

MARK WICKENS: A VICTORIAN POLICE CONSTABLE

Mark Wickens was baptised in the Hampshire village of Kingsclere on 5 November 1843, the son of Stephen and Harriet. The 1851 census revealed that the family was living at Old Farm Corner and that Stephen was an agricultural labourer. Mark seems to have been the first born son. In 1851 he had two younger sisters living at home, Sarah and Mary Ann. All of the children were described as scholars and born at Kingsclere like their father. Mother Harriet came from the Berkshire village of Brimpton, a few miles up the road.

In 1861 Mark aged 17 was still at home with his family, by now living at Plastow Green, Kingsclere and with four more younger sisters and a brother John. The older two girls recorded in 1851 had gone. Mark was an 'ag lab' like his father whose mother had now joined the household. She was described as the widow of an 'ag lab'. Farming seems to have provided the family's occupation for several generations.

Mark's home parish was quite a bustling place. According to *White's Directory* of 1859: *'KINGSCLERE which gives its name to a large Parish, Union, Police Division, and Polling District was formerly a market town, but may now be considered only as a large village, with about 1500 inhabitants, some good houses, four corn mills, a brewery, a tannery, a sack manufactory, etc. It is pleasantly situated near the head of a rivulet, on the north side of the lofty range called the North Downs; about 7 miles south-east of Newbury Station, 15 miles south-west of Reading, 9 miles north-west by west of Basingstoke, and 20 miles north of Winchester.'*

Despite its amenities, Mark must have decided to leave Kingsclere. In 1871 he was nowhere to be found in the census for England and Wales. However a general search for him on *Ancestry* revealed that he got married on 24 February 1870 at Sarsden, Oxfordshire to Winifred Brewer. This was the right man as his father was recorded as Stephen Wickens, labourer. The digitised marriage register entry revealed that Mark was serving in the army. His occupation was given as Private Grenadier Guards and his address was District of St Barnabas, Pimlico. Winifred's father Cornelius was also a labourer. Both parties signed the marriage register in a clear hand.

The service records of Grenadier Guards are not available online but there is a British Army Worldwide Index 1871 on *Findmypast*. The entry for Mark Wickens gives his service number as 1633 and his regiment its full title of 1st (or Grenadier) Regiment of Foot Guards. It confirmed that he was a private. This is all that is known about his army career at present.

Whilst Mark was away serving in the army, his wife gave birth to a daughter Ellen Elizabeth Brewer Wickens. The child was baptised at Sarsden on 22 January 1871. In the 1871 census returns Winifred and the baby were at her parents' house in the village.

How Mark Wickens came to meet his wife is a matter for conjecture. Sarsden is a hamlet

of the parish of Churchill near to Chipping Norton in the Cotswolds. It hardly seems likely to be a place visited by the Grenadier Guards. In 1861 Winifred was working as a dairy maid in nearby Lyneham, although it could have been nine years before she encountered Mark and she may have moved away from the Cotswolds to work. Churchill was on a rural railway line, which did link with the main line to London. This mystery is unlikely to be resolved.

The next confirmed record of Mark is in the Goring, Oxfordshire parish registers where on 25 January 1874 the baptism of a son, Stephen Cornelius (dutifully given the names of both his grandfathers) is listed. The child was born on 15 December 1873. Mark's occupation is policeman. Stephen is recorded in all subsequent censuses as born in Goring. Thus Mark Wickens became a police constable in the village between 1871 and 1873.

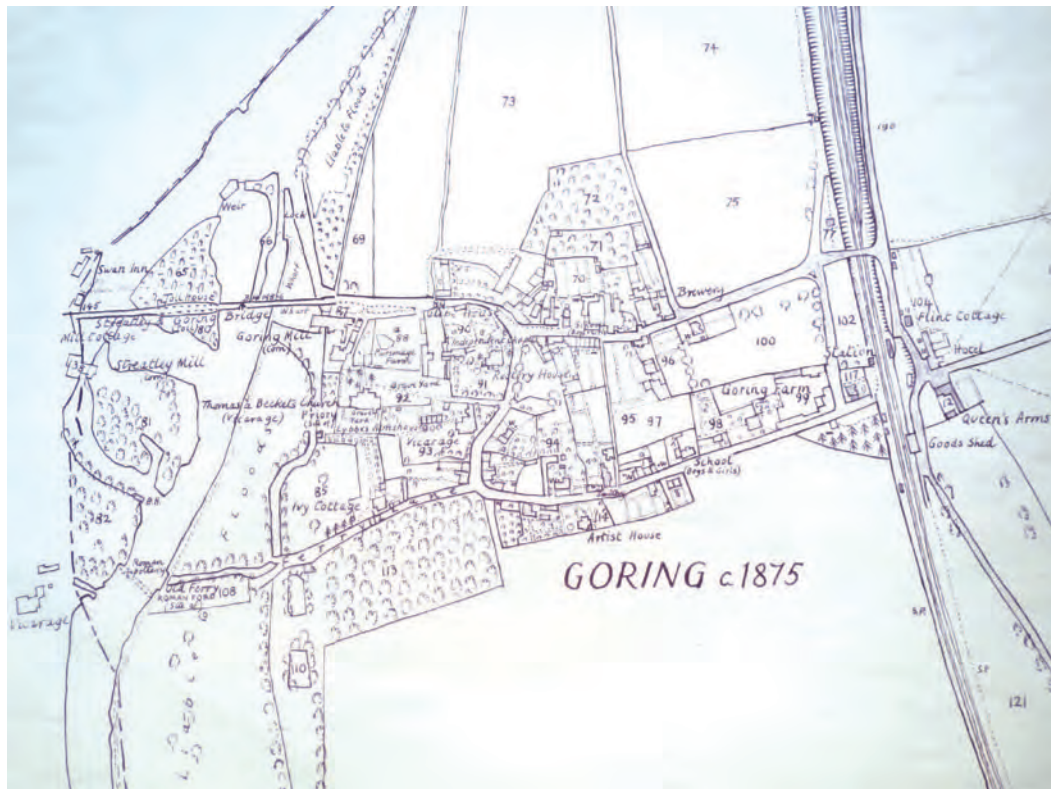
County police forces came into being following the passing of the County Police Act in 1839. This act was permissive and could be adopted where the Justices in Quarter Sessions decided they should levy a rate and set up a police force in a county or part of a county. However police forces were not compulsory until the County and Borough Police Act was passed in 1856. Thus the Oxfordshire County Constabulary was not established until 25 March 1857, although there had been police forces in Wallingford and other county boroughs and in Oxford City from 1836. There was also a Borough Police Force in Reading from that date.

When it was formed, the Oxfordshire County Constabulary had 88 officers, comprising three superintendents, seven inspectors, six sergeants and 72 constables who were each paid 17s a week. At about this time, labourers were earning 14s a week and soldiers 12s, and so the pay would have been attractive to a young man like Mark Wickens who had just embarked on married life. He had already learned the discipline of life as a soldier and presumably would have adapted easily to the structure and systems of the police force.

At the time when Mark Wickens came to Goring, this rural village on the banks of the Thames was beginning a transformation. Following the coming of the Great Western Railway in 1840, tourists began to visit the area to walk, fish, paint and take boat trips on the river. In the 1870s the local squire started to sell off land for building and in the 1880s large mansions began to spring up along the riverside. Most of these belonged to wealthy professionals who lived in London and who used the houses as their country retreat. They could also commute to town if necessary. Skilled tradesmen took up residence to help with the building and there was a big influx of servants to look after the new inhabitants and do their gardens.

By 1885 Mark had moved from Goring to North Stoke. In that year his daughter Winifred was born and it was her birthplace according to the 1891 census. This is a very small Thames-side village on the road to Wallingford from Goring. It had a couple of big houses and a mill, but otherwise the principal industry was agriculture. It was very

different from Goring which in 1881 had a population of 976, compared to the 167 recorded in North Stoke in the census.



Map of Goring village in 1875 [GGLHS]

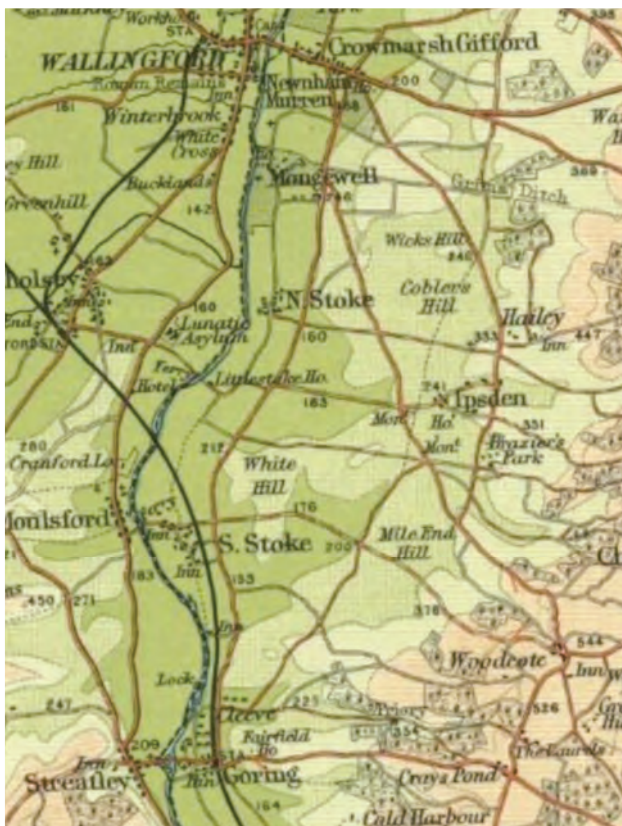
Neither Winifred's baptism nor that of her younger sister, Elsie, also born in North Stoke, can be found in the Oxfordshire online parish records.

In the 1891 census, the North Stoke household of Mark Wickens, police constable, consisted of wife Winifred and children Oscar, Ethel, Winifred and Elsie Rhoda.

Mark's police career had ended by the time of the 1901 census when he was recorded as a 'retired police constable' and was living in the adjacent village of Crowmarsh Gifford. Only 16 year-old Winifred was at home with her parents on census night. The family had moved to Crowmarsh in the 1890s, probably in late 1895. In 1894 the Local Government Act had resulted in parish councils being formed to replace the former vestries that had run each place. The new Crowmarsh Gifford parish council tried to shut down one of the four pubs following disturbances at closing time, and in 1895 successfully petitioned the Chief Constable for the reinstatement of a resident police constable, expressing particular concern at the threat allegedly posed by tramps passing

through from Wallingford workhouse. They noted that Wallingford police did not patrol Crowmarsh and that all manner of travelling fairs and theatres camped on Crowmarsh Meadows. Gambling games were openly played in the street, even on Sundays! When Mark Wickens took up his new post, he apparently carried a ground ash stick with which he issued summary punishment to boys caught scrumping apples or men fighting after a night in the pub.

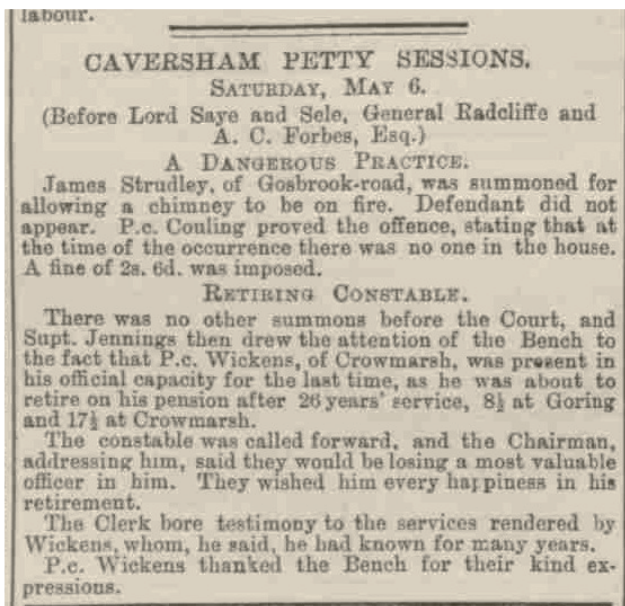
Bartholomew's Half Inch Map of Berkshire 1902 showing the area covered by PC Wickens during his career, Crowmarsh Gifford is in the north and Goring in the south [National Library of Scotland]



Although only a mile or so away, Crowmarsh Gifford was a very different place from sleepy North Stoke. In effect it was an extension of Wallingford, being separated from the town by a bridge over the Thames, and the road from Wallingford to Henley ran straight through the village. The main focus was on agriculture but a market and fair were established in the Middle Ages, and the village remained a focus for roadside trades and crafts. In the 1881 census there were 84 households (compared with 42 in North Stoke) and carpenters, grocers, bakers, a wheelwright, tailor, blacksmith, watchmaker and photographer all plied their trades alongside farmers and labourers. It seems odd that this busy place, which had previously had a police constable in 1871, had none at this time, whereas North Stoke did. A PC Collett had preceded Mark Wickens there. Evidently PC Wickens was persuaded to make the move from North Stoke to Crowmarsh Gifford, although judging by the cases he dealt with (see Table 1), his work had not been limited to North Stoke parish.

The end of Mark's career is reported in the *Reading Mercury* of 13 May 1899. This article helpfully provides details of Mark's police service, stating that he was at Goring for 8½ years and Crowmarsh for 17½ years. He had served for 26 years, making him eligible for a pension at the relatively young age of 56. From these figures it can be inferred that Mark went to Goring in 1872 and Crowmarsh in 1881, but as we know, part of this

term, probably 14 years, was actually spent in the separate parish of North Stoke. In the 1895 edition of *Kelly's Directory*, Mark is listed as the police constable at North Stoke.



By 1911 Mark had been widowed and was being cared for by his unmarried 29 year-old daughter Ethel and her sister Elsie, aged 24, who was working as a shop assistant to a newsagent. Mark was by this time not only a police pensioner, but also a beer retailer. This is confirmed by entries in the 1907 and 1911 editions of *Kelly's Directory*. His wife Winifred's death took place in 1910.

Mark Wickens died on 28 March 1924 at the age of 80 and was buried in Crowmarsh Gifford churchyard on 2 April.

Reading Mercury, 13 May 1899, p2

In the news

Newspaper articles reveal that Mark Wickens was a keen and competitive gardener! He seems to have entered numerous categories in all the horticultural shows for miles around and won many of them, or came second. His cottage must have been groaning with trophies. The love of gardening seems to have been life-long, perhaps reflecting his early years of working the land. For example in 1882, whilst resident at North Stoke, he came first for vegetable marrows, first for winter onions, second for apples, second for a nosegay and first for a collection of vegetables in four varieties. There are more references to Mark Wickens's horticultural prowess over the years than there were articles on his police cases.

However reports of crimes did come up which showed the variety of incidents that a rural constable had to deal with. They also shed some interesting insight into his character.

The earliest report discovered is in the *Reading Mercury* of 17 May 1879, when he was living at Goring, and tells a rather entertaining story verging on farce.

CAPTURE OF AN ESCAPED PRISONER

Esther Ada Chamberlain, the young woman who effected her escape from the Reading Prison between the evening of Thursday the 1st and the morning of the 2nd inst, was recaptured on Saturday near Goring. It seems that about 11 am on that day some children who were at play on the hill near Cleeve, Goring, saw a person whom they described as 'a funny looking man', who came and sat down upon a bank, and asked the children to fetch a bottle of water or milk. Two of them happened to be the children of PC Mark Wickens, stationed at Goring, and they ran home and told their father what had happened. The officer, seeing there was something peculiar in the matter, put on plain clothes and made his way to the hill. When near the 'funny man' he recognised Chamberlain's features. As he got close she jumped up and ran off across the fields, and the constable gave chase, but as well did she run that it was not until a mile and a half had been covered that she was caught. PC Wickens took the woman – who was dressed as a man, in a cap, coat, vest, trousers, and flannel shirt and whose hair was cut close – to his home, where his wife lent her a dress and bonnet, and she was then taken to Reading Gaol. Her clothes having been changed at the prison, Chamberlain was apprehended by Inspector Pocock, of the Reading Division of the County Constabulary, on a charge of obtaining goods by false pretences at Newbury; and on Monday she was removed to that town.

Although this is a good tale, it shows that PC Wickens was a policeman with initiative. He must have also been quite fit to run that distance. Other reports provide evidence of his zeal.

Articles mentioning PC Mark Wickens in newspapers published in Reading 1870-1900

Year	Date	Newspaper	Case
1879	17 May	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Capture of an escaped prisoner
1880	25 October	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Drunkenness [at Ipsden]
1881	19 March	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	Working a horse as unfit
1881	16 April	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Army deserter at South Stoke
1887	3 September	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	Brutal assault at Ipsden
1889	23 November	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	Arson at Mongewell
1890	16 August	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Drunkenness at Newnham Murrell
1892	12 March	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	Blocking the highway [with a traction engine]
1896	22 February	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	Funeral of a police officer at Whitchurch
1897	4 September	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Fighting in Crowmarsh
1898	28 May	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	A magistrate summoned for cruelty
1898	31 December	<i>Berkshire Chronicle</i>	Serious case against a farm bailiff
1899	7 January	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Charges of stealing barley
1899	18 February	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Furious driving [of a horse over Wallingford Bridge]
1899	13 May	<i>Reading Mercury</i>	Retiring constable

Amongst the cases of drunkenness, theft and common assault that must have made up his daily round, PC Wickens was also involved in prosecutions relating to cruelty to animals. In 1881 a Goring farmer was in the dock for working an emaciated horse with sores on its body and in 1898 Mark Wickens even took on a JP who lived in his former village and who sat on the local bench at Henley Petty Sessions where the policeman regularly gave evidence. Farmer and landowner John Pittman King of North Stoke was summoned for cruelty to a horse by causing it to be worked whilst in an unfit state at Ipsden. The case against him was dismissed although the lad who worked the horse was fined £1 which Mr King paid, having denied all knowledge that a sick animal had been taken into the fields.

In 1881, somewhat ironically, former soldier PC Wickens apprehended a 22 year-old deserter from the 99th Regiment of Foot in Bermuda, whom he found asleep in bed at the man's father's house at South Stoke. It must have taken some determination to escape from Bermuda and get back to England without detection. The man was turned over to the military authorities. The court gave a reward of 20s to PC Wickens for his role in the recapture.

Nearly 20 years later, in 1898, PC Wickens was still on the ball! When stationed at Crowmarsh he encountered two men, a local hawker and a general dealer from Blewbury, in a horse and trap on the road. In the cart were sacks of grain and PC Wickens' suspicions were aroused. The men gave evasive answers to his questions, so he arrested them. Making enquiries at a farm in Ipsden, he discovered that four sacks of barley were missing and that the bailiff had no authority to sell it. The bailiff was subsequently charged with stealing the corn and the other two men with receiving stolen goods.

Family

Mark and Winifred Wickens had seven children, four girls and three boys. None of the boys followed their father into the police force, instead all made a career on the railways and moved far away from South Oxfordshire. Oscar became a railway shunter and lived in Lichfield whilst Stephen became a guard in Wigan. Oliver Louis was a signalman in Watford, Herts. Daughter Elsie married a gardener and went north, and was living in Macclesfield in 1939. Ellen and Ethel married local men and stayed in the Wallingford area. Winifred seems to have remained single and died in Wallingford Registration District in 1947.

Character

We can only speculate about the character of Mark Wickens, but he seems to have been determined and thorough, both in his work and in his hobby of gardening where he entered and won numerous competitions over many years. He appears to have been fearless in pursuing wrong-doers, be they drunks, thieves or violent. He also was not intimidated by authority as shown by the prosecution he brought against a magistrate on the bench in his own local court at Henley. No hint of humanity or humour comes through in the reports of the court cases. PC Wickens, with his 'ground ash stick', was probably a force to be reckoned with.