

High Wych History – 37 – Jack Oliver

Talk to an older High Wych resident about policing and the name Jack Oliver is bound to come up. Jack was our village policeman from 1938 until 1959.

Jack, or to give him his proper name, Thomas Oliver, was born in Charlton Horethorne near Sherborne on the Dorset Somerset border. Jack's father, a huntsman by profession moved about a bit. At the time of the 1901 census the family lived in Birdsall Yorkshire. By 1911 John Oliver Sr. was working on the Luton Hoo estate which was at one point occupied by John Stuart, the third Earl of Bute, prime minister from 1762 to 1763. When the Olivers lived there Luton Hoo was occupied by the Wernher family whose fortune came from the diamond mines of South Africa.

Jack attended Dunstable grammar school and was in fact quite a scholar. His favourite subject was latin! In 1916 however he joined the army, initially in the Durham light infantry but later on in the Lancashire Fusiliers By 1918 he was a lance corporal and whilst at the front near Dovecote Beauregard, he had to assume command of his platoon. He was awarded the military medal for his efforts. In 1921 he joined the Hertfordshire police under the then chief constable Colonel Alfred Law. Coming from a cavalry background, Law was eager to restart the mounted police. Thomas Oliver having been raised around horses was the ideal candidate. Initially there were two colleagues but in the end he was alone as the very last mounted policeman in the Hertfordshire Constabulary.



Jack Oliver's medals, from left to right:

1. for exemplary police service,
2. World War II defence medal,
3. The great war for civilisation,
4. World War 1 1914-18,
5. Bravery in the field Lance Corporal Thomas Oliver – Lance Fuseliers.

Jack Oliver and his horse Benny Ally were stationed first in Hatfield, later on in Hoddesdon. There he used his horse to great effect when dealing with Monday evening visitors from London to Rye House, the "rent dodgers", so called because of their habit of combining a day out in the country with avoidance of the rent collector. When the landlord of a pub at Rye Park was unable to clear his ballroom of intoxicated customers, Constable Oliver and Ben Ally were sent for. Jack and his steed quickly hustled them out!

In 1928 Chief Constable Colonel Law passed away. He was succeeded by his former deputy George Thomas Knight, who was particularly keen to cut costs. One day shortly after his appointment the new chief constable in his motorcar came upon Jack Oliver on his steed, out on patrol on the outskirts of Hertford. He stopped his car at the side of Oliver and said to his driver: "there he is: the life of a country gentleman". Oliver replied "not for long sir". The chief constable asked what he meant. Jack said "they tell me you prefer motor cars over horses sir". Shortly after, the mounted police section was disbanded. Whether Oliver's facetious reply played any role in that decision we shall never know.

In 1934 in Watford Jack Oliver married Evelyn Busley. Evelyn, better known as Floss, was born in Spalding Lincolnshire. In 1935 their son John was born. In 1938 the couple moved to High Wych, where Jack did indeed serve for 21 years. They took up residence in the police house which was situated next to the school house. The police house a wooden "cottage" was in fact a disused first world war officer's quarters from the first world war. It may not have looked much but for Jack and Floss it was a cosy home.



Jack and Flos in 1959



The Police house during the Oliver's residence there

Jack Oliver on his bicycle doing the rounds of High Wych, Allens Green, Eastwick and Gilston was a familiar sight. Seeing him inspired authority and confidence amongst the adults, respect and sometimes fear amongst the youngsters. Our village constable was not averse to giving a child a "clip around the earhole" if he thought that was justified. Raymond Kempthorne remembers how Jack stopped schoolboys scrumping apples, something policemen nowadays would not bother about. Raymond, who was friends with Jack's son John, also remembers the village constable knocking on their door during the war and warning them about a German plane that had come down in the neighbourhood. Eric Willison remembers him and a friend being told off for riding two on a bike (one on the crossbar). On another occasion Jack warned Eric and his friends about a new girl who had moved into the area: a "wrong type", not the sort you want to have anything to do with. Little did he know that at that very moment one of the friends was with that girl and doing the very thing Jack was warning about!

Constable Jack was also a frequent customer at the Rising Sun, then as it is now our village's living room. Bill Bury, a schoolboy in the late thirties, tells us how one day he and a friend spied our village policeman's bike leaning against the wall outside the Sun. Workmen had been out at the time laying cables. A giant wooden spindle stood about, around which the cable was wound. The boys attached the end of the cable to the back of Jack's bike and retired to watch what would happen. After a while Jack came out, got on his bike and rode off, followed by the spindle slowly unwinding its cable until. The boys did not see the result, but apparently, one day later, constable Oliver turned up at the Rising Sun decorated with some bandages.....



Two pictures from the seventies: pensioner Jack in front of his house and (to the right) at the Rising Sun dressed in proper game keepers' attire.

In July 1959 Jack Oliver retired from the police force. He was given a roaring send off at a party organised for him and his wife at the Grange courtesy of the Wentworth Stanley family. All the village VIPs were there: headmaster Mr. Mabey, Len Helmer, chairman of the Parish Council, Mr. Walters, the vicar and many others. Jack's health was drunk from barrels of ale set up on the lawn. No doubt those barrels of ale were supplied by the Rising Sun! Many speeches were made. In his word of thanks Jack told his audience that he and his wife had liked High Wych from the moment they had arrived. According to an article in the Herts and Essex Observer he added: "I don't suppose there is anywhere in England a little village, more compact, more sociable and whose people work together more than they do in High Wych, both in war years and since. I shall stay a good many more years among you yet." Jack was replaced by two constables, PCs D Lamb and R Hughes.

In “retirement” Jack and Floss did indeed stay on in High Wych. The police authorities allowed them to buy their little cottage in which they spent the rest of their lives. Jack filled his time as (amateur) village gamekeeper. Coming from a family of huntsmen, he did take to the job with relish. That was just as well as the job did not come with a salary. The Wentworth Stanleys and the Guinness Estate people, whose land he looked after, just paid some expenses and got Jack a suit so that at least he looked the part. Many tales were told of how he stopped poachers getting hold of pheasants, rabbits and hares. Strangely neither he nor Floss liked game very much as a food source themselves. Floss meanwhile sold eggs from home. For a long while also every Saturday morning, together with Nina Elsdon, she manned a stall on Hertford market where she sold cakes on behalf of the Women’s Institute.



1965: PC Jenkins, one of Jack’s successors

2014 Where once the police house stood

Jack Oliver carried on with his duties as gamekeeper until the late 1970s and passed away in December 1980. He was cremated and his ashes scattered near the top of Penny’s Hill, a favourite spot during his time in High Wych. Flossie carried on living in the former police house on her own until 1998. When she too passed away, the bungalow was sold. The site then stood empty for quite a while as no plan put forward for its redevelopment was accepted. Last year it was finally demolished and the site will now most probably indeed be developed.

Sources for this article were: Bill Bury, Ray Kempthorne, John Oliver, Eric Willison, Neil Osborn’s book the Story of Hertfordshire Police, The Hertford Mercury, the Herts and Essex Observer, Wikipedia, Ancestry.co.uk and as always county archives aka HALS. Do not forget: the High Wych History Project needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, be it positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vanderbilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468. You can also check my blog at <http://vanderbilt.co.uk/history/>