

A Succession of Town Clerks (3)

Sir Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker (1838-1907)

Part I

————— Martyn Webster —————

This is the fourth essay in my series of Essays focusing on the Knocker family and their three generations of Town Clerkships of Dover. Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker, often referred to as Wollaston Knocker, reigned supreme over and above all of them and in 1901 was knighted for his services. He is believed to be the only Dover Town Clerk to have been so honoured. Such is the magnitude of his credentials that this essay devoted to him must be divided into two parts. I can do no better than to quote directly, with appropriate editing here and there, from the words of the Dover Express itself in doing so. Dover surely stands unique in this man.

"Dover Express" Friday January 4th, 1901 Memoir of Sir Wollaston Knocker

Sir Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker was the second child and eldest son of Mr Edward Knocker F.S.A., solicitor of Dover and his wife Elizabeth Mozier, daughter of Robert and Elizabeth Mozier, nee King, Walker of Dover. He was born on Tuesday, July 17th, 1838 at Castle Hill House where he died on Sunday the 22nd of September 1907 aged 69 years. His unusual second and third forenames are a bit of a mystery but it may be that Wollaston related to Thomas Vernon Wollaston (Vernon being a name given to his brother) (1822-1878), a noted entomologist, possibly a protégé of his father. The name Nadir is another matter. He had a keen regard for the welfare, history and traditions of the ancient Cinque Port that was his birthplace, and his whole life was devoted to it; for with the exception of his school days spent in Highgate and other brief intervals of absence the whole of his three score years and nine were spent in Dover where he qualified for his position as a solicitor following in the steps of his father and throwing himself



Sir Wollaston Knocker (1838-1907)

earnestly into local affairs having made a name for himself as the greatest of the Town Clerks of Dover. At the age of 24 he married Clara Caroline daughter of Monsieur F.D. Chantrelle, of Bruges, Belgium, Chevalier of the Order of Leopold and Managing Director of the West Flanders Railway, their surviving family consisting of four sons and one daughter. His hereditary association with Dover has already been recounted.

A great Town Clerk

The biographer of Sir Wollaston Knocker will find much to say respecting his active and useful career but the feature of his life standing out in greatest prominence was his position as Town Clerk and as far as the records of history afford information he appears to have been beyond all question the greatest Town Clerk

Dover has ever had, whether we regard the length of his term - nearly approaching 40 years - or the great care and wise discretion manifested in the advice given to the Corporation. In years past when political fluctuations used to sweep one party from power and bring in another, at municipal banquets he used to playfully remark "Men may come and men may go but I go on for ever". He spoke that in no disrespectful sense or flippant manner for there never was a Town Clerk more loyal to the party in power or more respectful to the Mayor in office no matter what his views or politics might be. Nevertheless the comings and goings in the Council Chamber during Sir Wollaston's term of Town Clerkship have been very many. During his term of office he saw about 144 different members in the Council, 22 different Mayors, 5 Surveyors (each of whom he had more or less to initiate in their duties); there were in his time 3 Recorders, 3 Treasurers, 2 Clerks of the Peace, 2 Town Sergeants, 3 Clerks to the Magistrates, 2 Town Criers and 2 Superintendents of the Police. In every office there was one change or more. The personal changes that occurred since 1868 are quite equalled by the transformation that had been brought about in municipal affairs. Since he took office the town doubled in population and area. Legislation has year after year brought many changes, some few of the new enactments tending to simplify but the great number to complicate local government. The dual system of Town Council and Local Board which he found when he came into office has been merged in one. Year after year additional legislation piled new work on the Town Clerk's office. The change from open voting to vote by ballot entailed much labour in its initiation. The boundaries of the Borough were three times extended in Sir Wollaston's term and twice had the Education laws made radical changes in administration - the first making the Corporation responsible for enforcing school attendance, and the second making it the supreme Educational Authority in the

Borough. Both in his capacity as Town Clerk and as secretary of Dover College, the Town Clerk had much to do with the administration of technical and higher education, the provisions of the last Education Act having nearly doubled the work in his office. In connection with the Local Government Act of 1894 the Town Clerk initiated a scheme for merging the whole of the Borough of Dover into one parish for civil purposes which entailed the appointment of the whole of the overseers by the Corporation and to the Town Clerk fell the duty of being clerk to the new rates levying authority. Another still greater change which Sir Wollaston recommended and organised was the consolidation of the Borough Debt and converting it into Dover stock. The introduction of the new illuminant electricity entailed a great deal of labour in the Town Clerk's office - labour that it was all the more difficult to perform because the ground was new. The initial stages required watchfulness on the part of the Town Clerk to warn the Council against too precipitate action on dangerous ground on the one hand, and on the other, against delaying action too long, and allowing outsiders to slip in and secure a monopoly. The Town Clerk served the Corporation well in that respect: powers were secured to the town by his advice but when the time for action the Council were too fainthearted to take the field, with the result that the powers were handed over to a private company to be bought back at a later date. The whole action of the Council in this matter had been the subject of hot debates, but there was no question as to the ability of the Town Clerk in performing the heavy and responsible work which the new system of illumination in its initiation cast on his department. Even in a greater degree the widening of the town thoroughfares entailed official responsibilities on the Town Clerk, the work being more than doubled by the contentions which arose as to the way that improvement should be carried out. It may be said that it was through great tribulation that the scheme of street

improvement was carried to a successful issue, but in its completion it has worked a transformation so that the Dover that the Town Clerk left was a far better one than that which he found when he entered on his duties. Another great work was the introduction of the electric trams. Sir Wollaston Knocker together with Mr Stilgoe, the Surveyor, took the official burden of the inception of that great charge on their shoulders and seeing that Dover was then leading the municipalities and had no other Corporation owning electric trams from which to gather experience, it may be fairly said that the Town Clerk piloted well in that critical period. The net result of those works of street widening, electric lighting and electric trams had been to raise Dover from the third rank to a first rank provincial town. During Sir Wollaston's term of office Dover life was brightened by the provision of facilities for recreation in the Park, the Granville Gardens, the Baths the Danes and the Athletic Ground and in respect to all these the Town Clerk worked with the ardour of a patriotic townsman quite apart from mere official responsibility. For improving the seafront he both as a professional and as an individual townsman was greatly interested in obtaining and administering the East Cliff Sea Defences Act and for bettering the condition of the people it became his duty to put in force in the Borough the Artisans Dwellings Act and the Allotment Acts and during his time there sprang up an entirely new preventive section of the sanitary department including a system of sanitary oversight, an Isolation Hospital and a system of inspection to ensure that the people were supplied with wholesome food and drink compared with the go-as-you-please system of 40 years previously. All these changes amounted to a revolution and in giving effect to new enactments and remedial schemes the Town Clerk had been the pivot on which the machinery had moved and its smooth working had been due to his power of initiation, tact and good judgement. Sir Wollaston was by far the longest of all the town

clerks and as in earlier times the appointment was usually for one year, so it is probable that if we had a perfect list of all the previous town clerks the late Town Clerk's record would not have been broken. It is 47 years since a town clerk died in office. That was Mr Thomas Baker Bass. Previous to that there is no record of the town clerk's death in office and it is possible that such an occasion was rare. All of his life' work as Town Clerk and solicitor was conducted in the Town Clerk's office which would appear to have been specially constructed to the right side of his residence at Castle Hill House. This is still clearly evident today. All of the day to day business was minuted by hand in yearly ledgers and only after his death did it take printed form. These archives are now kept at Maidstone in their entirety

An officer of the Cinque Ports

As an officer of the Cinque Ports Sir Wollaston had fully caught the enthusiasm manifested by his father in that ancient Confederation. He was appointed Registrar of the Ports as the successor of his father in 1875 and was made solicitor of the ports on the occasion of the Court of Brotherhood and Guestling being held at Dover in 1887. He also filled the office of Seneschal of the Grand Court of Shepway on three occasions, the first being when the court was formed on Bredenstone Hill on 22nd June 1892 for the administration of the ancient oath to the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports; and on two subsequent occasions when the Marquis of Salisbury and Lord Curzon were severally installed, the court on both those occasions being formed in Dover College grounds. In each of these historic scenes although the Lord Wardens were the central figures, the guiding spirit of those great ceremonies was Sir Wollaston Knocker, who, by his masterly management, infused into the proceedings the odour and realism of antiquity. He was an equally important factor in the arrangements of the two Courts of Brotherhood and

Guestling of the Cinque Ports which were held at Dover on the occasions of Queen Victoria's Jubilees in the summers of 1887 and 1897. Installations are held at Dover in accordance with ancient custom, but the Courts of Brotherhood and Guestling were most frequently held at other ports, and those two Courts of Brotherhood and Guestling were convened at Dover through the influence that Sir Wollaston wielded throughout the Cinque Ports, it being an interesting fact that when the court was held at Dover in 1887 there had not been a similar gathering at this port since 1599. To organise such a gathering after an interval of 288 years required no little reconstructive skill; but everything was so well arranged the meeting aroused a great revival of interest in the affairs of the Cinque Ports. The event which Sir Wollaston threw himself into with the greatest zeal for the ports was the Coronation of King Edward VII. A great effort was made on that occasion to revive in all their picturesque details the provision and bearing of canopies over their Majesties King Edward and Queen Alexandra in Westminster Abbey according to the custom of many centuries. On the committee appointed to claim privileges and to carry out the ceremony, Sir Wollaston who had then recently been knighted, as Registrar of the Cinque Ports, was named first after the Speaker of the Ports, and on Sir Wollaston devolved the greater part of the work. The privileges of the Cinque Ports having been dropped at the coronations of King William IV and Queen Victoria, it was no easy task to get the old machinery into going order again. So well was the case of the Cinque Ports put in the position, in which Sir Wollaston secured the assistance of the late Mr F.A. Inderwick K.C., in drawing up, that the claims of the Cinque Ports to send Barons to bear the canopies were allowed without reserve, but it was stated that as there would be no procession to and from the Abbey there would be no need of canopies but the privileges of the Ports to act on future occasions would not be prejudiced. With less

persistent defenders of privileges this answer would have settled the matter; but the Committee of Privileges renewed their suit and prayed the Barons of the Cinque Ports to be allowed to attend with the canopies at the Abbey to receive their Majesties as they arrived and departed to and from the Coronation. Eventually it was decided that there were to be no canopies, but special places were secured for the selected Barons of the Ports in the Abbey, and during the ceremony they between them bore the four standards of Ireland, Scotland, England, and the Union, and lowered them in homage to the King as he passed into the choir. The substitution of duty was a compromise but it gave the dignified position of the Barons of the Ports an honour that was largely due to the tact and perseverance of Sir Wollaston in his capacity as Solicitor of the Ports. He has since taken part in other Cinque Ports' business but that was his last great work. He has also striven to secure the installation of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales as Lord Warden at Dover and it was a disappointment to him that that could not be arranged. This same right was enacted at the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953.

As a volunteer officer

The longest period of public service which Sir Wollaston Knocker rendered was as a Volunteer. He joined the Cinque Ports Volunteers in 1859, a young man of 21 years, and he remained in the service, passing through grade after grade up to the highest, receiving as recognition for his patriotic sacrifices the distinctions of V.D., and C.B. Family traditions no doubt inspired the Knockers to join the Volunteers (for his brother and his son have attained distinction as Volunteer officers). Sir Wollaston's grandfather in the days of Lord Warden Pitt, was the oldest Volunteer officer in Dover. Capt. William Knocker was with the Dover Volunteers on 23rd October 1803 when eight companies of them, dressed for the first time in their scarlet

regimentals, paraded on the Ropewalk (i.e. the seafront), and marched with Colonel the Right Hon. W Pitt at their head to Maison Dieu Fields; and again on 22nd December 1807 the Dover Volunteers marched from the Ropewalk to the Northfall Meadow. William Knocker, riding in front of them as the oldest captain. As we have said, young Edward Wollaston Knocker joined the Volunteers at Dover in 1859, was Ensign and in 1862, Lieutenant in 1863, and on the retirement of Mr J.G. Churchward from the command of the Dover Company in 1864, attained the rank of Captain Commandant. He commanded the Dover Company until his promotion to the rank of Major in the year 1872 on which occasion he was presented by the Dover Company with a sword and spurs, which he has used ever since. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in 1874. In that year the two battalions in East Kent, the 4th East Kent and the 2nd Cinque Ports, were consolidated into one battalion, and Major Knocker, who up to that time had been of the Cinque Ports Battalion, became Lt-Col by seniority. From that time, and for 30 years after he commanded the East Kent Battalion of the Rifle Volunteers. In the year 1874 no less than 18 officers of the battalion and 538 men were present at the Easter manoeuvres at Dover. In 1892 Lt-Col Knocker was raised to the rank of Hon. Colonel. He had commanded the regiment more than a quarter of a century when the Transvaal war broke out and the time limit required his retirement but his time was extended and during that great national crisis no less than 200 men from his battalion went to the front and participated in active service. After the war he retired with the distinction of 30 years' service and of having been one of the most useful Volunteer officers that have served their country.

As a lawyer

The pursuits of Sir Wollaston Knocker as already detailed might lead to the impression that in his profession as a lawyer he did little;

but that would be a wrong impression. He did not figure much as an advocate, nor did he shine as a public speaker, but as a reliable solicitor he fully maintained the reputation gained by his father and grandfather. The business of his firm seldom came into the Law Courts and the fact that he was in most cases able to protect his clients' interests without appeal to the Courts was one of his distinctions as a solicitor.

As a literary man

Least of all amidst his many avocations would it be expected that Sir Wollaston Knocker would be able to devote any time to literature. Nevertheless, he was keenly interested in the branches of literature which dealt with history and antiquities. It is very probable that if his life had been spared another ten years, he might have found time in the evening of life, to emulate his father, and to have left a substantial compendium of historic facts immediately associated with Dover and the Cinque Ports. It is one of the great losses that we have to sustain in connection with his death that with the resources at his command he did not live to carry out that work. Fortunately he has done something in that direction.

If the minute books of the Dover Corporation were searched from the year 1868 to the present time, there would be found, scattered over the 39 years, copies of an enormous collection of addresses which Sir Wollaston drafted for presentation to all sorts and conditions of 'illustrious personages'. He was an adept at such composition, and if those addresses were collected in one volume, it would be a unique production, and municipal rarity. Also through those minutes would be found numerous carefully compiled votes of thanks given to mayors and others in recognition of public services. He, in preparing those resolutions, had the knack of compressing into a few well chosen sentences the work of a year or the features of a great

event. Many such resolutions of commendation are mural ornaments of which the owners are proud.

Another valuable work of a literary character which Sir Wollaston has left is a thin folio volume, illustrated, relating to the regalia, muniments and officials of the Corporation. It contains a list of the Mayors from the time of the Conquest and lists, so far as they are known, the town clerks, stewards, and recorders; illustrations of the Corporation plate, mace, seals, etc.; lists of pictures; and particulars of charities. It is not a large work, but one of great value.

Another valuable contribution is a thin quarto (illustrated), containing a record of the Coronation of their Majesties King Edward VI and Queen Alexandra, as far as it was associated with the ancient privileges of the Cinque Ports; and it also contains valuable information relating to the part taken by the Cinque Ports in previous Coronations. The frontispiece of this book consists of a group of the 18 Barons who attended the Coronation, in which there is a lifelike portrait of Sir Wollaston Knocker standing beside the Speaker of the Ports.

Sir Wollaston Knocker has, we believe, contributed various articles on local topics to publications. In "Bygone Kent", a volume issued in 1892 he contributed a very interesting article on Dover Castle, dealing with its history from the earliest times down to date. In its conclusion he remarks if there is but little other similarity between Dover Castle of the early Christian era and Dover Castle in 1892, the sound of discipline and trumpets still exists within its walls. He modestly adds this paper cannot lay claim to be original or to contain anything new; it is only an attempt to give a few facts upon a large subject deserving a better hand and more extended treatment. "Bygone Kent" is in the Proprietary Library and the library is also enriched by 30 volumes of extracts from the "Gentleman's Magazine" on historic antiquarian

and topographical subjects presented by Sir Wollaston Knocker and affording a fair index to the literary bent of his mind.

As the successor of his father, he was the honorary librarian of the Dover Corporation. In that capacity he had not much to do, because his father spent several years of the latter part of his life in collecting, arranging and classifying the records of Dover which are deposited in the new muniment cabinet in the council chamber. Sir Wollaston esteemed the appointment for one reason because the office was created as a compliment to his father, to continue his association with the corporation.

As a churchman

Sir Wollaston Knocker as a member of the Church of England held broad evangelistic views. Like his father, he took great interest in the Parish of St James the Apostle, and after restoration of the old church in 1869, he regularly attached himself to the place of worship where he had a Bible class, trained the choir and acted as organist. It has been remarked that it is the busy man who does things that idle men cannot find time to do. It was so with Sir Wollaston - his occupations lay in all directions, but it is possible that for a good number of years he found his keenest delight in the Christian work in which he took part in the ancient church of St James, (now but a tidy ruin) which stood but a few feet from his front door. His choir practices choir outings and choir suppers were events to which some now no longer young enough to be claimed as choirboys look back with interest. It is a matter of interest that only three weeks before his death he entertained the united choirs of the two churches to breakfast on the day of their first united outing, and a group photograph was taken by Mr C.S Harris contains a very good photograph of Sir Wollaston in the midst of the choir (photo now lost). In the old church with which he was so closely associated a part of the simple service connected with his funeral took place (to be recounted in the next essay)