

A Succession of Town Clerks

(1) Edward Knocker F.S.A. (1804-1884)

— Martyn Webster —

The office of municipal Town Clerk is a very old one in our country, no less so than for Dover's Corporation where according to John Bavington Jones' "Annals of Dover" (pub.1916) an unbroken list of names stretches back as far as 1499, although it probably extended much further back than that. Their role was basically to enact the corporation's agreed business as well as enforcing local Acts of Parliament, charters, trusts, decrees, orders and dictats etc.

Dover is undoubtedly unique in our realm in this regard. Most of its Town Clerks were originally local men whose lives over the years were interwoven and interrelated with other main families, trades and offices of the town, in particular between the years 1860-1935 when a father, son and grandson of the Knocker family held the office of Town Clerk successively. No other town in England could surely claim such fame. After them came just three more Town Clerks, for the first time none of them local to Dover, in office until the demise of Dover Corporation in 1974. Remarkably, all Dover's Town Clerks, whether local, or latterly not, were men of distinctly singular accomplishments in terms of strength of imposing character, personality, qualifications and competence and who each made an indelible and lasting mark upon the affairs of Dover as well as for the Cinque Ports for which they also held offices.

This succession and period of office of Dover's hereditary Town Clerks from 1860 to 1935 is as follows:

(1860-1868) Edward Knocker



*Edward Knocker FSA (1804-1884)
circa 1870-1 about 66yrs*

(1868-1907) Sir Edward Wollaston Knocker (Baronet)

(1907-1935) Reginald Edward Knocker

The family background to this three generational dynasty has already been recounted in my first two essays. This essay will concentrate on the start of the corporation dynasty itself. Much is already available in print about them largely thanks to very detailed contemporary accounts appearing in the Dover Express and excellent modern day features on them in the Dover Historian. The extensive family history work undertaken by my original sources, co-lateral descendants William Robert Knocker and

Paula Irwin stops short with William Knocker (1761-1847) so it is my pleasure to take up the family story where they left off. Between them, they are certainly an act to follow and something of a challenge to paraphrase from the super abundance of information already available, although not, I would suggest now widely known. Without therefore compromising the whole picture I will try to highlight, where possible, some of the lesser known facts about these three municipal Knocker titans.

First Town Clerk in the succession was Edward Knocker the eleventh child and eighth son of William and Ann West, nee King. He was born, probably at the family house on the Esplanade, on 10th September 1804 and baptised at St Mary's on 8th November 1804. His father was 43 years old at the time and his mother 37 - they would go on to produce two more children totalling thirteen altogether of whom ten survived into adulthood. Edward came into the world at a very fraught time for Dover when Napoleon's Grande Armee was massing for the invasion of England in tented encampments at Boulogne, 27 miles across the channel and visible to the naked eye on clear days. His father William was preoccupied through this period with his captaincy of Archcliff Fort as well as his solicitor's work and duties as a member of local government already once as mayor. Edward would thus have spent his formative years under the threat of old Boney, his father much energized by the circumstances of the time and brought up in a large family where most of his brothers went on to join the navy and/or go abroad. All his surviving sisters remained unmarried at home. It is not known where Edward was educated and trained so it can only be speculated that he apprenticed with his father and brother's

law firm W & T Knocker. Edward would have been in his late teens when the whole family took up residence at their Bushy Ruff mansion at Temple Ewell. When Edward was 26 years of age in 1830 his mother died aged 63, only for his then elderly father to soon take off and remarry, no doubt to astonishment all round, a young local girl and produce yet a further baby brother at a time when Edward by the first of three marriages already had two young children of his own by 1835. He was thus a father and a brother to babies at the same time Edward lived to be eighty years of age and was married three times, all to fathers-in-law with good monied connexions, as follows:

1. 10th September 1832 (at age 28) - 6th March 1835 at Kingston, Kent to Elizabeth Sarah Martha Bartlett, eldest daughter of Rev Thomas Bartlett of Kingston. Two children: one daughter and one son who died shortly after birth with mother.
2. 15th June 1837 (at age 33) - 11th October 1859 at Eastry to Elizabeth Mozier Walker, a daughter of Robert Walker, twice mayor of Dover and proprietor of Dover Oil Mills, Limekiln Street. Eight children: six sons (one died in infancy) and two daughters.
3. 7th August 1871 (at age 67) - 24th July 1884 at St James Westminster to Jane Cecilia Bayly Longworth Dames, daughter of Lieutenant General William Longworth Dames (5th (Northumberland Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot). She was born in Montreal, Lower Canada where her father was then garrisoned. Three children: two sons, one daughter.

He was thus widowed three times in his lifetime. Of all his eleven surviving children, the last but one by his third marriage (Alfred De Burgh Knocker, born 1874) lived longest until 1961, the second half of the twentieth century, and has been

noted in the national press as being a link to the twentieth century by someone who through his father could tell tale of life during the times of the Napoleonic Wars and the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo – a remarkable family achievement by any standard.

Castle Hill House, an imposing residence, now Grade II listed dating from 1760, was purchased by Edward Knocker in 1832 when it sold for £7,000. Along with three other businessmen, Edward Knocker also thereafter laid out Castle Street, the eastern part of which is on land that had formally been part of the estate. An annexe was then added to the right side of the house to form the Town Clerk's office which lasted there until 1911 when it moved to 69 Castle Street following the death of Edward Knocker's son and heir Sir Edward Wollaston Knocker. The triangular shrubbery in the roadway now is all that remains of the original front garden.

Edward Knocker was elected Town Clerk in 1860 on the death of his predecessor Thomas Baker Bass. At the time he, Edward Knocker, as well as local solicitor, was Clerk of the Paving Commission, a local body which had the principal share of town management. He was also Clerk of the Local Health Board, Register and Clerk of Dover Castle, Seneschal of the Grand Court of Shepway (Cinque Ports), Registrar of St James' Burial Board, Clerk of the Commissioners of Property an Income Tax, Treasurer of Dover Hospital, the Church Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Sailors' Society. He relinquished his post as Town Clerk of Dover in favour of his eldest son and first born child, Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker, in 1868. He carried on however as alderman and then elected mayor in 1870-1. In that capacity, having ordered a new mayoral robe, he attended (although

in what capacity is not quite clear) the opening by Queen Victoria of the Royal Albert Hall, London on 18th March 1871. The robe he wore was described as being "a superb garment of crimson silk, purple velvet bands, silk tassels with sable trimming". The only known depiction, a photograph, of Edward Knocker dates from this time, showing him clad in his finery. On retirement he presented the town of Dover with the mayor's wand of office (a white painted wooden staff with silver gilt Crown finial with ferrule to the base). It is still used on ceremonial occasions by the town mayor.

"It was at that time that he called to the attention of the Town Council the great necessity for carefully examining and classifying the documents in their keeping, and gave two or three reports as to ancient charters and deeds in the Corporation's possession. This so aroused the interest of the Council in the matter that they determined on the creation of a new officer styled the Corporation Honorary Librarian which post Edward Knocker accepted and filled during the remainder of his life. Fully appreciating the importance of the work that had been commenced in that capacity, the Town Council gave to the Honorary Librarian sufficient help to copy many years' records of the Corporation in Stuart times which would not have otherwise been available-at any rate not in form that would be of any practical use, and those bulky manuscript books as well as numbers of carefully arranged drawers with documents systematically numbered, docketed and arranged, form the legacy of archaeological lore which Edward Knocker left in a Muniment cabinet of rosewood especially constructed in 1877 by local builder Herbert Stiff. This may still be seen with numbered drawers still intact in the Council Chamber under the window.

Edward Knocker also was a very active church man and took the principal part in the arrangements for building St James (new) Parish Church (destroyed in the Second World War) which was considered in its day without exception the most perfect archaeological edifice which Dover possessed and he exhibited even greater interest in the thorough restoration of the ancient church of St James the Apostle (severely damaged in the Second World War and now a tidy ruin), as a chapel of ease for the parish.

Perhaps it was in connection with the Cinque Ports that he won most lasting distinction, occupying the position as Registrar of the Cinque Ports and Seneschal of the Grand Court of Shepway. It fell to his lot, when Lord Palmerston took the office of Lord Warden in 1861, to make the extensive research which was entailed by reviving in all its freshness and quaintness the installation ceremony which had centuries before been enacted at the Bredenstone on the Western Heights, Dover. He directed the ceremony with the correctness of details so dear to all lovers of archaeology and he subsequently made a permanent record of the event in a handsome volume entitled "The Grand Court of Shepway" which is now the chief authority on the Cinque Port ceremonies.

As a public man in Dover Edward Knocker passed a busy and useful life. His readiness to communicate from his store of knowledge, information connected with the history of Dover, led him on several occasions to occupy the platform and give lectures before Kent archaeological societies, several of his lectures existing in pamphlet form. Then in his later years having classified documents in the archives of the Dover Corporation he, when the matter was fresh in his mind, gave to the town council an address on the

antiquities of Dover, which was published under his supervision, and is probably the most reliable book on that subject now extant." (Extracted from the Dover Express)

It was also during this time that Edward Knocker, soon to be married for the third time in 1871, left Dover altogether, yet returning frequently, and relocated firstly to Austria House, Ventnor and then to Cameron Villa at St John's, Ryde, Isle of Wight alternately moving, presumably seasonally, from there to a residence at Torquay, Devon. So he carried on for subsequent years until his third wife Jane, mother of his three youngest children, died at Westward Ho! North Devon at the age of 45 on 28th July 1884 (she is buried in Northiam churchyard) while Edward lived on for a further five months finally departing this life on Christmas Day 1884 aged 80 at 4 Lisbourne Crescent, Torquay, his death from "Organic Visceral Disease & Asthenia from sickness 2 weeks" being registered by his eldest son and heir E. Wollaston Knocker. His last will and testament was made out only ten days before.

Edward Knocker is buried in Torquay cemetery, his headstone standing to this day fully legible. Reference to him is also made on the memorial of his son Sir Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker at St James' Cemetery Dover. Both inscriptions record after his name the letters F.S.A. (Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries) to which body he was elected in 1874, he having deposited his printed works on Dover's records to their library where they may now still be seen. It was said that whenever in any excavations in Dover anything was discovered of historic interest he was the first to investigate it together with subsequent observations placed on record in particular a very

ancient oak landing stage unearthed on the building of a gasometer in Fectors Place. He would have been in his element during today's rebuildings!

One of the last visits to Dover was on the occasion of the Archaeological Society meeting in Dover in the year 1883 when he read a paper on the insignia of the Dover Corporation. But his last visit of all was a few months before his death, by then widowed a third time, to take part in the proceedings of the Church Missionary Society, the local branch of which he had assisted in establishing 50 years before he died. A resolution proposed by the mayor was passed at the first town council meeting after his death placing in their minutes a recognition of his valuable services to the Corporation.

For a man, the greatest fount of knowledge of Dover in all time, who had had a major part in almost every conceivable aspect of Dover's local governance, curiously at the time of his death no obituary of Edward Knocker was published. Only at the time of his son Sir Edward Wollaston Knocker's knighthood in 1901 did any account of his life appear in public, also again at his son's death in 1907 and the resultant obituary in the Dover Express of 27th September 1907.

His role as Dover Librarian and custodian and cataloguer of Dover's unique archive collection must be added to his many great legacies to us including no less than the revival of ceremony used to this day for the installation of Lord Wardens of the Cinque Ports, a subject upon which he was the unrivalled expert. His cherished Muniment cabinet archive collection had to be safeguarded during the Second World War in the former prison cells in the Maison Dieu basement where they were subjected to damp unfavourable conditions for many years. It was only in 1979, in the

face of some local opposition, after the dissolution of Dover Corporation in 1974, the archives were removed in two truckloads to the Kent Record Office (now the Kent History & Library Centre) at Maidstone where they were conserved, catalogued and made available to the general public. One can only hope that he would have approved of what became an inevitability. Like him or not (and one wonders what impression he would have made on meeting him) the impact that this one extraordinary man who placed such an indelible imprint upon Dover's living and recorded history has made on the heritage of Dover is therefore incalculable. It was such that it carried on through his son and grandson for a further fifty years after his death and in many ways for all of us to this very day. Would that we are worthy of it.

From this essay's point of view Edward Knocker is focal to the whole story since it was to him that this author's great-grandfather, Alfred William Webster, was indentured as a writer in 1874, then 15 years old, for seven years, and through him by apprenticeship made a Freeman of the Borough of Dover in 1881 and Corporation Minute Clerk until 1920, altogether 46 years' service as right hand man and every bit party to the whole dynasty's operation and as such my own personal inspiration for these essays.

Edward Knocker's children

By Elizabeth Sarah Martha Bartlett (1814-1835). Buried Kingston, Kent.

1. Emily Elizabeth (1833-1916), later wife of cousin Edward Newman Knocker, Solicitor, Sevenoaks. Buried Woodbury Park, Tunbridge Wells.
2. Edward Tottenham (8.2.1835-10.2.1835) buried with mother, Kingston

By Elizabeth Mozier Walker (1806-1859). Buried St James (new)

3. Edward Wollaston Nadir (1838-1907) Solicitor & Town Clerk. Buried St James (new)

4. Henrietta Augusta (1839-1853) Unmarried. Buried St James (new)

5. Louise Mozier (1841-1917) Unmarried. Buried St James (new)

6. Walker Geary (1842-1933) Clerk in Holy Orders, one time curate St James (1869-1873). Buried Exwick Road Cemetery, Exeter, Devon.

7. Henry Bunbury (1844-1889) Merchant Navy Officer P & O, (sail & steam), later auctioneer and estate agent. Died Ore, Hastings. Buried Guestling, Sussex.

8. Sidney Herbert (1846-1914) Bank Clerk. Died Aston, Birmingham. Burial place as yet untraced.

9. James Wigzell (15.4.1848-19.4.1848). Buried St James

10. Vernon Edwin (1849-1933), solicitor, partner in E & V Knocker. Buried Deal.

By Jane Cecilia Bayly Longworth Dames (1840/1-1883) Buried Northiam, Devon.

11. Edward William Longworth (1872-1933) O.B.E. Diplomat at British Embassy Rome. Buried in Protestant Cemetery, Rome

12. Alfred De Burgh (1874-1961) Ceylon Tea & Rubber Planter. Buried Torquay

13. Christine Cecilia (1876-1917). Unmarried. Buried St James (new)

Edward Knocker's Headstone Inscription, Torquay Devon "Even to hoar/hairs will I carry you/Isaiah 46:4/In/memory of/Edward Knocker, Esq. F.S.A.,/late of Dover and Ryde/Who died at Torquay on Christmas Day 1884/Aged 80 years//The dead in Christ shall rise first"/"Them also which sleep in Jesus will God/Bring with Him"/1 Thessalonians IV

14.15/Also/Alfred De Burgh Knocker/ Youngest son of the above/Died 2nd January 1961/Aged 86 years/ Also/Mary/Wife of the above Alfred/Died 24th June 1972/Aged 95 years."

Edward Knocker's family memorial, St James (new) Cemetery, Dover, Kent. "In memory of/Elizabeth Mozier Knocker/the beloved wife of/Edward Knocker Esq/who died 11 October 1859/Aet 54/Also of/Henrietta Augusta/their daughter/who died June 1853/Aet 14/And of their two infant sons buried in family vaults/at Alkham and St James' Church/Also of the above/Edward Knocker Esq F.S.A/who died at Torquay/on Christmas Day 1884/Aged 80/His mortal remains are interred/in Torquay cemetery."

"In/loving memory/of Christine Celia Knocker/youngest daughter of the/the late Edward Knocker/who passed away 25th Sept. 1917/aged 41"



Edward Knocker Grave Torquay Cemetery Devon