

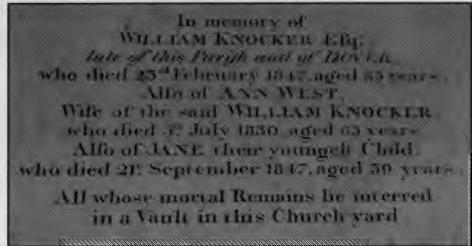
William Knocker (1761-1847) Father to a Succession of Town Clerks

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The careers of a three generational succession of Dover's Town Clerks from 1797 until 1935 all really started with William Knocker (1761 – 1847) upon whom this second essay will focus. The family needs little introduction, stemming back in Dover to the 1670s, their original trade being that of barbers and periwig makers through their progenitor, William's father, John Knocker (1721/2-1793), later Steward to Sir John Hale of Hackington, Canterbury, his story already having been detailed in my first essay "The Knockers of Dover".

William, out of a total of nine children, seven of whom died in early infancy from two marriages, was John Knocker's only surviving son, born to him at the age of forty years, by the second of his two marriages. A daughter of the first marriage, Susanna, born in Dover June 1748 also survived into marriage to Stephen Kennett, cooper of Folkestone, and a family of her own who died in 1798. It was William who first came to local prominence in Dover's affairs. From him descended the family tradition of legal service as solicitors, freemen of the borough and town officials through son number eight Edward (1804-1884).

William Knocker was born on 20th March 1761 and baptised at Dover St. Mary's on 29th March 1761, the son of John and Mary, nee Styles. It is not known alas where they then lived. Where he was schooled also cannot be traced but it was very possibly in Canterbury. What is known however is that at the age of sixteen he took articles of clerkship for five years on 2nd May 1777 with William Slodden, solicitor of that city,



*William Knocker Wall Plaque
in Church of St Anthony the Martyr Alkham Kent*

his father no doubt having good connexions there through his stewardship to Sir John Hale. From about 1786, and by then a Freeman of the Borough of Dover since 1782 at his twenty first birthday "by birth", William Knocker, qualified as a solicitor, set himself up in legal practice in Dover and is recorded as having a fine house on the Esplanade or Ropewalk. On 25th September 1787 at the age of twenty six years he was married at St Mary's to Ann West King (then only twenty years of age), the daughter of shipbuilder Thomas King, of a locally prominent family whose number included William King, twice mayor of Dover. Thus he embarked, no doubt with the help that his wife's monied background brought him, on his legal career in Dover, surely gaining privy through his marriage and by his own exertions, to all the covert machinations of local governance. From 1811 his business was known as "W & T Knocker" in partnership with his eldest son Thomas (who died in 1830). By so doing he was made Mayor of Dover four times between 1792 and 1817 and again in 1832 (aged seventy years). It was said that during his mayoralty the mayor's seat in St Mary's Church was never empty during Sunday services.

During his first mayoralty in 1798 the men of Dover were formed into eight volunteer companies and it was William Knocker who was captain of one of them. He thereby actively engaged in promoting the efficiency of the volunteer corps at Dover all the while the armies of France were mustering in 1804 on the opposite coast and preparing for invasion. He also had the captaincy of Archcliffe Fort whose guns were often actively employed in repelling the attacks of French privateers. Thus he came to the fore locally. In about 1820 William Knocker had sold his house on the Esplanade and bought the existing Bushy Ruff paper mill at Temple Ewell. He subsequently developed this with great endeavour by a programme of works including the construction of a canal to form a working enterprise producing brown and white paper. He also had constructed a very fine colonial style mansion nearby (which alas now is derelict after a subsequent checkered history) whereto he moved with his wife Ann in about 1825. Ann Knocker died at Bushy Ruff House on 5th July 1830 aged 63 years.

William Knocker had fathered thirteen children by his wife Ann, many of whom went on to illustrious futures. For example second son John Bedingfield Knocker (1793-1861) became a Royal Naval Commander based at Harwich later in the Indian Army, Madras and lastly manager of the London Bank in Snargate Street (now the Masonic Hall). He was the great grandfather of William Robert Knocker who is the modern day source of many of these notes. John and his family are buried in one of the large vaults at the top of Cowgate Cemetery (now repaired after desecration during the 1980s).

No doubt however much to everyone's surprise and dismay not least to his three old maid daughters still at home who

promptly moved out, William Knocker took off, at the age of seventy two years, with his "housekeeper" Sarah Tyson aged twenty years (baptised at Dover St James on 12th September 1813, daughter of Matthew Mc Cormack Tyson, of Dolphin Lane, paper hanger). He married her out of the public eye three years after his first wife's death, at Chislehurst on 13th September 1833. Why Chislehurst remains a mystery but by its distance probably a purposeful disguise from local awareness bearing in mind the great difference of ages of the two parties.

As a final incredible twist in his life, by Sarah, William Knocker fathered his last and fourteenth child Frederic on 25th June 1835 when seventy four years of age and his wife still but twenty one. Frederic subsequently left Bushy Ruff at the age of twelve with his young mother upon his father's death in 1847 when the mill was sold and the big house given up. He was educated at King's School Canterbury, then went on to a career as a railway clerk at St Pancras raising a London based family among whom was Frederick William Knocker, one time museum curator at Penang, Straits Settlements and latterly the last curator (and also last Knocker of Dover) of the old Dover Corporation Museum until 1939 (he died long time widowed and descendentless unlamented at a hospice in Uckfield, Sussex in 1944). Frederic in retirement had returned to Bushy Ruff Cottage (not to be confused with the House) where he died in 1915 aged 79 years and was also buried like his father in Alkham churchyard, along with his first of two wives Janet (nee Hawkes). Their grave alas now subsumed in undergrowth but its inscription fortunately on record, his mother having died in distress after commission some years earlier to Colney Hatch Asylum, Hertfordshire in 1889 aged 75 years. This branch and their descendants were very much the forgotten Knockers,

perhaps consciously so.

William Knocker died "at his cottage" at Bushy Ruff on 23rd February 1847 aged eighty five years as a result of having dislocated his right shoulder and/or broke his right arm, and even his leg, some two months earlier after walking in his sleep one night and having fallen downstairs. He was apparently in the habit of every morning before breakfast walking up the hill to Ewell Minnis (the high ridge behind Bushy Ruff) and probably was in a daze in the dark when the accident occurred.

According to his obituary in a contemporary edition of the Dover Telegraph he died "a lamented gentleman", "a bright example to his fellow townsmen" and "conspicuous in using his influence and exertions in the promotion of every benevolent and pious institution". Further poignantly noting "when retired, from public life, the village schools became the objects of his care; and, he was often seen surrounded with a group of little children attentively listening to his kind and impressive advice". Apart from them, he certainly knew how to father a veritable school of children of his own into great age with an eye to two wives married at twenty to help him!

His railed grave site and flat tomb together with his first wife Ann, their unmarried son George Wigzell Knocker (1800-1863) formerly of the Honourable East India Company and three spinster daughters, Elizabeth Styles (1791-1880) Anne Wellard (1797-1873) and Jane (1808-1847), may be seen to this day. It is barely identifiable, badly eroded and subsumed by undergrowth to the left of the path leading through the churchyard from the lychgate to the church door at Alkham. A full transcription of the memorial inscriptions of this grave site are thankfully on record. Within the church may also be seen a wall

plaque to their memory. There is as yet no known depiction of the man himself.

The will of William Knocker is a subject of special note. A full copy of this will and its four codicils, the last of which was drawn up on his deathbed, typed with narrow spacing, requires eight sheets of foolscap and a further five similar sheets are required to cover the contents of affidavits by the young widow, some executors and some witnesses. These were largely due to apparent alterations or errors in the original manuscripts. It could be said that the whole might be considered as a good example of why a solicitor should never be allowed to draw up his own will!

The will itself was drawn up shortly after the death of his first wife, the first codicil after his remarriage, the second on the birth of his youngest and only child by his second wife and the third and the fourth, the last of which he had been unable to actually sign eleven days before his death, to amplify provisions for his wife and eleven year old son. All these documents except the last codicil were kept in a locked drawer of a cabinet in William Knocker's bedroom, to which Sarah Knocker had kept the key. She had frequently been reminded about the contents of the locked drawer but professed no knowledge of the nature of the documents themselves. Shortly before his death William Knocker had told his oldest son and one of the executors John Bedingfield Knocker about the whereabouts of his will and the key but that the drawer should not be opened until after the funeral. This request was complied with and only then were the will and three codicils found in the drawer in a sealed envelope.

Codicil number three dated 22nd May 1841 is worth reading for conjugal interest "I give and bequeath unto my wife Sarah in

addition to what I have given her by my other codicils the bed whereon we sleep and such of the furniture and materials in the chamber wherein we lie as she may think proper to choose also I give to my son Frederic my gold watch chains and seal so soon as he is of age to take care of them".

William Knocker's will was proved in London on 7th August 1847 whereby his estate was basically and complicatedly distributed among his surviving children and provision made for his young wife and son and his education and also for the upkeep of his parents' grave at St Stephen's, Hackington, Canterbury. The winding up of the estate and distribution of possessions, chattels etc. took years and not without very evident contention. This is clear from a handwritten memorandum written on 4th March 1847 by two of the executors, sons John Bedingfield Knocker and William Knocker junior (1795-1882 Royal Naval Commander and Merchant Navy Captain) in which it is recorded "We deeply lament the unseemly conduct during the projected arrangements for the interment of the remains of our late father and the niece of the elder of the undersigned Knockers, and the occurrences at the very grave itself, and seeing what occurred on such occasion we can have no confidence that the most unlooked for and unreasonable proceedings may not on a much less solemn occasion present themselves, and we hereby wish our Edward Knocker (brother) as co-executor and an attorney to understand it is our wish he carries out the intentions of the will in their plain literal meaning without favour or affection and without reference to the relationship between our father's children. The moveable property in the house at Bushy Ruff and elsewhere over which it is our duty as executors to exercise control and nothing will be removed without the mutual concurrence of all". Clearly in such a large family all was not

sweetness and light. William Knocker had altogether fourteen children, eight surviving at his death (five sons and three daughters). He had no less than sixty-five grandchildren although twenty-one were born to him posthumously. All were children of his sons who married (none of the daughters married), thirty four out of the sixty five being sons. In spite of this solid male foundation modern male descendants are but numbered and my next essay "A Succession of Town Clerks" will reveal that the Dover Knockers were as unprolific as their progenitors had been the opposite. It was once suggested that "the Knockers bred like flies but it would be but a few generations hence that all who started from one will be again back to square one" William Knocker's children were as follows:

By Ann West King -

1. John (1789-1790). Buried St James.
2. Thomas (1790-1830) Solicitor. Buried St James.
3. Elizabeth (1791-1798). Buried St James.
4. John Bedingfield (1793-1861) RN Commander, Indian Army Madras & Banker. Buried Cowgate.
5. Mary (1794 -1812). Buried St James.
6. William (1795-1882) RN Commander & Merchant Navy Captain. Buried Boulogne.
7. Ann Wellard (1797-1873). Buried Alkham.
8. Henry (1798 -1820). Buried St James.
9. George Wiggzell (1800 -1863) East India Company. Buried Alkham.
10. Sidney Herbert (1802- 1831) Lieutenant R.E. Buried Tobago, West Indies.
11. Edward (1804-1884) Solicitor, Town Clerk. Buried Torquay.
12. Elizabeth Styles (1806-1880). Buried Alkham.
13. Jane (1808-1847). Buried Alkham.

By Sarah Tyson -

14. Frederic (1835-1915) Railway Clerk. Buried Alkham.