

WILLIAM STYAN - 1807-1877 (Regular Soldier) - Continued.

In the first part of these Chronicles the reader may recall that we left William Styan in limbo after the birth of his youngest son George at 'Rose & Crown Yard', Knightsbridge on 2.9.1852. A little more light has now been cast on the subject which at least rounds off the story of our soldier.

Rose & Crown Yard was located on the South side of Knightsbridge opposite Hyde Park at about the point where the underpass now begins. We do not need to go more than a few hundred yards from here for the final scene. On 9.3.1869 William died at his home 21, New Road, Chelsea of Chronic Bronchitis at the age of 62. His wife Sarah registered the death. His eldest son William gave the same address for his marriage on 20.3.1870.

During 1870 many London streets were renamed and New Road together with several other streets became Pavilion Road. Sarah was found dead at 44, Pavilion Road on 6.10.1870 and an Inquest held the following day gave the cause of death as 'disease of the heart'. Incidentally Pavilion Road runs immediately behind and parallel to Sloane Street.

No Coroner's records for the time survive at County Hall and so the circumstances in which she died are not known and one can merely speculate - why was an Inquest necessary? Had she been dead long? Was she living with the family? Had the houses been renumbered when the renaming took place so that 44, Pavilion Road was possibly the same place as 21, New Road? Perhaps we will learn more after further research, but in the meantime we pass on to our next subject which is

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT.

Do not be misled by the title. The Styans are not believed to have had anything to do with Guy Fawkes. The term 'Plot' is being used in the sense 'the essential facts of the tale' and it is a 'Gunpowder' plot because the manufacture of gunpowder had a significant part to play in enabling a particular line of Styan ancestry to be traced.

It is at this point that we must pause to consider the duties of a 'Family Historian' - particularly a self-appointed one. In order to trace our family tree we become privy to information which our ancestors may have regarded as none of our business, and so we place ourselves in a position of trust which must not be betrayed. The problem is to know what is our business and more particularly to know what facts we ought to reveal. In these Chronicles the view is taken that we are entitled to know the basic facts of our inheritance - provided that they are treated in confidence within the family - and we do not presume to comment on the behaviour of individuals. In this respect we are better off than more prominent families whose private life is publicly recorded. If we take the case of illegitimacy we find - especially in Victorian times - that the person who felt most guilt about the whole thing was the innocent illegitimate child and whilst the mother was often shunned the father usually got away scot-free, at least in terms of stigma. This seems to be in reverse order to responsibility. There is no denying that illegitimacy has always occurred and in the best of families. Thus our own Queen has only to look back a few generations on her mother's side to find a 'bar sinister' in her pedigree and William the Conqueror was himself unashamedly illegitimate. Presumably they were less sensitive about these things in those days.

What however has this to do with the Styan family? Well, as the reader may have guessed - we are in 'Royal' company. An illegitimate birth took place over 120 years ago and it is unfair that the father should escape in a cloak of anonymity. In any event the relevant Birth Certificate is readily available at the General Register Office in London for anybody who cares to apply for it. It is therefore hoped that no offence is given by relating this story.

The writer's grandfather George Styan married Frances Marion Purchase, the

daughter of Frances Marion Purchase on 12.3.1876. To ease identification they will be referred to as FMP(1) and FMP(2) in order of seniority. FMP(2)'s father's name was given at the time as 'Robert Purchase (deceased) - occupation Clerk'. She may well have thought this to be true at that time but it is now known that when her birth was registered (14.2.1857) her father was named as 'Robert Ashbee-Superintendent of Powder Mills'. She also had a brother Robert George (born 20.11.1858) with the same name named as father. Both births took place in Chelsea, in houses in adjoining streets and both of these houses were within 300 yards of FMP(2)'s address at the time of her marriage. The unusual name of the father and his rare occupation make it extremely unlikely that there was more than one person in the country answering to this description at that time and a considerable amount of information is known about him including his ancestry back to the 17th Century. A brief historical background is now given in chronological order and a simplified branch of his Family Tree is attached as an aid to comprehension.

ASHBEE Origins

The ASHBEEs are a very ancient East Kent family some of whom are reputed to have participated in Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450 at the time of Henry VI. Until the mid 17th Century our predecessors were less pedantic than we are about the precise spelling of names and this makes the tracing of the Ashbee line even more difficult than it would otherwise be. An Ashbee Coat-of-Arms exists but who if anybody is now entitled to display it cannot be ascertained. The earliest Ashbee in our line to emerge positively is RICHARD ASHBEE, a Yeoman who married a JANE DRAYNOR at Little Chart (near Ashford, Kent) on 9.4.1683.

The term 'Yeoman' denoted a farmer who owned his own land and in the case of the Ashbees they were substantial landowners with tenant farmers. A feature of the Kentish Yeomen was that they did not practice the Norman custom of primogeniture whereby the eldest son always inherited the family estate thereby keeping the family fortune intact. Instead provision was made for all the sons of the family. In these circumstances it is surprising that many of the Ashbees seem to have been well off despite the division of the estates at each generation. Most of them continued to live in the same small area for many generations with the villages of Little Chart, Pluckley, Egerton and Charing repeatedly appearing in the records. However to get back to the story

RICHARD ASHBEE of Smarden, Kent died on 31.8.1744 apparently at the age of 92 and his wife JANE died on 11.1.1729 apparently aged 83. If these ages - which come from the Parish Registers - are to be believed then she was 37 when she married and had the last of her 4 children at the age of 48. In those days it was not unusual for ages to be incorrectly recorded, particularly for old people. Their second child was

JOHN ASHBEE born about 1684, who married MARGARET HOGGES (of Charing) on 3.6.1718 at which time he is described as a Yeoman. He died aged 77 on 8.2.1761 having fathered 9 children, the 7th of whom was

JOSEPH ASHBEE born Feb. 1732. He was also a Yeoman and married ANN HILLS (of Bethersden) on 18.10.1759. They had 5 children and lived the later part of their lives at a Manor called TRAMPATCH. The house is said to date from c1350 and still stands immaculately maintained in idyllic surroundings in the Kent countryside. The eldest child of this family was

JOHN ASHBEE (Baptised 3.8.1761) who distinguished himself chiefly by producing a very large family. He married his cousin SUSANNA ASHBEE in 1788 and by the time she died 13 years later they had produced 8 known children of whom 7 were living. Within 2 years he had married a widow ELIZABETH COOK (nee BROWN) who already had one child by her first marriage and was expecting the first child of John Ashbee's second family. This eventually totalled 9 children so that Elizabeth's

child by her first husband had 7 older step-brothers and sisters and 9 younger half-brothers and sisters! To house this considerable family together with some servants John Ashbee needed a big house and in fact his home was the 'Clockhouse' at Colkins near Boughton, Kent a few miles from Faversham. The Clockhouse is a large George I house close to, but screened by trees from, one of the junctions on the M2. It is called the 'Clockhouse' because it had a large clock built into the top storey of its South or Western frontage. The clock face is still there today but it is difficult to see through the trees. The eldest child of the second family was

ROBERT ASHBEE

born 11.3.1804 - the hero (or villain) of our piece. He was born at Boughton, probably at the Clockhouse and found himself with at least 5 older half-brothers and eventually with 4 younger full brothers, not to mention innumerable sisters. In these circumstances-and despite all that Yeoman business- it is not surprising that he was destined to make his own way in the world. He attended Lynstead School a few miles from his home and when he was 10 he won a book of poems which was tooled in gold on the front cover "Master Robert Ashbee, Best Speaker, Lynstead School, 1814". This book still exists in excellent condition.

Nothing is known of him for some years except that he is reputed to have gone to South America to seek his fortune. He came home with nothing but a collection of curious watercolour drawing of Amazonian and forest landscapes which survived in his family until well after his death. He was 23 when his father died in 1827.

He married FRANCES ELIZABETH SPENCER of Deal (probably in the early 1830's) and his son HENRY SPENCER ASBEE was born on 21.4.1834 at 24, Blackfriars Road in London. This place was described in 1841 as the 'Rising Sun' Inn and by 1977 it had become a topless GO-GO club!

In 1845 when Robert's mother (Elizabeth) died, she referred to him in her Will as living at 'Hounslow' and we know for certain that by March 1850 he was manager of Hounslow Gunpowder Mills, in Middlesex. Meanwhile he is recorded as being a proprietor of Kensington School from 1848 to 1851. Kensington School was a private Grammar School and Henry Spencer was a boarder there. It was the practice in those days for fathers to become proprietors for the duration of their sons' attendance at these schools.

How Robert became involved with Gunpowder Mills is a mystery but it may be significant that Mills existed at Faversham at the time and there are records of workers walking there daily from Boughton. What was common with all Gunpowder Mills was their propensity to blow themselves up and it is by reading the reports(!) of the explosions that we can trace much of their history.

The Powder Mills at Hounslow on the River Crane had existed for a couple of centuries. Strictly speaking they were located in the Parish of Twickenham. The site was owned by the Duke of Northumberland and in the early 19th Century the Mills were operated by the firm of Harvey & Grueber. However in 1820 the newly formed company of Curtis & Harvey took over the lease. Mr. Harvey - probably one of the previous owners - continued to be the technical expert for some years and was certainly still living at Hounslow in 1841, but the real boss was Mr. Curtis. He knew very little about gunpowder and ran the business from his offices in Lombard Street in the City. It is probable that Robert Ashbee was appointed Manager some time in the late 1840's.

A big explosion occurred on 11.3.1850 and 7 men were killed. Robert Ashbee was actually discussing business with Mr. Curtis in Lombard Street at the time

but he may have heard the bang 11 miles away because it was heard throughout the Home Counties. (Did he think "You can't trust anybody these days - leave 'em in charge for half a day and see what happens"?). Both he and Mr. Curtis gave evidence at the Inquest on Friday 15th March. Robert described the hazardous nature of the work and other witnesses described seeing bits of bodies flying through the air and some of them finishing up in the trees. Apparently at least 150 people would normally have been working on the site at the time. A large party from the 11th Hussars at Hounslow Barracks arrived with a fire engine but the devastation was so complete that there was little for them to do. A substantial body of Police who happened to be in Hounslow to prevent a walking race in the town was rushed to the site to control the crowds. (Why were Police required to prevent a walking race? It sounds as though we may have stumbled on a Keystone Cops-type situation).

Robert is thought to have lived in the Manager's house in the middle of the site and a large scale map of the time shows a group of buildings amongst which one is described as a 'residence'. It seems to have been very close to some of the buildings where explosives were contained and hardly the place to bring up a family. A photograph of a house on the site exists and is said to be the residence. It does appear to match up with what other evidence exists. The photograph was taken in the 1920's but the building itself was demolished about 1930. It was close to the River Crane and Henry Spencer's diary refers to himself bathing "in the river behind our house". Close to this house was a tower incorrectly referred to as a Shot Tower. This structure still stands.

In the 1851 Census Robert is described as a Gunpowder Manufacturer and present at the house were his wife, his son, a niece, a young visitor whose occupation is given as 'goes to school' and one servant named Lucy Kent. Henry Spencer at 16 is described as an Auctioneer & Estate Agent. This does not agree with other information that is known about his career. He was not past the odd leg-pull however. A letter in Robert's handwriting has recently come to hand dated May 54 relating to some problem over control of the water in the river. He writes with quite a flourish.

The Mills at Hounslow specialised in high-class small arms powder for military and sporting purposes and it was normally taken in barrels by cart to the wharf at Isleworth for shipment. The Mills were located on the edge of Hounslow Heath near the exercise grounds used by the troops from Hounslow Cavalry Barracks and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that some of the powder could have gone there direct. There is no record of any special production effort being required during the Crimean War (1854-56) and there is no further reference to Robert Ashbee until his name appears on the 2 Birth Certificates dated 1857 and 1858.

In the 1861 Census there are 2 different nieces present at the house together with himself, his wife and 2 servants. In neither of the 2 Censuses mentioned was the house identified with an address although some idea of its location can be obtained by noting the description of the dwellings above and below it in the Census Returns. A photograph of him believed to be from 1861 shows him to be a man of medium build and commanding aspect. A baffling inscription on the back implies that he could have been in Moscow at about that time. Were we now selling arms to our erstwhile enemy? A photograph of his wife exists from about the same date. It may not have been very flattering but it depicts her as very stout and decidedly plain. She died on 2.3.1862. She came from Deal and it is observed that whilst her son is called Henry Spencer, one of Mr. Curtis's sons is called Spencer Henry. The possibility that there may have been a family connection is not so far supported by any real evidence although it is known that the Curtis family once owned a house at Ramsgate not all that far from Deal.

Henry Spencer had by this time had some success in business which he enhanced

by marrying the boss's daughter (a Miss Lavy from Harburg where the company was based) in about 1862. His wife is said to have got on very well with her father-in-law Robert. Robert's grandson CHARLES ROBERT ASHBEE (born 1863) recorded in 1939 how as a small child he used to sit on Robert's knee and more gruesomely- that he saw him in his coffin in 1867 when he himself was still so small that he had to be lifted up in the air to see. His account of this episode which happened 72 years previously provides us with the following description of his appearance- "cold and rather splendidly chiselled, very stately ---. The face was hard, a sort of enamelled beauty but not unkind. There may have been a touch of mockery about the mouth ---".

Robert Ashbee in fact died at his home at the Gunpowder Mills on 15.10.1867 and was buried in the family vault at Kensall Green Cemetery. Apart from £100 which he left to his unmarried sister Frances, he left the balance of his estate (under £3000) to his son Henry Spencer Ashbee. There is a legend in his family that shortly before his death he confronted a crowd of rioters who were threatening to blow up the Mills late one night and by a combination of bluff and stalling caused them to believe that the Military from Hounslow Barracks were on their way and thus dispersed them single-handed so saving a very dangerous situation. Mr. Curtis is said to have been so grateful for this that when he eventually died he left Henry Spencer £1000 in his Will 'in recognition of his father's signal heroism'. Great stuff but regrettably not supported by evidence. Mr. Curtis's Will does not refer to the Ashbee family at all and so far no reports of the incident have been found. It is however true that the Fenians were causing trouble at about this time and a guard from the Barracks was placed on the Mills some weeks after his death.

So much for his recorded activities. But what about FMP(1)? We know that Hounslow Station 2 miles from the Mills provided easy access to London and this is illustrated by the report of his visit to Mr. Curtis in 1850. He only had one legitimate child (way back in 1834) which was rather different to his own father and definitely unusual for well-heeled Victorians. There is rather flimsy evidence that his unfortunate wife was not very attractive and we know for certain that he was a very active man. Was he really the father of FMP(2)? Prior to 1874 a woman when registering the birth of a child could name anybody as father. After that date a man's name could only appear on a Birth Certificate if he attended the registration and acknowledged paternity. But why should Robert be named as father if he was not? - and he is named for 2 children which seems to underline the probability that it was true? (The writer has suspicions of another possibility but it would be unjust to express them without more evidence). Did he support the children? If so, what happened when he died? Did FMP(1) even know that he had died? Did she ever find out? Did anybody in his family know of the existence of the children? There is nothing on record to indicate this. If he was the father did he also have other illegitimate children elsewhere? One feature of this genealogical research is that for every question answered a dozen new ones arise.

The history of the Ashbee family after Robert's death is well recorded and no more will be said about it at this time other than to note that Henry Spencer's fortune increased and with it he achieved fame as a collector and authority on books, particularly rare Spanish ones. The bulk of his library was left on his death to the British Museum. He also achieved infamy as Europe's leading authority on pornography in the late 19th Century, at which point it may be as well to draw the curtains on the subject.

EPILOGUE

Before leaving the topic of Robert Ashbee a few coincidences should be mentioned which taken in isolation are mildly interesting but taken together seem uncanny. Robert's wife was named FRANCES. So was the only woman named in his Will, his only surviving unmarried sister - and so was his mistress FMP(1) and his daughter FMP(2). One of Robert's great-great-grandsons (in the legitimate-line) was born in 1945,

became an architect but decided to enter the Church and in 1978 was studying for this vocation at Cambridge. Such a person might be thought to be unique, but meanwhile one of George Styam's great-grandsons and therefore also a great-great-grandson of Robert Ashbee was

- Born in 1945
- Became an architect
- Decided to enter the Church
- Was studying for this vocation at Cambridge in 1978

at the same college and in the same year as his third cousin without anybody being aware of the relationship. A similarity in their lines of descent from Robert Ashbee is also striking.

One final coincidence. The site of the Mills was fairly extensive with the more dangerous parts being surrounded by trees and cultivated land. The North-Eastern boundary became marked by a lane which in due course became called Powdermill Lane. The Mills were later taken over by ICI and were eventually closed down in 1926. The bulk of the site was developed as a housing estate except for a narrow strip beside the river which became Crane Park. In it are the remains of the Mills consisting of one lodge which is still inhabited, the shot tower, a few huge millstones, some machinery foundation beds and some protective bunkers. In 1931 the writer's family moved from Pimlico to near Hounslow, unaware of any ancestral connection. During World War Two the land in Powdermill Lane opposite the Mills site became a cemetery and in due course the writer's parents (of whom one was Robert Ashbee's grandson) were buried there.

It was not until 1977 that the Ashbee connection was discovered and thus we came Full Circle. The Gunpowder Plot at last unfolded.

K.G.S. 1978



ROBERT ASHBEE

Yeoman of Smarden d.31.8.1744 aged 92. RICHARD ASHBEE m. Jane Drayner 9.4.1683

Yeoman of Little Chart d.8.2.1761 aged 77 JOHN ASHBEE m. Margaret Hodges 3.6.1718

Yeoman, latterly of Tramhatch b. Feb.1732 JOSEPH ASHBEE m. Ann Hills 18.10.1759

Farmer of Colkins d.5.7.1827 aged 66 JOHN ASHBEE m. (1) Susanna Ashbee 1788
(2) Elizabeth Cook nee Brown 17.10.1803

Gunpowder Manufacturer of Hounslow
b. 11.3.1804 d. 15.10.1867

ROBERT ASHBEE m. Frances Elizabeth Spencer

(Was he named after his father?)

HENRY SPENCER ASHBEE
b. 21.4.1834 d. 29.7.1900

FRANCES MARION STYAN nee PURCHASE
b. 14.2.1857 d. 30.4.1929
m. George Styan 12.3.1876

ROBERT GEORGE ASHBEE/PURCHASE
b. 20.12.1858

FRANCES SARAH MAGUIRE
nee STYAN
(Issue)

ROBERT GEORGE STYAN
(Issue)

HENRY EDGAR STYAN
(Issue)

MARION ISABEL BURGESS
nee STYAN
(Issue)

ALFRED JAMES STYAN

FREDERICK ORMONDE STYAN
(Issue)

CHARLES EDWIN STYAN
MABEL ELIZABETH COWARD
nee STYAN

(2nd/3rd Year Student Cambridge 1978)

COLIN CHARLES MALCOLM COWARD

ELSIE ANNIE GAYNOR
nee STYAN

HAROLD JOHN STYAN

RICHARD JOHN STYAN

ANDREW JAMES STYAN

THOMAS STYAN

LOUIS STYAN
(Issue)

KENNETH GEORGE STYAN

(Your chronicler)

MINNIE TALBOT
nee STYAN

MAISIE FRANCES BUTTLE
nee TALBOT

EMALINE FRANCES GRIFFITHS
nee BUTTLE

KAREN MARCIA GRIFFITHS

AN EXTRACT FROM THE STYAN PEDIGREE via ROBERT ASHBEE

(Examples of 10th identified generation)