him other injuries.

In March 1872, after 15 years' service, Walker was once again advanced to the Good Conduct and Merit class, which he was to enjoy for the next five years until his retirement on April 3rd 1877. His pension was to be 2s 9d per day (£50 3s 9d per year)

Walker was to remain at Horton-in-Ribblesdale in retirement and became the manager of a very successful fish hatchery on behalf of the Manchester Anglers' Association.

Police Constable 273 Robert Walker was one of the first members of the West Riding Constabulary and was the very first officer of that Force to be seriously injured on duty. A distinction, I am sure, he would have gladly foregone. Fortunately Walker survived, although there were times immediately following the Wombwell incident when even this was in doubt. But Walker was to achieve his three score years and ten; he died in September 1899.

Sources

Barnsley Times (Barnsley Library); *Burland's Annals of Barnsley 1744-1858*, Vol. 3 (Barnsley Library); *Wakefield Express* (Wakefield Library); *Wakefield Journal & Examiner* (Wakefield Library); West Riding Police Records (West Yorkshire Record Office, Wakefield); *The History of the West Riding Constabulary* by Barry Shaw; *West Riding Constabulary Quarterly Journals* (Spring 1952).



COLIN JACKSON retired from West Yorkshire Police in 1986 after 36 years service - Cadet to Chief Inspector,