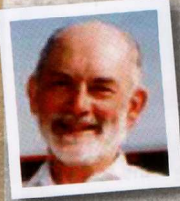


# History Matters

A look into Carlisle's past with history editor  
**David Ramshaw**



**O**n 17 August 1837, John Kent was appointed to the newly

formed Carlisle City Police Force. He was, almost certainly Britain's first black police officer. A black person would have been a rare sight in 1837 so how did this come about?

In the late 18th Century, Thomas Kent, a black African and a victim of the slave trade arrived in England from the Caribbean and landed in Whitehaven. He was a servant at Calder Abbey and after seven or eight years he went to sea before returning to Carlisle where he married a Cumbrian girl. They had ten children, one of whom a son, John Kent, was born at the family home at Low Hesket, Carlisle, sometime between 1795 and 1805. John grew up in the area and married a girl from Longtown.

He died on Monday, 19 July 1886, aged 88, at his home in Henry Street, Carlisle and was interred in Carlisle Cemetery. 'Black Kent is dead,' announced the 'Carlisle Journal.' 'Death of a Carlisle Notable' stated the Carlisle Patriot. 'Yesterday, there were interred at the Carlisle Cemetery the mortal remains of one of the oldest and best known inhabitants of this city, John Kent, popularly known as 'Black Kent,' he being of negro descent.'

'In his prime John Kent was a big powerful man.' Said The Patriot, reporting that at one time he was employed laying pavements in the city and 'Crowds gathered to watch the tremendous blows dealt with his pavior's beater.' So unusual was the sight of any black person in the city at that time, let alone a policeman, that "Black Kent's coming" became a household term used to frighten mischievous children into behaving themselves. 'But the imputation was ill-deserved. 'Black Kent' in the flesh was a quiet, inoffensive man with



John Kent, Britain's first black policeman, second from the left, from a painting by Mark Custerson (hanging at Carleton Hall).

a positive fondness for the children who were brought up to regard him as an ogre.

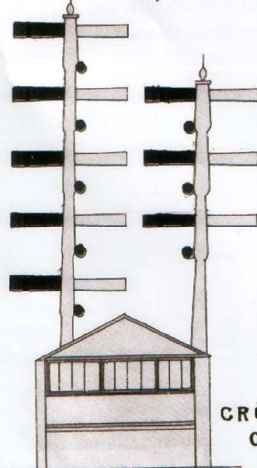
## John Kent Britain's first black policeman

Having served the city for many years as a policeman, one of the original 'Bobbies', he entered the service of the London and North Western

Railway Company and in that service he ended his days as an attendant at one of the waiting-rooms at Citadel station'. He was then an old man of 88 years of age [or 91, according to Kent himself].

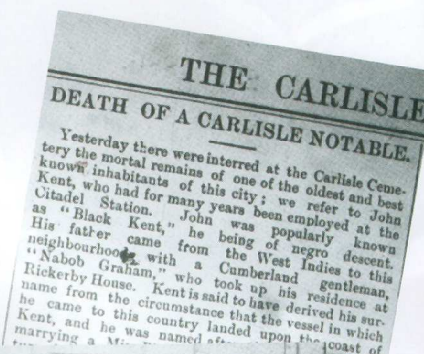
John was proud of his police service and like all policemen he liked to reminisce about his experiences. It appears he had plenty to talk about. One of his earliest arrests, was that of two hotel 'coiners'. He'd tell of how he captured one and chained him to the fire-grate in his own home before placing an empty pistol on the table and telling his wife to shoot the man if he so much as attempted to escape. He then went off and caught the other offender. On another occasion, he arrested a man for a robbery committed near Wigton. In order to put the offender off his guard, he feigned drunkenness, 'but the villain was soon to discover that what he supposed to be a staggering inebriate was in fact a stalwart guardian of the peace with all his senses about him.'

This is only a very brief synopsis of John Kent's story, described in full (5 pages) in 'Watching Over Carlisle' available from <http://www.p3publications.com>



CROWN STREET  
CABIN No. 7

Above: The signal box at Citadel Station, known for years afterwards as Kent's cabin. It was here that Edward VII, when a boy, asked 'Is that Uncle Tom's Cabin', on seeing Kent at the window from the Royal train. Right: Death notices from the Journal and the Patriot



"BLACK KENT" is dead. The announcement is one which would have had much more significance forty years ago than it has to-day. Then "Black Kent" was a policeman in the city police force, — one of the first appointments...