The picture is labelled “home of the couple who were killed at Basildon in 1906”. However, from the newspaper reporter’s description, it could possibly be the home of the Buckham family.
It is reported that the Emperor Napoleon once said “Don’t tell me that someone is a great general. Tell me if he is lucky.”

The luck to be stationed close to the scene of important crimes and events can be paramount in the development of investigative powers. Detective aptitudes can grow either from nurture or because of the officer’s nature. The instinct for “thief taking” can exist or can be cultivated. There had been a great English tradition of “thief takers” in the century before the formation of professional police forces. It is unlikely that the newly formed constabularies of 1840 contained detectives. In the early years, serious crimes were investigated by the local uniformed constable, supervised by his superintendent, later, (when those ranks were appointed) by an inspector or sergeant. Emulating the Metropolitan Police, someone would, upon occasion, be drafted into plain clothes. In Essex, officers identifiable as detectives began to appear in plain clothes in the group pictures of the early 1890’s.

On plain clothes duty
This staged picture of 1901 commemorates a smart piece of work involving constables Frederick Lancum and Arthur Collins.

Alfred Marden who served from 1883 to 1913 was one such officer. He was often there when these important events occurred. He was the groom of the Divisional horse and trap in 1885, and witnessed the shooting of Inspector Tom Simmons at Romford. Posted to Southend on promotion, he arrived at the time of a series of important and violent crimes in the town. These included the attempted murder of Pamela Bredin, wife of the Rector of Sutton, in 1892. In the following year was the murder of Emma Hunt, close by the Old Ship public house at Rochford. This coincidentally was to be the scene of another murder, that of Mrs Nora Trott in November 1976. In 1894 came Marden’s most spectacular case, the murder of Florence Dennis at Prittlewell. James Canham Read was executed at Chelmsford for this crime. In 1898 William Wilkes, a shepherd of Pudsey Hall at Canewdon, battered to death his down-trodden wife. Marden was the investigator and Wilkes too was executed. In March 1900 he was transferred to Romford, the main training station for the County Force and in 1901 he was promoted Inspector. In his new station he was to be simultaneously involved in the 1903 investigations of the Warley Gap Murder at Brentwood and the infamous Moat Farm murder at Clavering. While stationed in Southend years previously, Marden had got to know the murderer Samuel Dougal, as they both frequented the Duke of Cambridge Hotel, close by the Shoebury garrison. Both cases ended in executions, so, Marden was no stranger to capital crimes. By 1906 he was a Superintendent at Brentwood. Billericay and Basildon were part of his command. Basildon, a century ago, was a set of straggling farms and homesteads in wild and inaccessible country. People moved there from the towns and started new lives. But, as seen in many Wild West stories, water and the rights to it proved to be a problem. Honeypot Lane still exists to this day, but as a quarter mile long row of council dwellings stretching along the east side of present-day Gloucester Park. In 1906, a reporter from the Southend Telegraph described it as “little more than a track, five miles from Billericay, five miles from Pitsea, extending from the main road to the Laindon Road “. The main roads then were the present day A129 between Wickford and Billericay and the former A13 from Pitsea to Laindon.
At about 10am that day the lads ran to the main Billericay road and told a Mr Stevens that two people had been drowned in the pond. Neighbours were summoned and went to the pond where they saw the body of Albert Watson almost submerged and that of his wife lying close by. The local policeman Constable Layzell was called and the bodies were taken into their bungalow. Layzell informed his Sergeant, Richard Giggins of Billericay, an experienced officer with over 20 years service. He examined the bodies and found that both had wounds, the man in the groin and the woman in the chest. An initial search was made but no weapon was then found. The home had been disturbed. Throughout the day enquiries continued. When Mr Buckham came home from work that evening, Robert told him that the Watsons had drowned. When asked the reason he was told "suicide." Darkness fell and the police went away, sealing the bungalow.

On the following morning Superintendent Alfred Marden visited the scene. A doctor examined the bodies and put forward the theory that the shots had come from behind. The boys were then questioned more strongly and Robert, who had no doubt had a very bad night, soon broke down. He cried, then told Marden and Giggins that his brother Richard had shot the Watsons. "Go on Dick, tell them you did it." Their brick built home was searched and two guns were found. The boys were arrested and both were charged with murder on the spot. At the inquest the jury returned a verdict of Wilful Murder and they were both committed to the next Assize.

They were tried at the Essex Assize in November 1906. Robert, the 16 year old was acquitted. Richard’s defence lawyers did not deny his culpability. It had been necessary to reload the gun to fire a third shot into Mrs Watson. Instead, they concentrated on his mental stability. He admitted to torturing and killing pets and animals, and complained of headaches. This medical defence was not sufficiently convincing. The jury wanted to know what his motive could have been. As in many new communities, water was a basic need and source of major disputes. It was suggested that he objected to Watson using his parents water, though it did not cause them much concern.
The father had given Robert authority to let the Watsons help themselves to water. But the father, Richard senior, was at work and Richard junior, now seeing himself as head of the household had told the victims not to take water. From this the argument developed. Had the lad fired to frighten the Watsons or to kill them? If the former, why once they were shot had he finished them off. There were three wounds so the gun had to have been deliberately re-loaded. The brothers then entered the victim’s home and a watch and some money was stolen. It may be that they were making a clumsy attempt to conceal the real nature of the crime. The jury were firm with their verdict. Guilty! Executioner Pierrepoint made a December visit to Springfield Prison at Chelmsford and Richard was hanged.

The dead couple were buried at Great Burstead church, which was crowded with mourners. Honeypot Lane then gradually disappeared under the new town of Basildon as it grew after the 2nd World War. Richard Giggins became an Inspector and Tom Layzell a Sergeant. They were members of families with long and fine traditions in the Essex Constabulary. Throughout its history there have been few periods when one or other name has not appeared on the duty roster. Their descendants Dick Giggins and Tom Layzell are, to this day, stalwarts of the Essex Police Branch of the National Association of Retired Police Officers. All that remains of Alfred Marden is a group of faded photographs. A career is important, but a family can be a longer lasting memorial.

The Funerat of Mr and Mrs Watson

Essex Police History notebooks
1. The murder of Acting Sergeant Eves
2. The slaying of Parish Constable Trigg
3. Rough justice for Little Abel
4. The rise and fall of Alfred John Marden
5. One man’s meat is another man’s poison
6. Victorian heads
7. Somewhere over Essex (Zeppelins)
8. The Chelmsford Mystery
9. The Sible Hedingham Witchcraft Trial
10. The Harwich Death Club
11. Essex Police History notebooks
   * out of print
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by Martyn Lockwood *
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