

Notes on William King's Life 1870-1949

(some of this information was taken from Harold Harper's speech at William King's Funeral and information from Beryl King who was Augustus King's daughter and knew a lot about the King family history)

William's first job after leaving school was at Hardy and Willis, the boot and shoe sellers in Sidney Street, Cambridge. He was still a boot sales man when he married Clara Ann Wall at Cambridge Registry office on Thursday 4th February 1892. On their marriage certificate William's late father Daniel was now described as an *ostler* which would have sounded more impressive than a farm labourer. Clara was the daughter of William and Emma Wall who lived just along the road at 210 Mill Road where her father carried on business as a hairdresser and *perfumier*. She was born on 19th May 1870 at Barkway Street, Royston, Hertfordshire, when her father's occupation was a master cordwainer (a shoe maker).

The 1881 Census shows the family, William, Emma and daughter Clara living at the White Lion Inn at Melbourn near Royston where her Father William was the publican, although he was also a hairdresser. He had probably taken over running the inn from his father who had been the publican for 30 years. It is thought that William King met Clara there and she and her parents subsequently moved to Cambridge. After their marriage in 1892 the young couple lived with Clara's parents at Fern Villa, Mill Road. Their first child Reginald William was born there on 29 June 1892, five months after they were married, also their second son, Percival Frederick, on 19th February 1894. Williams interest in bicycles and machinery was growing and in 1898 he was renting a small basement at 23 Sussex Street, Cambridge, to repair and build bicycles. Their third son Augustus Harold was born at that address on 16th August 1898. Life must have been very hard for Clara with three small children. Sussex Street in the centre of Cambridge was not what she had been accustomed to and, with her husband William working hard to support them all while pursuing his dreams for the future, this may have been when she began to drink too much. This was to have a profound affect on the whole family.

In 1897 William became acquainted with a young man called Harold Harper who was apprenticed to Mackintosh, the ironmongers, nearby. Harper used to come to William's workshop at lunchtime each day to eat his sandwiches and both men shared the same enthusiasm for machines. The two became friends and when Harper finished his apprenticeship with Mackintosh he joined William in the business, becoming a partner on reaching his majority in 1899. By dint of their expertise and sheer hard work the business prospered and in 1904 premises were acquired nearby in Bridge Street.

In 1902 William and Clara were living at The Hatch in Garden Walk where their daughter Theodora Elizabeth was born on 7th August 1902. At other times they lived in Aylestone Road, Kimberley Road and finally at 7 De

Freville Avenue, all in the Chesterton area of Cambridge. It was rumoured that Clara's drinking habits upset the neighbours, which was why the family moved house several times within the same district. As houses were probably rented it would have been fairly easy to move elsewhere. The situation with Clara was now very serious.

The King children were growing up. The two eldest sons Reg and Percy attended the Higher Grade School at first, but finished their education at the County High School, both enrolling at the same time, Reg at 16 and Percy at 14. Their brother Gus (Augustus) followed them in 1910 when he was 12. He only stayed for one year, leaving under a cloud. It was said it was something to do with an explosion in the chemistry lab. He finished his schooling at Glenwood College, a private school in Newmarket.

William was in the fortunate position of being able to employ housekeepers to look after his home and family. It seems that Clara was not living with them now. Augustus recounted how the last time he saw his mother was when he met her while walking over Parker's Piece and she told him she was going away. She was becoming an increasing embarrassment to the family and the firm of King and Co. She caused a sensation on the occasion of the grand opening of new premises in Bridge Street when she turned up in an intoxicated state and hurled a brick through the plate glass window. Some sympathy must be felt for Clara because she was probably a very unhappy woman and her children had to live with this awful situation. Her daughter Theodora was only about 6 when all this was happening. Sympathy must also be felt for her father and other relations of hers who would have been close to the King family. Clara's father was now running a cycle hire business as well as hairdressing.

After these incidents Clara's life becomes a mystery. William and Clara entered into a 'Deed of Separation' on 25 November 1907. In April 1908 Clara sailed for Canada. Large numbers of people were emigrating to Canada and arrangements were made for her to start a new life there. It was said that William King was given an ultimatum by Harold Harper because of the embarrassment she was causing. She must have agreed to go, but probably only after long and bitter discussions. Her children must have been aware of the situation and her father would have certainly been involved. She sailed to Canada, then travelled by train to Medicine Hat in Alberta. It is presumed her fare was paid by her husband, William, and it is not known why she went to Medicine Hat. It is known that, Harold Harper had a brother who had emigrated to Vancouver and who may have assisted with the arrangements. It would have been necessary for her to find employment, but her father and her husband William used to send her money; probably, part of the bargain. She also wrote to the children, but they were never shown the letters. They must have been very unhappy. Clara is reputed to have married another man called Josh Woods (who was cited as the co-respondent in her divorce from William) and had another family. After all she was not yet forty when she emigrated in 1908, so this could have been possible. The Divorce Decree Absolute was 23 June 1914 and she was living with Josh Woods in

Nakamun, near Edmonton in Alberta, Canada at that time and William was given custody of the children.

William married his housekeeper Lily Fordham (Geoff King's grandmother) on 14 December 1914 after his divorce from Clara. They had a son Kenneth Oswin, (Geoff King's father) born on 4th October 1915.

When William King died on 16th March 1949, this address was given at his funeral:

To a cycling and motoring pioneer - the late Mr William King: Few men in their time, can have contributed more to the life and progress of this town than Mr William King, joint Governing Director of Messrs King and Harper Ltd, Bridge Street, Cambridge, who died suddenly on March 16th 1949. Mr King, who was 78 years old, and whose home address was at Sunnyside, Stapleford, had seen, with his partner, Mr Harper, the growth of their business. The oldest existing motor firm in Cambridge - from a cycle shop in Sussex Street to the flourishing concern of several depots, as it is known today. Not only did he win success professionally, by great courage, in placing his faith in what was, at the beginning of his partnership, a new fangled invention, but also took an energetic interest in numerous activities in Cambridge, so that he leaves behind a business whose name is locally a household word and a host of friends to mourn his loss.

It is a matter of deepest regret, especially to his partner, Mr Harold Harper, that he died such a short time before they could celebrate the jubilee of their partnership in March 1950. After 52 years with him, "I shall feel his loss very keenly indeed" said Mr Harper. "I met him in March 1897 and our partnership dates from April 1900. During those 52 years we have built up the firm to its present level. We first took up motors in about 1898, and we also made the King motor cycle which took the gold medal, against all the World, in the first Motor Exhibition to be held in this country, at the Crystal Palace in 1902. Mr King took part in the thousand mile, reliability trial about that time, winning another gold medal, and shortly after won the Brown motor trophy, open to all England. Our interest in motors was stimulated by an exhibition in 1898, when the Hon. C.S.Rolls, who was an undergraduate at Cambridge and became one of the parents of Rolls-Royce cars, drove a motorcycle around the Corn Exchange between the cycle stands. The first thing we ever made was a tricycle, which we used for about for a year or two, then in 1900, we both went for our holidays on it, at different times.

"The partnership of Messrs King and Harper Ltd. remained for a short time in Sussex Street, where Mr King had a cycle repair shop, but the firm moved to Sidney Street in 1902 and then expanded to Bridge Street, and from there to Milton Road, Hills Road and Thompson's Lane. Starting from nought, we developed the firm until it had a staff of over 300".

In the early days of the firm the two partners helped Ricardo, one of the pioneers of the motor industry in Cambridge, on the Ricardo piston, the

essentials of which are still used in many of today's cars. Mr King used to go with Mr Harper to Town and Varsity motor club trials, and the latter remembered many runs with Lord Brabazon, who now has the giant aircraft named after him and who was a great personal friend of the two partners. During Mr King's lifetime, he had seen the firm do business with the nobility of many countries, including King Peter of Yugoslavia and King Leopold of the Belgians.

In the First World War, Mr King was Chief Engineer in a scheme in which the firm ran a fleet of tractors, operating for the Board of Agriculture Food Production Depot, and in the 1939 war he again did valuable work. At a time when he should have been thinking of retiring, and owing to the sons of the two partners being in War Service, he felt compelled to carry on the work of the firm in re-conditioning hundreds of vehicles of various types for the Ministry of Supply.

The greatest of Mr King's outside interests was the Royal Albert Homes for Old People, for whom, since his appointment as President of the Royal Albert Benevolent Society in March 1940, he gave a great deal of his time. The old people remember what tremendous pleasure he gave them by arranging outings in connection with the Cambridge and County Motor Club, of which he was an original founder, and by taking motion pictures of the events. He had attended a meeting of the Selection Committee of the Society the day before he died. Paying tribute to his service, Mr E G D Elworthy, Secretary of the Homes said, "It is quite impossible to imagine anyone filling his place. We shall never get a President to put in the same time and friendly help as Mr King". As President of the Motor Club for over ten years, Mr King also created the social side of its activities in 1926, and in 1938 he founded the Cambridge Motor Service Association. He was one of the oldest Fellows of the Institute of the Motor Industry.

He did good work for the Red Cross in the two wars as a member of their Emergency Fund, and was one of the prime movers in the establishment of Winston House, a remand home for boys. He was also actively associated with the Rotary Boys Club, Tennison Road, and the Harvey Goodwin Home for Boys. As a keen ice skater in his younger days, he was a member of the National Skating Association. Among other activities, he was a Freemason, a member of both the Cam Sailing Club and the Cambridge Motor Boat Club; he was a keen golfer, a member of the Gog Magog Golf Club, and Chairman of Stapleford Parish Council. Many will remember the excellent films he made of local activities. He acquired an interest in cinematography in 1935 and provided a wealth of amusement with his products, as well as doing most valuable work for the Cambridge Accident Prevention Council. Despite this large number of interests, he found time for gardening, and few who attended the garden parties that he used to hold at his home will forget the beautiful results he achieved through this much cherished hobby.

The funeral of William King took place at St Andrews Church, Stapleford in March 1949 at 3 o'clock but owing to limited accommodation at the Church,

it was only possible for the family and close associates to attend the service. A memorial service was held at Great St Mary's Church , Cambridge on Tuesday 22nd March at 12.15 p.m. The firm's premises were closed on both these occasions.