

The Knockers of Dover

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Knocker is not a family name heard in Dover any more. There are those of the older generation however who may well only just remember its last vestige in the person of Frederick William Knocker (1873-1944), curator of the old Dover Corporation Museum in the 1930s, and latterly as its part in the title of the firm of Castle Street solicitors Knocker, Elwin & Lambert which lasted into the modern era and now known simply as Bradleys. That alas is all.

Yet once upon a time and still within living memory the Knockers would have been instantly recognizable to everyone as the embodiment of a unique dynasty which held sway over Dover's municipal affairs for a record four generations over three centuries. Between the years 1797 to 1935 their members included firstly Jurat and Alderman, then Mayor and lastly and most importantly as three successive Town Clerks to the Dover Corporation. More than that, the procedures and protocols for each and every installation of Lord Wardens of the Cinque Ports put in place since that of Lord Palmerston in 1861 are almost entirely due to the Knockers' revival of ceremony and input to them right up to the present day. The world looks on at this bequest.

In retrospect the Knockers' day to day looming influence over town affairs might by modern standards of judgment be seen as that of part of an overweening coterie of controlling families that would not curry favour to our taste. In the very long term however the impact that they and their travails have had on the development and administration of the town of Dover, as to



Sir E Wollaston Knocker

how we now know it, has been probably unequalled anywhere else in the realm, let alone in Dover.

This achievement nowadays has lost recognition. It is the purpose of this essay therefore to do justice to an extraordinary family and pay tribute to their heritage which all who came after them enjoy even to this very day. For all that these Dover born and resident folk, Freemen of the Borough, did for Dover, it is lamentable that they have now become so totally forgotten and their memorials of burial so neglected.

As a surname, Knocker is unusual. Its provenance and meaning are obscure but what is for sure is that it is rare, and is almost exclusively eastern Kentish in background. It first appeared in Dover in the 1670s. One is therefore given to ponder, for want of any other explanation, whether it and the seemingly related surname Knocke, might

not have some Flemish type connexion perhaps with the town of Knokke in Belgium but this can only be passing speculation. From its Dover origins it spread around the country and to other English speaking countries in the world. Like as not most of those with this surname today all probably descend from the same roots. The only existing annals and family history of the Dover Knockers are to be found in meticulous detail in four booklets produced between 1975-1981 by retired Cdr (RN) W. Robert Knocker (1913-1995). These are deposited with the Society of Genealogists, Dover Public Library Local History Section (in part) and Bradleys of Dover, solicitors. The booklets, in genealogically chronological order, are as follows:

John Knocker (1721/2 - 1793)

[November 1981]

William Knocker (1761 - 1847)

[May 1982]

John Bedingfield Knocker (1793 - 1861)

[Preface dated September 1975]

William Knocker (1795 - 1882)

[June 1976]

Much of this material is based on a Knocker family archive compiled by Mrs Paula Irwin (1921-1990) of Southend-on-Sea who was a Dover Knocker by descent on her maternal line. This archive is still being actively sought.

There are also excellent fulsome memoirs to be found in the Dover Express editions of 4th January 1901, 27th September 1907 and 9th March 1956 and also during the 1980s when a family vault at Cowgate Cemetery was broken into and resealed. These will be encompassed in later narratives. Similar detail may also be found in related articles in the "Dover Historian" which although admirably extensive do not quite bring the family as a whole all together in one piece.

No overall appraisal of this remarkable

family has therefore ever been attempted. This is very regrettable and somewhat surprising bearing in mind the fact that a father, son and grandson held record continuous office between 1860-1935 as three successive Town Clerks of Dover, during which time most of their life's work was in the day to day execution of every aspect of Government Acts of Parliament affecting local affairs and municipal function thereby bringing Dover into the modern world through such diverse areas as street naming, layouts and widening, drainage, pavement, education, addresses of welcome, reception and departure arrangements for royalty and dignitaries at the pier, electric tramway introduction, gas lighting and a myriad of other vital civic necessities. From the agrarian age to the industrial age, what they actually brought and achieved for Dover is incalculable and without compare. Much of Dover's infrastructure and a whole range of other local aspects are due to them in particular the construction in the 1880s of the Maison Dieu extension in Ladywell and the Connaught Hall therein.

No less important for posterity was the Knocker family's tireless work on and in emplacing of a Dover Corporation muniment cabinet in the Maison Dieu, especially created by them in 1877, as an archive repository for all manner of records of Dover's history as recounted in John Bavington Jones' (former Editor of the Dover Express) book "The Annals of Dover" published in 1916 (now available in reprint). The fate of this is however another story.

Castle Hill House, now a grade II listed building, is probably the one lasting monument to the Knocker family as their family home for many years in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and just as importantly as the office of Dover's Town Clerks until 1911-1913, whereafter it

moved to no 69 Castle Street, at the corner with Stembrook, the last shelled buildings of Dover in 1944, subsequently demolished.

Let us therefore begin with the progenitor of Dover's ruling clan, John Knocker (1721-1793). John Knocker was baptised at St Mary's Church Dover on 18th January 1721 the son of Joseph and Susanna Knocker. The trade of father and son was that of barber and periuke (wig) maker, a very profitable line of business in the standards of fashion of the day, possibly but unprovably brought from the near continent. Joseph Knocker was himself Dover born in around 1681 and had been married at Dover St Mary on 15th April 1704 to Susanna Tegge or Teague of unresearched background. They had had a large family some of their sons diversifying into pilotage and seafaring careers but it was their youngest who came to achieve municipal prominence for the family name. Curiously the prominent branch were to almost completely foreswear these origins through into their future thereby creating disparate lines of the same family.

It is recorded that John Knocker was married twice: Firstly to Susanna Dupont at St Dunstan's Canterbury on 30th December 1745 by whom he had four daughters, only one surviving, their mother dying months after the birth of the last unsurviving child, and buried at St Mary's Dover on 30th October 1752 (no memorial). Secondly John Knocker married Mary Stiles at Dover St Mary's on 28th January 1754 by whom he went on to have at least five children, nearly all unsurviving, but the most important of whom for this narrative was survivor son and heir William baptised at Dover St Mary's on 29th March 1761.

By this time John Knocker had moved on becoming Steward to Sir Edward Hales, of Hales Place, Hackington, Canterbury. Perhaps he made his wigs?



No depiction of John Knocker can now be traced. He died at Folkestone on 15th October 1784. The only tangible evidence of his existence which survives is the badly eroded headstone to him and his wife at St Stephen's Church, Hackington, Canterbury to where his body was borne at the time and which bears the inscription:

"Near this place lie interred the remains of/Mary the wife of John Knocker who/after a lingering illness died 15th October/1784 aetatis 59/Also of the above John Knocker who in the/72nd year of his age departed this life March 24th 1793".

The maintenance of this bricked grave is referred to in son William's last will and testament when he died at Alkham in 1847.

It has also to be said that of the whole Dover Knocker family only one of their municipally officed number, Sir Edward Wollaston Knocker was actually buried in Dover itself.

Thus came about the foundation of this Knocker ruling dynasty of Dover whose astonishing lives and careers will be recounted in the next episode of their story "A Succession of Town Clerks".