

'Wildcat' Strike: the story of William Thomas Brooks

by Dr Robert Haldane –
Police Historian

In the history of Australian policing there has only ever been one police strike. It was not led, organised or supported by the Victoria Police Association but was a 'wildcat' strike, initially involving just 29 constables on the night shift at Russell Street Police Station.

This month's article chronicling the major events in the history of The Police Association examines the role of William Thomas Brooks and his part in the 1923 police strike. What Brooks did was quite amazing but it cost 636 police their jobs and shows how destructive 'wildcat' industrial action can be, especially when taken without the leadership, knowledge or support of the relevant union.

The strike lasted only several days but by the time it was over 636 policemen were dismissed or discharged from the Victoria Police Force: never to be reinstated. And Victoria was subjected to an unprecedented wave of violence and looting that effectively turned the streets of Melbourne into a battle zone.

The mayhem of that week touched the lives of thousands of Victorians and changed the face of policing in Victoria forever but despite the involvement of so many people and its far-reaching ramifications, the story of the Victoria Police Strike is very much the story of one man: William Thomas Brooks. The final entry on his police record of conduct and service read: *A capable and intelligent constable, Dismissed from the Force on 1-11-23 for organizing and leading a strike of members of the*

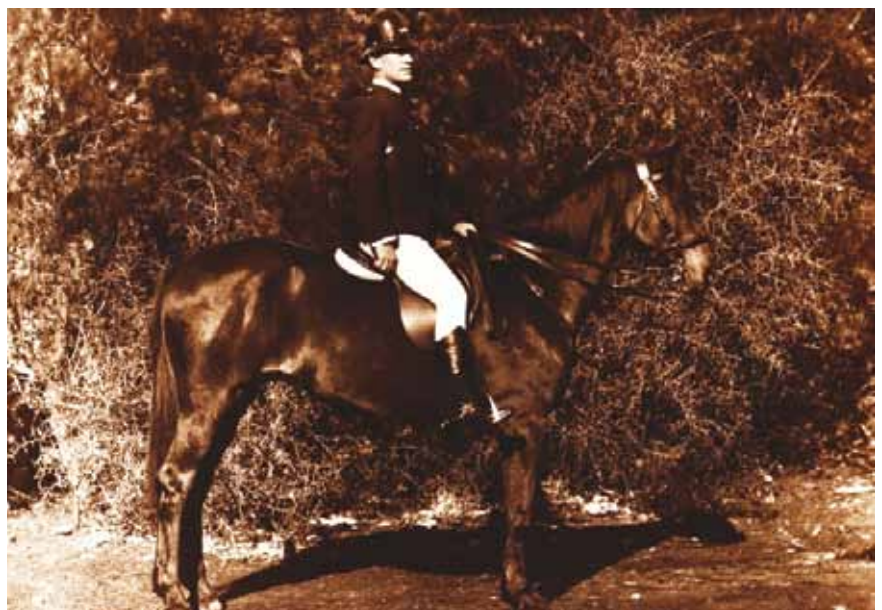
Force and a later Royal Commission found that the immediate cause of the strike was the agitation engineered by ex-constable Brooks.

William Thomas Brooks was born on 28 April 1889 at Port Melbourne, Victoria, the second child of seven to John Thomas Brooks, stoker, and his wife Catherine, nee Postlethwaite. A former gas stoker with the Metropolitan Gas Company, West Melbourne, he initially joined the Victoria Police Force on 28 September 1911 and soon after transferred to Dimboola for duty as a mounted constable, registered number 5697. He served for a little over one year at Dimboola before resigning without explanation on 28 February 1913. The one notation on his record of conduct and service at that time described him as 'well conducted and efficient'.

It is not known what Brooks did



The strikers had their own medallion.



William Thomas Brooks.

after leaving Dimboola but he re-joined the Victoria Police Force as a foot constable, registered number 5944, on 21 November 1913 and was stationed for relatively short periods of time at Russell Street, Seymour and Prahran, before being appointed to South Yarra on 3 March 1916. He married Mary Ethel Booth of Hay, New South Wales, at Moonee Ponds on 11 December 1915. They had nine children and Brooks and his family resided in Osborne Street, South Yarra.

During his time at South Yarra Brooks was employed mainly on liquor licensing duty. He did not come under adverse notice but was commended twice and described by his superintendent as 'efficient, energetic and well conducted'. In 1920-1921 Brooks was one of the two Melbourne District, No. 3 Division, Police Association delegates. He resigned from this position and during his brief time as a delegate he did not achieve anything of note or gain a position of prominence within The Police Association.

In October 1921 Brooks transferred to Russell Street for duty at the Licensing Branch, where he was again described by his superintendent as 'efficient, energetic and well conducted'. On 19 November 1922 he was commended for 'displaying zeal and tact in partaking in 846 licensing prosecutions and sly-grog cases in twelve months'.

Despite his excellent record, Brooks was one of seventeen licensing police ordered back to uniformed beat duty in a purge by Chief Commissioner Alexander Nicholson, who later admitted that he did not know Brooks personally and was relying on hearsay when he decided that Brooks was 'unfit for this class of work'. That decision transformed Brooks almost overnight from a taciturn and nondescript constable into a vocal dissident and firebrand.

Aggrieved at Nicholson's decision, Brooks circulated a petition headed 'Comrades and Fellow Workers' amongst metropolitan police. Signed by almost seven hundred men, the petition made reference to the 'Prussianism' of supervisors and demanded the restoration of police pensions, the immediate withdrawal of special supervisors and the granting of pay and

conditions then enjoyed by police in New South Wales.

The petition was not endorsed by The Police Association, and indeed at the time Brooks was not even a financial member but the petition's bold tone and widespread publicity established him as an unofficial leader among those police agitating for improved work conditions, which were generally regarded as the worst in Australia.

Nicholson responded by transferring Brooks away from his South Yarra home to Geelong 'for special work', and thence even more remotely, to Colac for licensing duty: which he refused to perform.

Suspended and charged for this refusal of duty, Brooks called Nicholson to give evidence at a much-publicised discipline hearing held in the Melbourne City Court during May 1923. The charge was dismissed and on reinstatement to the Force an embittered Brooks promised to 'cause a lot more trouble'. And he did.

On the night of 31 October 1923 Brooks led 28 other constables at Russell Street Police Station on strike, refusing to parade for night shift until a covert system of 'special supervisors' was discontinued. The constables, who were mostly young and single, with less than twelve months service, spontaneously elected Brooks as their leader.

In the days that followed Brooks toured suburban police stations rallying men to strike, exaggerating the strength of his support by claiming 'all the men at Russell Street are out'. His 'wildcat' industrial action cost 635 other men their careers but also resulted in more improvements to police work conditions than constitutional means had achieved in more than two decades.

Remarkably, Brooks was never called to give evidence at the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the strike and although he was elected secretary of the 'Strikers Reinstatement Association' he never publicly spoke about his decision to strike. And despite speculation to the contrary, there is no evidence that he ever had any other union or political affiliations.

In 1924 Brooks moved to Hay, NSW, where he worked initially as a water-boring contractor, then later for many years as a night watchman. In July 1943 he was employed as caretaker



William Thomas Brooks.

at St Patrick's College, Ballarat. Brooks died on 15 November 1943 in St John's Hospital, Ballarat, and was buried in the Ballarat Cemetery, survived by his wife and daughters Isabel, Mary and Irene. He did not leave any notes, diaries or memoirs pertaining to the police strike or his role in it.



The Police Association badge.