



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 an '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!

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. This leads to the situation whereby we have 'our' Walter Wiskin, aged 11, son of William and Eliza Whisken, 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 – 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!

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.

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, 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!

¹ Norfolk News 10 Jan 1846

² Norfolk Chronicle 24 Oct 1840

1841 had another 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 a 70-year-old charwoman, Susan Whiskins, 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 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 Whisken 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 Whisken, who had been living with husband and mother in law Susan Whiskins in '41 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 Whisken, 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 and Sarah. Charles Whisken 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.

In brief, Whisken's father in law, Mr Brown, 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, Whisken's own financial difficulties came to light, being about £1000 in debt, he went bust, Brown was brought back in handcuffs,

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.

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

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 Whisken 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, Charles remarried to a teacher of music - very genteel for a lady who wound up married to a fraudster and bankrupt 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 Whisken 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.

Going back to our Harleston hero, Walter Wisken Snr married his wife, Lillian Garnham, midway through 1905, just at the end of his time of service in the Regular Army. Walter Jnr was their fifth child, their oldest child had died young, perhaps the sad little scrap of humanity, 'female Wisken' who was born and died in late 1906 before being given a name to carry with her to her grave. The two children, William and Winifred, who appeared in the 1911 return were joined by a fourth with the unusual name of Wallace in 1911 whilst the birth of Walter in early 1913 was followed quite rapidly by that of Eileen in late 1914. It seems that by the time they got to child number six, they had run out of names beginning with 'W'. Although the family were living in Thorpe Abbots at the time of the 1911 census, William and Winnifred were both born in Billingford, as was Walter Jnr.

⁶ Norwich Mercury 11 Jan 1896

Walter Snr, however, was a Harleston lad, born and bred. He who had previously enlisted in the militia as a 17-year-old, went on, 14 months later as an 18-year-old, to enlist in the regulars, the Royal Field Artillery. He then re-enlisted at Norwich at the outbreak of WW1 on 7th September

1914, when he was literally double the age he was the first time he enlisted. With 7 years' experience already under his belt, it is not surprising that Walter Snr was rapidly promoted from Gunner to Acting Corporal; men who knew what they were doing were at a premium. His participation in the Great War doubtless explains why there was a gap between Eileen, born late 1914 and Jack, Lillian and Sheila born in 1920, 1922 and 1924 respectively!

The family returned to Harleston, which was almost knee deep in relatives. In the 1911 census 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.

However, WW2 took Walter, 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

Army Form E. 504.

MILITIA ATTESTATION OF

No. 3810 Name Walter Wiskens Battalion _____ Regiment _____

Questions to be put to the Recruit before Enlistment.

1. What is your Name?	1 <u>Walter Wiskens</u>
2. In what Parish, and in, or near what Town, and in what County were you born?	2 In the Parish of <u>Redenhall</u> in or near the Town of <u>Harleston</u> in the County of <u>Norfolk</u>
3. Are you a British Subject?	3 <u>Yes</u>
4. Where do you now reside?	4 In the Parish of <u>Redenhall</u> in or near the Town of <u>Harleston</u> in the County of <u>Norfolk</u>
5. Where have you resided for the last twelve months?	5 In the Parish of <u>Redenhall</u> in or near the Town of <u>Harleston</u> in the County of <u>Norfolk</u>
6. What is your age?	6 <u>17</u> Years <u>14</u> Months
7. What is your Trade or Calling?	7 <u>Labourer</u>
8. Are you an Apprentice?	8 <u>No</u>
9. What is the Name and Residence of your present (or former) Master?	9 Mr. <u>James Frost</u> in or near the Town of <u>Harleston</u> in the County of <u>Norfolk</u>
10. Are you Single, Married, or a Widower?	10 <u>Single</u>
11. If Married, or a Widower, how many Children have you under 14 years of age?	11 <u>None</u>
12. Have you ever been sentenced to imprisonment by the Civil Power?	12 <u>No</u>
13. Do you now belong to Her Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Royal Navy, the Volunteer Force, the Army Reserve, or the Naval Reserve?	13 <u>No</u>
14. Have you ever served in Her Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, or the Royal Navy? If so, state which, and name of discharge?	14 <u>No</u>
15. Have you ever been discharged from any part of Her Majesty's Forces with <u>honour</u> , or as honourable and without disgrace, or on account of <u>illness</u> , or of a sentence of <u>dismissal</u> , or have you been <u>dismissed</u> with disgrace from the service, or have you been <u>dismissed</u> with disgrace from the service? And you are warned that <u>any</u> answer to this question will be taken into consideration if you make a false answer to this question.	15 <u>Yes</u>
16. Have you truly stated the whole, if any, of your previous Service?	16 <u>No</u>
17. Are you in receipt of a pension for any such Service?	17 <u>No</u>
18. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for Her Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds?	18 <u>No</u>
19. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated?	19 <u>Yes</u>
20. Did you receive a Notice and do you understand its meaning, and was care given to you?	20 <u>Yes</u> (Name <u>Regt. G. Overton</u>)
21. Are you willing to be attested for the term of <u>six</u> years (provided Her Majesty should so long require your services), as a Militiaman for the County of <u>Norfolk</u> to serve in the <u>London Regiment</u> ?	21 <u>Yes</u> (Corps <u>B.A.</u>)

I, Walter Wiskens do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true and that I am willing to fulfil the engagement made.

Walter Wiskens { Signature of Recruit } C. Overton { Signature of Witness }

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MILITIA RECRUIT ON ATTESTATION.

"I, Walter Wiskens do solemnly promise and swear that I will be faithful to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, her heirs and successors, and that I will faithfully serve in the Militia, until I shall be discharged. Witness my hand."

Walter Wiskens { Signature of Recruit } C. Overton { Signature of Witness }

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE OR OF A COMMISSIONED OFFICER.

The Recruit above named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the foregoing questions he would be liable to be punished.

The foregoing questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence. I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the signature of the Recruit has been made and appended to the declaration and oath before me at Harleston on this 27th day of September 1897.

Samuel J. J. J. { Signature of Magistrate or Commissioned Officer of Regular Army or Militia }

If any alteration is required on this page of the Attestation, the Officer who attested the Recruit, or a Justice of the Peace, should be requested to make it and initial the alteration under Section 80 (5), Army Act, 1881.

The Recruit should, if he requires it, receive a copy of the Declaration on Army Form E. 504.

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. 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. 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, and 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 Thailand 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.

Walter jnr's little sister, named Lily after their mother, was a war time bride marrying in, early 1945, and was fortunate that, in two of her other brothers, William and Jack were able to participate.

William gave away his sister, Jack was the best man, so I think we can say the boys had feet in both camps although I wonder why Lily's father did not, as was traditional, give away his daughter. She was married from the family home, 3 Council Houses, School Hill although shortly before the war Walter Jnr and his brother Wallace had been living in Aldous Yard.

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.

Wallace himself 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 but died sadly early, aged only 52 in 1963.