



Walter Wisken

5771946 Corporal, 4th Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment

He died from cholera in the Far East at Tai-kol-nun on 24th July 1943, aged 29

Walter is commemorated on the Singapore Memorial



The Whiskens are a family whose roots are made more challenging to trace by virtue of there being an immense number of ways of spelling the name, not just between different branches of the family but for various individuals. Literacy rates, particularly amongst males, were pretty low in rural areas and if you can't spell your own name, you are fairly well at the mercy of whoever is writing your name down. In essence this family's variations mostly rolled around: 'h' 'or no 'h' after the 'w', 'i' or 'e' after the 'k' and, if an 'i' was used then a 'g' after the 'n' might or not be used. Oh, and of course 's' or no 's' on the end of the name was another interesting variable. Transcribers unfamiliar with the name also tend to have habit of converting Wisken to Whisker, thus demonstrating that whenever possible – use originals!

Just to prove the point, when Walter Wisken Snr, completed his census form in 1911 he signed his name as Wisken whereas the front cover gave his name as Wiskens whilst the 1921 census return has been merrily filed under Wisker where to the Harleston eye the name is plainly Wisken!

To add to the joys, the families of Harleston liked to share certain names amongst themselves leading to the same name being repeated both amongst and between generations. We have a Walter Wisken being born in Harleston back in 1839 and this continued to be a popular family name. This led to the situation whereby we have 'our' Walter Wiskin, aged 11, son of William and Eliza Whisken nee Shanks, appearing in Lush Bush in the 1891 census. In 1891, living next door to William and Eliza Wisken, and 8 of their children, was William's brother Albert and 3 of his children

George Saunders (14), Stanley Page (14) and Walter Whisken (16), of Harleston, were charged by Superintendent Bentham with stealing plums from the garden of Mr. W. H. Hazard, and pleaded guilty. Mr. Hazard asked the Bench to reprimand the boys and dismiss the case, which he had no desire to press. Police-constable Roberts said that in consequence of complaints of losses from the garden he secreted himself, and at 9 20 p m. saw Saunders and Page on the garden wall plucking fruit. He jumped the wall and caught Page, and saw the others running away. Whisken must have helped the other boys on to the wall.—The Chairman said the Bench appreciated Mr. Hazard's kindness in wishing for leniency, but these lads must be taught to amend their ways. He addressed a special warning to Whisken, who has been before the Bench on previous occasions. Page and Saunders were each fined 2/6 and Whisken was fined 10/-.

– there were 6 in 1881. One of those children is another Walter Wisken, 8 years older than his cousin and namesake and possibly the chap who was hauled off to the Harleston Magistrates' court on a number of occasions in the early 20th Century for being drunk in the street, don't be too judgemental, this was very common at the time!

Diss Express
5 Sep 1919

Has to be said that this bearer of the proud name of Walter Wisken was a bit of a Herbert – by the time

he was 16 and up in court for stealing plums from the Hazards in Caltofts, the news report reveals that he was already a frequent flyer in the court system. Remember this is the cousin of our hero's father, not Walter Wisken Snr!

The Wiskens were a prolific, and on occasion, slightly racketsy family who tended to travel in packs, I have already mentioned the two households living together up at Lush Bush, this was a common pattern although one of the earliest records we have is of a Susan Whisken nee Peck living in the 'Middle Row' in 1827, she was married to Jospeh at Redenhall in 1793!

Way back in 1841, one family of Whiskens was living up at Jay's Green; one of the sons, James who was 17 at the time of his offence¹ was charged with stealing

'portions of lead from A. S. Holmes Esq. at Redenhall'

More or less at the same time, from another branch, Robert Whisken was found guilty of stealing a scythe from Fulcher Page at Wortwell and given a month's imprisonment²; unfortunately, not the first or the last of this family to wind up on the wrong side of the law!

1841 had a Whisken household headed by Robert and Hannah, with their 5 children aged between 1 and 13 out 'near gas works'³. Also featuring in the same census is 70-year-old charwoman, Susan Whiskins, widow of Jospeh and head of a three-generation household of assorted Whiskins⁴ with another, 15-year-old William lodging next door. I am assuming it is this William Wisken, not Walter Snr's father who appeared in court 29 years later accused of robbery at Redenhall⁵. You can see how tangled things get and why so many of the Victorian Harlestonites went by nicknames!

This slightly confusing tale of William Wisken details how this chap, by then a 48-year-old Yarmouth publican, stole a 'Jacket, Cloak, Shawl, Ladies Hat, Feather and fall, and a cloak with 3 skirts' from two ladies staying with his sister-in-law at Harleston. Initially Wisken claimed that he thought the items were his brother's (an early drag queen perhaps?) and then that he thought he was holding

¹ Norfolk News 10 Jan 1846

² Norfolk Chronicle 24 Oct 1840

³ On the Redenhall Road on way to Lush Bush

⁴ Henry 35, Maria 30, Edward, Walter and Charles (9 years to 9 months!)

⁵ Norfolk Chronicle 13 Aug 1870

the items on the basis that one of the ladies was to accompany him to Australia. Oddly enough he was not believed (not least as the court was told he already had a wife, Mary according to the 1851 census) and William Wisken wound up with two months hard labour!

With all these Whiskens about the place it is difficult to work out which William Wisken got caught scrumping peaches. Whether he got off comparatively lightly due to his limited participation or due to his not being a Buckenham (a family with a far worse reputation record!) remains a mystery.

HARLESTON.—On Friday last, *Edward Buckenham* and *W. Whiskens*, of Redenhall, were charged with stealing 13 growing peaches, the property of Mr. George Gedney, at Harleston, on the 21st of August. Buckenham was committed for 21 days; Whiskens was fined 2d., the amount of the damage, 1s. 1d., and the costs, 10s. 6d.—*John King*, of Earsham, was charged with being drunk and

Norfolk Chronicle
12 Sep 1863

By 1851, Maria Wisken, who in '41 had been living with her husband and mother-in-law Susan Whiskins was widowed and living with her four sons and a daughter in Shipston's Square, along with another two families of Wiskens - 15 of them in total in one small area. One of Maria's sons was yet another Walter, another son, Charles Frederick Wiskens, grew up to be a baker and apparently respectable trader – a highlight in this family largely consisting of labourers making do.

This baking Wisken, wound up owning the bakers on the corner of Old Post Office Yard. By the '81 census his son, William was training and living in as a Vet's Assistant in Bromsgrove – quite a social step up for the lad; there appear to have been no other surviving children from the union of Charles Frederick and Sarah Wisken nee Brown. Charles Wisken was a parish constable and, other than the odd issue about scales and weights, led an apparently blameless life until everything came crashing down in 1882.

HARLESTON, NORFOLK.
To be SOLD by AUCTION by
ARCHER and TURNER,
At the Swan Hotel, Harleston, on Wednesday, September 13th, 1882, at Four o'clock in the Afternoon precisely, in one Lot, by direction of the Official Trustee in the Bankruptcy of CHARLES WISKEN, baker and confectioner, and with the consent of the Mortgagee,
ALL that very desirable FREEHOLD BUSINESS PREMISES, situate in the principal street, and comprising capital front Shop, large Bake-office, and commodious Dwelling House; also, at the rear of the same, Two Dwelling Houses.
Further particulars next week, or of Mr. J. M. Pollard, solicitor, Ipswich; Messrs. Turner and Prior, solicitors, Norwich; Mr. A. E. Vincent, Harleston; or of the Auctioneers, 13, Museum Street, Ipswich.

COLCHESTER AUCTION MART.

In brief, Wisken's father-in-law, Mr Brown of Pulham, was in financial difficulty, the two men conspired to strip his farm of assets to defraud his creditors, they got caught, Brown fled to London, Wisken's own financial difficulties came to light, being about £1000 in debt, he went bust, Brown was brought back in handcuffs, everyone blamed everyone else. 12 month's hard labour each and that was the end of Wisken's bakery business which, as can be seen from the details printed when the property was up for auction, was really quite substantial.

Sarah Wisken nee Brown stuck with her man and followed him to Yarmouth where Charles resumed being a baker and confectioner. Sadly, she died at the start of 1889; within six months of this death, Charles remarried to a teacher of music - very genteel for a lady who wound up married to a fraudster and bankrupt and with whom she appears to have born the fruits of an illicit relationship conducted before the death of his wife! I wonder if she rather regretted this liaison as, in 1896⁶ Wisken was back in the debtor's court again having lost the £100 his wife invested in his failed attempt to be a Cab Driver, perhaps he should have stuck to baking.

⁶ Norwich Mercury 11 Jan 1896

Harleston was almost knee deep in relatives during the inter-war period. In the 1911 census, when Walter Snr and Lillian were out in Thorpe Abbots, there were two families of Wiskens, 9 people in total, up on Harleston Common, a family of 5 on Station Road, a family of 4 at the Factory Cottages on the Redenhall Road, doubtless there would also have been numbers of female aunts carrying their married names with numerous and increasingly more cousins for Walter Snr and Lillian's quite large brood to mix with. These close links continued into adulthood – when the Railway tavern (which post war was to have a National Prize-Winning Darts Team) took on the Territorials in a match in 1938. The Railway Tavern boasted 2 Wiskens whilst another 2 had turned out for the Territorials!

However, WW2 took Walter Jnr, and doubtless numbers of those cousins and siblings, away from Harleston, In Walter's case never to return. Having, as so many other locals did, joined the Norfolk Rgt, it took Walter and the rest of his Battalion 3 months to sail from Liverpool to Singapore via Halifax Nova Scotia and a 3-week camp in Bombay. As the saying of the time went (referring to the tanning of the area between khaki socks and voluminous military shorts worn by the Army in hot areas at the time) Walter and his companions had barely got their knees brown before being launched into battle. 2 weeks after the Battalion arrived in Singapore, the British surrendered to the Japanese and the 4th Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment were moved to Changi prison. At this stage Walter had been wounded and was suffering from shell shock but his troubles were only just starting.



HARLESTON
IN JAPANESE HANDS
Mr. and Mrs. W. Wisken, of 3, Council Houses, School Lane, Harleston, have received a card from their son, Corpl. W. Wisken, 4th Royal Norfolk Regt. that he is safe and well.

Most of the captured soldiers were expected to work on building a railway in Thailand and over 124 of the Norfolk men died from disease and starvation including Walter who died from cholera on 24th July 1943, aged 29. With bitter irony, his death occurred at almost exactly the same time his parents' received news that he was well – unknown to his family

Walter's death had occurred 6 days before this good news was reported in the Diss Express. When the Japanese surrendered, only 88 men of the battalion were found on Singapore Island, the rest having been dispersed over Thailand and the surrounding country. Walter was one of the many men whose bodies were not recovered; he is commemorated on the Singapore Memorial.

Walter Jnr's war could not have been more different than his father's: the heat and misery of a prisoner's life in the Far East where disease was the greatest enemy, contrasted with the mud and misery of Flanders where a momentary lapse of attention or bad luck could result in instant death.

Shortly before the war, the family including Walter Jnr and his brother Wallace had been living in Hudson / Aldous Yard (Everson's Way?). Wallace married in Yarmouth, in mid-1941, although after the war he gravitated home again, living on Rushall Road, Starston when his bicycle tangled with a milk delivery van on the Thoroughfare in 1948! He died sadly early, aged only 52 in 1963; his obituary reveals that he too served in the Norfolks during the war.

(Starston)
A FUNERAL SERVICE was held at St. Margaret's Church, Starston, on Tuesday, for Mr. Wallace "Dan" Wisken, of Cross Road, Starston, who had died a few days previously at the age of 52. The Rev. W. W. Evans, Rector of Starston, officiated.

Mr. Wisken, a native of Harleston, had lived in Starston for several years, but had been in ill health for some time. Prior to his illness he worked on the Pulham Air Station for a number of years and during World War II served in the Royal Norfolk Regiment.

Family mourners present were: The widow; Mrs. Hammond, Mr. and Mrs. J. Wisken, Mr. and Mrs. P. Taylor, Mr. and Mrs. A. Allum and Mr. D. Wisken.

Harleston Branch of the British Legion was represented by Mr. C. Barber (chairman), Capt. A. E. Smith, Mr. L. A. Whalebelly and Mr. J. A. Perfit.

Diss Express
11 Oct 1963

Walter and Wallace's little sister, named Lily after their mother, was a war time bride marrying in early 1945, to a Cpl. Clifford Lionel Hammond who originally came from Lowestoft and whose father had been in the Royal Naval Reserve during the war. It was fortunate that two of Lily's other brothers, William and Jack (in the Home Guard) were able to participate in the ceremony. William gave away his sister, Jack was her new husband's best man, so I

think we can say the Wiskens had feet in both camps although I wonder why Lily's father did not, as was traditional, give away his daughter. Lily had also been doing her bit for the war effort – although the report was a bit vague merely listing her job as being at a Govt Establishment. She was married from the new family home, 3 Council Houses, School Hill.

One of Walter's many cousins, Dorothy Ellen Wisken, lost her husband in the chaos of the evacuation of the expeditionary force from Europe in 1940. Having applied for a widow's pension, disposed of his civilian clothes and upped sticks to return to Harleston with their two children, 6 weeks later she was sent the welcome news that her husband, a Grenadier Guard, had actually been captured and was in a Polish Prisoner of War camp where the facilities, although basic, were neither brutal nor cruel. Her husband was one of the many P.O.Ws to return from Europe after the war, a poignant contrast to the fate of Walter and several other Harleston men.

Walter's brother Jack married Dorothy Woolnough in 1961, his grandchildren are still in the area, hopefully they will read this and be proud of their great uncle Walter Wisken.

Oddly, some 20 years after Wallace had his crash, little brother Jack was very lucky to emerge unscathed when driving a scrap metal lorry.

Diss Express
22 May 1964

And of course, 240 years after Joseph Whiskins married Susan Peck at Redenhall, his Harleston descendants still remember Walter who died so far from home.

A HARLESTON lorry driver, Mr. Jack Wisken, of 7 School Lane, escaped injury when his vehicle left the road at Wortham early on Wednesday morning last week.

The lorry, owned by Samuel Spinks and Son, was carrying seven tons of scrap metal when it plunged off the road near Oak Tree Farm, Wortham, demolished a telegraph pole and damaged an overhead cable before coming to rest near a tree.

The cab of the lorry was badly damaged and police had to control traffic round the scene until workmen could repair the cable and pole.