

Edgar Allen: 'A Man from Sheffield'

This is an edited version of part of a talk given by Sue Roe for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor.

In 1894 the Illustrated Police Budget used this misleading headline when it covered his divorce case, a cause célèbre at the time. Edgar Allen was not from Sheffield and in many ways, he is difficult to place. Even where he sat at church on Sundays is puzzling. In 1890 he rented only two seats in St John's. Both seats were near the back, on the dark north side. I would have expected the owner of an international company to be near the front with fellow industrialists like Henry Steel. I had to find out more about this apparently self-effacing man who had offices and agents across the globe.

The first record I found of his existence was in the 1841 Census, when he is living with his aunt, Mary Ann, and his grandmother, Mary Ruselhoff in the East End of London. The Ruselhoffs or Rudelhoffs were from Germany. There were many foreigners in that area of East London so he would have heard different languages, as well as speaking German at home. No wonder he became an accomplished linguist. The Rudelhoffs had a reputation for good looks, to which, as you can see from his photograph, aged 13, he certainly contributed. His aunt married William Ovenden in 1848 and they settled in Camberwell. Shortly afterwards Allen was enrolled at College Chantal Paris. He then worked his way round Holland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal to learn the languages.



A Man from Sheffield (Illustrated Police Budget 24th March 1894)



Edgar Allen, aged 13. (Edgar Allen News: Sheffield Local Studies)

He returned to England in 1857 to take up a position in a shipping office in Liverpool and, in 1858, he became foreign correspondent for Ibbotson Brothers & Co. Ltd. Globe Steel Works in Sheffield, a firm making steel and edge tools. In 1868, he left Ibbotsons to go into business with George Jones, spending 10 months of the year on the Continent chasing orders. He knew the languages, had already established personal contacts, was dashing, cheerful and a good mixer. He accepted orders for anything, steel-related or not! Pears Soap, sea-sickness remedies, hammers, steam rollers, bicycles, salt water in barrels, glass tumblers, a pack of fox hounds, two pointer dogs as well as tools of all kinds and much more. He saw himself more as a merchant, than a manufacturer.

After 14 years however he parted company with Jones. There were several reasons for this: Jones took issue with what he regarded as Allen's extravagant expenses whilst travelling. Also, Jones had suggested he bring his three sons into the firm. This didn't go down well with Edgar Allen - still single and childless. He could envisage his family name being lost to the firm. This led to argument which turned physical. An office boy, Charles Everitt (later chairman of the firm), witnessed the two men "bleeding freely, collars were twisted and torn".



*Mary Ann's memorial grave, Worksop Priory 1887.
(Edgar Allen News: Sheffield Local Studies)*

This breach may have precipitated his romantic venture. Another reason might have been the death of his aunt in 1887. When her husband had died in 1864, he decided to rent Manor Cottage, a twelfth century house, in Worksop for himself and Mary Ann. After her death, he built a large memorial over her grave in Worksop Priory. This was made of red granite with beautiful Italian mosaics, installed by artisans he had brought over from Italy. While mourning his aunt he met Maud Charlotte Sarah Shaw, an attractive woman in her thirties in Scarborough. They were engaged, and eventually married in 1890, despite concerns from some of his friends about her history. Very soon relations

deteriorated. Maud had fits of uncontrollable temper and on the second of March 1892 they finally parted. The divorce case was reported the length and breadth of the country. The plaintiff's case was that she was "subject to extraordinary variations in temper and conduct" and had been unfaithful. She accused him of being an old roué, claiming cruelty and connivance (neglect). The Illustrated Police Budget - which seems to be much like the late News of the World despite its semi-official title - reported it at length including salacious details of her affairs with appropriate illustrations. Things turned nasty: in a letter read out in court, Maud called him "A true specimen of a harlot's progeny without a manly trait in his character." He was granted a divorce in 1894 and never re-married.

Allen's marital disaster does not seem to have affected his career. Edgar Allen's became a byword in the construction of tramways and railways across Europe, South Africa, the Far East and the Americas. I came across a photo on Facebook of a railway line in Argentina with his name on. In the 1910 Railway Exhibition, Buenos Aires, Edgar Allen and Co. won a gold medal for their railway crossings!



Track in Argentina with Edgar Allen trademark (Facebook)

Allen was clearly an outstandingly capable individual: cosmopolitan and charming. His skills enabled him to build up an international company. But distinctive though his background is, it is important to note that he was not unique. Despite Sheffield's parochial reputation, the merchants and industrialists could not afford to be inward looking. They too had agents and representatives abroad, making contacts and looking for orders. In that same exhibition in 1910 other Sheffield companies like Hadfields, Vickers, George Turton Platts, Laycocks were represented and some also won medals.



Edgar Allen, merchant, aged 23 (Edgar Allen News: Sheffield Local Studies)

In the 1890s Allen was spending less time in the business due to ill health - he suffered from severe rheumatism and a lung condition. He spent winters abroad in warmer climates such as the West Indies, India, Egypt but in 1915 he died, as he predicted, "alone with probably only a nurse." He was cremated and ashes were placed in the vault with Mary Ann Ovenden in Worksop Priory, in accordance with his will.

His fortune of £271,000, equivalent to over £35 million today, was distributed with considerable generosity to friends, staff, workers and servants. He never forgot his humble origins: the majority of his bequests went to charities for poor children and single women. For instance, he left £5000 to the Sheffield House of Help for destitute young women and £2000 to the Orphan Homes at Crookes. His legacies also reflect his cosmopolitan life and his travels: Waldensian

Churches in Italy, Italian hospitals, the Society of Lepers in India, a school for teaching trades to poor boys in Turin, were all remembered.

The story of Edgar Allen doesn't end here, thanks to Eric Simons, the Publicity Manager at Edgar Allen and Co. – a man nearly as interesting as Edgar Allen himself. What Simons discovered about Edgar Allen will be revealed in my next blog.

Sue Roe

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