

Village Echoes

Kent County Constabulary was formed in January 1857 under the leadership of an ex-army Captain, John Henry Hay Ruxton who, in June of that year, was able to report that police constables had been appointed to cover the whole county of Kent. Among them was PC Reuben Hilder who had been sent to Goudhurst. He would have been immediately recognisable as a policeman, dressed as he was in his uniform of a frock coat and high hat.

Hilder seems to have been stationed in the parish for about four years and his name frequently appeared in the newspapers, though not always in connection with crime. As a newly appointed constable, in June 1857 he came across a distressed, but respectably dressed, young woman huddled in a hedge. Realising that she was a cut above the usually accepted appearance of “rogues and vagabonds”, instead of taking her to the local lockup he took her to his home and enlisted the aid of his wife. In the meantime, he sought the help of his superiors who were able to trace the young woman’s employers. It transpired that she had been suffering from “fever and melancholy” for some time and was employed as a maid by Jeremiah Smith, a well-to-do business man and farmer in Rye, who had already been concerned for her welfare and whereabouts and was happy to pay any costs incurred.

The following year Hilder appeared in court, where he corrected the magistrate over the pronunciation of Goudhurst before giving his evidence in the case of Amy Bartholomew. This young lady was also a respectable servant until, that is, she stole a dress from Allwork’s the drapers in West Road. Found guilty, she was sentenced to three months’ hard labour.

One February morning in 1860 around 3am, presumably while on patrol, P C Hilder discovered that the Chequers Inn (these days the Goudhurst Inn) was on fire. With the aid of the neighbours he aroused the landlord and his family, and the fire, which had started in the bar, was brought under control. The occupants had quite a narrow escape as the fire had already reached their bedroom and had started to burn the bed.

By 1861 PC Hilder had moved on and the census shows that the parish now had two constables, Charles Ellis in Goudhurst and Thomas Waller in Kilndown. The uniform had now changed to a long tunic uniform and a shako hat, and each man was equipped with a rattle and a truncheon. (Whistles weren’t introduced until 1885).

During the rest of the 19th century Goudhurst and Kilndown were home to a number of police constables and their families, most of whom were stationed here for only three or four years. Reporting of their activities in the newspapers gradually lessened as presumably the “novelty” of a county-wide police force wore off. It was a perceptive person who wrote in the Maidstone Journal soon after the Kent County Constabulary had been formed in 1857 that *“during our walk from Goudhurst on the Sunday evening there is to be seen a marked improvement in the state of things near Iden Green, in that parish. We believe the ratepayers of our locality will find in the new police force a panacea for a great many local evils”*.

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