

# MRS BERESFORD BAKER AND THE DAY STAR MISSION

*Derek Leach*

Little did I realise when I decided to research the history of a building in Dover where it would lead me. My starting point was an old photograph of an elderly woman. On the back was written Mrs Baker, Founder of the Day Star Mission. These few words were to reveal a fascinating story. Isabella Wilson from Knowle in Warwickshire married William Beresford Baker, an Army captain from Ireland, in 1877. This was accompanied by a marriage settlement. A Trust was formed. The Rev Cosmo Noyes and John Saint were appointed as Trustees and certain funds were vested in the Trustees who were empowered to purchase and sell hereditaments as they thought fit. I assume that the money came from Isabella's family and was intended to provide a home for her and her husband. By 1890, if not before, they were living at 2 Wellesley Terrace - in one of the four houses that were later converted into the Grand Hotel. The 1891 census shows that they had six servants living in. By 1900 they had moved to 9 Waterloo Crescent.

In 1907 the Bakers bought, via their Trust, 11 Princes Street, the adjoining cottages on Durham Hill and the (new) large hall at the rear from Thomas Lewis, a builder. These premises had comprised Prospect House School until at least 1905. The adjoining premises 12 Princes Street (Matlock House) plus the adjacent cottage 1A Cowgate Hill were purchased at the same time from Henry Hutchinson, the school master who had run Prospect House School (a private school for young gentlemen) since 1866.

The 1908 Dover Directory lists Mrs Beresford Baker with a Home of Rest at 11 and 12 Princes Street. and her husband

Captain Beresford Baker living separately at 25 Waterloo Crescent - more about that later! The Day Star Mission Hall on Durham Hill appears for the first time in the 1908 Directory.

The Directory entries are unchanged until 1921: Mrs Beresford Baker still at number 11, Christians Home Mission but with Captain William Beresford Baker at number 12, Prospect House. This situation was unchanged until 1934 when Mrs Baker is shown both at the Christians Home Mission and at Prospect House. Her husband had died in 1933..

These are the cold documentary facts but they reveal nothing of the fascinating story that I have discovered from talking to a handful of people who remember Mrs Baker.

Mrs Scott, who was born in 1922 in Bowling Green Terrace and has lived in the locality all her life, told me that the Day Star Mission Hall was run by 'Lady Baker' as she was known locally. She was a very well to do regal lady with a superb soft-topped car and chauffeur. Mrs Scott recalls as a young child in the 20's and 30's everybody in the surrounding (poor) streets would look when Lady Baker ventured out. Mrs Baker was very good to the local people - every Monday she sent out food parcels to different poor people in the locality. Mrs Scott attended the Day Star Mission Sunday School from the age of four attending a service in the hall of all age groups which then separated into different classes. At Christmas there would be a big service and Mrs Baker would sit at a large table covered in brown parcels - the table not Mrs Baker- with a gift for every child (which was always a garment). The lady missionaries who lived at Mrs Baker's

26 Home of Rest made a lot of the gifts. At Christmas 1930, when Mrs Scott was about 8, she was not given a gift because she had been naughty but was told that she would have it the next week if she behaved - which she did - but the gift was a pair of big bloomers which fitted her mother who was 8 months pregnant! The Mission had a Mothers' Meeting on Monday afternoons with a crèche for children but Mrs Scott only went once - her mother was asked to leave her with a neighbour in future! Services for grown ups were held Sunday mornings and evenings.

I managed to track down a lady who had given the YMCA - the present owners of the building, a photograph of Mrs Isabella Baker. The photograph had been given to her by an old friend of 92 who had been her Sunday School teacher at the Mission and who was still alive. I arranged to see her and spent an interesting morning listening to her story. This was Mrs Florence Morris (nee Steel) who knew Mrs Baker very well. Her own life story is fascinating with much of it connected with Mrs Beresford Baker and the Day Star Mission. She was born in London but came to live in Dover when she was two. As a small child her mother found out that Mrs Baker's Day Star Mission (as it was known) distributed parcels and gifts to those attending. So Florrie soon attended the Sunday School which was 250 strong and went with her mother to the Monday Mothers' Meeting and the Sunday evening service. Later, Florrie was to be a Sunday School teacher at the Mission for many years. Every Christmas each child would receive two garments made by Mrs Baker's ladies and two oranges handed out by Mrs Baker.

At the age of fourteen Florrie went into service with a Miss Alice Payne, a cripple who lived in Beaconsfield Road and ran a cottage industry with a few girls employed on knitting machines. Florrie did

everything for Miss Payne - washing and dressing her, cooking etc. Prayers were always said morning and evening. She also pushed Miss Payne in her wheelchair to the Day Star Mission meetings. As a result Florrie became the 'prodigy' of Mrs Baker with Mrs Baker clothing her, taking her out and taking her for a holiday to her country house at Tenterden.

At nineteen Florrie became nanny to the children of Mr and Mrs Cook at Davington Manor, Faversham. Mr Cook was a director of Shepherd Neame. After two years Mrs Baker wrote and asked if she would like to go to Africa as nanny to the children of a doctor and his wife who were going as missionaries. Florrie jumped at the chance and returned to Dover; but, the good doctor would not take her insisting that she would be homesick!

Mrs Morris told me that Mrs Baker was a very wealthy woman (presumably the wealth was inherited) who had been presented at court when she was young. Mrs Baker always wore black with white satin fronts. Her clothes and hats were



*Mrs Beresford Baker*

made on the premises. The hats had to allow for her bun to show through. She bought her husband out of the army but 'they never lived together'. He drank a lot and always used a back door to avoid being seen returning from his drinking trips. He lived in one part of the building with his own servants and she in another (Nodd Ffa - House of Repair). She had ten well-to-do



*Inside the mission hall*

retired ladies living with her known as her ladies-in-waiting. Some of them had been missionaries. They made a lot of clothes for the children of the Sunday School etc and assisted in the Mission's work. Apparently Mrs Baker also paid for some missionaries abroad.

Mrs Baker had eight maids in uniform - some at least were local girls that had been rescued. Florrie tells the story of going out one day visiting the poor with one of the ladies. At one house they found a fat woman in rags lying on the floor in a completely empty room. They returned to the Mission for food and drink, but Mrs Baker told them to bring the woman back to the Mission. She was given a maid's room, was washed and clothed and became another maid. The maids had to be up at 4am every morning roused by a retired school governess..

Mrs Baker held 'Quiet Evenings' for her ladies on Tuesday. Florrie was invited to attend but the ladies would not start their discussion saying 'We are not alone Mother, because Florrie's here'. Mrs Baker replied 'Florrie is one of us - do I note a spot of jealousy?' Everybody loved her and she loved them. She was known as our Dover Mother.

Another 90 years old contact, Eric

James, told me that she was also known as our Holy Mother. He confirmed that she was well loved and never heard a nasty word said about her. Even so she was strict with her ladies and maids who were never let out of the building without her permission. Tradesmen were often asked to post their letters.

Eric James had a coal merchant's business in Queen Street founded by his father in 1889. He told me that Mrs Baker was a good customer of theirs - particularly at Christmas when she would arrange for the most needy people who attended her Mission to have 3cwt of coal as well as groceries. He recalls Mrs Baker buying a Ford open tourer car in 1928 but there were few drivers around then. She asked Eric's father for a driver temporarily who would also teach somebody else to drive permanently for her. Eric, who was twenty years old, got the job. He drove Mrs Baker and two of her ladies to (the old) Sainsbury's at Folkestone to shop. She and two of her ladies would also be driven into the country for picnics - Woolage Green and Nonington, he remembers. Each person, including Eric, was given a packed lunch of good food. She was a stickler for time and punctuality and always told her staff what time she would be back. On one

28 occasion she asked to be driven to Dymchurch but only left three quarters of an hour to be driven back before her scheduled return to Dover. They were ten minutes late and all the staff were waiting outside and gave her a great welcome as if she had been lost!

Eric taught a Mr Hogben to drive the car. He was the husband of one of the maids. On another occasion, when Mr Hogben was able to drive but Eric had to sit alongside to keep an eye on him, an outing to Tenterden was arranged. Mrs Baker hired three single decker open top coaches for the people of the Mission and some of her ladies but she went in the car with two of her ladies and the two drivers. The main party was left to enjoy themselves in a large field near Tenterden but Mrs Baker and her party went off to a big house. The two drivers and a Sister Hilda stayed outside and ate their packed lunches. After lunch Mrs Baker asked to be driven to Heathfield and they all went into a big house. Mrs Baker insisted that they all have a nap before returning, put Eric on a settee, covered him with a blanket and went off herself for her nap which lasted two hours! Then they went back to the big house at Tenterden. Apparently the owner was a missionary - or was it Mrs Baker's Tenterden house? He proceeded to give a talk about his exploits overseas. Then Eric drove them all home. That was the last time he went out with Mrs Baker because his trainee Mr Hogben was considered competent by then - no test in those days. Later Mrs Baker had a row with Mrs Hogben and sacked both her and her husband!

Eric James confirmed that Captain Baker and Mrs Beresford did not live together. Captain Baker had rooms in Prospect House adjoining Cowgate Hill and Mrs Baker occupied Nodd Ffa in the middle and Beresford House at the Durham Hill end. Inside you could move between them all. There was no friction between Mrs Baker and her husband. He was looked after by Mrs Beresford's staff

and she saw him occasionally but he was free to do as he pleased. They each had their own interests: Mrs Baker with her Mission work and Captain Baker the Royal Hippodrome in Snargate Street where he was a regular and always had a front row seat - apparently attracted to the chorus girls! He died in 1933.

Mrs Baker died aged 84 on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1938. She was buried in Charlton Cemetery and there I found a distinctive red granite headstone topped by a 12 pointed star - the Day Star. The headstone is inscribed :

TO THE GLORY OF GOD  
AND IN LOVING AND GRATEFUL  
MEMORY OF

ISABELLA BAKER

FOUNDER OF THE DAY STAR MISSION  
WHO ENTERED THE ETERNAL GLORY  
23RD OCTOBER 1938

REDEEMED WITH THE PRECIOUS  
BLOOD OF CHRIST

THY WORD WAS UNTO ME THE  
JOY AND REJOICING OF MINE HEART  
CAN YOU WONDER WHY IT IS

I LOVE HIM SO ?

Mrs Morris told me that when Mrs Baker was old she was infatuated with more than one younger man. She used to send her chauffeur for a man who was brought back for breakfast. She tired of him who was then replaced 'by a con man called Captain Geary' (*Mrs Morris's words not mine*). He became a trustee for the properties in 1923 and was one of her executors. According to Mrs Morris, Mrs Baker left virtually everything to Captain Geary on condition that he allowed her ladies to continue living in the house for the rest of their lives. She also left each lady £500 and something for Florrie. However, Captain Geary made life so unbearable for them that they all left and he sold everything. 'He was a rotter!' - according to Mrs Morris.

Captain Geary and his wife then opened the premises as the Day Star Mission Guest House. A small brochure described it as 'a Christian Holiday Home and Guest House, comfortably furnished,

gas fires in the bedrooms and bathrooms on each floor with hot and cold water. About 5 minutes walk from the sea and within easy access of station and of buses which run to the beautiful country and places of interest around Dover. Terms from 35/- per week according to room and season. Reductions made for permanent guests. Every care is taken to ensure comfort of guests. Family prayers daily. Services on Sunday and meetings during the week are held in the adjoining Mission Hall'.

Despite Mrs Morris's assertions about Captain Geary it appears that the Mission Hall activities continued for a while after Mrs Baker's death. Eric James told me that Captain Geary was between 40 and 50 when he took over but he did not last a year because he did not have enough money to run the place. Attendances at the Mission dropped off - perhaps because all the perks for the needy stopped.

To date I know little about the War years. Both Eric James and another contact say that the premises were taken over by the WRNS. In 1946 Stanley Geary and Leslie Philips (another of the Bakers' Trustees from 1923 and presumably a

beneficiary in her will) sold the premises to The British Sailors' Society.

So ended the era of Mrs Baker and the Day Star Mission but the premises have more to tell with the opening in 1949 of the Seamen's Residential Club followed in 1953 by the Prince of Wales Sea Training School. After its closure in 1975 Dover College used the premises as a school boarding house for girls until 1994. In 1996 the YMCA purchased the buildings and began renovation work to prepare Prospect House - or Prince of Wales House as it is now called- for the next phase of its fascinating life.

*Footnote Why Day Star? The dictionary tells us that the day star is the morning star - the bringer of light. The Christian connection is of course Jesus being called the light of the world. Charles Wesley in his hymn 'Christ whose glory fills the skies' ends the first verse 'Day star in my heart appear'. In 2 Peter 1 verse 19 the writer says 'So we are even more confident of the message proclaimed by the prophets. You will do well to pay attention to it, because it is like a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the light of the morning star shines in your hearts.'*

*Copyright reserved.*



*Prince of Wales House as it is today*