

John Bennett Tunbridge (1850–1928)

Mayor of Hythe, 1908



John Bennett Tunbridge, Mayor of Hythe 1908

John Bennett Tunbridge led an extraordinary life. Born in New Romney, Kent, he rose through the ranks of London's Metropolitan Police, became Commissioner of Police in New Zealand and eventually returned to Kent, settling in Hythe. Here, he became an active member of the local community, serving as Mayor in 1908 and continuing to contribute to public life.

His story connects Hythe and the surrounding area with the wider history of Victorian policing and the development of New Zealand's police service.

Key Offices Held

- Metropolitan Police: 1867–1868 and 1869–1895
- Commissioner of Police, New Zealand: 1897–1903
- Mayor of Hythe: 1908
- Alderman of Hythe: 1920 onwards
- Justice of the Peace: During his later years in Hythe
- Special Constable: During the First World War

Early Life in New Romney (1850 onwards)

John Bennett Tunbridge was born in New Romney, Kent, on 17 November 1850.

The 1851 Census records his mother, Mary Tunbridge, as unmarried, with her infant son bearing her surname. Mary married William Bennett Apps in 1857.

When John married in 1877, he named his father as Benjamin Tunbridge, a servant. The exact relationship between Benjamin and Mary remains uncertain.

He spent his early life in the Romney Marsh area. Despite a career that took him around the world, he eventually returned to his native county.

His Personal Appearance

Metropolitan Police records provide a physical description of Tunbridge, offering a glimpse of the man behind the distinguished career.

- Height: 5 feet 11 inches
- Hair: Light brown
- Eyes: Blue
- Complexion: Described as “fresh”
- Identifying marks: None recorded
- Birthplace: New Romney, Kent
- Date of birth: 17 November 1850

The records describe him as married and name his wife, Ellen Maria, as his next of kin.

Joining the Metropolitan Police (1867–1895)

Tunbridge first joined the Metropolitan Police in December 1867 but resigned after only three months. He rejoined in September 1869 and began a career with the force that would span until his initial retirement in September 1895.

His promotions included:

- 1871: Police constable
- 1873: Sergeant
- 1878: Inspector
- 1881: Joined the detective branch (C.I.D.)
- 1887: Served in the Commissioner's Office

His experience in criminal investigation and police administration eventually brought him to the attention of senior figures within the force.

Metropolitan Police

METROPOLITAN POLICE	No. 16. DESCRIPTION OF THE PENSIONER, &c.
Number on Pension Register <u>11979</u>  <u>6th Department Division</u> 23rd day of <u>September</u> 1895. REPORT OF PARTICULARS transmitted, by direction of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, to the Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District, relating to the undermentioned person Pensioned by order of the Secretary of State. <u>John Bennett Tunbridge</u> late a Police <u>Chief Inspector</u> Resigned from this Division on the <u>23rd</u> day of <u>September</u> 1895, with pay to the <u>22nd</u> day of <u>September</u> 1895, to which day inclusive he <u>has been</u> paid, and he is entitled to a Pension of <u>£ 206..13..4</u> per Annum, commencing on the <u>23rd</u> day of <u>September</u> 1895. <u>Whishore</u> Superintendent. Correct as to dates. <u>A. H. Manscroft</u> Clerk in charge, Candidates' Department. * (Has been, or will be, as the case may be) For Description of the Pensioner, see other side.	Age on Resignation - <u>45</u> Years complete. Length of Service in the Force - <u>26</u> Years <u>7</u> Days. Remuneration at date of retirement - <u>5</u> <u>19</u> <u>0</u> per Week. Height - <u>5</u> Feet <u>11</u> Inches. Hair - <u>Light brown</u> Eyes - <u>Blue</u> Complexion - <u>Fresh</u> Particular Mark, Defect, or Infirmary by which he may be identified - <u>None</u> Where and when Born - <u>At New Romney Kent on the 17th November 1850</u> Date of Joining the Police - <u>Scotland Yard on the 23rd December 1867</u> Particulars of Service - <u>Apptd to Chatham Division joining 23.12.67. Regd 29.2.68. Rejoined B.G. 64, apptd to 4 Div. 17.12.68. to 4 25.9.70. to K. 10.4.78. to T. 17.2.74. to 4 21.5.81. to 66.10.11.81. Promoted to Serg 4.4.85. to Insp 19.8.86. to Insp 23.5.87. to 2nd Class 16.7.88. to 1st Class 22.12.90. Apptd Ch Insp 31.3.91.</u> If injured in the Service, state nature of Injuries - <u>✓</u> If Single, Married, or a Widower - <u>Married</u> Present next of Kin, or legal Representative, in case of Death - <u>Wife, Ellen Maria Tunbridge</u> Where he intends to reside and draw his Pension - <u>Sutherland Villa, Park Road Hythe Kent</u> Present Address - <u>£ 100 00 00 00 00 00</u> Pensioner's Signature - <u>John Bennett Tunbridge</u>

Marriage and Family (1877 onwards)

On 17 November 1877, Tunbridge married Ellen Maria Hatch, the daughter of an officer in the Royal Irish Constabulary.

Their daughter, Milly Norah, was born in 1882.

Ellen accompanied John during the family's years abroad, and they eventually returned together to Kent. She survived her husband by nearly six years.

Marriage certificate

1877. Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church in the Parish of Streat Church ^{Roxeth} in the County of Middlesex

No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
58	November 17 th	John Bennett Tunbridge	full	Bachelor	Policeman	Roxeth	Benjamin Tunbridge	Servant
		Ellen Maria Hatch	full	Spinster	—	Roxeth	James Hatch	Policeman

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church, by — or after Banns by me,

This Marriage was solemnized between us, John Bennett Tunbridge in the Presence of us, William Bennett for Weller & A Officiating Minister
Ellen Maria Hatch Mary Masters

Notable Criminal Investigations

During his Metropolitan Police career, Tunbridge became associated with several high-profile cases of the Victorian era.

Thomas Neill Cream — The Lambeth Poisoner

Tunbridge was heavily involved in the investigation into Thomas Neill Cream, who murdered women using strychnine. The case became one of the most notorious murder investigations of the period.

Jabez Balfour — The Fugitive Financier

Tunbridge was sent to Argentina to escort Jabez Balfour back to Britain after fraudulent financial dealings had ruined thousands of investors. Balfour was associated with the Liberator Building Society, whose financial collapse caused widespread losses.

Commissioner of Police in New Zealand (1897–1903)

Following a brief retirement spent in Hythe, Tunbridge was recommended for the position of Commissioner of Police in New Zealand in 1897 by Sir Edward Bradford, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

The recommendation came during the visit to London of New Zealand Premier Richard Seddon for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

Tunbridge's appointment was historic. He became the first professional police officer to head the New Zealand Police, succeeding three commissioners who had previously served as army officers.

He held the post until January 1903, bringing decades of British policing experience to the administration of a national force overseas, including the introduction of their police pension system.

For a man born in New Romney, his rise to such an important international position was a remarkable achievement.

Returning to England and Settling in Hythe (1903)

After resigning from the New Zealand Police in January 1903, Tunbridge returned to England with his family and permanently settled in Hythe.

Tunbridge and his family had developed an affection for the town during earlier visits. Following their return from New Zealand, they settled in North Road, in a house named Tiro Moana. The Māori name, meaning "ocean view," recalled their years overseas and the property's outlook towards the sea.

Home and Property in Hythe

After returning from New Zealand in 1903, John Bennett Tunbridge established his home in North Road, Hythe. He named his bungalow Tiro Moana, meaning "ocean view" — a name that reflected his connection with New Zealand and the outlook from his new home.

The house was built in September 1903 and was constructed of brick and tile. It contained three bedrooms, a hall, drawing room, dining room, study, kitchen, scullery, bathroom and WC. There was also an outside workshop, and the property enjoyed a pleasant view.

The name Tiro Moana provides a personal link between Tunbridge's life in Hythe and his remarkable career in New Zealand, where he served as Commissioner of Police from 1897 to 1903. Although he had returned to his native Kent, he chose a name that recalled the country where he had spent six important years of his professional life.

The Golf Terrace Properties

Tunbridge and his wife, Ellen Maria, also owned property on Lower Blackhouse Hill. The 1910 Lloyd George Domesday records four houses at Golf Terrace, held on long leases from the South Eastern Railway Company (SER).

The properties were recorded as follows:

- No. 1 Golf Terrace — Plot 1571, owned by Ellen Maria Tunbridge.
- No. 2 Golf Terrace — Plot 1570, owned by John Bennett Tunbridge.
- No. 3 Golf Terrace — Plot 1569, owned by John Bennett Tunbridge.

- No. 4 Golf Terrace — Plot 1568, owned by John Bennett Tunbridge.

These records show that the Tunbridges had established property interests in Hythe. Ellen owned No. 1 in her own name, while John owned the other three houses. Together with their home at Tiro Moana, North Road, these properties reflect the life they built in Hythe after his return from New Zealand.

Tiro Moana, North Road

According to the Lloyd George Domesday Survey, the property is a brick and tile bungalow that was built in September 1903 on land restricted to the erection of one private house; the dwelling contains three bedrooms, a hall, drawing room, dining room, study, kitchen, scullery, bathroom, and W.C., with a coal store and workshop set within beautifully laid out grounds. (Plot 1651)

Lloyd George Domesday Survey



A Connection with Hythe

One particularly interesting detail in Tunbridge's earlier police records is his intended residence at Durham Villa, Park Road, Hythe, Kent. This address provides a valuable link between his active police service and Hythe, suggesting that the town already featured in his long-term plans well before his final retirement there.

His return to Hythe marked the beginning of a new chapter in which he became increasingly involved in the town's civic affairs and community life.

Borough Councillor and Mayor of Hythe (1905–1908)

Tunbridge was elected to Hythe Borough Council in 1905, filling a casual vacancy in the West Ward. In 1908, he was elected Mayor of Hythe.

His experience in public administration, gained during his police career in Britain and New Zealand, provided a strong foundation for his civic responsibilities.

His local interests included:

- Planting trees and improving public spaces.
- Supporting allotments for local residents.
- Promoting better housing for working men.
- Ensuring that public money was spent economically and effectively.

These activities demonstrate that Tunbridge's contribution to Hythe extended well beyond his distinguished career elsewhere. He took an active interest in the town's appearance, facilities, and living conditions.

Tunbridge transitioned from a distinguished career in British and international policing to become a resolute and occasionally controversial civic leader in Hythe, serving as mayor in 1908. His uncompromising demeanour and strict disciplinary approach in local politics and community matters frequently drew opposition, yet he remained deeply dedicated to the town's civic improvement until his death in 1928.

Other Public and Community Roles

Tunbridge also served as a Justice of Peace and was involved in several local organisations. He was a Freemason, a trustee of the St Bartholomew and St John Charity, and for many years the honorary secretary of Hythe Bowling Club.

He was a keen member and an excellent player, winning numerous trophies. He also took a great interest in rifle shooting. In 1920, he became an alderman for the South Ward, a position he still held at the time of his death.

Service During the First World War (1914 onwards)

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Tunbridge volunteered as a Special Constable.

More than forty years after first entering the Metropolitan Police, he returned to policing duties in support of the home front. His decision reflected a continuing commitment to public service, even after retirement from senior office.

His Golden Wedding Anniversary (1927)

In 1927, John and Ellen celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, marking fifty years of marriage. The occasion reflected their long life together, which had included John's distinguished career in British and New Zealand policing and their eventual return to Kent.

Death and Burial at Saltwood (1928–1934)

Obituary

John Bennett Tunbridge died at his home, Tiro Moana, in Hythe on 6 October 1928, following an illness of only a few days. He was 77 years old.

The Kentish Express and Ashford News published the following account on October 8th, 1928:

HYPHE ALDERMAN'S DEATH.

FAMOUS POLICE OFFICER.

The death occurred very suddenly on Saturday at "Tiro moana," Hythe, of Alderman John Bennett Tunbridge, who was in his seventy-eighth year. Only the previous Thursday he had attended a Council Committee meeting, but on Friday he had a heart attack and passed away the next morning at 11.30.

Born in the parish of New Romney, he joined the London Police Force at the age of nineteen. He was transferred to the C.I.D. at Scotland Yard, and while serving there, arrested Neil Cream, the poisoner, and was sent to South America to arrest Jabez Balfour, who was associated with the Liberator Building Society. After retiring to Hythe in 1895, he was appointed Chief Commissioner of Police for New Zealand, holding that position for six years. He came back to live at Hythe in 1903 and was elected a member of the Borough Council in 1905, filling a casual vacancy in the West Ward. In 1908 he was elected Mayor and in 1920, an Alderman for the South Ward—a position he still retained. He was a Justice of the Peace, a Freemason, a trustee of the St. Bartholomew and St. John Charity, and formerly, for many years, honorary secretary of the Hythe Bowling Club, of which he was a keen member and an excellent player, having won numerous trophies. He also took great interest in rifle shooting. Last year he celebrated his golden wedding, and he is survived by his wife and only daughter.

The funeral took place on Wednesday at Saltwood,

The only family mourners were the daughter and son-in-law of the late Alderman, while among those who followed were the Corporation, headed by the Mayor (Brig.-General G. G. Cunningham) with the officials. The police were represented by Superintendent Golding (Elham Division). A large number of beautiful tributes were placed upon the grave.

His wife, Ellen, died on 11 April 1934, aged 80.

They were buried together in Saltwood churchyard, close to Hythe and only a few miles from John's birthplace in New Romney.

St Peter & St Paul Church, Saltwood



John and Ellen Tunbridge Grave

