

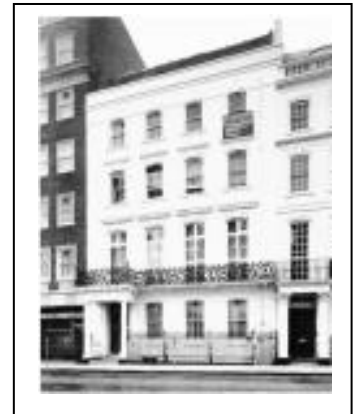
## Constable John Henry Dobson

It is every historian's dream that they can speak face to face with an historical figure but that can be difficult when they are long dead. An alternative is to encounter an historical person that leaves behind him material that is effectively the 'crown jewels' as far as the provision of information is concerned. John Henry Dobson - apparently always referred to as Henry - left us his story and some of the tales of a few of his colleagues in the form of a notebook.

Fortunately during his early years he saw fit to write down many details of his upbringing and more pertinently to transcribe a number of his police reports; some of the latter are pretty basic material and under different circumstances quite boring, with the passage of time the boring takes on an interest in the detail it brings to life about policing 120 years go. The main reason for the notebook was as a form of self advancement, improving his writing skills and as a result it is his early career rather than the later one that features. In the main the later material relates to family events, particularly the births of his children.

Henry Dobson's mother was born in Sussex during October 1832 but unfortunately his own birth, probably in Kent, during the 1860s is not recorded. Based wholly on the content of the notebook siblings were Emma born 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1864 and Florrie born 27<sup>th</sup> January 1867, there were probably others. Although his father was also shown to be born in Kent the family had connections in Stowe in the Wolds and in Yorkshire.

The family believe Henry was in service with Lord Kensington, William Edwardes at 69 Grosvenor Street, near Grosvenor Square, Mayfair, London [see right]. Later developments were to confirm the connection.



Henry joined the Metropolitan Police on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1883 and was posted to serve Hammersmith in the west of London on 'T' Division as PC759T, he was not to serve there for long, on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1885 he was transferred to Chatham Dockyard as PC53.

As had been the case from the creation of the Metropolitan Police and continued through into at least the 1960s, everything officers did at that time had to be applied for and agreed by a senior officer. A seven day holiday visiting friends in York 14-20<sup>th</sup> June 1884 appears to have been his first ever major period of time off in many months police service.

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1885 Henry was serving in the 4<sup>th</sup> Division at Chatham when he applied to his Superintendent for permission to marry Sarah Florence Lyons. Sarah was living in the service of the Liberal member of Parliament for Haverford West, William Edwardes The Lord Kensington at 69 Grosvenor Street. As might be

expected he stated at the end of his request that he was expecting to stay in the 4<sup>th</sup> Division at Chatham but it seems likely that this was simply a stalling move. A notebook entry referring to 6<sup>th</sup> June and 22<sup>nd</sup> August confirms that he was serving in Chatham as PC53. Later in the month though, on 29<sup>th</sup> August, he requested a move to the 'N' Division to enable his marriage to go ahead. In both instances we must assume that the requests were accepted, there is no supporting documentation.

The transfer was swift. On Monday 7<sup>th</sup> September 1885 he transferred from Chatham Dockyard to the 'N' Division and presented himself at Stoke Newington the head station at that time. The following day he was in Waltham Abbey and paraded for duty as PC515N at 10pm that evening for a five hour stint through until 3am.

Over the years the Dobson's lived in terraced housing at 12 and 38 Greenfield Street, Waltham Abbey.

The marriage was very productive in terms of children, Henry lists eleven births in his book. As always happens with families the first born entry included every detail including the date of the Christening and the names of those attending.

Progressively the detail falters with the third child although he religiously noted the time of each birth.

- Henry Dobson was born at 6-15pm Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> August 1886, was Christened on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> October 1886. The Godfather was William Moore and the Godmother Jessie Hicks.
- William Dobson was born at 6-20pm Friday 6<sup>th</sup> January 1888 and Christened Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February 1888.
- Cecil Dobson was born at 5-30pm on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> August 1889
- Florence Emma Dobson born at 1-20am Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> January 1892
- June Grace Dobson 7-50am Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1893
- Edith Dobson born 10-25am on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> December 1895
- Robert Victor Dobson 8-15pm Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1897
- Frank Dobson 10am Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> July 1899
- Ellen Agnes Dobson 8-15am Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1901
- Alec James Dobson 2-30am Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> March 1904
- Ivy Allanson Dobson was born at 12-45pm on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> December 1905. Ivy died at 7am on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1905 and was buried just before Christmas on 21<sup>st</sup> December.

The relatively short span of the notebook gives us some insights into duties at the time, the seemingly unimportant reporting of trifles including more than one entry about a horse and cart reported for standing at the road side too long – this at a time well before yellow lines the 'parking' rules were written in no Highway Code as a driver you either knew them or found out about them the hard way.



*Photograph taken in May 1893 in the police station yard in Sun Street. It commemorated the retirement of a senior officer, SDI Henry Holland but included many of the officers in service at the station at that time. A bearded Henry Dobson PC515N is in the back row fourth from the right.*

In another retirement photograph taken in 1898 Henry is part of a far longer line up of officers from the Sun Street and RGPF station contingent to mark the retirement of Chief Inspector Henry Craggs.

In August 1901 the more lurid police newspapers were carrying a story about Henry in their pages. The story linked up with one of the first tales I was to encounter in a quest for stories about policing in Waltham. The story was that following an unspecified 'incident' the police in Waltham Abbey were instructed to ensure that all prisoners being taken to courts and prisons in London and elsewhere by train from Waltham Cross and Abbey station were to be accompanied by two officers.

Henry Dobson's artefacts included clippings from two illustrated 1901 newspapers, *The Illustrated Police News* and *The Illustrated Police Budget* that told the tale of a single Waltham Abbey police constable taking a man charged with burglary to prison in London. The pair had safely reached Liverpool Street station by train and had then transferred to a Hansom Cab for the onward journey to Holloway. During the road journey the prisoner had attacked the officer as they drove along in New North Road and broke free with the officer in hot pursuit. In a subsequent rough and tumble on a canal bridge both had fallen over a wall twelve feet to the towpath of the canal. The prisoner escaped by plunging into the waters of the canal and disappearing in the direction of Hoxton.

