



History Notebook 56

Just an ordinary copper

The life and death of James Doss

1820-1889

by Martin Stallion

When William Campling, Chief Constable of Saffron Walden Borough Police, was murdered in November 1849 (see *History notebook 49*), the Watch Committee wasted no time in finding a replacement. The man they chose was James Doss, who was appointed on 23 November 1849 at a salary of 25/- a week, plus 3/6 for lodgings. This appears to have a temporary or trial appointment, because on 12 February 1850, he was re-appointed, still at 25/- a week, but without extras. He was allowed £2/18/3 for his removal expenses from London

James Doss was baptised on 2 April 1820 at St Margaret's Church, Barking. His parents were Thomas, a labourer, and Mary, of Barkingside. On 23 August 1841, he married Amelia Sanders, in the parish church of St George-in-the-East, London. Both were living at 1 Walberg Street [now spelt Walburgh]. His occupation is shown as butcher and her father as George Sanders, a farmer

He joined the Metropolitan Police as a constable, warrant number 18834, on 18 October 1841 and was probably posted to the S or Hampstead Division. On 8 December 1842 a daughter, Ann Amelia, was born at 37 St John's Wood Terrace, Marylebone, but she died there a month later

James was promoted to sergeant, still on S Division, on 17 June 1847. A second daughter, Mary Ann, was born on 3 March 1849 at 12 Little Albany Street, North Regent's Park, St Pancras. Little Albany Street runs parallel to Albany Street, which was the location of S Division's HQ

On 31 October 1849, he was awarded a gratuity of £24 [in lieu of pension] *as he had become worn out and unfit for further duty*, a quite remarkable assessment, first, because he was only 29 and second, because of his later career. His resignation from the Metropolitan Police took effect on 1 November and three weeks later, he was in post at Saffron Walden as Chief Constable of the town's tiny force - he had only two or three men serving under him

The 1851 Census showed him to be resident in Castle Street, Saffron Walden, with his wife (now named Ann Amelia and her birth place given as Bethnal Green) and their daughter, Mary Ann

An active officer

Between December 1849 and April 1852, the *Essex standard* newspaper reported on ten cases in which Doss was involved, mainly theft:

Some knavish rogues, not esteeming the rule of "meum and tuum", entered the poultry yard of Mr Spicer (Sheer Hill Farm), and stole five turkeys, without leaving any trace to their whereabouts. Mr Doss has been appointed Chief Constable in the place of poor Campling; the sooner he is able to become personally acquainted with these depredators the better it will be for those to whom their visits are more frequent than profitable, and check their dishonest career, and enable honest men to enjoy their own

One case, in 1850, shows his method for detecting criminals

James Hodson, carpenter, of Saffron Walden, was charged with having stolen eight elm boards, the value of 14s, the property of Mr Thomas Wright, builder, of the same place. The property being missed by the prosecutor, and having occasion to visit a malting adjoining the prisoner's residence, he discovered his missing boards. Information having been given to Chief Constable Doss the malting was watched for two nights by the prosecutor and the constable; towards the morning of the third day, and after the prosecutor and constable had retired to avoid observation, the goods were removed, and on the prisoner's residence being searched the missing property, or the greater proportion of it, was found in the prisoner's workshop. The defence set up was, that the prisoner bought the boards of a man he had met in the town two or three nights previous to the property being found by Doss, and the learned Counsel (Mr Naylor) endeavoured to shew that it was possible for any person to steal the property, and decamp with it at the rear of the premises over a low wall. The Jury, without much hesitation, found the prisoner Guilty, who was immediately sentenced to six months' imprisonment, with hard labour

Unfortunately, at the Watch Committee meeting on Thursday 30 June 1852:

A charge having been made against the Chief Constable of this borough, James Doss, upon an allegation of an assault committed on a person named Mark Kelledge[?] alias Freeman at Ashdon and an investigation having been made by the Mayor and one of the magistrates into the facts of the case and Mr Doss's statement having been heard in explanation it was determined to adjourn this meeting to Monday next at 12 o'clock in order to give Mr Doss the opportunity either of refuting the charge or to take any other course he may think proper

and, at a further meeting on 5 July 1852, *the resignation of Mr James Doss having been handed to the Mayor and read to the meeting, [it was] resolved that it be accepted*

A new beginning

James disappears from the records for a few years but on 26 February 1856, he joined the newly-formed Berkshire Constabulary as a first class constable, number 19. He was described as aged 33, height 5ft 8ins, with a broad visage, fresh complexion, grey eyes, brown hair, no particular distinguishing marks and a good figure. His previous trade was laborer [sic], he could read and write and was married with one child. His residence was at Barkingside, he had eight years' service with the Metropolitan Police and his last employer was Mr Thomas Sawyer of Barkingside. Not surprisingly, he did not mention his service with Saffron Walden Police

On 31 March 1856, he was posted to Hampstead Norris, South Western Division, and in November 1857, he was promoted to sergeant and posted to Faringdon, North Western Division. His luck ran out again on 7 April 1858, when he was reduced to 1st class constable for irregularity and posted to Marcham, Abingdon Division

He was in trouble again in 1861, when he was reduced to 3rd class constable for drunkenness and fighting when on duty but two years later, on 29 June 1863, he was promoted to 2nd class constable and on 5 August 1867, to 1st class constable. He was posted to Abingdon on 9 May 1871 and on 1 August that year, his daughter Mary Ann married Charles Spratt, an optician. He was promoted to the merit class (the highest grade) on 14 April 1879 and given his last posting, to Chaddleworth, Wantage Division

Two local newspapers give details of 13 cases between 1856 and 1872 in which Doss was the prosecuting constable. They include drunkenness, theft, assault (on himself and other people), vagrancy, furious driving (of a horse and cart) and ravishing (rape):

That nuisance, Harriet Grimes, was again brought up [before the magistrates], charged with begging and being drunk at Marcham on the previous (Sunday) evening. PC Doss proved finding the defendant lying on the ground, and bringing her to the lock-up at Abingdon, having to carry her great part of the way. Committed for both offences for a month. Marcham is nearly 3 miles from the centre of Abingdon!

Richard Stone, labourer, of Marcham, was brought up on remand from Saturday last, for violently assaulting, and against her will ravishing, Kezia Ayres, of the "Black Horse", near Marcham, on the 7th inst. The evidence went to prove the guilt of the prisoner (and in fact this he acknowledged to PC Doss), with the assistance of two labouring companions, named Hammans and Mazey, both of whom have absconded. The Reverend N Dodson [the magistrate] strongly dilated on the guilt of the prisoner, and gave him some necessary advice, and sent the case for trial at the next Berks Sessions

At the Berkshire Midsummer Sessions, the Chief Constable reported to the Police Committee that PC 16 James Doss had been reported as medically unfit for further service and recommended him for a pension. He had served 29 years and 4 months in Berkshire and 8 years in the Metropolitan Police. The Committee recommended a pension of 18s 3d a week, two-thirds of his pay. This was confirmed by a resolution at the Michaelmas Sessions. He had already left the force on 17 August 1885

On 28 May 1889, he died at Chaddleworth

The inquest and funeral

The inquest was held at the Ibex Inn in Chaddleworth on 29 May. Four witnesses gave evidence: his widow Amelia Doss, neighbours Job Preston and Harriett Herbert and the local doctor William James Wood. The fifth witness, Priscilla Woodley, another neighbour, was unable to attend through illness and her evidence is in the form of a deposition. Amelia Doss could offer no explanation for her husband's actions but Job Preston and Dr Wood said that James had been worried about his wife's health: she had an incurable affliction and he did not know what he would do without her if she died before him. The *Newbury weekly news* reported on the death:

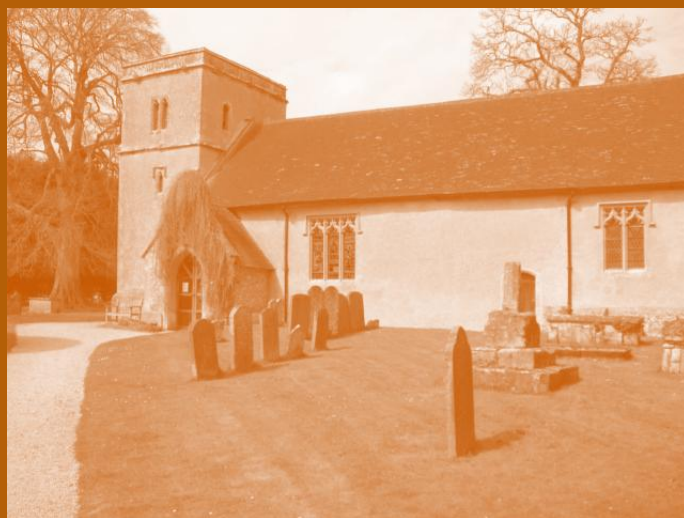


The Ibex Inn

Drowned in a well at Chaddleworth

Considerable excitement of a melancholy character was occasioned in the somewhat secluded village of Chaddleworth, on Tuesday morning, when it became known that Mr James Doss, formerly a police constable, but now retired on a pension, who has lived in and out of the service, in that district, for some eighteen years past, had been drowned by jumping down a well. About half-past eight on Tuesday morning, as reported to us, a woman named Mrs Cully [sic - actually Mrs Woodley] living near the scene of the suicide saw deceased go towards the well-house on Norris's farm, and as it is usual for the neighbours to help one another draw water, as it is no easy task, she hastened to the spot

and offered to help deceased. He however refused her proffered aid and opened the lid of the well. She immediately saw what his intentions were, and exclaimed "Oh! don't do that" but the deceased calmly replied "I must", and after uttering the words "Oh Lord have mercy on my soul", he jumped down the well. The unwilling witness to this appalling scene immediately went for assistance, calling on a policeman who lives close at hand. Strenuous efforts were made to recover the body by means of grapplers but it was not until two o'clock in the afternoon that the body was brought to the surface, the thighs and legs being much mutilated by the grappling irons penetrating into the flesh but failing to hold their burden. An inquest was held last evening at the Ibex Inn, Chaddleworth, before Mr L Jotcham, but the telegram we expected, informing us as to the verdict had not reached us at the time of going to press. The deceased had maintained an excellent character, and was respected by his superior officers, also by his fellow-constables, with whom he had been associated, and by the residents of the district of Chaddleworth, where he had been stationed for the greater part of the time he had been in the constabulary. He had been in the Berkshire force 30 years, he was also for a period of 10 years in the Metropolitan Police. On his superannuation two or three years since, he retired upon a pension, and having been a careful man, with no family, he was regarded by those who knew him as being in specially good circumstances for a man in his sphere of life



St Andrews Church, Chaddleworth

The jury recorded a verdict that he, not being of sound mind, threw himself down a well whereby he killed himself by drowning. James was buried in Chaddleworth churchyard on 1 June 1889 after a funeral service attended by his widow, his daughter and a few personal friends

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