

Shackleton Family - Billericay

Ernest Shackleton the polar explorer, what has he to-do with Billericay. Well! As far as we have been able to establish, he never came to Billericay but members of his family did.

William Shackleton, his first cousin, according to the 1939 register was living at Barnsley House, 98 High Street, Billericay now owned by a firm of solicitors. His occupation recorded as a retired Medicine PR actioner. He was born on 3 October 1872 in Kildare, Ireland. His parents were Richard and Elizabeth Anne Shackleton. Richard, who was the brother of Henry who was Ernest's father. William Graduated from Dublin University with a M.A. and M.D.

By 1897 William was living in Liverpool. The 1901 Census has him living at 16 Albemarle Road, Beckenham, Bromley, Kent and his occupation being Medical Man. In 1905 he married Sarah Alice Knight soon afterwards they travelled to China to carry out missionary work. Their first child was born in 1907, Dorothy Elizabeth, followed by Maria Alice in 1908. Their daughter Agnes May (1910) and son William (1912) were born back home in Cambridge.

J. Sidlow Baxter in his book "Does God Still Guide" has this to say about William: - *Although not so famous as his explorer cousin, it could be truly said of him that like John the Baptist he was "Great in the sight of the Lord". He and his wife had a long and outstanding record of missionary service in China.*

On one occasion he told me about his call to the overseas Mission Field. If I remember rightly, he was the youngest student ever to graduate M.A. from Dublin University and one of the youngest ever to qualify as M.D. Not only was he a brilliant student, he came from a well-to-do family. Fond hopes were centred in him and he was expected to "make a name" for himself. However, young William "God converted" and that changed his whole outlook.

Later, to dismay or anger of his family and other relatives, he had the "Call" to be a missionary in China. To his worldly-wise kith and kin this was wasting wonderful talents and throwing his life away. Every argument was used to dissuade him. However, heart-breaking though it was to young William, even the alienation of his nearest and dearest could not shake his conviction of a divine call to the Mission Field.

Eventually the day of sailing came. Young William stood aboard the vessel in Dublin docks. All the other departing passengers had relatives or friends bidding them goodbye and waving from the quay-side. William was utterly alone. Not one of his angered relatives would even see him off. Amid the drizzling rain, beneath a cold, grey sky, Williams' feelings were such as those know who have gone through that kind of experience.

A loud blast from the ships horn indicated that in another minute or two the vessel would loose her moorings and be away. Then Just one minute before the gang-way was lifted, Williams' Sunday School teacher came hurrying aboard. Almost breathless to speak, he explained that he had been strangely hindered from getting to the dock.

He had asked God to give him a message for William – and there it was, quickly scribbled on a leaf from his notebook. The brief, affectionate farewell was like a lovely sun shaft. William thanked him and quickly put the scribbled note inside his pocket New Testament.

After some week at sea, William eventually reached China. When the vessel had anchored, the passengers were taken ashore in sampans, and soon now young William got a close-up at the men

working the docks. Suddenly he found himself plunged into one of those deep, inward ordeals which knocked one sick with a feeling of indescribable desolation. It was a sight of these Chinese dock-workers! These sweating, emaciated-looking bodies! But most of all, those faces! Those faces! He had come out all this way with a heart of compassion (as he believed) toward these people who did not know the Gospel; but now, as he looked at these faces, he felt utter revulsion and a nameless fear. He could never stay among those faces? In sudden agony he groaned, "God, have I misread thy guidance? Please give me some direct word from thyself." He quickly pulled out his pocket New Testament – which he had not used during the voyage, because he had his study bible with him. As he opened his pocket testament, out fell the note hurriedly given him at Dublin by his Sunday School Teacher, it simple quoted Jeremiah: 8: "BE NOT AFRAID OF THEIR FACES"!

In 1909 William and his wife returned to Britain and settled in Cambridge. It would appear that his health did not allow him to return to China. Around 1912 the family moved to Billericay, Essex where he continued his general medical practice. Taken over Barnsley House, 98 High Street.

He appears to have teamed up with a Mr Hills who had built the Gospel Hall in Chapel Street in 1906. In 1919 Dr R Bowsman joined him in partnership at Barnsley House. William, around this time purchased the Hall from Mr Mills and for several years he superintended the work there. He often preached himself: and invited preachers of many different denomination. His daughter Marie stated that her father bought the hall because so many of his patients were being converted, he needed somewhere to minister to them spiritually.



1921 census has William (Medical Practitioner) and family living at Barnsley House. Sarah Alice his wife, we established was born Ipswich, Suffolk in 1873. His children, Angus May born Cambridge 1910, William Isaac, Cambridge 1912 and Lizzie Ann born Billericay 1914. They had two servants, one a cook and one nurse and house keeper.

He was a much-respected doctor and described as "A Man of prayer but somewhat eccentric," his main eccentricity being that he would always pray with the family before examining a patient he visited.

It was while under William the hall was called 'The Un-denominational Church'.

Following the war breaking out in August 1914 the Hall was opened up as a Reading and Writing room for the soldiers and Agnes Rose, Williams' Aunt who was living with the family and other ladies in the afternoon would mend their socks etc. The hall was open from 2pm to 4pm, then again from 6pm to 8pm when there was singing, short address. Sundays was obviously reserved for services. There were fresh regiments of soldiers every three weeks. This went on for approximately two years.

In these early days, grass grew between the cart wheel tracks on Billericay High Street and livestock grazed on a field between the High Street and Chapel Street. From the house, members of the church bible class would walk through his large garden and across the meadow to the Hall where he would conduct services. It was possible around this time that people called it High Field Gospel Hall?

David Collins was attending the Gospel Hall on the Sunday when war broke out. It was about 11.20am when the congregation heard an air raid siren. A hymn was being sung at the time and some people thought the noise of the siren was something wrong with the Organ! Soon the preacher, Dr. Shackleton, asked for quiet and then said "Surely not an air raid. Surely, they wouldn't – not on Sunday". It was not long afterwards, before William, left Billericay in 1940 for Ireland. He had reached the age of 70 and was no longer allowed to practice in England but could in Northern Ireland. It was another twenty years before he returned to Billericay in 1962 to be nearer his son and daughters. He sold his home in Ireland in order to have a smaller place, without stairs and was looking forward to renewing many old acquaintances when the warmer weather came but after a two-week illness, he died on Sunday 3 March 1963. He was living at the time at Mountnessing Road, Billericay. His funeral service was held at the Billericay Evangelical Free Church on 7 March 1963.

Appendix 1

Regis House. 98 High Street. (Listed – grade II) Georgian style red brick house built in 1750, formerly known as Barnsley House. It was the Maiden Head Inn until 1810 and was used as the headquarters of the Home Guard in the Second World War. Foxcroft. 100 High Street (Listed grade II) A Georgian style house with white brick front, built around 1750. It was an E.C.C. children's home during the 1930s. Both are now owned by Solicitors.



Barnsley House and Foxcroft are both eighteenth-century buildings. (Basildon Heritage)

Appendix 2

Alma Link connects the High Street with Chapel Street. A curious little road that masquerades as an entrance to Waitrose car park and was probably not intended to be used as a short cut between these roads, albeit one way. Its name was derived from Alma Hatt, Basildon's first Town Manager. When this link was proposed, at the time Waitrose submitted an application for a new store, the Society pressed for it to be named after Dr William Shackleton, a former missionary and outspoken preacher who owned the Gospel Hall in Chapel Street. He lived at 102 High Street, the building that flanks this road; now an insurance agency, and was a relative of the explorer Ernest Shackleton. Alma worked hard to establish the new Town of Basildon and died young while still in office. But the good,

if controversial, doctor, with his Billericay connections, surely had the better claim; at least that was view of the Billericay Society and many others.



Appendix 3

Agnes Rose was the aunt of both William and Ernest Shackleton. She was born 2 May 1845, Kildare, Ireland and lived with William at Barnsley House, 98 Hight Street Billericay, she died in Westcliff on the 3 July 1921 at the age of 76. She is buried in Great Burstead Church Yard.



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1655 Words
7th June 2022

