

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE

JOHN HENRY COOKE – 'THE KING OF WINSFORD'

It is not often that one man can be said to have been the creator, or at least the prime mover in the creation, of a town but in the case of John Henry Cooke and the town of Winsford this is perhaps no exaggeration. Though a man of small stature, and affectionately referred to as 'Little John Henry', in importance he stood tall, a man of immense significance so far as the history of Winsford is concerned. Due to his work with the Winsford Local Board and its successor the Winsford Urban District Council in improving the living and working condition of the townspeople, and his charitable work for their benefit, he has rightly been called the 'the Father of Winsford', and even 'the uncrowned king of Winsford'. Much of what follows has been gleaned from a booklet entitled *John Henry Cooke: A Tribute*, written in 1963 by his daughter Annie Mary (born 1878) who had married a Mr A. E. Murrell and lived at Red House, Cape Town, South Africa. The remainder is taken from a variety of sources.

John Henry was born on 14 October 1848 at Bank House, Over Lane, Over.ⁱ He was the third son of seven sons and two daughters born to John and Ann Cooke. His siblings were: Frederick (b. 1841), Alfred (b. 1845), James (b. 1850), Edwin (b. 1851), Annie Maria (b. 1852), Charles Oswald (b. 1855), Frank Betteley (b. 1856), Mary Jane (b. 1858).ⁱⁱ His father had occupied Bank House since the late 1830s. It was set in grounds of a quarter acre and had with it a parcel of land at the rear called 'Bank Croft': in all John Cooke had one acre of land leased from a John Wright.

Father John had been born in Cholmondeston in the parish of Acton about 1807.ⁱⁱⁱ It is highly likely that he was son of Randle and Ann Cooke who farmed in Cholmondeston and Worlston in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Their son, a younger Randle Cooke, born in 1811, farmed Breach House, Darnhall, in the 1840s and 1850s. He had a daughter named Anne Betteley Cooke which is a strange name and coincides with John's son Frank Betteley Cooke which certainly suggests a family relationship. It is not known where he was educated but he became a solicitor living and working in the Borough of Over. At St Matthew's church, Stretton, in 1840 he married Ann, who had been born in Frodsham in 1817, daughter of Thomas Burgess, a farmer, and his wife Hannah. John and Ann are listed in the 1841 census for Over without any children but ten years later the family consisted of John and Ann, with Alfred, John Henry, and James. The eldest son Frederick was away from home at the time of the census being a boarder at a school in Frodsham.^{iv} The family employed a cook named Ann Tomlinson, a nurse called Mary Hollingworth, and a groom, George Tomlinson.

By the time of the next census (1861) it was John Henry's turn to be away at school and that of his elder brother Alfred. By this time the family consisted of the parents, John and Ann, with son Frederick, a nineteen years old articled clerk: James, aged eleven; Edwin, aged nine; Anne Marie, aged eight; Charles Oswald, aged six; Frank Betteley, aged five, and Mary, aged three. The family employed one servant.^v

John Henry first attended a school in Pear Tree House on Over Street run by Mrs Mary Moate: this was for boarding ladies as well as being a day school for local children. When he was about eleven years old he was sent to board at a school on Welsh Row, Nantwich. John's brother Alfred also attended this school where the headmaster was a Mr. Orchard. It seems he did well there winning a number of prizes for his work and good conduct. How often he and his brother went home, or how often their parents visited them is not known, but every weekend a carrier called 'Old Vernon' would deliver fresh clothes and collect the dirty items.

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE

On leaving school in Nantwich John Henry went to Wesley College, Sheffield,^{vi} for eighteen months where he studied law and passed his first examination which he sat in Manchester. About 1867 he sat and passed his intermediate law exams in London and three years later he passed his finals. During this time, 1865 to 1870, he was articled to his father and for a time worked at the offices of Messrs. W.C. & C. Milne, his father's London agents, at Harcourt Buildings, Temple, London, and attended the Law Institute there. He recalls that he resided at 65 Brecknock Road, Camden Town from where he walked about 3½ miles into the Temple each day. He managed on £1 a week, paying 6 shillings a week for his room, and sometimes paying 2s 6d for a 'dinner de luxe' and at other times making do with a 'twopence halfpenny tart'.

Whilst articled to his father he did a great deal of office work by engrossing many deeds including one was a conveyance of the land off Swanlow Lane on which Crossfield House was eventually built, given to his father John by Lord Delamere. In his memoirs he records that his first public experience was his successful conduct of an arbitration case on behalf of his father which was held in the vestry of the old Congregational Chapel that once stood on Swanlow Lane. His first criminal case was conducted just after he had passed his finals when he defended a Richard Jackson at Middlewich Sessions. Jackson was charged with stealing one and half pennies and because of his bad character was sentenced to two months imprisonment; John Henry's fee was 15 shillings.

John Henry's father obtained for him an office in Kinderton Street, Middlewich, where he practiced and to which he travelled by pony each day from Bank House. His first clerk's name was William Lowndes who was an old man when he started having previously served the solicitor Benjamin Vaudrey. According to the 1871 census John Henry was still living at Bank House on Over Lane with his parents, brother Alfred, who was described as being a farmer of twenty acres, and sister Annie Maria.^{vii} By this time the family had one servant – Anne Hitchen.

Cooke's practice continued in Middlewich with much time being taken up with police work and also county court work in Northwich.^{viii} Cooke records one particular judge, Judge Harden, who was hard of hearing and who was reluctant to award costs. At the successful conclusion of a case John Henry asked for costs saying that as he had been awarded the verdict he was entitled to be awarded costs. The judge said quietly "Mr Cooke, I am not sure you are entitled to the verdict". Cooke also remembers the county court being flooded when the rivers Dane and Weaver burst their banks which meant that they had to stand on chairs to address the judge and were carried out of court on men's backs.

On 22 April 1875 John Henry Cooke married Martha Kemp of May Bank, Audlem, at Audlem parish church. She had been born at Adderley, Shropshire on 24 December 1853. It seems, according to his own memoirs, that he was so nervous of the occasion that he couldn't remember his age when filling in the register and also made his worst speech ever at the wedding breakfast. The couple went on honeymoon to Paris.

In September 1875 Cooke was appointed Clerk to the newly formed Winsford Local Board of Health. At that time the Winsford area which comprised Over and Wharton, had no public water supply, no sewerage, no street lighting and poor footpaths. People had to carry lanterns at night and get their water from a pump situated on Over Lane opposite Well Street. Many homes had privies and there were numerous cesspits resulting in a very unhealthy atmosphere such that cholera was a particular problem with many deaths being recorded from the disease in 1866. Under his guidance over 90% of Winsford's residents received running water and sewerage provision to their homes; the town had its own water works to purify and pressurise the system; lighting provision and street paving. As a result of the Board's great improvements by the time the Winsford Urban District Council was formed in 1895 it was

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE

considered a model authority due to the early foundations made by the Board under Coole's able direction.

In 1881 Cooke resided at Elm View, Swanlow Lane, near to Oak Villa.^{ix} He is recorded here with his wife and their children: Henrietta Marie aged four years; Annie Mary, aged three; John Kemp aged two; Frederick H aged one; and seven months old Elizabeth E. Their cook was called Harriet Thomas and their nurse was Eliza Hughes. John Henry's father had now moved from the old family home at Bank House to live at Crossfield House with his wife, their children Annie Maria, Frank Betly, and Mary Jane; their servant at this time was nineteen years old Emily Blackhurst.

In 1881 John Henry had his first taste of Parliamentary work by promoting and then managing 'The Cheshire Salt Districts Compensation Bill' drafted for the purpose of compelling brine pumpers to pay compensation for subsidence. He appeared as a witness before the Parliamentary Select Committee to give evidence in support of the bill but he and his colleagues were not successful against the opposition of the salt proprietors, the railway companies and those who owned the royalties from brine rents. It was however passed into law ten years later. When the Salt Union was formed in 1888 John Henry acted for them.

In politics he was, like his father, a Liberal, but later, in 1886, concerned at Gladstone's policy on home rule for Ireland, he joined the newly formed Liberal Unionist Party and acted as agent to Robert Verdin who won the Northwich election against Sir John Brunner. With the aid of the Duke of Westminster he formed the Cheshire County Liberal Unionist Association and became its Honorary Secretary. He went on to become a member of the Council of the Liberal Unionist Association for the United Kingdom.

John Henry was a Wesleyan, his father having been a preacher. Though for many years after his marriage he attended the Congregational Church in Swanlow Lane, due to differing political views with most of the those who attended, he left that church and began to attend St. Chad's Church, Over.

John Henry's father died on 24 June 1885 aged seventy-five, to be followed three years later, on 1 September, by his mother Ann, aged seventy-one. Following their deaths he moved into Crossfield House and is recorded as living there on Sunday 5 April 1891 the date of the census. Then the family consisted of himself and his wife, son John Kemp, then aged twelve; Frederick Henry, aged eleven; Elizabeth E, aged ten; Charles T, aged nine; Florence A, aged eight; Oswald H, aged seven; Herbert James, aged five; and Ellen Owen aged one year, who was to die on 7 June that year. There is at this time no mention of daughter Henrietta Marie for it seems she had died that year. In the family grave there lies buried a 'May' Cooke aged fifteen who died on 18 June who seems to be the same girl – but why no mention in the census taken in April? They had at this time a cook, a general servant and a nurse residing with them.

John Henry's home at Crossfield was noted for its gardens and orchards. A story relates to apples grown there. A man was accused in court of stealing apples and pleaded not guilty. The magistrate remarked that the apples seemed to be 'Granny Smith's' to which the defendant replied " They're not, they're John'Enrie's". Today Crossfield House consists of three dwellings and the old stables are now a bungalow.



TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE

John Henry was also clerk and secretary of the Over School Board and was heavily involved in educational developments in the town. In 1888 it was agreed that a Free Library be established in Winsford and so a committee was formed to raise the subscriptions to pay for it and John Henry was appointed the Honorary Secretary. He was present at the official opening at the end of the year when Charles Dickens read a passage from one of his father's books. He organised 'Technical Classes' in Winsford from 1886, and then following on from two popular art exhibitions, science and art classes for adults using local schools were established in 1895. Thirty-three adults joined to begin with and they were promised 'treats' by John Henry should they pass their examinations. By 1898 the number of attendees topped 700 with examination candidates numbering 200; so many that they had to find accommodation at the Verdin Technical School for their 'treat', which consisted of a cold supper and entertainment. Winsford was the first place in Cheshire to have a science school and became the first town to adopt the Gymnasium Act. John Henry was also an active member of the Council of the Union of Lancashire and Cheshire Institutes.

In 1898 John Henry was made Clerk to the newly formed Winsford Urban District Council which was the successor to the Winsford Local Board and the Over School Board.

In his capacity as clerk he was heavily involved in the organisation of a number of significant events. In 1895 the Verdin Technical School and Gymnasium was opened by the Duke of Westminster. Salt Union shares worth £25000 were presented to the authority by Mr Joseph Verdin which had been made possible by the passing of the Brine Compensation Act. In October 1898 the Albert Infirmary was presented to the town by Mr W. H. Verdin of Darnhall Hall and opened by the Duchess of Westminster. This was a day of great celebration and processions attended by many dignitaries.

According to the 1901 census the Cooke family were still at Crossfield House. By then the family consisted of the parents with Frederick, then an undergraduate, Elizabeth E, Charles, an articled clerk, Gertrude J aged nine, and Reginald A, aged four. By this time the son Herbert James had died aged thirteen.^x They employed a cook and a nanny.

Following the passing of the Education Act 1902, John Henry was appointed Clerk to the Over School Board. A little later he was appointed Clerk to the County Justices for the Over section of the Eddisbury Division.

He was always intrigued by what was known as the 'Nun's Grave' at Vale Royal and the site of the abbey. His researches attracted the attention of architect Basil Pendleton of Manchester University. Excavations were started which uncovered the foundations of the ancient abbey church. His passion about the past and Vale Royal in particular led him to write a romantic novel about life at the abbey which he called *Ida: the Mystery of the Nun's Grave*, published in 1912. He had previously published two other books: *Bibliotheca Cestriensis* a compendium of books relating to Cheshire in 1904, and *The Queen's Diamond Jubilee in Cheshire*, in 1899, a copy of which was sent to Queen Victoria. In 1913 he also wrote, in collaboration with his son John Kemp, *5,000 Miles with the Cheshire Yeomanry in South Africa*.

When war with Germany was declared on 4 August 1914, John Henry was in London on business. The war was to bring him and his family great heartache with the loss of two sons, John Kemp, known as 'Jack,' and Charles in the summer of 1915. Oswald and Reginald, known as Rex, were also in the army. Oswald received the Military Cross and a Bar. Sister Florence served in France as a nurse.

In response to national campaigns local men flocked to join up and enlist in the Cheshire Regiment. The Winsford Company of Territorials, part of the 7th Battalion of the Cheshire regiment was commanded by Major John Kemp Cooke. Although he did much to organise the

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE

local war effort and on 9 August led his contingent to the railway station where they boarded a train for Crewe he was not well enough to travel abroad. He had served in the Boer War as part of the local volunteer force which he joined in 1898. By 1900 he was in South Africa as a trooper with the 22nd Company of the Cheshire Imperial Yeomanry. During his seventeen months service he saw action and had some narrow escapes having his horse shot from under him and having a bullet pierce his tunic without injuring him: he was mentioned in despatches.^{xi} In 1902 he joined his father's firm along with his brother Charles and served as deputy Town Clerk and in his own right as Clerk to the local magistracy. He retained his military interests organising the local volunteers from his home at Lidgate House. Major Cooke fell ill at Christmas 1914 suffering from cancer and moved to his wife's parents' home at Chorlton, near Alderley Edge, in order that he could undergo treatment at the Manchester Royal Infirmary^{xii}. As the end was near he moved back to Crossfield House and died there on 29 July 1915. His funeral two days later was a big occasion and it was said of him by the vicar, Mr Stables: *'his name will always shine brilliantly in the history of Winsford as one who for many years gave much voluntary labour in the military interest and who in the last few months of his life insisted in toiling and working till he could work no more. He is a fine instance of perseverance and of fighting against great odds.'* In his will he left an estate worth £1357.

John's brother Captain Charles Taylor Cooke, who had a law degree and was destined to work in the family practice, also took a great interest in the Winsford Territorials and worked with his brother in recruiting local men. With the outbreak of war he joined the Cheshires, received a commission and rose to the rank of captain. He was with his regiment when they landed at Sulva Bay, Gallipoli on 25 April 1915.^{xiii} On 10 August the thirty-three years old captain led a group of twenty men in an attack on a Turkish position. He fell in this action but amid the confusion of battle it was not certain for some considerable time that he had in fact died. Reports as late as November gave the family hope that he was alive, and matters were still not clear by February 1916. During the long months of uncertainty John Henry Cooke wrote hundreds of letters in the desperate hope of obtaining news of his son. Eventually in June 1916 the War Office concluded that he must have died and on 12 January 1917 the family received a letter of sympathy from the King. John Henry obtained probate of his son's estate worth £1415.

In memory of these two sons John Henry commissioned a memorial plaque. Placed on the wall of the north aisle this was dedicated on 28 February 1917 and refers to the 'present terrible European War. It records that Major Cooke served in the South African (Boer) War in 1900 and died on active service on 29 July 1915, aged thirty-six, and that Captain Cooke, who had a degree in law, was killed on the Sulva Bay Expedition on 10 August 1915 aged thirty-three. The phrase 'active service' in respect of the major seems something of an exaggeration given that he died at home from cancer, though he was a serving soldier.^{xiv}

Oswald Hayward Cooke fared better in the war. He had been in Rome when war was declared, hurried home to enlist. As Lieutenant Oswald Cooke he served with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and saw service in Flanders in 1916, 1917 and 1918. On 1 October 1916 he was wounded whilst attacking enemy positions and as a consequence of his actions was awarded the Military Cross. He was again wounded during his second tour of service whilst leading a party of stretcher bearers and for this he received a bar to his M.C. He was wounded yet again during his third term of service in Flanders whilst on a reconnaissance mission. He married and had a son.

A Reginald Arthur Cooke of Crossfield House, born in 1896, served as a lieutenant with the machine gun corps in Egypt and Palestine for just over two years and was wounded in November 1917.

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE

Not to be outdone by her brothers Florence Amy Cooke volunteered to be a nurse in 1915 and served as a nursing sister in France in 1917.

As a further tribute to his sons a new organ was installed in St. Chad's Church for which the family donated £200 and asked that the organ cost not less than £500 with the remainder being donated by the parish. The new organ, installed by Messrs Jardine of Manchester, at a cost of over £600, was dedicated on 1 January 1918.

Frederick Henry, the second son, entered the church rather than the army. He was admitted to Queen's College, Cambridge in 1899 following schooling at Warrington Grammar School. At the age of twenty-three he obtained his BA degree and then in 1906 his MA. He was ordained a deacon in 1903 within the diocese of Durham and became a priest the following year. He was vicar of Kingsley, near Frodsham, from 1920 until 1928, then vicar of Hooton until 1939. He was an active member of the temperance organisation representing the Durham Dioceses from 1907 to 1911; a member of the national society between 1911 and 1920 and then represented the Chester area from 1933.

Throughout the war John Henry busied himself in looking after the widows and dependents of men serving at the Front, the disabled, the prisoners of war in Germany and the wounded. He established the Families' Association and with funds from the Prince of Wales fund he got grants to tide over temporary difficulties. Eventually separation allowances were paid by the government. Finally a Pensions Committee was formed and John Henry became the local Honorary Secretary. He was then able to pay for medical treatment for those discharged and disabled; to send them to the convalescent home in Southport; pay for artificial limbs, and to arrange vocational training. For the work and advice he gave the Government on pensions he was thanked by the War Office. The work he did locally ensured that war pensions were introduced nationally.

He died on 29 May 1928. Martha died on 31 March 1931. The *Chronicle* of June 1928 said of him: "Mr Cooke retired a short time ago owing to increasing infirmity, with the respect and admiration of the people as a whole. They recall his services with gratitude and thank him with a full heart. He was so vivacious, so impatient of obstacles and at times quite a little pugnacious. Yet withall so forgiving, so lovable, so altogether admirable. There really was no one quite like Mr. J.H. Cooke in actual work-a-day life. So accessible to all, he was a lawyer, a scholar and a gentleman."

TONY BOSTOCK'S LOCAL HISTORY NOTES: JOHN HENRY COOKE



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ⁱ Bank House at the top of what was Over Lane, now the High Street, no longer stands. Today its place is taken by a block of flats known by the same name.

ⁱⁱ Charles Oswald, John and Ann's sixth son, died on 29 November 1883 aged twenty-eight and is buried at Over. Annie Maria died on 11 February 1929 aged seventy-six.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some sources suggest 1807 but others, particularly the 1871 and 1881 census suggest 1811. His grave stone states he was seventy-five in June 1885 suggesting the year 1810/11 for his birth. His place of birth is given as Chomondeston, in the parish of Acton, in each of the census returns 1851-81.

^{iv} A school run by Mr Church, of Crosbie House, Main Street, Frodsham.

^v Frederick, John Henry's elder brother, became the first Town Clerk of Crewe and resided at Brooklands, Coppenhall. James and Edwin became apprenticed to a timber merchant in Liverpool in the 1850s and then subsequently became timber merchants and brokers themselves. James resided at Kilbryde, Corbridge on Tyne and Edwin at Llandaff, Glamorgan in the early 1900s.

^{vi} Later the King Edward VII Grammar School.

^{vii} Brother Alfred went on to be a farmer at Hill Farm, Sound, near Natwich and lived there for the rest of his life.

^{viii} Later brother Frank Betteley Cooke practiced in Middlewich and resided at Kinderton Lodge. He became Middlewich's first Town Clerk and as such was responsible for improving the town's utilities and amenities in the late 19th century just as John Henry did in Winsford.

^{ix} He is also said to have lived at a house called 'Airedale' on Swanlow Lane.

^x He died on 29 March 1900 and is buried in the family plot at St Chad's.

^{xi} Cooke, J.H., *5000 Miles with the Cheshire Yeomanry in South Africa* (1913); Verdin, Lt. Col, Sir Richard, *The Cheshire (Earl Of Chester's) Yeomanry* (1971), p.556

^{xii} John Kemp Cooke married Hilda Frances Shiers, daughter of John Jackson Shiers of Chorley, near Macclesfield on 30 October 1912

^{xiii} The landing at Suvla Bay was an amphibious landing made at Suvla on the Aegean coast of Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey as part of the August Offensive, the final British attempt to break the deadlock of the Battle of Gallipoli. The landing, which commenced on the night of 6 August 1915, was intended to support a breakout from the Anzac sector, five miles (8 km) to the south.

Despite facing light opposition, the landing at Suvla was mismanaged from the outset and quickly reached the same stalemate conditions that prevailed on the Anzac and Helles fronts. On 15 August, after a week of indecision and inactivity, the British commander at Suvla, Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stopford was dismissed. His performance in command was one of the most incompetent feats of generalship of the First World War

^{xiv} For more information on the Cooke brothers and others from the parish who served in the Great War see the excellent book by A. Clayton, *A Cheshire Parish at War: St Chad's, Over, Winsford, 1914 - 1925*. (1998)