

A Succession of Town Clerks

Reginald Edward Knocker MBE

Part III

————— Martyn Webster —————

This is the fifth and final in my series of essays on the Knockers of Dover and their unprecedented tenure of office as Town Clerks for 75 years through three successive generations and brings their story, as far as Dover is concerned, forever to a close.

Reginald Edward Knocker was the third child and oldest surviving son of the nine children of Sir Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker and his wife Clara Caroline, nee Chantrell. He held the record as the third and last generation of Knockers to be Dover's Town Clerk and the last of his family to be of the town. Born on 18th September 1870 at Castle Hill House where his father, second in the succession of Dover's Town Clerks, not only resided but also held office. He succeeded, aged 37, to the municipal title on the death in 1907 of his father, to whom he had acted as deputy for many years, assisted from 1882 onwards by his uncle Vernon Edwin Knocker (1849-1933), he being partner in the solicitor's family firm E & V Knocker.

Having pre-eminent experience and qualification as Deputy Town Clerk already, Reginald Knocker was first appointed to office by the unanimous decision of the Town Council on 9th October 1907 on a remuneration of £450 per annum, with allowances of £250 per annum for his office and £120 per annum for his staff. In their deliberations for the appointment the mayor and councillors went to inordinate lengths to



Reginald Edward Knocker

extol the virtues of his father, a titan in his field with a difficult act to follow and thereby giving the problem in matching his tenure of office for the past 39 years. The unequalled experience and competence gained by him, his brother and son, and the over-riding fact, he was a Dover man to the core, as had been all his predecessors in the affairs of the town which they loved and for which had worked so unstintingly since the eighteenth century; in spite of other contenders to the office from elsewhere no one could possibly match the credentials of Reginald Knocker, a member of a respected Dover family without compare, possibly unique in the country.

He served as Town Clerk for 28 years from 1907 until 1935. These years represented undoubtedly the first of the two most critical and challenging times in the history of Dover, both during the twentieth century, namely World Wars 1 and 2 and their aftermaths. During Reginald's tenure of office, his last twenty years covered the First War period and what was described at the time as the "chaotic" after-war period (which in the event was merely a precursor to an infinitely worse Second War after-war period, which he was luckily spared). He was awarded the MBE for his war work. After the death of his father in 1907, Castle Hill House and its contents were sold and disposed of by auction, apart from items specifically bequeathed in the will to his widow and children.

This will, handwritten by Sir Edward Wollaston Knocker, and witnessed by his clerks Henry Marshall Munro (since 1892) and Alfred William Webster (since 1874), was dated 22nd January 1899. With Reginald and Vernon Knocker named as executors the will made as one of its provisions: "All books, prints, documents and antiquities belonging to me and relating to Dover and the Cinque Ports and Kent (except books or pamphlets relating to Dover published by my late father or me) to the Corporation of Dover".

Sometime between 1911 and 1913 the Town Clerk's office moved from its purpose built premises adjacent to Castle Hill House to number 69 Castle Street on the corner of Stembrook. There it remained until the end of Reginald Knocker's reign when, under his replacement, it relocated to Brook House. By then it had become the offices of Knocker Elwin and Lambert, solicitors, successors to E & V Knocker, also the office of the District Registrar, the County Court Office, Dover Masonic Hall office and the office of St Mary's and St James' cemeteries until extremely damaged by the last shell to fall on Dover on 26th September 1944 during the Second War. It was later demolished and replaced by the structures now occupying the same position, rendering the whole original area now indiscernible. The old buildings can just be made out in pre-war street and aerial photos.

The Dover Express on 23rd June 1935 reported Reginald Knocker's retirement as Town Clerk at the age of 65 years, and noted that he would be asked to retain the title of Registrar of the Cinque Ports which he did until 1946 even though he had in the meantime moved away from Dover altogether: "Legislative changes as to municipal administration had followed one another in confusing succession. In his administration of the town's affairs during that period Mr Knocker has never spared

himself, and in spite of the fact that this paper has at times disagreed with decisions of the Town Council we can with all sincerity pay tribute to Mr Knocker for unfaltering zeal and ability in the conduct of the town's affairs. For his services during the war Mr Knocker was given the Order of the British Empire and it is probable that only the Military Authorities and Mr Edwin Farley the Mayor of the town during that period knew how thoroughly that award was earned. As Registrar of the Cinque Ports Mr Knocker has been responsible for the arrangements for the installations of three Lord Wardens and a very gratifying tribute to his organising abilities followed that of Lord Reading last year. It is possible that his resignation of the Town Clerkship of Dover will not necessarily mean that this connection with the Cinque Ports will be severed. It would be only a fitting tribute to the prolonged association of his family with the Cinque Ports if Mr Knocker were to be asked to retain the office and it would be of great advantage to the Cinque ports if that were done. At the Town Council this week a well-known Councillor expressed some surprise that this paper last week contained information that the Town Clerk of Dover had expressed his wish to tender his resignation. As a matter of fact, the Editor of this paper, having heard of Mr Knocker's announcement from a source outside the Town Council, obtained the authority of the Town Clerk himself for the publication of the facts. When an officer of the town of the standing of the Town Clerk resolves to bring to a close a long and honourable connection it is a matter of considerable importance. Of course had Mr Knocker objected to any reference appearing in print as to his announcement, we should have fallen in with his views. There is little doubt however that he had made up his mind on the subject and did not wish his decision could be treated as confidential. The fact that the Council should urge upon him to reconsider the matter was the only thing

they could do, but at this week's meeting to the regret of the members Mr Knocker made it clear that he had given the matter serious consideration and did wish to retire."

Extracted from the Dover Express 9th March 1956: "Death of Mr R E Knocker - Town Clerk for many years. Town clerk of Dover from 1907 to 1935 Mr Reginald Edward Knocker MBE died at his home at Crowborough on Monday in his 86th year". (N.B. In fact he had died in a nursing home there). "For many years Registrar of the Cinque Ports and joint solicitor Mr Reginald Knocker was the son of Sir Wollaston Knocker and grandson of Mr Edward Knocker both former Town Clerks of Dover. He was appointed to the office in succession to his father in October 1907 and continued until 2nd September 1935. Mr Reginald Knocker's retirement brought to an end the association of his family with the office of Town Clerk which began in 1860. His term of office saw the expansion of municipal business brought about by contemporary social legislation as well as many difficulties caused by war. A hereditary Freeman of the Borough Mr Knocker had the unique distinction of being made an Honorary Freeman on his retirement in recognition of his service to the town. As a Baron of the Cinque Ports he attended the coronations of King George V and King George VI (as honorary canopy bearer). Mr Knocker's wife died two years ago, aged 79. There is no family."

Reginald Knocker, aged 42, had married his second cousin Nora Violet Knocker, aged 40, on 27th March 1913 at St Mary's Church, Kippington near Sevenoaks, Kent. She was the daughter of William Wheatley Knocker, solicitor and a high worthy of Sevenoaks, and his American born wife Nora Josephine, nee Duke, all described at the time as templates of Victorian family respectability. One of the three clergyman officiating was their uncle William Geary Knocker (he presided at the

funeral of Sir Wollaston Knocker in 1907), rector of Tetcott in Devon. All these Knockers stemmed from William Knocker (1761-1847). The ceremony was fulsomely reported in the Dover Express of the next day including details of the finery worn by the female attendees and then a list of wedding presents and their donors that filled nearly two columns of newspaper print. The last fitting words should come from the following extract from the Dover Express of Friday 16th March 1956: "Dover Remembers Former Town Clerk. Flags at Half Mast. Flags on municipal buildings in Dover were flown at half-mast on Friday, the day when Mr Reginald E Knocker, MBE, for 28 years Town Clerk, was buried at Eridge. He died at his home in Crowborough on March 5th aged 85. As well as being Town Clerk Mr Reginald Knocker was at one time the Major in charge of the local Buffs Company of the Volunteers. Among his many other appointments he was Recorder of the Cinque Ports, Clerk to the Governors of Dover College, and Commodore of the Dover Sailing Club. Among the family mourners were Mr Clive Knocker (brother-in-law) and Mrs Clive Knocker. From Dover were the Town Clerk (Mr James A Johnson), the present Recorder of the Cinque Ports and representative of the Mayor and Mr W Ransom (Deputy Town Clerk) who served under Mr Knocker for 25 years".

Tribute to the work of Mr Knocker and his family, on behalf of Dover, was paid at a meeting of the Town Council on Monday. The Deputy Mayor (Councillor A E Husk) pointed out that Mr Knocker was the third member of his family who gave distinguished service as Town Clerk of Dover over a period of 75 years. Mr Knocker was also for many years Registrar and Joint Solicitor of the Cinque Ports. Both his grandfather and great-grandfather were Mayors of Dover and the Knocker family contributed much of value to the life of the

town in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. "Mr Knocker's death" said Councillor Husk "serves to remind us of his own and his family's valued activities for which we, the present day Dovorians, are most grateful". Adding his tribute Councillor R E Eckhoff recalled that he and Alderman A T Goodfellow were the only two members of the Council now serving who had been there during Mr Knocker's time. "He was every inch a gentleman", said Councillor Eckhoff. Members stood for a few moments in silent respect. R.L. writes: "I have always considered it to have been one of the greatest privileges that has come to me to have worked for and been closely associated with Mr R E Knocker during the latter part of his Town Clerkship of Dover. It is more than 20 years since he left the town and it may be that there are not so very many people living in Dover now who remember him and the outstanding work that he did for the Borough." "Not only was he a man of complete and absolute integrity who never feared or hesitated to say or do what he thought was right but he was also a man of great personal charm and immense kindness once a rather reserved and slightly unresponsive manner (which, however, was entirely superficial) was penetrated." "There were those (though not many of them) who feared and consequently disliked his exacting standards, but those were people of no consequence; all who have ever had the interests of Dover at heart will remember him as a man whose love and work for Dover was untiring and whose service to the town was beyond all value, more perhaps even than that, those who knew him, and his late wife, well, will remember them both for their invariable kindness, courtesy and complete goodness of heart."

This is believed to have been written under cover of initials by Samuel Ronald Holden Loxton (1902-1977) Deputy Town Clerk to

Reginald Knocker 1930-1935 and Town Clerk of Dover 1935-1946, the first non-Knocker and out of town as Town Clerk in 75 years.

Reginald Edward Knocker's will, proved at the Principal Probate Registry on 30th April 1956 extracted by the Knocker family firm of solicitors in Sevenoaks, included these interesting provisions:

"To the Corporation of Dover a picture of Dover as in 1730, a view of Dover Castle 1806 and a bronze head "Singing Girl" by the late Richard Goulden of Dover". "To my sister Evelyn Henrietta Lush (formerly Dudley-Scott) the oil portraits of my grandfather Edward Knocker and grandmother Elizabeth Mozier (nee Walker) and the pastel portrait of Thomas King..." Reginald Knocker died childless. It is interesting to speculate on the present whereabouts of these heirlooms, in particular the family pictures, probably never publicly seen, together with the unconfirmed portrait of the family progenitor John Knocker already identified elsewhere. Bear in mind that Evelyn Lush and her two daughters, and through the younger of the two by her daughter Armored Dudley-Scott Bird, down to the Bird family of the present day are the only direct living descendants of Sir Edward Wollaston Knocker himself.

The Dover of today, though its many dire tribulations reduced its very appearance out of all recognition from the grandeur it once had and from which it has still yet to fully recover, owes an infinite debt of gratitude to the Knocker family. These five essays are my tribute to them in the hope that even now they can be recognised by a blue plaque to their memory on Castle Hill House and for the grave of Sir Edward Wollaston Nadir Knocker at St James' Cemetery to be restored to a condition as befits him and all that he did for the town and its people as his life's work. Not to do so would be truly lamentable and to our eternal discredit as his inheritors.