

## James Robert Avis



James Robert was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1886 to Charlotte (nee Erswell) and Robert Avis, a labourer. He was born in Woollard Street, Waltham Abbey, a stones throw from the police station in Sun Street, and itself in its 10<sup>th</sup> year of use

If anyone enquired after former policemen a hundred years later on the streets of Waltham Abbey, as I did in 1985-86, the first, and sometimes the only, name proffered was that of PC Avis. It is perhaps fitting that the son of a labourer in the then small Royal Gun-Powder Factory should be held in this high esteem many years after his death. He was unusual – but not unique - in that he managed to work and live in the town of his birth during his police service and then in the years after in retirement.

He was set at the age of 14 to join his father in the RGPF on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1900. Working in the cordite and gun-cotton section of the factory came to an end when he reached his majority [21 years]. Working close to what were to be future police colleagues as well as members of his extended family and friends ended with his youth, on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1907. He was now an adult and no adult work was available in the RGPF.

Forced to look for alternative employment, it took two years and two months to gain acceptance by the police. On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1909 he joined the police force with a warrant number of 94605. Any fond thoughts of service near home were soon evaporated by his posting to the West of London. After a brief induction exercise, he became PC384T. After a period at the divisional station, he was moved to Chiswick police station, and later Hounslow, both on 'T' division.

Throughout this time he had made periodic attempts to 'escape' home to his birth-place without success. For most senior officers sending a policeman to undertake the enforcement of law in a town where dozens of the inhabitants were family seemed madness. He therefore was forced to remain with his wife and growing family in the west.

Superintendent Powell refused one application to return and support his now widowed mother but, when his station (Hounslow) was made into a sub-divisional station, the new Inspector in charge SDI Eward proved to have a kinder disposition and recommended a transfer to 'N' division.

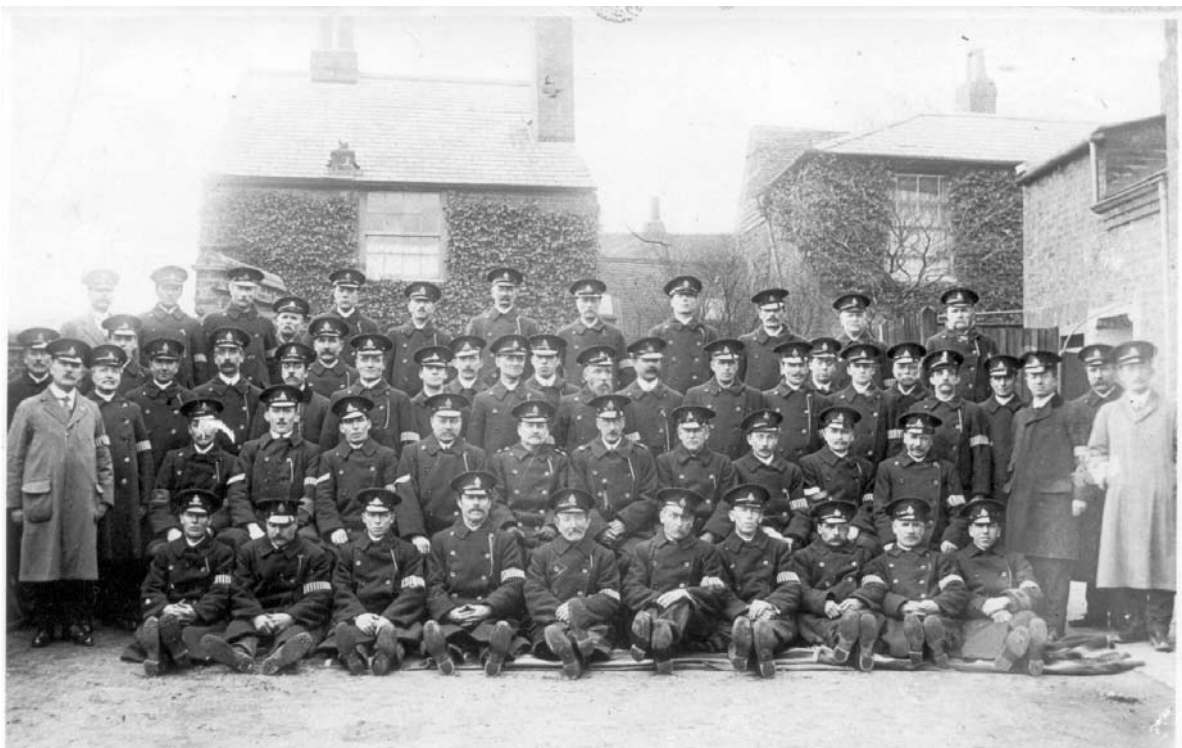
The transfer, in 1917, was an overnight affair. Avis was still asleep off night duty when a message came to his wife that he was to report the next day at Islington. He went up in front of Superintendent Jenkins the following morning at 10 am and

was asked whether he wished to take up duty at the Sun Street or Powdermill Lane stations in Waltham Abbey. He chose the Sun Street station because his many family connections in the factory might prove even more difficult to handle than a town full of family members.

A message was sent from the Sun Street station to James mother in adjoining South Place and he was staying with her that night. The wife and family were to follow in due course from their lodgings in Hounslow. There was a war on and duty was still to be performed with little thought to him being given time off to arrange the family move.

Avis, like many of his compatriots, was exempt for the first two years of the Great War from military service. Many had previous military ties which called them up upon the outbreak of war, but the others were 'safe' with police exemption certificates from mid-1916. This situation was only to alter radically in the last months of the war.

PC354N, as he now was, obtained a place for himself and his family close to both the police station and his mother, in South Place, the gardens of which overlooked the police station yard. He was now well set to re-engage with an existence interrupted by his eight years to the west of London and to again take-up his great love of pigeon racing and breeding.



*James 'Napper' Avis' house overlooked the station yard [Special Constabulary 1919]*

During the war little of note occurred in the town. There were two incidents of a war nature that involved him. On October 19<sup>th</sup> 1917 two airships, under attack by the Waltham Abbey guns deposited their bombs towards the RGPF lying below them, prior to being attacked by a lone BE2e biplane fighter from North Weald. The bombs failed to cause any real damage in their target, merely plonking down in the muddy fields of Waltham Marsh to the west of the town. The bombs, mainly incendiaries, were unexploded, and collected up, one either end of a pole slung

over the shoulder for transport to the Sun Street station for storage prior to disposal. Robert was one of the band of officers deputed to this duty. In conjunction with the air raiding, the police at that time were expected to pass a warning of intended attack to the towns-people from their bicycles, and supervise young lads blowing the all clear on bugles.

The next year, on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1918, he was called up to Mott Street, then southern boundary of the Waltham Abbey police areas to assist in the capture of the last of three escapee German prisoners of war. Two of the party – on the run for some days - had already surrendered to a member of the Special Constabulary without trouble. In company with Sergeant Creagh, PC Tilling and two others the third man was rounded up. Robert Avis used subterfuge by pretending to take aim with a non existent gun, to effect the surrender of the German. The story became more confused with the telling over the years but happily he left versions of it in the form of written notes and an audio recording.

Into the peace that followed 'Napper' Avis as he was known performed his own brand of policing. Many years later it was to be claimed that he never actually arrested anyone, especially locally, during his police service. Such a suggestion was a slight upon him. He was quite active, often 'taking prisoners' for this or that, and reporting others for minor infringements.



**Waltham Abbey Police cricket team at Beechill Park, Pynest Green, 1920.**  
The officers include the umpire – former sergeant William Brooker, Sergeant Hiscocks, PC Tilling on the left, PC Pearce in the centre rear, PC Avis right rear and PC Parker at the front with the bats.

Napper was by no means a learned man\* as can be seen from, the transcript that follows later. He was however shrewd. One way he effectively covered up his lack of advanced schooling was to approach any passing youth, enquire as to the

young fellows learning and upon the receipt of any positive reply, get the youngster to write out any required notes in the officers note book. In this manner the officer was able to maintain the quality of his submitted reports. The shrewdness was also evident in other areas. It was rare for any cat-calling youth to be able to get away with his 'crime' for long, when the object of his attentions knew each and every youngster by sight in the small town. Days later, out of the blue (literally!) a heavy rolled up glazed cape or weighted woollen gloves would strike the unwary in retribution. Heavily built in his later years, 'Napper' was slow, but thorough.

It was only Avis, and the similarly built PC Wilfred Noble that were not to suffer the ignominy of being lifted by a certain 'gentleman' and hung by the leather belt from the 'irons' projecting from the front of the butchers shop in Sun Street. This Saturday night's entertainment for the populace was beyond this particular strongman's skills as far as these two officers were concerned. Neither Avis nor Noble ever had much trouble with these rowdy elements then a common feature of the town centre.

The main downfall of a large number of the officers at this time was drink, and Avis was no exception. In modern times he would be said to have a very definite 'problem', with regular consumption of pints of beer measured in double figures. The attitudes in those days were far different and the heavy drinking was considered to be the mark of the man. In addition to consumption in the large number of public houses then extant, he was a keen 'home brewer' of various wines. Often pub sessions would adjourn to the home and testing - to destruction - of a variety of bottles of the home produce would ensue. There were numerous complaints that these brews were often not yet ready at the time they were presented. Such complaints were only voiced the 'morning after'.



Napper Avis on 'Point Duty' at the Wake Arms c1920 with SPS Skeates [right]

Drink was to feature in a number of the tales re-told by a variety of present day sources, often with minor variations of a constant theme from a differing source. Tales usually improve with the telling. The basic story appears to set itself in the late 1920's, when Sergeant Styles who arrived in 1929, was out on patrol in Honey Lane. By Skillet Hill, now much changed by the modern motorway junction, the sergeant found a bicycle abandoned. He knew right away that it was the steed of PC Avis tucked away by the field gate to the land in these days a Jewish

Cemetery, and handy for the attractions of the nearby 'Volunteer' Public House. To satisfy any curiosity he took a peek through the window and sighted the errant constable, pint in hand. An officer with less service than Avis might have been challenged and ended up in some discipline hearing for 'failing to work his beat' or such. But the sergeant took no such action. Instead he hid the bicycle well inside the field and returned to the Sun Street station. The constable was late returning off duty having had to walk rather than ride back to the station. He came with a sad tale of theft of his bicycle whilst answering the call of nature a great distance from the true location. Amid roars of laughter he was informed of the truth. He was very late off duty having returned to retrieve his mount and then returned to his home, by then in Woollard Street again. The exercise will have served him well.

Not long afterwards, in June 1932 he retired, aged 46 years and able to spend a greater time with pigeons, home brewing and bowling at the Larsens Social Club rink.

Any fond ideas of a long uninterrupted retirement were rudely dissolved late in the summer of 1938. At the time of the Munich Crisis, large numbers of retired policemen were recalled to serve. His recall was six years after retirement but it was to last only a month. In the meantime he returned to his 'retirement' occupation of night watchman locally. A year later, on the eve of war, he was again back in uniform with a new collar number allotted of 145JR the latter letter denoting his reservist status. Duties were much as in the Great War including the requirement to mount a bicycle equipped with sandwich boards to undertake attack warnings. Most of the duties were a mite more difficult to perform as he was now 53 years old, but most of the air raid warnings were now performed adequately by the police station siren equipment.



Napper Avis at Pick Hill in 1943 – he is wearing spectacles. ©Janet Grove

He managed to remain active enough for the police medical authorities until mid-July 1944. Police Orders of the 27<sup>th</sup> June announced that 'Napper' Avis would leave the police payroll on medical grounds on the 14<sup>th</sup> July. He was in his 59<sup>th</sup> year.

After a total police service of 28 years, five of which were the wartime recall, 'Napper' actually managed to draw his pension for 40 years, some 34 years after he had finally left the force. He was living at 4 Patmore Road until 1976, when he

moved in with daughter at Harveyfields. He died at St. Margarets Hospital Epping on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 1978 aged 91 years. The 'Obituary' notice in the local paper on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> February, was far more comprehensive than that normally given to late policemen even if it was filled with the erroneous 'never nicked anybody' phrase. It was a fitting marker for the status he held in life.

(NB: "Napper" was not the only Waltham Abbey policeman to have been born and bred locally, as well as serving. PC Edward Bayford, also born in the town is believed to have spent all of his service locally in the post-war years)

Below the second page of his written personal history - reproduced in full on page 8.

I was then told to report back  
but schooling which I did  
I then came home and was soon  
told to report at a Section House  
at the seat of Kennington Police  
Station, from then I had to  
go to Wellington Barracks for drill  
had bowler hat collar and tie  
I think one of the sergeants was  
Sgt Bayford,  
and then the day come when  
I had to report before Sgt Gilwood  
Henry and was posted to T  
Division and with others went in  
a cab with a ~~the~~ sergeant from  
T.D., on our arrival one had to  
pay the cabbie which I did  
and we were found lodging.  
I was at T.D. for a while I did  
go to Desford in Leicestershire <sup>with</sup> a  
boy name Elfish from Bayonne  
Road Fulham for stealing boots

Transcript of part of audio tape left by P.C. Avis. Concerns an incident on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1918 when Special Constable Davies of Mott Street captured two escaped POW's and other officers returned for a third man.

'So Sergeant Creagh collected me, and PC Tilling and we went to the wood. Up Mott Street. He told Tilling to go to the right of the wood, and he told me to go inside the wood, which I did. I climbed over a fence into the wood, when I saw a man in the wood. He threw something away and started to run. So I dropped on one knee and shouted to him to 'Stop, or I would fire.' He came running towards me with his hands up, and I dropped my hand on his shoulder and when I blew my whistle and took the prisoner to Sergeant Creagh who marched him down the Sewardstone Road to 'WY' police station, where he was detained with other two prisoners until an escort arrived to convey all three away; back home to Mill Hill, which was on a Sunday. A Sergeant and a private arrived to take them back and I had Ted Carter of the special branch march them to Waltham Cross Railway Station where they were taken back by train.

PC J.R. Avis WY.'

The officers mentioned were

P.C. James Robert AVIS P.C. 354N/94605  
P.S. John Collins CREAGH P.S. 29N  
P.C. A.J. 'Jim' TILLING P.C. 191N/94520  
S.C.S. Edward John CARTER SPECIAL CONSTABULARY  
S.C. DAVIES SPECIAL CONSTABULARY.

The tape continues with a verbal description of joining the police in 1907, which was left in a fuller form in written notes.



**Transcript of notes covering the period 1907 to 1918 left by James Robert Avis., Constable 1907 to 1932 and 1939 to 1944.**

*I remember going to Scotland Yard and going before the doctor. It was on a Tuesday.*

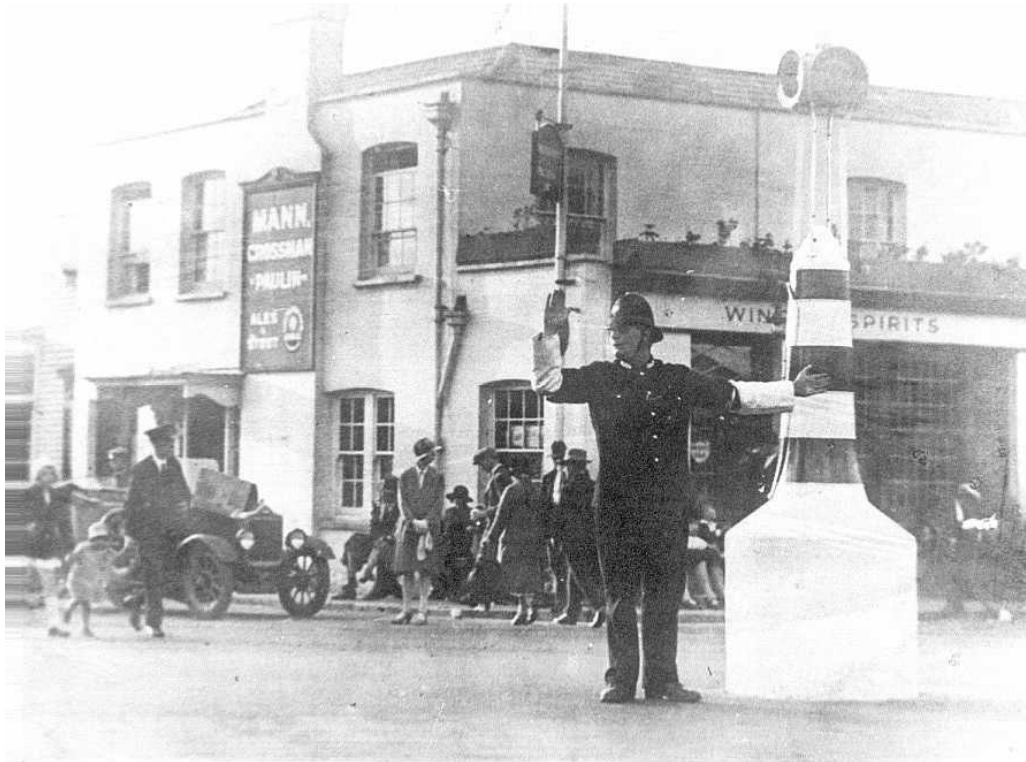
*There was a lot chaps there, and I was told to strip off my clothes and put on an old cloak which I did. And then I was taken before the doctor who examined me, looked at my teeth and was told to turn around which I did very smartly. I told the Doctor my teeth were eating away by sulphate of acids. I was told to get drist which I did and was told to sit in the classroom with the others, when a young man got up and read all there names out and told them not to wait as the Doctor had not pass them, and he left me setting there I was then told to come up and sign some papers.*

*I was then told to report back for schooling which I did. I then came home and was soon told to report at a section house at the rear of Kennington Police Station. From there I had to go to Wellington Barracks for drill, hard bowler hat, collar and tie. I think one of the sergeants was Sergeant Rafford. And then the day come when I had to report before Sir Edward Henry\* and was posted to T Division and with others went in a cab with a sergeant from TD\*\*. On our arrival one had to pay the cabbie which I did and we were found lodgings. I was at T.D.\*\* for a while I did go to Derford in Liecester with a boy named Elfich from Bayonne Road, Fulham for stealing boots and soon after I was posted to Chiswick where I was for some time there I used to have to go outside the Sussex Public House and wait most mornings for the unemployed to assemble and march them all around Acton and Uxbridge until they broke up. Then I had to report how much they shared out to one another.*

*Then they asked for transfer to Hounslow so I in where I served until 1917. When I put in an application to come to Waltham Abbey to help support my widow mother. I had tried before and was turned down by Supt. Powel. He would not recommend me and said I was doing alright at Hounslow. But when HU (Hounslow) was made sub division station and Sub Division Inspector Mr. Eward took over I had another report in Mr. Eward - at Montague Road HU - said he would recommend it, and I was in bed off night duty when a PC name Bokum came to my door told me and my wife I was to report at Islington Police Station at 10 a.m. next day which I did in front of Supt. Jenkins. He ast me if I wanted to go in the Mills or outside. I told him outside as I had a brother who work in the Guncotton section and I thought It would not be right it was against the rules Sergeant Cook from WY (Waltham Abbey) informed my mother I would be sleeping with her tonight*

*I reported to WY Waltham Police Station and was alloted the number 354N soon I got a house In South Place next to my mother. While at Waltham Abbey WY we use to do 3 shift 5.45 a.m. until 2 p.m, 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. and 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. night. When you paraded, sometimes in the charge room sometimes in the stables at the rear of the police station night duty you would go to the lamp cubbard and get yourself a lamp wich you place on your belt you always had a lamp guard to keep you uniform clean sometime when you paraded at 6 a.m. in the morning you would report for station duty because the Station Sergeant Skeets would not come on until 9 a-m. in the morning because some P.C. were in the factory assisting the mill.*

*We also had to clean up the station brasses to be cleaned. Hand cuff to be cleaned. Windows another day scrubbing down the passage. There was weather glass in the charge room which we could read and tell when we were going to have a raid. When a raid was on I use to go around on the double cross bar cycle blow my whistle and shout take cover. When the all clear went I would go out and blow the bugle all clear (sic). Sometimes you were told to the air raid shelter. I use to sit at the foot of the Church Tower with the vicars father and mother Rev. Cleal.*



*Napper Avis at the Wake Arms 1929*

*If the Newmarket Races were on you had to go to the Wake Arms to regulate traffic. Sometime we would ride our cycle. 4 rides per week. We use to go up to Copt Hall to Epping Road along to the Wake Arms to Robin Hood up to High Beech around to Leppits Hill down Mott Street to Daws Hill and back to Waltham Abbey Station. I think there 78 miles to cover. After an air raid we would go across Waltham Marsh and opposite the Jolly Bargeman we would find German incendiary bombs and pull them out and convey to Waltham Police Station carrying two or more on sticks.*

*\*Commissioner 1903 to 1918.*

*\*\* Head station of T Division\*\**