

William Alfred Stevens, 1845–1914

by Ann Davies

My great, great grandfather, William Alfred Stevens, was born in Colchester in 1845; he was one of five children. His father James kept a tailors shop. William must have had a reasonable education as by 1861 he was apprenticed to the *Essex Telegraph* as a printer's compositor "starting as a 'reader' as he was gifted in that way".

In December that year aged 16 he ran away to sea and joined the Navy. Committing himself to the service for 12 years, the paperwork shows that William declared that he was not apprenticed! He became a gunner and travelled widely; apparently his family heard nothing of him for a long while. In 1868 William married Harriet Dent, a publican's daughter from Sudbury and their first son, Alfred, my great grandfather, was born the following year. The baby's middle name was Hercules, which was the name of William's then current ship (an armed ironclad).

On 8th August 1871 *HMS Caledonia*, part of the Mediterranean fleet, fired a royal salute in honour of Crown Prince Humbert of Italy. William was the captain of one of the guns. He was injured when the charge being passed to the breech-loading gun exploded. He was transferred to the British Naval Hospital where he had an operation to remove both arms above the elbow joints and an eye. *The Times* report next day stated "I fear no hopes can be given of his ultimate recovery". However, on 26th September the *Essex Herald* reported a "Frightful Accident to a Colchester Man ... the doctors have expressed their admiration at the strength of his nerves, which enabled him to live under such severe injuries, and hold out hopes for his recovery".



William returned to Sudbury and was determined to make the best of his misfortune. He learnt to write holding a pen between his teeth and was able to write legibly and quite fast. In autumn 1872 a second son, Walter, was born at Sudbury. For some years William travelled about the neighbouring villages giving religious addresses. His wife's health caused him to leave Sudbury and they lived in Kilburn, Fareham and, for a short time, in Portsmouth/Southsea with William taking an active part in the public

and political life of each locality. For some of this time his eldest son was at the Greenwich Hospital School. By 1891 the census shows William as a naval pensioner living with his wife and second son, Walter, in Portsmouth. He briefly moved to Southsea, from where his first son got married in April 1893.

Later that year William moved his remaining family to Westbourne where for 21 years he became very involved in the community. He also became a political agent for Lord Edmund Talbot MP; apparently making speeches in all kinds of out of the way places. My great, great grandmother died in 1897 and within four months, aged 57, William married his nurse, Mary Groom. By 1899 he was a member of the Parish Council. The local rector said of him, "Mr Stevens has done more for the church and parish since he has been in Westbourne than nine-tenths of my able-bodied parishioners". At a council meeting in 1902 William got agreement that there would be a celebration of the King's coronation but that the cost would be met out of voluntary contributions not the rates.

By 1907 William was no longer on the council but a member of the Board of Guardians.

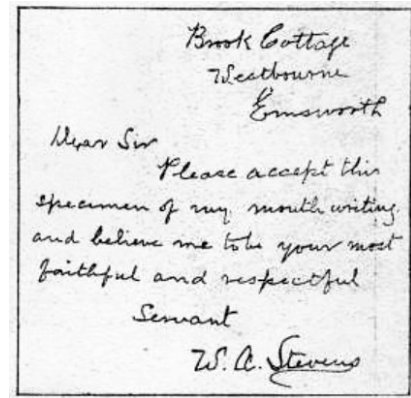
Seven years later in April 1914, William died aged 68 and was buried in Westbourne Cemetery in the same grave as his first wife. The obituary in the *Church Monthly* stated that the prevailing point in his character was probably his energy.

Research

I started research in 2006 with a card giving the date of William's funeral and a short paragraph in a letter from his son to my grandfather dated 1947. There was no family memory of such a fascinating person.

One highlight was when a card index in the Chichester Records Office mentioned an album. I waited a couple of weeks before it was available but it was worth it. The album contained a newspaper article which gave William's life history plus a photo and a sample of his handwriting; this dated to 1900-02. The surname of the family that deposited the album was the same as that of one of the witnesses at William's second marriage and this must explain why they had included the article in their family album. The Westbourne *Church Monthly* provided on-going background in terms of William's community involvement and also eventually his obituary. A 1971 article from *The Times* described the accident emphasising that he was not expected to live.

I then put the investigation to one side until last year. On a whim I called in at the Westbourne cemetery expecting a long search but quickly located my great, great grandparents' grave. It is down on the right a short distance from the entrance; a lovely location. Was this a benefit of being on the Cemetery Committee? Previously William's naval records held at Kew were too blurred to read. They must have been re-scanned and are now available online so we have his signing-on papers and full naval history. Last year I visited the pub in Sudbury, where he spent some time. The pub has been re-named but has not undergone major refurbishment. Sadly, they had no records relating to the 1860-80s.



L & R Photos:
Picture Press
Agency

I met with local historian Nigel Peake from Westbourne, who had researched William, and we exchanged research results. His additional information included an *Essex Herald* cutting from the time of the accident. This made particular reference to his having been apprenticed to the *Essex Telegraph*.

Given that so much more data has become available, I may be able to get more information on the 20-year gap between his accident and his arrival at Westbourne.

What puzzles me is that such a fascinating character who was obviously well liked was never referred to within the family, especially as my grandparents were living locally on Hayling. I wonder if it is because WWI started almost immediately after William's death, then there was the depression followed by WWII and by then it was another time.

As part of Emsworth Museum's collection of Covid-19 stories, Adrian Fox has made a short video of Emsworth during the Covid-19 lockdown.

"I have tried to capture some images to convey how we lived, how the town looked, and some interviews with local residents around VE day 75. The shots of sparsely occupied streets and queues for food shops contrast with the relative crowds of holiday-deprived people on the front with their paddle boards, kayaks and children, also queueing, for ice creams."