

John Bennett Tunbridge 1859-1928

Mayor of Hythe 1908

John Bennett Tunbridge was born in New Romney on November 17, 1850. He joined the Metropolitan Police in December 1867 but resigned after three months. He rejoined the force in September 1869. By 1871, he had become a police constable and was promoted to sergeant two years later.

On November 17, 1877, he married Ellen Maria Hatch, the daughter of a Royal Irish Constabulary officer. He was promoted to inspector the following year and began serving in the detective branch in 1881, working in the commissioner's office starting in 1887. During this time, he and his family, including their daughter Milly Norah, born in 1882, began visiting Hythe. In 1886, Tunbridge intervened when a man attempted to eject two boys from a boat, striking one of them with an oar.

Professionally, he played a significant role in the capture of Thomas Neill Cream, the "Lambeth Poisoner," who murdered women, primarily sex workers, using strychnine. He was then dispatched to Argentina to bring back Jabez Balfour, a corrupt financier who had left thousands of investors penniless and fled the country.

While New Zealand Premier Richard Seddon was in London for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, Tunbridge was recommended to him by Metropolitan Commissioner Sir Edward Bradford to lead the New Zealand Police. He became the first professional police officer to hold this position, as the previous three heads of the police force had been former army officers.

In January 1903, John resigned and sailed back to England with his family, retiring once more in Hythe, where they lived on North Road. Their house was named Tiro Moana—a tribute to his time in New Zealand. In the Māori language, Tiro Moana literally translates to "Ocean Vista" or "Sea Views." This term is commonly used in New Zealand for properties and conservation areas that feature extensive views of the sea.

John was re-elected as a councillor year after year and continued to serve as a Justice of the Peace for the rest of his life, becoming mayor in 1908. He took a particular interest in beautifying Hythe by planting trees and shrubs and in providing allotments and decent housing for working men, always insisting on value for money in the council's activities. When war broke out, he volunteered to serve as a Special Constable, an experience that must have felt strange after a gap of over forty years..



He passed away at the age of 69 on October 6, 1928, at home after just a few days of illness. He was buried in Saltwood churchyard alongside his wife, Ellen. Although he died only a few miles from his birthplace in New Romney, his life journey took him around the globe.

Thank you to Anne Petrie and Debby Jones for providing information about JB Tunbridge.