

The Littleboy Family – The Millers of Benson

The Littleboy family were one of the influential Benson families of the 19th Century, residing mostly in Preston Crowmarsh where they ran the Corn Mill for many years. The family had a long tradition of being millers, and were also staunch Quakers. The two brothers who set up the family business in Crowmarsh Mill in the early 1850's were William & Thomas Littleboy from Northchurch near Berkhamstead in Herts. Their father (another William) was a miller there and his father before him, being a miller was in the Littleboy blood.

The mill at Crowmarsh was mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, so the Littleboys were inheriting a long tradition of milling in the area. In 1841 the Census mentions James Green as the miller, but by 1851 he had retired and Richard Brown is named. However in May 1853 an advert in the Times shows it available for lease, complete with warehouse & machinery, a bone crusher, 5 cottages, the ferry and lock, a desirable residence and some 5 acres of meadow. The Littleboy brothers were taking on quite an establishment!

William was in his twenties when he and his wife Sarah settled in Crowmarsh, where their eight children were born and raised, Thomas and his wife Sophia also settled there and their four children were also Crowmarsh born and bred. By 1861 the Mill was thriving, with 10 men and 1 boy employed, 3 domestic servants living in the Littleboy household, and the children being sent off to boarding school. Life must have been good for the Littleboys in the 1860's.

Sadly however, they had their troubles; Thomas and one of his sons died quite young in 1869, and his widow Sophia took the remaining three children back to her family home in Sunderland – where her father was (naturally) a miller. The Littleboys did well in the northeast, with eldest son Charles becoming an Iron Shipbuilder in Saltburn and employing a Swiss governess for his children as well as 4 servants at home. Frederick went into the old family business of corn milling in Sunderland and did well before retiring to Byfleet in Surrey. Daughter Ellen Sophia never married, but lived for many years with her aunt – Sarah Darby – in Denbighshire and inheriting enough to live on her own means as the census described it.

Over the next twenty years the business in Preston Crowmarsh continued to thrive with 12 men employed under a foreman in 1881, and the Littleboys must have been an influential family. In 1884 William's daughter Isabelle married John Henry Darby, (her cousin) a steel magnate from North Wales - that is a story described below – and the sons began careers for themselves but outside the local area and not in milling. Gradually the numbers of Littleboys in Preston Crowmarsh declined, but the family remained influential and William was elected the first Chairman of the new Benson Parish Council in 1894 whilst acting as executor for several well to do Benson men in their wills.

Two daughters (Florence & Mary) died relatively young and by 1901 William Littleboy had retired from the business and later moved with Sarah to spend their remaining years in Crown Lane, Benson together with their unmarried daughters Rose & Amy. William & Sarah were both buried in St Helen's Benson in 1912 & 1915 respectively, as were Rose in 1939, and Amy in 1940.

Eldest son William Henry lived for a while in North Wales working as a mine manager, married Janet Newton (another famous Benson family) and later settled in Hook Norton; he died in 1951 in Benson. Second son Thomas also worked in North Wales as an electrical engineer in the Darby steel business, whilst the youngest boy Allan stayed more locally, working as a Thames Conservancy Inspector and lived in Reading and later in Frimley.

In 1902 the Mill turned from corn milling to flock manufacturing (under John Wigglesworth) as trade declined, but the summer floods of 1906 were bad news for the Mill; the water wheel could not be turned and the Mill had to close. The vacant property & land was part of a large parcel of Preston Crowmarsh sold by the Wittenham Estate to John Stevenson in 1906.

In 1922 it was briefly used as a Hydro Electricity generating station by the Wallingford & District Supply Co but this also closed in 1930 and eventually the buildings were converted to a private residence in 1933. It was the end of an era.

The Wedding of the Year!

On Wednesday 2nd July, local girl Isabelle Littleboy was married in Benson to John Henry Darby in what was probably the wedding of the year. A daughter of a well to do local family marrying into a mega rich society family amid a media frenzy, it was the social highlight of the year – but the year was 1884.

Isabelle was the youngest daughter of William & Sarah Littleboy, the corn millers of Preston Crowmarsh. Born in Preston Crowmarsh, aged 22, she was marrying John Henry Darby (aged 27), and hence into the famous Darby family, the steel magnates of Shropshire & North Wales. The Darby's had made their name and fortune in Coalbrookdale where they pioneered the modern iron/steel production process in the 18th Century – thus helping to kickstart the Industrial Revolution - and had not looked back since. The new Brymbo works (near Wrexham) involved using a new process which produced the finest grade steel in the world

How had the young couple met one wonders? Well John's mother was Sarah Darby (nee Littleboy) who in 1851 was living with her brother John Littleboy, a well established miller in the Wirral. Her husband to be was William Darby, an Iron Master in Shropshire – and they were both strong Quakers. Most likely this was how the couple met, and hence their son John Henry Darby was a cousin of Isabelle Littleboy and they would have probably met through the families.

The wedding service itself was in the Free Church in Benson, with the bride wearing a gold and diamond bracelet presented to her by the employees of the Brymbo Steel works, her husband's latest venture. It was naturally a grand affair, with carriages for the parents, the uncles & aunts, and then all the other family members. The Best Man was Mr William Darby, brother of the groom, and the five bridesmaids included the three sisters of the bride – Rose, Mary & Amy Littleboy. The wedding gifts included the traditional linen from the bride's parents, as well as a piano, whilst other gifts included a china tea service, a desert service, extensive cutlery and a painted screen.

The service was followed by a wedding breakfast in a marquee on the lawns by the Old Mill House in Preston Crowmarsh, with the happy couple later leaving for a honeymoon in Switzerland, whilst the wedding guests enjoyed a river cruise to Wittenham Woods after the meal.

Then on Monday 11th August, a month after the wedding, the families attended a celebratory event in Brymbo Park in Denbeighshire, with a procession of some 2,100 schoolchildren prior to some 5,000 people watching an athletics event organised in their honour. The band chosen to play at the event was the regimental band of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and the evening closed with a fireworks display.

Did the couple live happily forever after? Well unfortunately no they didn't. John Henry & Isabelle had a daughter Gwendoline in 1885 and a son John in 1890 who only lived for a year. Sadly Isabelle herself died very early in 1899 aged just 37, not living to see her daughter married in 1908.

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