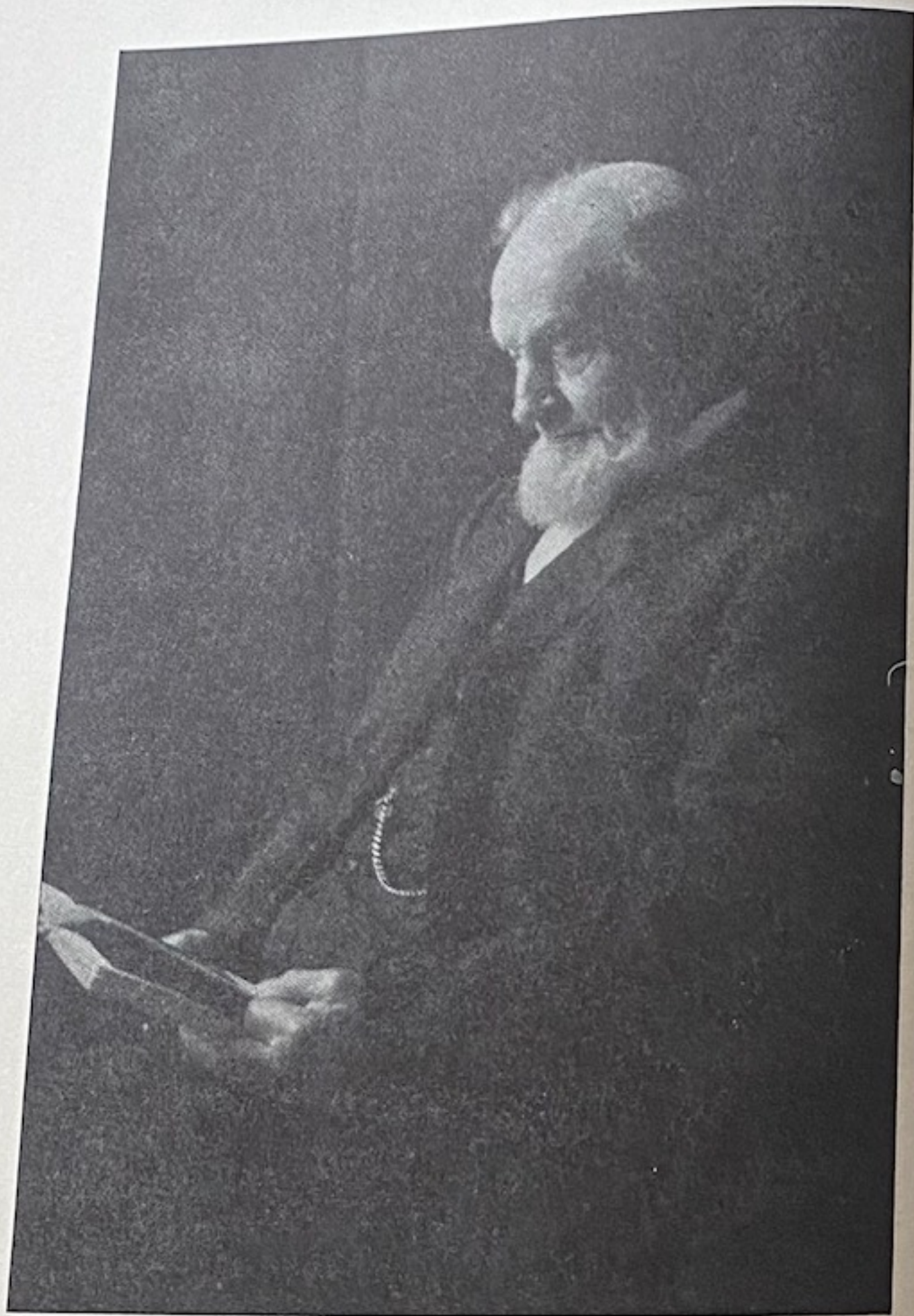


WILLIAM  
HEFFER  
1843-1928





WILLIAM HEFFER

*[Photo: Miss Olive Edis*

WILLIAM  
HEFFER  
1843 - 1928

by

SIDNEY HEFFER



# FOREWORD

**D**URING my earlier years at Cambridge I often saw the venerable figure of William Heffer. I do not remember ever having an opportunity of speaking to him, and at the time I knew nothing of his remarkable career. It was nevertheless obvious to me at a glance, as it must have been to all who saw him, that he was not an ordinary man. Later, when I came to know something of his achievements, I regretted (as many another must have done) that no biographical record, even the briefest, was available of this unlettered Cambridgeshire-born countryman, the founder of a firm of booksellers, publishers, and printers which even in his own life-time, grew until it enjoyed a celebrity that was world-wide.

Mr. Sidney Heffer's filial piety has now filled the gap. His readers will be grateful to him for the sincere, concise, and straightforward way in which he tells the story of his father's life. It is the story of a very remarkable man; and it is told by one who, though he could very legitimately have boasted about William Heffer's achievements, has refrained from doing so and has allowed the facts to speak for themselves.

F. BRITAIN.

*Jesus College,  
Cambridge.*

1952.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

As no records of my father were kept by any members of his family, I have had to depend solely upon memory. The writing of this biography has consequently been no easy task, yet none the less a pleasant one.

I am indebted to Dr. F. Brittain for reading the manuscript and for writing a Foreword.

SIDNEY HEFFER.

*Cambridge.*

1952.



# WILLIAM HEFFER

**A** MAN to be proud of, and to boast about, but no boaster; as strong in moral fibre as in physical strength; afraid of no one except his God; just but stern, with the full courage of his convictions.

Such was William Heffer, founder of the firm of W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., originally at 104, Fitzroy Street, Cambridge, Booksellers and Stationers, born in the year 1843 at Burwell, near Newmarket, of humble parents, his father a farmworker, his mother busy looking after a fairly large family with whom this narrative is not concerned. As school-leaving age was unknown during William's boyhood, his education was very limited—a smattering of what were termed the three R's. In fact, he was almost illiterate when he left his seat of learning, and in later years he realised how much this lack of education meant. He could sign his name and under necessity write a letter, but this only on rare and vital occasions. Arithmetic was never a strong point with him but during his middle years his grasp of figures was considerable. If asked what the percentage was on a particular figure, he would give the answer almost immediately.

At thirteen years of age his parents considered him old enough to begin earning. His contribution towards the family exchequer was derived from driving a donkey and cart delivering parcels to the villages nearby—not very lucrative but it brought something towards his keep. Burwell, his native village, was but a few miles from Newmarket, the centre of horse racing. His journeys would sometimes take him to this fascinating place, and there is no doubt this bred in him his love for "osses." In later years he loved to drive to Newmarket and, when crossing the Heath, he would draw attention to the thoroughbreds exercising, exclaiming on their proud carriage and condition.

What happened during his youth is uncertain. That he went to Yorkshire as an apprentice to a racing stable is known, but how

long this lasted cannot be stated. He however returned to his native village at or about the age of twenty years.

There are no recorded facts of his parents after he left Burwell—not that William would spurn his parents, but solely because he was no letter-writer and also the post was in its infancy.

William knew full well that he had to depend entirely on himself—to make or mar. He had no influential friend, but having tasted independence he intended to work out his own destiny, given the opportunity. He had never heard of or read Longfellow's *Excelsior*, yet his feet were set thus early on the rough road to success. His vision was beyond his village and a labourer's life.

William must have reached his majority before he found what may be termed settled employment as groom to a doctor living in Sidney Street, Cambridge. It was a full-time job, no eight-hour day. The doctor was a keen huntsman, keeping three hunters and following the hounds twice weekly during the season. William had to lead a remount to a rendezvous, hand it over to his master, bringing the used horse home. Both had then to be groomed, fed and bedded down; then he had to await the doctor's return with the third horse. The doctor was unfortunately not a good horseman; indeed, during the course of years nearly every bone in his body, except his neck, had been broken through his being thrown. William therefore was thankful when he heard the horse's hooves on the cobbles. Now his work started again—grooming, feeding and bedding down; his homecoming was very uncertain.

The doctor was famous for his dinner parties: to drive inebriated diners to their houses was a duty William disliked heartily. In after years he would point out men who had been bosom companions with the doctor—hard drinkers and livers but now eking out a miserable existence in straitened circumstances. Little wonder that William, after leaving the doctor's service, became an ardent temperance worker. He was not a snob, but he could not find any pleasure in the gambling and drinking enjoyed by the other grooms. He was trying to be thrifty—very difficult on his earnings, after paying for lodgings.

One of William's duties was to call at his master's house each morning to receive orders for the day. These calls eventually altered his life, for employed as a maid there was a young woman named Mary Crick, a very attractive little woman, most capable as a cook and housekeeper. For William to be asked into the kitchen for an extra bite of breakfast was most agreeable—apart



from the food, which was very welcome—and William began to be interested in Mary Crick. He however was not the only pebble on the beach by any means, and Mary was a merry little woman, who frequently exasperated William by her offhandedness.

Mary Crick was the daughter of working people living at Balsham, a village about eight miles from Cambridge. She had been brought up to work, and service with the upper class was the height of her attainment.

Mary caused William many a heartache. He was deeply in love with her, but the trouble was money. Could the two—provided Mary would marry him—live on his pay? William was tired of lodgings and living alone. There remained one way out—to convince Mary that he was the only man in the world, and certainly that she was his one and only choice. Eventually William succeeded in gaining the heart and hand of Mary. Here it must be stated that all through their long married life they were sweet-hearts and lovers.

In the parish records of All Saints' Church in Jewry, which was then opposite St. John's College gateway, is to be found this entry:

"On May 28th, 1868 William Heffer, bachelor aged 25 years, married Mary Crick, spinster, aged 32 years."

The happy couple found a house in Ram Yard, off Bridge Street—a four-roomed cottage, very convenient for William, as the stables were near by. Mary was a martinet for cleanliness. Dirt she could not and would not "abide." William therefore had to tidy up at the stables, and woe betide him if he fell short of Mary's standard.

The house was adequate for a time, but when a family appeared the accommodation became cramped; and before Ram Yard was left five children had arrived, all needing clothes and food. William's wages did not increase with his family. True, doctoring was free and doubtless food was often supplied from Sidney Street; but their living was precarious, and William was disturbed about the future.

William and Mary soon learned the value of the humble penny. After stables William would do the cobbling for the household; he had never been taught this trade but "What one man can do another might." Mary would be busy darning and cutting down clothes to make do for the smaller children. It was during these domestic scenes that ways and means were discussed.



ALL SAINTS' CHURCH IN JEWRY, 1868

[Photo: by courtesy of Cambridge and County Folk Museum]



Whilst living in Ram Yard, William contracted smallpox. There were no isolation hospitals, so Mary had to do the nursing, assisted no doubt by what to-day would correspond with a district nurse. What happened to the children during this illness is not known, but that none became victims proves what an excellent nurse Mary was. The irritation caused by this disease is fearful and to prevent himself from scratching the healing scars William had a handkerchief in each hand and pulled them to and fro over his face. This restraint was characteristic of the man: the only trace left of the disease was a slight pitting on his nose.

After one "meet" William was riding home with the spare horse on the lead. He was very concerned about family affairs. On approaching Madingley Hill, he pulled up and dismounting from his horse, led both horses into a field and there knelt down and asked God—a very personal God—to help him and lead him. From whom did William obtain this firm faith? for his upbringing and his life so far had been lived amongst those who had little or no use for religion; and yet it was part and parcel of his daily life. He frowned on vulgarity of any kind and during his long life it can be said that his lips were never sullied by unclean words. His great expletive was "Dash my buttons"; and he had to be very upset to give vent to that. Though strict in this respect, he had a keen sense of humour and enjoyed a good joke; he was also a tease on occasions.

Having attended to the "osses," William went home. He had little appetite for his meal, and Mary's quick eyes and understanding sensed that something unusual had happened. She never hesitated to attack: all through her life she insisted on knowing everything that concerned their well-being. Then he told her the episode of Madingley Hill. "What shall we do, and where can we go?" she asked. "Don't fret yourself, my dear," he answered. "I am not afraid of the future; we shall be guided—be sure of that. One thing is certain: I must find another job with better prospects."

And soon the most amazing, indeed almost the impossible thing happened: William became licensee of a public house in Burleigh Street, Cambridge. What howls of mirth must have been heard when the news was told! The temperance man, non-drinking and non-smoking, non-swearing man was now running a pub. How William was chaffed! but he was quick at repartee when the occasion demanded.

Why did William become licensee of a public house when he



had no inclination towards that kind of life? Because it was a better paid employment, and because he could not afford to be unemployed. His wife and family must be housed and fed. The public house was not the be-all and end-all; but until more congenial work presented itself it provided the necessities of life.

The long hours and the probable familiarity of the "regulars" were anything but pleasing to Mary. William, however, held everything on a tight rein, on the curb sometimes. His rules were: no brawlings, no swearing, and no more drink to a man showing signs of sufficiency; and in a very short time his clients respected him. Indeed, when he left, he had made a good impression.

The public house was in the parish of St. Andrew the Less. The Vicar was a man of great understanding, who could judge a man's worth. He visited William and, through conversations with him, learned how distasteful his employment was. Did the Vicar know of a more congenial occupation? William asked.

The situation was surrounded by difficulties. Here was a man, anxious to improve himself, but without any money or experience. "Supposing a small shop could be found, do you think you would be able to make a living in some way or another?" the Vicar asked. William replied that, given the opportunity, he was sure he would make good. How many opportunities he seized during the following years will be told.

The Vicar was impressed by William's manner, feeling that here was a case worthy of any help he could give. Not long after their conversation, William was informed that a small shop and house, No. 104, Fitzroy Street, just opposite the public house, was vacant: the Vicar had interviewed the landlord, who was willing to lease the premises to William.

As soon as possible William shook the sawdust of the public house from his feet and entered into his new house and life. To put William on his feet, the Vicar "gave," not lent, sufficient money with which to buy stock, to enable him to begin his new venture free of debt—a gracious act indeed. Here it can be recorded that some years later, after the Vicar had left the parish and when his financial conditions were straightened, this gift was repaid in full.



# FITZROY STREET 1876

THUS in July, 1876, was founded the firm known in later years as W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., Booksellers, Publishers, Printers, Stationers, etc. The purchasing of stock must have been difficult. William had no experience of shop keeping, and could hardly know how to proceed, but trial and error were good teachers and he proved an excellent scholar.

The stock was very mixed: needles and cotton, envelopes, labels—all cheap but useful—and a few pounds judiciously laid out made a brave show in the window; but prices were very low and continuous business must be done to make a living from packets of cheap envelopes and notepaper. The struggle was great for several years, living was difficult, clothing and food were expensive in comparison with the shop takings. Anxieties faced William day by day, and yet through them all his faith in the ultimate success of his efforts never failed.

That the Vicar was the means of introducing business to William cannot be overlooked. A strong feeling of brotherhood existed between the clergy and parochial workers in those days, and as the years passed William became a great church worker. Never could it be said that he was giving just lip service: anyone who had dealings with him would refute such a suggestion. The fact, however, remains that his Temperance and Sunday School work helped considerably in those early years towards the success of his business.

Fitzroy Street had two aspects, one good and the other bad. If one went to the right from No. 104 the shops were rather more imposing, and the houses were of a better class. If one turned to the left the reverse was to be found—meaner dirty shops and houses, and the further one walked the worse the conditions became until one reached the beginning of Barnwell, which was notorious for unlawfulness and drunkenness.

It will therefore be seen that William's shop was at the dividing line.





104, FITZROY STREET, 1876  
The shop window has been modernised



To add a few shillings to the family exchequer he used to work as a waiter in one of the college halls in the evenings. The work was not very remunerative but he had the privilege—if the money was available—of buying food from the kitchen at a reduced price, and this was a welcome addition to the home bill of fare.

He was also a Proctor's "bulldog." This meant sometimes late hours, walking the streets to see that the University regulations about the wearing of caps and gowns after sunset were observed. He was very fleet of foot, and was the despair of undergraduates who were breaking the rules. If they tried to escape, William set off in pursuit and eventually caught his man. One of the Senior Proctors, a Professor of Greek, who was also a noted pedestrian, was very absent minded, to such an extent that during his proctorial duties he would walk several miles into the country and only realise this when his attention was called to the time and distance. When one reflects on those early years with their dire struggles, it seems almost a miracle that within relatively speaking a few years, No. 104, Fitzroy Street should become the Mecca of hundreds of members of the University. This, however, is anticipating events.

Newspapers, both daily and weekly, proved a successful means of obtaining permanent customers. Every morning for years William and one of the family would be on the station platform at 7.30 a.m. to meet the paper train from London. Gradually better goods were added to the stock, and the increase in the business necessitated employing an errand boy. One lad was anything but a bright specimen—practically uneducated and from a miserable home. It has already been stated that William was unlettered. Realising how this had handicapped him, he tried to help the lad by insisting that he should write in a copy book and work out simple sums each night, bringing the results to his employer the next morning. The boy profited by this strange tuition, so much so that he eventually became head assistant in the science department at Petty Cury—no mean achievement.

In close proximity to 104, Fitzroy Street was a pawnbroker's shop. An amusing happening occurred one Monday morning. Having "popped" their bundles until the following Saturday, four women, of the type the late Phil May delighted to portray, decided to hold "Parliament" outside No. 104. After the quartet had gossiped for 15 minutes, William decided to remove them. As the pavement was public property he could not order them off; he therefore got a broom and swept the pavement, apologising each



time he approached the talkers, until he actually swept them off his section of pavement.

However arduous the week, it did not interfere with the duties of Sunday, which to William was a day of rest and thanksgiving. Church-going was a duty and a pleasure. Perhaps this was carried too far when he required his family to attend the Watch-night Service. Seeing the Old Year out and the New Year in was a dreary affair, never attracting a large congregation. During the service a most lugubrious hymn was sung, the first verse running:—

“Days and moments quickly flying  
Blend the living with the dead,  
Soon our bodies will be lying  
Each within its narrow bed.”

Such comforting thoughts! and then to wish one's friends a Happy New Year!

About ten years after William commenced business, the two well-known revivalists, Sankey and Moody, were widely advertised to appear in Cambridge. They hired the Guildhall and for a week it was packed to overflowing. They certainly created a stir at the time. What lasting impression was made cannot be known. There was a special hymn book issued, known as *Sankey and Moody's Hymn Book*, published in several sizes and prices, from the paper-covered edition at 4d. to bound editions with full music at 7s. 6d. William was asked if he could undertake to sell these books in the Guildhall each evening before the meeting. There was no risk, as the books were sent on “sale or return” conditions. Finding the staff to sell them was a difficult matter, but it was overcome, and the number of books sold was enormous. That is the only word to describe the volume of business. William, of course, had a percentage on sales, which were for immediate cash.

That week was nearly a gold mine, and the sale of those hymn books went on through the years long after Sankey and Moody had been forgotten. Even in the year 1952 a stock of this hymn book is to be found at Sidney Street.

The different papers issued by the stationery trade were carefully scanned, and anything which might prove of real use to customers was sent for. One such article was Stone's Filing Boxes. William said, “I can sell those,” and having obtained a sample from the manufacturers, together with a pamphlet describing its uses, sizes and prices, he journeyed round the Colleges. Those



cabinets were a blessing both to the buyer and the seller. To the buyer they solved the difficulty of storing lecture-notes and loose papers. To William they gave good grounds for invading the sacred college precincts. Seldom did he meet with a rebuff: he had great tact, and was never forceful or pressing. Those Stone's cabinets opened up many accounts which otherwise would never have been opened. William was a marvellous commercial traveller but his heart was frequently in his mouth, as he wondered what kind of reception awaited him from this or that don; but he was respected, never calling without having something of interest to show. Some of Stone's manufactures are still stocked at Sidney Street.

William began to interest himself in Sunday School work and became superintendent of the toughest and most unruly school in Cambridge; but he was made of stern material and not to be cowed by a crowd of hooligans, coming from the most abject of homes, where the parents cared more for their beer than for the welfare of their offspring. Should one of the boys disobey the superintendent's orders, he marched that boy to his home told his parents what had happened, and said: "You have the right to correct him, and for his good I ask you to whip him in my presence."

In after years several of those boys, grown to manhood, came to thank William for the training he had given them—a proud moment indeed.

One very important detail that he discovered was that children who made regular attendances at Sunday School received a prize. He made it his business to discover where the books came from, and found that London was the source. Why could not he or other booksellers in Cambridge reap a little benefit from this business instead of London houses? he wondered. He discussed the matter with his Vicar and with the heads of Jesus Lane Sunday School, telling them that he was prepared to stock a selection of books if he could count upon the support of the various schools. When he had been assured on this point, the stock was purchased. This proved a great boon to the selectors, because the books had formerly been chosen from catalogues. The titles were frequently misleading and this had often caused many humorous and awkward incidents, as some of the books were found quite unsuitable to the child or the occasion. Now, with the actual books to select from, such mishaps were prevented.

From the Sunday schools to the day schools was an easy step;





4, PETTY CURY (REBUILT)



and eventually William had the satisfaction of seeing his prize books producing a steady income. Besides story books, Bibles and Prayer Books were added to the stock.

The elementary schools of Cambridge were administered by two different governing bodies—the church schools under a board of clergymen and laity, the others under town authorities. William's investigations produced evidence that the headmasters and mistresses of the church schools ordered supplies as needed, but these came from London. He obtained samples of the writing books being used, and on sending these to other manufacturers he received quotations and samples, both of which were better than those being supplied. Taking these round to the schools, he succeeded in obtaining orders and also introducing new educational publications which London firms sent from time to time. By such methods he gradually built up a very substantial local scholastic business.

Having made sure of the church schools he turned his attention to those of the town. This was not so easy a task, but quality and price gained the day. William always gave great attention to these details: many times were consignments of goods returned to the makers because they were not up to sample. It was a proud day when William decided that a fascia board bearing the wording, "The Eastern Counties Educational Company" should be displayed.

The original premises had become too restricted now, and increased shop room had to be obtained. Separating No. 104, Fitzroy Street from No. 105 was an archway leading to a yard which had been used as a builder's dump. The gateway was removed and a window built in the opening. Overhead more house accommodation was provided, and additional shop space was made available on the ground floor. No. 104 was a very busy spot, goods arriving daily either in parcels or boxes. If in parcels, a lesson in economy was given, for the string had to be untied and not cut, the paper carefully folded for re-use. Many shillings were saved by such thrift. William was an adept packer: he noted how the incoming goods were packed and from these examples learned the art of packing and was able to demonstrate to the assistants.

No. 105, Fitzroy Street, on the opposite side of the old gateway, was a toy and tobacconist's shop. When the proprietor died William took over the stock and premises. The toy and tobacconist

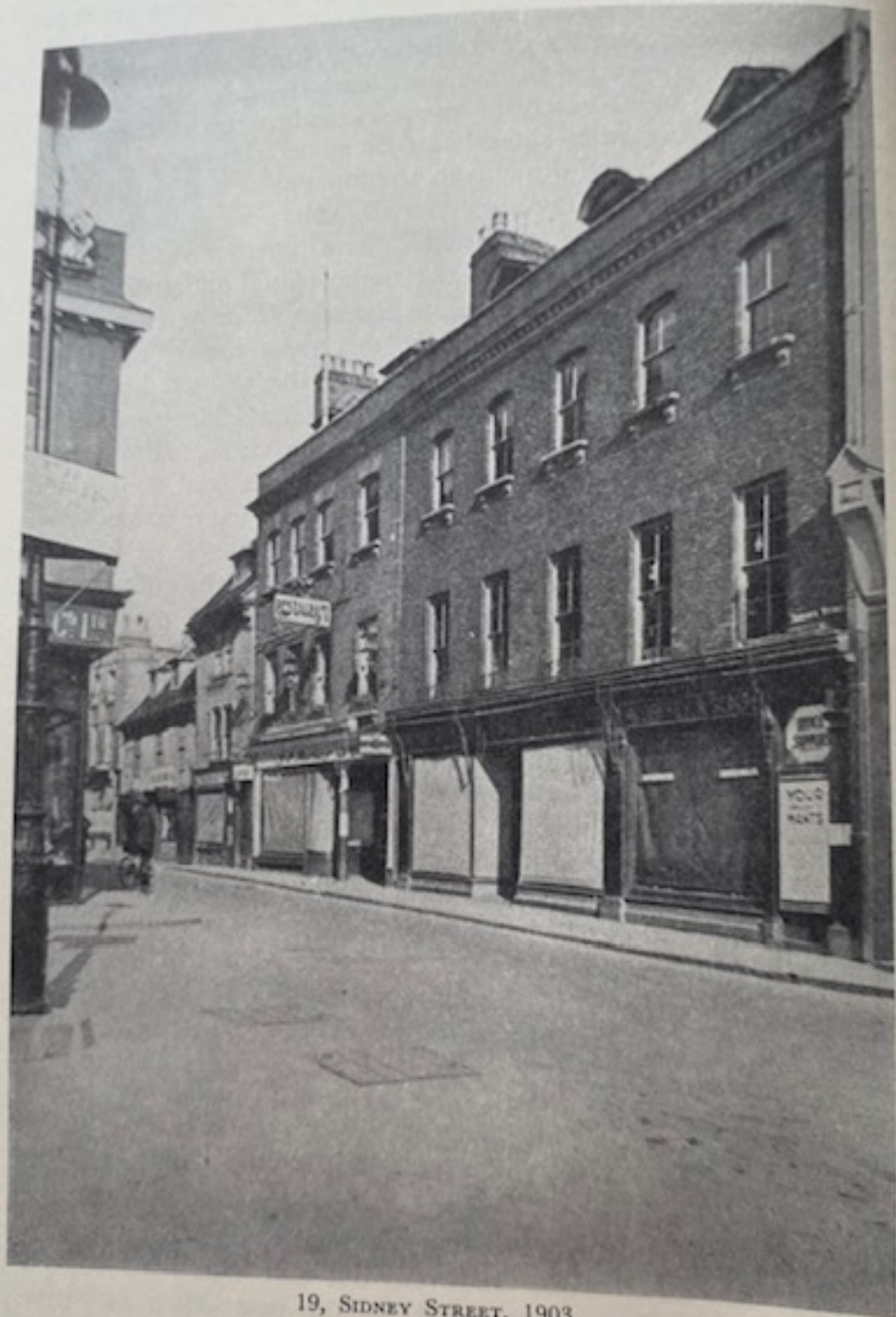


trade was not very desirable, especially the tobacco. The type of customer this business encouraged was not what William wanted and, besides, he was never intended to stand behind a counter selling pigtail tobacco and snuff. So, after two years both toys and tobacco were given up and the space gave much needed room for displaying books and stationery.

Thus, within a few years, William's efforts had succeeded. How did he get his knowledge? By asking. "Never be afraid of asking from those who know. They are flattered and are very willing to help," he used to say. He practised this method all through his life.

William was a great reader when the time for it was available. He would talk to customers on what he had read, and thus get their opinions. In trains or even buses he would get into conversation with fellow travellers, just because he was seeking knowledge—a grand way of self education. This habit of opening a conversation with strangers once had a surprising ending for William. When many years later the Sidney Street shop had been opened, part of it was used as a rare book department, because Petty Cury was too cramped to exhibit these treasures. A manager was engaged, whose credentials were excellent, but unfortunately they were faked. Also this man, who knew the trade well, had at sometime or other been involved in a shady piece of business. The police found him and he was committed for trial in London and released on bail. On the day of the trial, William had to appear as witness. Taking a bus outside Liverpool Street station to travel to the Law Courts, he entered into conversation with a fellow traveller. "How do all these people live in London? what human tragedies must happen?" he said. "Indeed yes," the other answered, "day by day the Courts are filled by people who have in some way offended. Some cases are very sad, as doubtless you see in the papers." William's surprise can be imagined when a few minutes later he saw the man he had spoken to on the bus presiding over the trial. In 1886 William was approached by the postal authorities, who were anxious to open a sub-office in the district. After he had been duly attested as a right and proper man, honest and trustworthy, he was appointed sub-postmaster. This meant more work, but the return fully compensated for the extra labour. The post office brought hundreds of people into the shop, not all of whom were desirable, but they brought business, small but paying; and soon a full-time assistant was appointed to attend to the postal business.





19, SIDNEY STREET, 1903



in obtaining the half day for sub-post offices after a great deal of argument.

Bank holidays were red letter days for the family. Perhaps William would hire a break with a pair of horses and drive to Exning, to visit his brother and sister. How he loved the feel of the ribbons! His love for "osses" never died. At other times an outing was taken on the river. A large boat was engaged, lunch and tea were prepared before hand, and the older boys would pull the family down the river, to picnic on the bank some miles away and after a delightful but lazy afternoon set out for home, tired but happy.

For relaxation William rented a plot of garden land situated next to Hawkins' Bakery on Midsummer Common. There was more ground than could be conveniently cultivated, so he had a full-sized hard tennis-court made, which was a great joy to the younger members of the family and their friends. Chickens were kept, some of which found their way to the table. William never mastered the technique of wringing a bird's neck. His method was to cut its throat. The R.S.P.C.A. were not aware of this unorthodox method: they might have taken a dim view of it. William tried mushroom growing but only a few feeble fungi put in an appearance, so mushrooms were scrapped. There were fruit trees, particularly a large William pear and a Jargonelle pear. These bore unfailingly, and the main crop was sold.

Having safely secured the supplies both of elementary textbooks and of stationery for the town schools, William searched for fresh fields. These he found in the schools throughout the county; but difficulties faced him—distance and transport. A horse and trap were useless, as they could not be left outside a school for an indefinite time. Bicycles had hardly arrived. There was the "penny-farthing" and also a fearful three-wheeled contraption, the only one in Cambridge being used by a don of Caius College. Neither of these was suitable for William's purpose; but the cycle-makers put on the market a machine known as the Kangaroo. It was a smaller edition of the penny-farthing, much safer and handier, however. William thought that this solved the difficulty of transport. He bought one of the machines, but he was no cyclist, falling off repeatedly and spraining an ankle or wrist. Dogs were a fatal attraction to him. It seemed as though he just had to try to run them down. He decided that after all the railway and "Shanks' pony" would be his transport.



The task William set himself would have broken the heart of a less robust and determined man. He took with him two bags containing samples of educational interest, and these weighed anything up to twenty pounds apiece. To carry them from village to village was a gruelling effort; but he was helped on his way by being blessed with great physical strength, plus a great heart, filled him with hope that his visits would produce good results. Calling at the villages nearest Cambridge first to test his belief that he could obtain orders, and also to see what the method of approach ought to be, he would return knowing that the seed had been planted. The teachers had but to come to Fitzroy Street to see for themselves the latest publications and to examine them at leisure, and this was a great inducement to them.

Not easily was William disheartened: call after call was made when his first reception had produced no results. Only when he was fully convinced that there was no hope of getting custom at a particular school did he most reluctantly acknowledge defeat. The miles he walked must have totalled hundreds. He never appeared to tire, but covered the ground with steady, purposeful plodding. Sometimes he was fortunate in obtaining a lift, whether in a farm waggon or a dog-cart. This was a great joy to him, for not only was he resting his limbs but he also saw the possibility of calling at another school that day. Success crowned his untiring efforts over the years; and 104, Fitzroy Street became a meeting place on Saturdays for the county teachers. They were of course shown the stock of prize books which were an unfailing source of income. The visits of the commercial travellers were of great value. There was now every reason for their calls: an excellent business had developed, orders were large and payment was dependable. Some of the travellers were very helpful; but if one of them tried to work off dud stock he was thoroughly dressed down and his face darkened No. 104 no more.

In twenty years (1876 to 1896) William had built up a substantial connection, and he was always seeking opportunities to enlarge his sphere of activity. A few years before 1896 he discovered that booksellers of Cambridge were getting only a proportion of the orders for text-books used by the students, and he wondered why. The answer was that the London publishers were giving 25 per cent. discount for cash with orders, but the Cambridge booksellers were giving no discount. William was surprised at their attitude: they appeared unmoved by the fact that legitimate trade was being lost.



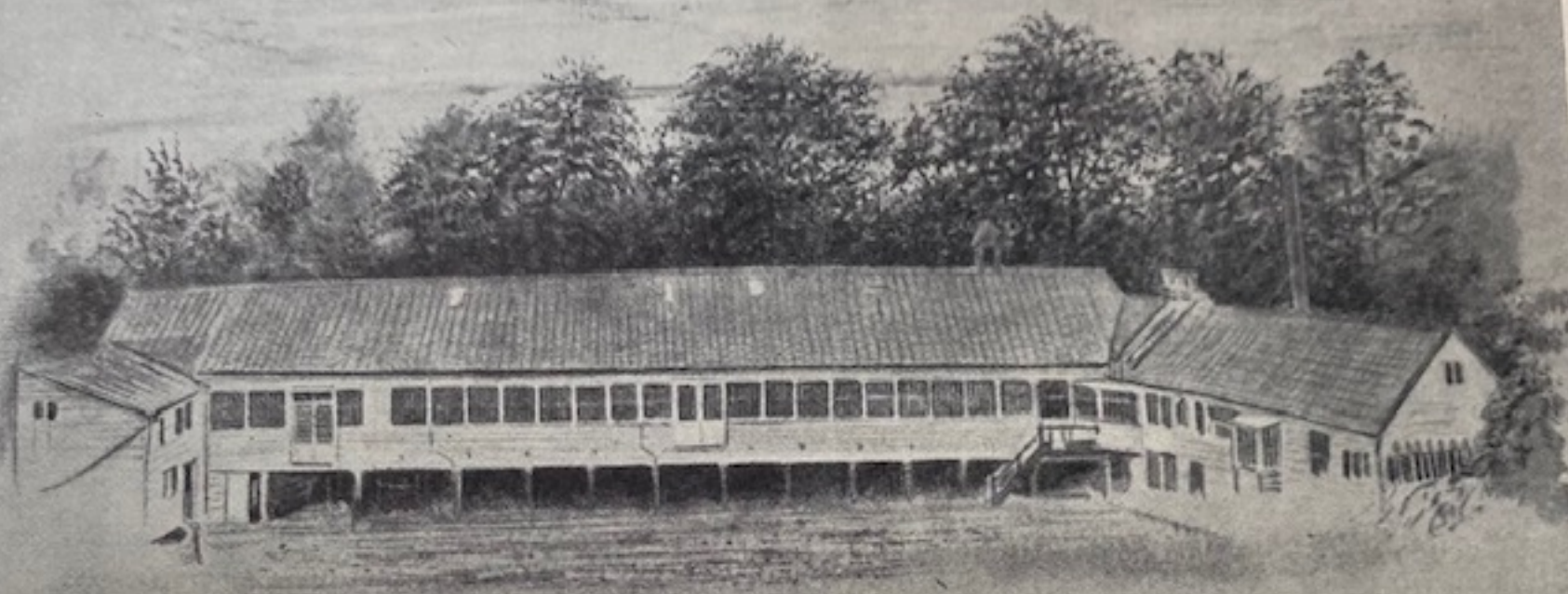
A rude awakening was in store for them: they never thought an opponent would dare to invade their field of operations. The idea that William was turning over in his head seemed ridiculous. Knowing nothing about university text-books, and having no facilities for dealing with them, what was the use of even considering the matter? But he could not let it pass unheeded. The opportunity was there. Could he use it?

Now must be told how two of his children made history. The fourth son, always of a studious disposition, and the eldest daughter had worked for years in the business. When William advanced his idea of starting a university bookshop on the 25 per cent. discount basis, they entered wholeheartedly into the scheme. First they obtained catalogues from the publishers, then came the task of getting acquainted with the book needs of the students. At this critical time the calls by the representatives of the publishers were most helpful, as they were well versed in the business. It is true that a few were somewhat sceptical as to the wisdom of opening an account with William. The situation of the shop certainly was not of the best; but they were won over by the enthusiasm which these two young people displayed, plus William's reputation.

William's next step was to advertise in every local paper, informing all and sundry that at 104, Fitzroy Street, all text-books could be supplied at 25 per cent. discount for cash with order. The news soon got noised abroad, and day in and day out a steady stream of undergraduates and dons arrived to take advantage of this wonderful offer. Considering that for some time no stock of text-books was carried, it was extraordinary that the undergraduates made little or no fuss that the books were not immediately available. The business thrived mightily. When certain books were found to be standard ones, a small stock was accumulated. How angry the town booksellers were. How dare a man owning a shop in an out-of-the-way neighbourhood, who had no knowledge of the trade even dream of entering their preserves? Indeed, they went so far as to ask the publishers to boycott William—not a gracious or gentlemanly action, but it was resolutely refused. William had made a name for himself in the scholastic world. He paid his accounts promptly, and his orders were as acceptable as those of the people who had tried to frustrate his efforts.

Having failed with the publishers, the booksellers wordily attacked William, but he was undisturbed and went calmly towards his goal. What was giving him serious thought was how long his





THE BLACK BEAR PRESS, 1912



rivals would stand the strain of seeing their business drifting away. For about two years William held sway, and a very useful two years they were. He came home one day looking rather glum, announcing, "They have started the discount." There were cries of "What shall we do?" "Do," said William, "why move into the town. No hesitation! Meet the threat on its own ground." He had no intention of sacrificing a good business because of opposition. He loved a fight; and he would fight to good purpose.



# PETTY CURY

## September 1896

WILLIAM wasted no time in trying to find a shop in the town to which he could transfer the book business. The stationery and elementary school trade were to remain at Fitzroy Street. His visits to estate offices and his general enquiries became frequent, for he knew the urgency of the matter. One day his search was rewarded, and he came home to say that he had found a shop in Petty Cury right in the centre of the town. A chemist who wanted to retire was anxious to sell out. William unhesitatingly bought the stock and fixtures, and disposed of them at a profit.

No. 4, Petty Cury was typical of the houses of those days, having a basement, three floors, and attics. The only space available for the books was the ground floor as all the others were sub-let to a lodging-house keeper. The quarters were very cramped indeed, but they must answer for the time being. It was a big undertaking, but William was getting used to venturing, and success had followed.

The move to Petty Cury was beset with difficulties, the chief of which was the lack of capital; for, although Fitzroy Street was showing good returns, yet its need for expansion and stock used up all available cash. William would not ask for a bank overdraft, and he was wise in this decision. There were plenty of expenses to face—the rent (high even then), necessary alterations to be made to the shop, stock which must now be bought, and additional help.

Reference has been made to the fourth son. It was through him that monetary help was found. A wealthy member of Trinity College had interested himself in this young man, even coaching him with the idea that he should enter the University. This scheme came to nothing, but the interest which he took in his pupil, and which developed into a lifelong friendship, was instrumental in



William receiving from this philanthropic gentleman a substantial sum, lent free of interest for an indefinite time—a wonderful gesture of trust. This trust was not misplaced, for the loan was repaid. The expression on William's face when he saw the value of the cheque was one of incredulity. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought to handle so much money, yet he lived to see cheques of greater value passed through the bank by W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd.

With thankful relief that the difficulty of capital had been surmounted, William faced the future in good heart. Advertising that W. Heffer & Sons of 104, Fitzroy Street, the originators of the 25 per cent. discount scheme had moved their book department to No. 4, Petty Cury, he opened the shop. An apprentice was engaged, and shortly afterwards a fully experienced book assistant. That the other bookshops were also offering the discount seemed to make no difference to the volume of business coming to Petty Cury for some time. Cash with order and no bookings meant that the office staff was very small—an ideal way of transacting business. To try to counteract William's opposition, the rival booksellers offered to open accounts and still give the discount. This was an unlooked-for blow, but William met it by also opening accounts with discount. There was much in favour of this, because the established booksellers had had accounts with college libraries and with many dons of the University for years; and this made it practically impossible to ask for cash with orders. The booking system immediately necessitated employing a fully trained office staff with all the required books and stationery and accommodation. This entailed further expenses, and overhead charges on a not very lucrative return from the sale of books. Nothing, however, seemed to daunt William. His blood was up; the fight was on.

During those early years at Petty Cury William was offered an unexpected opportunity which proved of great help to his new venture. A London publisher had produced a large quarto volume entitled *The Interleaved Parallel New Testament*. This was bound in full black cloth—an imposing volume, but it failed to interest the booksellers. The publication was therefore remaindered. Whether or not it was offered to any or all of the Cambridge booksellers and refused is not known. It is sufficient to know that when William was offered the whole stock, he closed with the deal. The volume sold at 6s. and at that price was marvellous value. William put one copy under his arm, and called on all the dons he knew. They bought the publication eagerly and also introduced



it to their pupils. In a very short time the whole stock was sold and Heffer's name became better known than before.

By sheer hard work and initiative the business increased and within a few years the three floors used as a lodging-house were taken over. Later developments included the classification of the books into various departments. A second-hand section was found advisable and fully trained assistants engaged. Indeed, no branch of bookselling was omitted. Catalogues were printed and widely distributed, and before long the slogan, "The bookshop known all over the World" was justifiably printed on the stationery used at Petty Cury.



# FITZROY STREET

1896-1903

THE opening of Petty Cury made an enormous difference to Fitzroy Street. William realised that even the sale of stationery to members of the University—and this sale had been very profitable—would disappear because they would be most unlikely to walk a considerable distance merely to buy exercise books when these could be bought practically outside the college gateways. Yet this trade was too valuable to lose. The only possible way to retain it was to remove the whole of the Fitzroy Street stock into new premises in the town—a bold prospect indeed. This meant giving up the scene of his early exploits, with their anxieties and triumphs; or alternatively, part of the premises could be retained with a skeleton staff and reduced stock, and this alternative was adopted. William always maintained that “First loss was the best loss,” and he proved right.

Another more momentous change affecting Fitzroy Street followed a few years later. Up to the year 1900 the scholastic business that William had built up flourished. As a result of the Education Act of 1902, both town and county authorities had to appoint an Educational Secretary whose duties were far reaching, and Education Committees were appointed to examine the supply situation. They decided to obtain quotations from all manufacturing firms producing school requirements. William was asked to quote, but he realised that it was impossible for him to compete, as he was not a manufacturer. Nevertheless, he sent in his quotations and samples, but with little expectation that they would be accepted. The chief concern of the education committees was to ease the rate-payers' pockets; consideration was not given to quality or prices in some items, and William's tender was not accepted. He pointed out that his exercise books were of vastly superior quality to those accepted by the committee, which were





19, SIDNEY STREET, 1931



days of plate-glass cases, but mahogany-topped counters, and very ordinary deal shelving. It is of interest to note that even in the year 1952 a counter used at Fitzroy Street is still in use at Sidney Street in the despatch department.

The new premises were imposing. The building was an excellent example of Georgian architecture, and many people regretted the demolition which later had to be made. There were two large windows for displaying stock, and the ground floor was spacious but until properly fitted out quite useless for stationery stock and all that term covers. A back entrance was a boon—all goods, both in and out, being handled there. For a time the fascia board bore the wording "The Eastern Counties Education Depot." This was later removed, because no such claim could be made. In its place was displayed "W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., Stationers and Booksellers." New departments were added for artist's materials, church supplies, and also a picture department. The upper floors were sub-let to a lodging-house keeper, but this arrangement was very soon cancelled, as the business demanded more space. No attempt was made to alter the upstairs rooms, except to provide the necessary fixtures. The church department was in a room on the first floor facing the stairs, and over the chimney breast there was a display of crucifixes. William was very uneasy about the introduction of these, fearing that many people would be shocked, as Cambridge churches as a whole were not "High."

Two amusing incidents occurred through this display. A Scotsman came into the room and seeing these "idols" he exclaimed in a loud voice, all in broad Scotch, "The Lord will send fire from heaven and burn the lot." The second incident was when an unknown woman immediately fainted at the sight of the crucifixes; but these disturbances did not prevent the church department from doing increasing business.

For a time the bookshop stocked a supply of University stationery, but the bookselling demanded more space, so the stationery was transferred to Sidney Street. Until William opened at Sidney Street there was no really good stationer in the town. The variety of stock which he carried had never been seen before, and this was all in his favour.

He threw himself whole-heartedly into the building up of this new venture. Immediately behind the premises in Sidney Street was a large building which had been used as stockrooms for the





THE PRINTING WORKS (EXTERIOR)



to make a good display in the front of the house, and he had to be content with a rather scanty show.

The planting was done in the morning. After the midday meal, William was taking a well-earned rest when he was disturbed by one of the maids coming to inform him that a man had called asking if the governor wanted any geraniums. William was very pleased at the prospect of being able to carry out his bedding to the full, so he bought the plants gladly. The man was a noted Cambridge character, bearing the unusual name of "Sluce" Parker, given him because of an impediment in his speech. He lived precariously, and sometimes dangerously, having been in the police court many times. William was unaware of his caller's character, but when he, in a happy mood, took the plants to the front of the house he found that "Sluce" Parker had been too smart for him, having pulled up the plants which William had so carefully bedded out. Naturally William was annoyed but he also saw the funny side of the incident and so "Sluce" was allowed to get away with his crafty scheme. Needless to say, William took care not to be caught again.

William had enjoyed exceptional health all through his long life; he affirmed that "hard work never killed anyone," and he was certainly a fine advertisement for hard work, leading a very regular life, and possessing a calmness found only through contentment and the feeling that what he had set out to do had been achieved.

On May 28th, 1928, William and Mary celebrated their diamond wedding and for this auspicious event the Masonic Hall was engaged. All the employees and their wives and many personal friends were invited. After tea the company were entertained by variety acts (all of which had first been "vetted"), round games were played, and the many beautiful gifts were inspected. William and Mary then retired to a private room for rest and to prepare for the evening's festivities. Nearly 300 guests lined both sides of the dining room, down which William and Mary walked arm in arm to their places at the high table to the strains of the Wedding March. Each employee was presented with a pair of silver candlesticks, the usual congratulatory speeches were delivered, and the health of the happy couple was drunk with musical honours.

The three establishments—Petty Cury, Sidney Street and the Printing Works—are ample proof of William's labours, for in each his was the guiding hand. He never sought public honours but was content to be a shopkeeper whose integrity could not be doubted.



His reward was seeing his children carrying on the tradition he had established—all occupied in the business and reaping a harvest from the seed he had sown.

On the morning of August 4th, 1928, William was reported unwell—"just tired" was the medical opinion, and he was ordered to bed. He never rallied, and from the 4th to the 9th August he gradually and peacefully fell asleep. The funeral service was held at Christ Church (St. Andrew the Less), where he had always worshipped. The body of this large church was filled by representatives of the University, prominent townsmen and employees. No dreary service this—the large congregation had come to pay their final tribute to a man who in his lifetime had surmounted many difficulties, gaining their respect and admiration. Two hymns which William had loved were sung: "Fight the good fight" and "Now thank we all our God." It was heartstirring to hear the rendering of those hymns with their note of thanksgiving.

His body was interred in the Borough Cemetery, Mill Road.

Thus ended a wonderful life, and his memory lives on in the great firm which he created.