

# POLICE TROOPER JOHN (JOCK) ROBERTSON

(1907-1944)

By

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Trooper John Robertson with daughter Anne, who were tragically killed.

Constable John Robertson died as a result of an accident, 10th Dec 1944. He was my mother's first husband. He was 37 years old, born in Queenstown, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1907. His parents were John Henry Robertson, storekeeper and Annie Eliza nee Pamplin. Later they had a retail shop at Moonah.

Trooper Robertson was married to Ann Alma Payne (1) and was stationed at the time of his death at Macquarie Plains. The Police house and joint cells are still there (2021), although the house is now privately owned (Derek Low 2019). It stands to the north side of the railway line overlooking it, about 200 yards away. Advancing to the railway crossing from the house from Gordon River Road, one would travel down a sloping curve and it would be possible, if one did not hear the engine's whistle or if it was not sounded, not to see the train until it was virtually at the level crossing. For many years I suspected this was the route taken by John and I believe it still is. According to Derek there was a garage from the property situated on Gordon River Road.



Rear view of the house bounding on Gordon River Road. The low sloping attachment of the shed, which came later, was where the garage once existed. Photo taken in 2019.

However, further inspection of the site in February and again in June 2019 makes me consider that the natural exit from the house was the small road that led to the entrance of the house, south of Gordon River Road. If this was the case, then it is more puzzling how the accident took place as the vision to the crossing would be better.

John was appointed Probationary Constable in Hobart 1 October 1934. At the time of his appointment to the Tasmanian Police Force, as it was then known, he is recorded as being 5'10 ½" tall, married, a labourer by trade, a native of Tasmania with no prior policing experience.

His appointment was confirmed following his successful six month period of probation at Hobart and Gazetted on 12 July 1935. He was transferred from Hobart to Glenorchy on 15 July 1937 and remained stationed at Glenorchy until transferring to Macquarie Plains as a Trooper 1 October 1939. His transfer to Macquarie Plains is listed in the Police Establishment Record Book on 1 October 1939, however the Gazette records his transfer as 2 October 1939. The formal notice is probably contains the correct date.

He had been stationed at Macquarie Plains for five years before the tragic accident and I understand from family sources that he was soon hoping for a transfer after expecting to receive a promotion. I can recall my mother telling me of the various stories when she was left alone with the cells occupied at Macquarie Plains. The inmates would make a ruckus because of drunkenness and wanting – of course – to be let out. Trooper Robertson would be out on duty at this time. Despite the frightening experiences of his wife she had the responsibility of feeding the prisoners in their cells. Many of these prisoners were men who had deserted from the army.



The cells in 2009. Then used as a goat house.



The cells in February 2019 after being renovated.

Before becoming a policeman he was employed at the Electronic Zinc Company. He was also a State cyclist champion, winning many competitions and at one time, the author can recall seeing many silver trophies to that fact.



John Robertson on bike. Taken in 1925 just before the 25 mile race. Reg Blasley on right.

Sadly the records pertaining to his cycling career has long since gone. His cups testify that he won in 1925 (31<sup>st</sup> Oct) the 50 mile; in 1926 the 50 mile; in 1927 the 30

mile (The Delaney Trophy) and in the same year, the Amateur Cycle Road Racing Season (The Combe Cup).

The Robertsons had three small children at the time of his death (2) and my mother was carrying a fourth child who was born a month later after he died.



The Robertson family 1944. (from left) Mother Ann, baby John, Anne,(girl in middle), June and John Snr.

I, of course, was not around at the time of the accident, my mother marrying again later to my father, Reginald Gordon Watson. My mother rarely talked about the accident, which was a very traumatic time for her. I did pick up things from time to time in that the accident was quite controversial.



The Robertson house, Macquarie Plains (2009)



The house in 2019 after renovation by the new owner. Notice the entrance to the house has been changed.



The author outside the house in 2021

John Robertson was killed with his eldest daughter Anne. Anne's friend, Dorothy Appleby was injured, but I believe survived the tragedy. The two died at the railway crossing at Macquarie Plains, hit by a diesel train. Trooper Robertson was on his motorcycle with the two children in a sidecar as passengers.



The child Anne died on the spot. Bill Hume who lived nearby at the time was fourteen years old. He was at boarding school in Hobart, but he informed the author in an interview on 11th February 2019 that his mother, a nurse, was called upon to assist at the scene. According to Mr Hume Jock said to his mother, "*I'm dying aren't I?*" Bill Hume and his wife were the owners and operators of the shop where John Robertson was heading to on that fateful day. He added that *Jock* use to ride to their farm to buy butter. He can only remember him as being a '*tall man*'.

Trooper Robertson and the other passenger were eventually taken to the Royal Hobart Hospital. He died the following morning (2 am), while Dorothy incurred severe head injuries.

His sister, Mrs Flo Flint (3) wrote of the event the following: "*I remember dear Jock was killed whilst taking his daughter (Anne) to the little local store which was very close to his home to buy a birthday gift for the other one....we all loved him...it was said the train driver was well known to drive straight across the crossing and no whistle. He and his old motor bike and side car were well recognised; it was called 'the dusting'*."

*"According to witnesses some friends called out to Jock, but the train was almost upon him. Jock was sent to the Royal Hobart hospital. He looked okay and told us he neither saw or heard the train!"*

*"His little passenger (daughter) was decapitated and Jock died during the night as his motor-bike handles had pieced his lungs and he died of internal bleeding. We were very shocked as he looked so well and talked to us."*

*"He had a very big police funeral and looked as tho (sic) the stream of the cars would never end."*

There are a couple of points to the letter which need to be taken up. In the letter it is stated that the daughter was '*decapitated*' and that the train sounded no whistle. We will look at these aspects a little further on.

A Mercury newspaper report (4) states: "*The rail car which was approaching the crossing at 20 to 30 miles an hour struck the sidecar in front of the wheel. It threw the machine across the cattle guards and rolled it along the track. The driver of the diesel, Frank Ingram, was unable to stop the train in time to avoid the collision.*"

*"The motorcycle and occupants were thrown to the side of the track about 28 yards from where the collision occurred.*

*"Tpr Robertsons' child was killed instantly. Tpr Robertson and the other girl were taken to the Royal Hobart Hospital after they were treated at Hayes by Dr. C. Hartley Rowe of New Norfolk."*

Later the report added, "*One theory of the cause of the accident is that when approaching the crossing the trooper had his attention focussed on the men in the station yard and did not look in the direction from which the diesel was travelling."*

The controversy was that it is claimed the driver of the rail engine; Frank Ingram\*, did not sound his whistle when approaching the level crossing. Trooper Robertson was alive when he was taken to hospital and uttered that he did not see or hear the train until it struck him (see following). The railway porter, however, said that he heard the train, which was travelling from New Norfolk, whistle before approaching. The railway porter said he approached the level crossing at 10 mph and he expected Robertson to stop, which obviously he did not.

The following are statements given to the Police.

Frank Ingram, the engine driver, said while about 400 yards away he gave "*a good long blast*". About 100 yards away from the level crossing, he gave another blast, but not so long. He said that, "*I saw the cycle was going to come over the crossing and not stop.*" The train was travelling at 25 m.p.h. Mr Cyril George Youd, porter at the Macquarie Plains Station (no building now exists) said that when he saw Trooper Robertson approach the line, "*he appeared to be easing up and I took it he was about to pull up. He was then about a chain from the crossing and was travelling considerably slower than (sic) when I first saw it. I took it he was about either to stop or ease up to go behind (sic) the rail car after it crossed the crossing.*" He said the girl Appleby was sitting at the back and Ann (sic) Louise was sitting a little more forward in the sidecar. He said he heard the whistle 400 yards from the Crossing and later blowing a second time, one hundred yards from the crossing. However, Mr Charles Robert Shoobridge, another witness said that the cycle "*made no attempt to slow down*" and that, "*John Robertson looked straight ahead. He neither looked to the right or the left*" which contradicts Mr Youd's statement. Mr Shoobridge does confirm that the engine did sound its horn, "*I heard one blast loudly and longly and the whistle continued to blow to within a few yards from the crossing.*" He stated again that he heard only one long blast and "*if there was an earlier whistle I did not hear it.*" The first policeman to have contact with the accident was Thomas Ashley Canning, who came from New Norfolk. John Robertson was still conscious and was asked how the accident happened. Robertson replied, "*I do not know I neither saw or heard it until it hit me I have always been a very careful rider.*" Witness Shoobridge confirmed this statement.

The train engine hit the sidecar first. Mr Shoobridge said, in contrast to Mr Youd, but in agreement with Mr Ingram, that the motor cycle "*was not going to stop and an accident was inevitable.*" Mr Shoobridge then jumped from his lorry. The cycle was lying on top of Robertson. Shoobridge refers to the other girl as Dorothy Appleton (as opposed to Appleby). With assistance from the porter, Mr Youd, he loaded Robertson and Dorothy on to his truck. Anne was already dead and while travelling to the Royal Hobart Hospital he dropped the body of Anne off at New Norfolk. He met Canning on the way near Plenty and that was when he asked Robertson how did the accident happen.

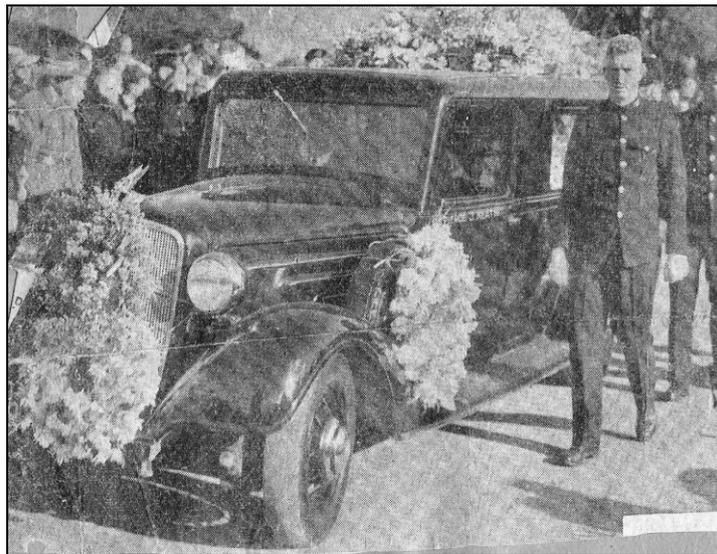
According to his sister, Robertson was on duty at the time. He had one day off a month. As he was the only trooper in the district (the next one being at New Norfolk) he would have been on call, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. A Parliamentary report (published 1947) (6) lists "*Constable J. Robertson (killed on duty)*" and states a retiring allowance of 92 pounds 16 shillings and 7 pence. It was permissible for the trooper to use the police motorcycle for private use. (7)

The Official report states that Anne's death was "*instantaneous*". She died as a result of a severe fracture of the skull and cerebral haemorrhage. Therefore, there was no decapitation. John Robertson died because of haemorrhage and shock; fractured ribs and ruptured spleen. A Mr. F.J. Wilmhurst was granted permission on behalf of the widow and relatives to view the body.

His passing is included in the Police Journal of September 1945 under Obituary. It states: "*It is with sincere regret we record during the year of Constable W.G. Brown (Bellerive) and Constable J. Robertson (Macquarie Plains). The late Constable Robertson met his death in most tragic circumstances whilst on duty.*" Of course Robertson actually died the previous year, 1944 in December.

Whatever the real reason of the accident it was a great tragedy. Trooper Robertson is buried at Cornelian Bay. My mother and his daughter are buried with him. (5)

A Mercury report states of the funeral: "*A police escort met the cortege at Risdon Road. Present included the Attorney-General, Mr McDonald, Commissioner of Police, Mr Hill and Supt. Dowling. The police parade was commanded by Insp. Smith and Sgt. Edwards had charge of the police escort.*"



Funeral of Trooper Robertson  
(Source: Mercury newspaper)

The question has been asked. Was Trooper John Robertson on duty at the time of the tragic accident? By carrying civilians does that not clarify that he was not on duty? However, the following points should be taken into serious consideration:

- In the official statement of Driver Ingram to the Police, he said Robertson "*was in uniform*".
- Robertson was permitted to use the police cycle for private use.
- Country troopers were on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

It is clear then, that he was on duty at the time.

(1) 28<sup>th</sup> May 1931, Holy Trinity Church, North Hobart.

- (2) Anne Louise (1935), June Maree (1937), John Brett (1943), and later, Valma Anne (Jan 1945)
- (3) Mrs Flo Flint, letter dated 20<sup>th</sup> March 09. Aged 85 years at the time of writing.
- (4) The Mercury 10<sup>th</sup> December 1944. P.2
- (5) Wife, Ann, died March 1980
- (6) "Report of the Commissioner of Police for the Years 1942-43 to 1944-45"
- (7) Commissioner of Police, Mr Hill at a Police Commissioner's Conference in Adelaide 9<sup>th</sup> October-11 October 1944

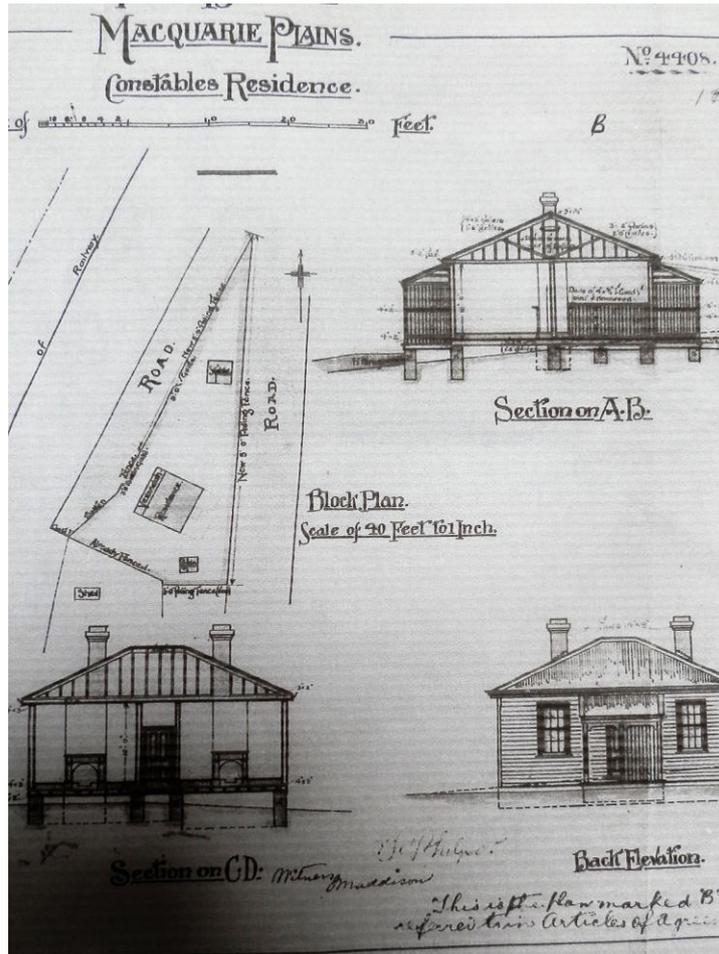
**Sources:**

Verbal statement from remaining children, Mr. John Robertson junior and Mrs Valma Williams. Written letter, from sister to Trooper John Robertson, Mrs. Flo Flint of Canberra. Newspaper reports from The Mercury at the time. Police Journal September 1945; Police Gazette October 12, 1934 (re his appointment); Report of the Commissioner of Police (Parliament of Tasmania Paper 1947); Police Commissioner Conference Proceedings (9<sup>th</sup> Oct-13<sup>th</sup> October 1944); Coroner's Report; Sandra Harvey, Tasmanian Police Academy Library and the author, Reg. A. Watson. Thanks to Colleen McCullough and Jenny Scott of the Justice Department. Interview with Bill Hume of Macquarie Plains (2019). Tony Grincaise, Rokeby Police Academy.

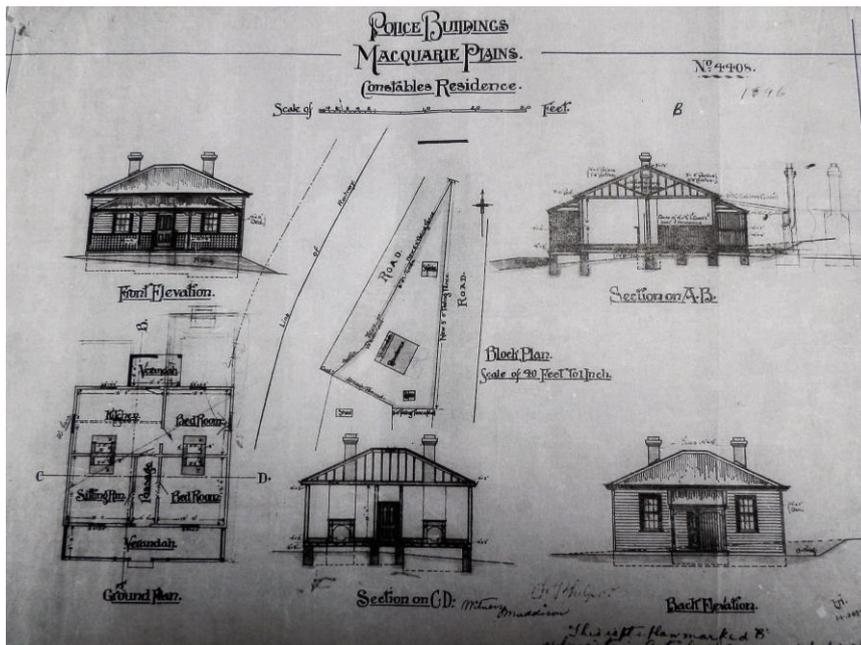
*\* The author relates a strange tale. On an expedition in July 2009 to take photos of the accident site and of the house and cells, a friend, whose car we used, accompanied me. Quite unbeknown to both of us, it turned out that my friend's grandfather was Frank Ingram, the engine driver at the time of the accident.*

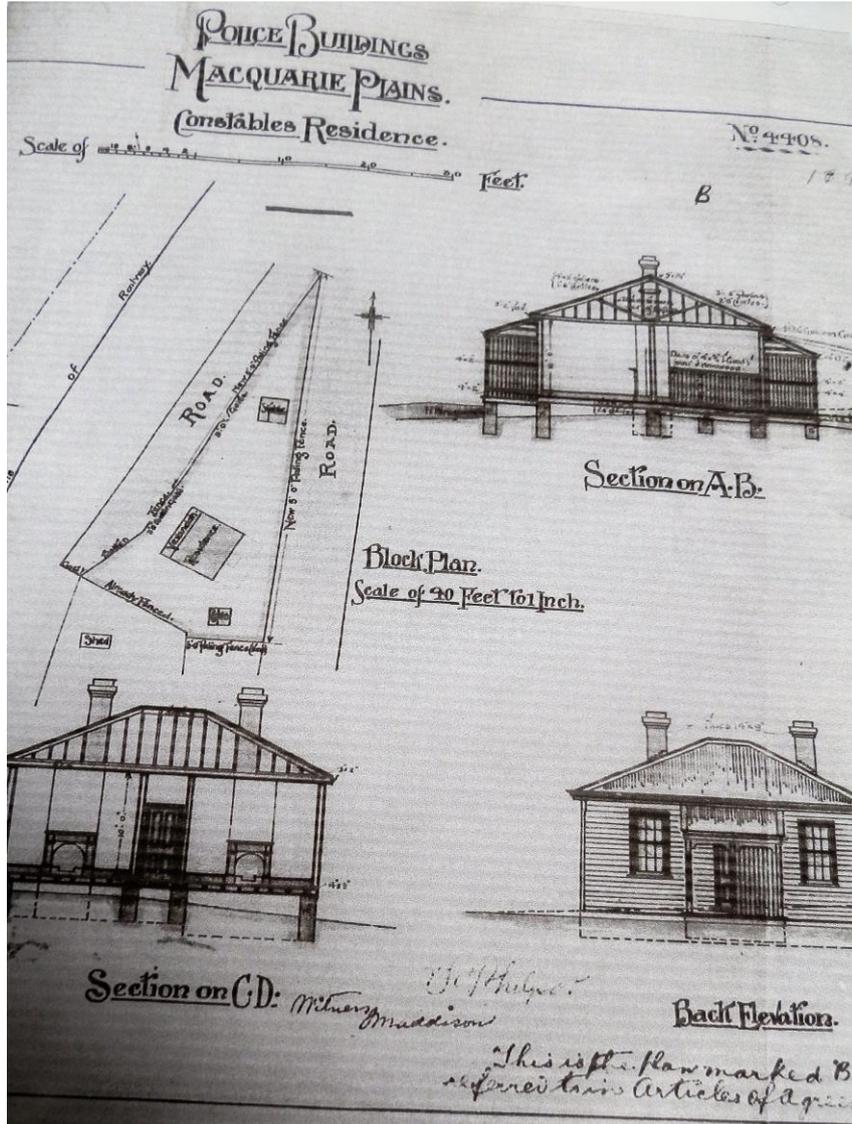
The house at 292 Gordon River Road was a police house from about 1900 to the 27<sup>th</sup> November 1952 when the station was transferred to Bushy Park. The Police Gazette makes mention that the Police Station at Glenora will close 24<sup>th</sup> April 1900) and Police Trooper McKinlay will be moved to Macquarie Plains.

Following photos of the original plans of the house. (Plans held by the Archives Department, Hobart and by the courtesy of Derek Low). The builder was Mr Philpott.



Over the years there has been successive alterations by the various owners. Originally it was just a four room house. By the time of the occupation of the Robertsons, little had changed except a kitchen appears to be relocated to an area added on. It also had an amazing number of fire places, five in total. Since 1944 it had been extended further.







- St Augustine's Church CofE, Macquarie Plains. This would have been the Robertson's church. It was being used only rarely by 2019

The term Trooper ceased 8<sup>th</sup> March 1956.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> June 2021 I received a letter from my first cousin Margaret Ryan *nee* Mulchay. She lives in Queensland. I had written to her after being told when at an early age she visited the home at Macquarie Plains. Her reply was very moving and adds to the human side of the sad episode....following are the contents....

“I can't really tell you much about Macquarie Plains. It was before I went to school. I can remember how tall uncle Jock was – I guess I was so small – though he was huge. I went on rides with June in the motor-bike. Hair flying – we loved it, giggle all the time. I also remember taking lunch in to the prisoner kept in a shed in the back yard. We were so excited to do that – couldn't have been much security in those days. They didn't have prisoners very often. It was just a holding shed. We laughed and laughed doing that.

“I remember the accident and Auntie Anne and John (baby) came and stayed with us. I still remember this terrible noise coming from the room and I asked mum what it was. It was poor Auntie Anne crying. Perhaps dad had just told her Jock had died. He lived for a few days after the accident. Dad was with him in hospital and I remember dad telling mum Jock was so distressed about little Anne. He asked dad was she ok and dad told him yes she would recover but (in truth) she was killed instantly. Jock was so relieved to hear this and he calmed down and died peacefully. It was the only time my father told an untruth I'm sure. It was such a terrible tragedy and I don't know now how Auntie Anne managed. As children we didn't realise much – we weren't told much.”

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John Robertson is remembered on this memorial, Police Academy, Rokeby.



John Robertson's name is carried on the Canberra Police Remembrance Memorial (right) and a small plaque (left) is located in the grounds of the Police Academy Rokeby. I was able to represent the family at the unveiling of his name in Canberra which is located on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2009. On behalf of the family I laid a wreath.