

Metropolitan Police Constable Alfred Smith

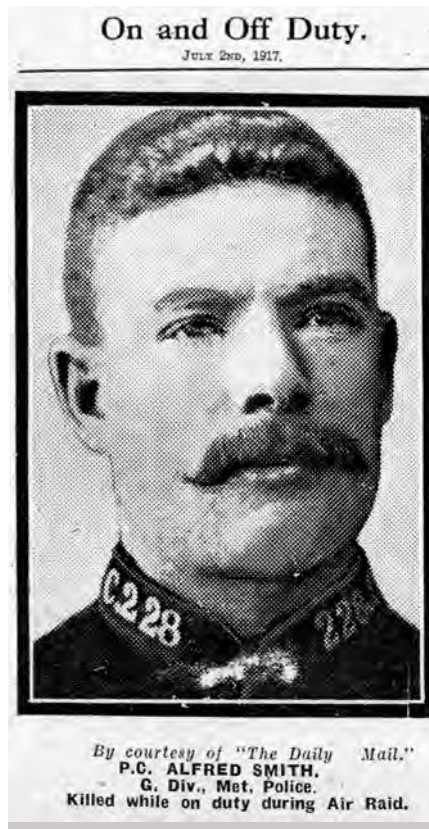
59 'GR', Warrant No. 89106
Killed on Duty: 13th June 1917

By KEITH FOSTER

Continuing to expand and share their research knowledge, the team of Keith Foster and Anthony Rae, working in support of the Islington Borough Police, organised another memorable occasion to record the centenary of the death of PC Alfred Smith, killed during an air-raid in 1917. On this occasion it was most suitably accompanied by a Islington Council's People's Plaque, chosen by a public voting competition, which has resulted in a lasting memorial at the site where PC Smith died.

The memorial was led by the Metropolitan Police Senior Chaplain, Rev'd Jonathan Osborne, who was joined by Supt Nicholas Davies and officers from Islington Police, the Mayor of Islington, Alfred's great nephew Rob Jeffries, formerly a Thames Division officer, and many other guests with a keen interest in the history of policing in the metropolis.

Alfred had joined the Metropolitan Police in 1902 having moved to London a year earlier from the agricultural community in Wokingham, Berkshire where he grew up. He had met and married a local Islington girl, May Titlow, in 1910, and by 1914 they had a young son named George. At some point during his career he became



part of the G 'reserve', which in those days of the Met signified an officer of imposing demeanour and appearance, such officers being called upon for ceremonial duties as they occurred.

By June 1917 Londoner's had already endured two years of German air raids by the Zeppelin airships, and with no effective anti-aircraft defences, once they had dropped their bombs the

majority returned home unscathed. The public were left in grave fear of their safety each time the 'silent menace' returned – typically on a night with a full moon.

More terrifying though was the air raid to occur in daylight just before midday on 13th June, when a squadron of Gotha bombers arrived to the east of the London, first dropping their bombs at Barking and Poplar followed by more in the City at Fenchurch and Liverpool Street stations. Next in line was Finsbury and Islington where Alfred, attached to City Road Police Station, had already taken up his duty in the area of Old Street and Lever Street.

Much of the area at that time was crowded with factories and warehouses, serving and served by, the City Road Basin part of the Regent's Canal. Hard to imagine nowadays since the German's did much to virtually obliterate the location on their 'return visits' during WW2. Many of us are familiar with the standard WW1 image of a bobby-on-a-bike adorned with a placard "Take Cover", and blowing a whistle. But seriously, this was the only regulation method of public air raid precaution before the advent of the ARP siren system put in place by 1939.

The policeman on patrol however, in this case Alfred, would already have heard the earlier explosions first hand a short distance away in the City. As he ran along Central Street, ahead he could already see a crowd of mainly women workers gathering at the main entrance to the City Sylicia factory, this left him in no doubt they were about to put their lives at great risk by running in all directions. By now the planes were almost overhead, and the only option available to him was to coerce them back inside and bar the doors with his own body.

This was to prove not a moment too soon, although in so doing he sacrificed his own life as a bomb exploded in the street close to where he was standing, killing him outright. At the Coroner's Inquest the factory manager of

the City Sylicia factory was recorded as saying in praise of PC Smith's gallantry: "The death roll would have been very heavy but for Smith holding back the 153 women who were present".



It is altogether sad to reflect upon the fact that although a posthumous King's Police Medal had been awarded a few months earlier (PC Greenoff - Silvertown munitions explosion), no record could be found that Alfred Smith's name had been put forward for a similar accolade. In part that has now been put right, and everyone can see his gallantry recorded at 43/45 Central Street.



KEITH FOSTER is a police historian, and has been researching for the National Police Officer's Roll of Honour since 2001.

Photograph P1159

Taken in Stratford Road, Wolverton showing a Sergeant and a Constable

By MICK SHAW

