

Grandparents

In the swirl of memory which this pandemic has created in my mind, one particular set suddenly stood out, my grandparents. These memories are, it has to be said, quite sparse. Only one of them lived beyond my twenties and one, my maternal grandmother died when I was just six. Nor do I have very strong memories as none of them were very strong personalities who left lasting impacts on me. Yet, and this is what sparked this little piece of work, is that these few memories are, in a sense, nearly all that is left of them. We now live in a world of records and documentation. In the catalogue of the British Library, there are a dozen or so books and reports which I wrote or contributed to which cover my political and professional life. There are a lot of Michael Prior's in the world, or so a Google search on my name suggests, including a priest, a poet and an Aussie rules footballer who all have many more references than me. Yet a diligent biographer, in the very unlikely event that one will exist, could burrow around in these and many other resources to find out about much of my life. Indeed this little essay will in time appear on my website and from there to Facebook and beyond. The same is true of most of my contemporaries at least in this country. Even for those who do not publish there are huge databases of shopping, phone, residential and medical records. Confidential for the moment, they will live on in microscopic rearrangements of magnetic particles on huge hard-disks on great sheds throughout the world. And, of course, in this age of phone-cameras, we are all recorded in hundreds of images.

Yet nothing like this exists for my grandparents just like many millions, indeed billions, of people, both living and dead, who have lived out their lives in this world. When I die even my few scattered and partial memories of them will go. So let me put them down here together with such facts as I can glean about their lives so that at some trace will be left.

Selina Franklyn

Born: 18 October, 1886

Died: 13 April, 1949



My maternal grandmother is to me the most mysterious of my grandparents in the sense that I have no personal memory of her as she died in April 1949 when I was six. I think that this is a photo of her taken around 1916 as part of a group holiday photograph in Margate. The child is probably my mother. She is also a bit of a mystery in herself, something I will come to.

She was born in 1885 to Thomas and Sarah Franklyn in Stanfield, Norfolk. I can find no trace of any birth-certificate or address. Stanfield is a tiny village in Norfolk which had a population of around 250 at the time. Sarah was born in Scarborough and their eldest child is recorded as having been born in Stockton-on-Tees in 1876, the year they married so Thomas presumably met her in Yorkshire though he was born in Fakenham, Norfolk.

Thomas and Sarah moved soon after to the Norfolk

coast near Kings Lynn probably in search of work and the first trace I can find of Selina is in the 1891 Census where she is listed as part of a family of 9 with eldest child, Elizabeth being 15 and the youngest, Arthur, being just one month old. They lived 13, Norfolk Street, Kings Lynn and Thomas is listed as being a bricklayer. The eldest child is already working as a "domestic servant".

In the 1901 Census, Thomas is recorded as being a "general labourer" living as a lodger in Fleet, Lincs. whilst Sarah is living with 4 children in Holbeach, Norfolk with no recorded occupation. There is no sign of Selina. It is possible that she is the "Selina Franklin" aged 17 recorded in this Census as living as a domestic servant in the house of one James Hickinbottom, an innkeeper living at 6, Boston Road in Holbeach Lincolnshire. She is recorded as being born in Stamford, Lincolnshire but this might be just a recovers error.

This is where the mystery exists. After 1901, Selina vanishes until she is recorded as marrying my grandfather, Edward Coe in 1908 in St. Pancras, London, something recorded in the general register of marriages though I can find no certificate. According to my mother's memoir, Edward Coe, at that time a jeweller by trade, went off for "some years" and returned with Selina, apparently married. She does appear to be rather beautiful in the one photo and presumably Edward simply met her on his holiday and fell in love. No one else in his family has any connection with Norfolk so just how he met her is unknown. My mother told the story that one of Edward's sister rather sniffily remarked that they were not sure that they were actually married until Selina gave birth to my mother in the Royal Free Hospital then in Grays Inn Road. Apparently this institution only allowed married woman to birth there so the couple must have proved their relationship. In any event, Selina is living as a married woman,

In the 1911 Census, Selina is living as Mrs. Coe in 19 Rawstorne Buildings, St John St, London with two children, my mother aged two and Grace, just born. Her mother, Sarah, is recorded as also being there as a "visitor" though for how long is unknown. My mother is recorded as being born in 1909 at 49, Frederick Street in Islington so presumably that is where the couple first lived together.

When they were married my grandfather worked as a jeweller and, probably, earned quite good money. However, and this is a story to tell under Edward's life, this all fell apart after the First War and life was a lot tougher. The family moved first to 145, Hertford Road, Enfield Wash and then to 31, Gilbert Street, Enfield near where Edward had taken a job in the munitions factory at Waltham Cross. Gilbert Street was not a paradise. No bathroom and an outside lavatory until much later when my uncle Charles, married to Selina's second daughter, Grace, added a conversion.

My mother has recorded something of their lives in her partial memoir and, at one point, it involved going from house to house 'totting', that is asking for old clothes which they sold at a stall in Caledonian Market. Despite this struggle, my mother records that she was a good mother to her three children and very solicitous about their welfare. She mentions that she would never give them margarine rather than butter even when this was supposed to be the issue when using food-stamps as she was sometimes forced. She was also good humoured. I have been told the story that she would sometimes dance on the bar of the local pub smashing glasses in the process.

Selina had six siblings, three brothers and three sisters. She did maintain contact with them. As mentioned, her mother, Sarah, was staying with them in 1911 and my mother mentions that two of the brothers stayed with them in London and were, presumably the two she notes as joining up. The younger, she calls Jack, was killed at the battle of Loos in 1915. The older, Ernie, was badly wounded and stayed with them briefly. I can find no

record of the younger Franklin, presumably the one whose full name was Arthur John being killed at Loos though two Franklin's, both in the Lincolnshire Regiment, did die there. The fate of the elder, presumably the William registered in the Census, is also unknown to the records though the story recounted by my mother is rather sad. He was given a small Army gratuity which he spent on a device to make dog-tags with the dog's address on them. He left after the war their house and was never heard of again.

The final recorded part of Selina's story is sad. On 13th. April, 1949, Selina Coe is recorded on her death certificate as having died in Claybury Mental Hospital of "Cardiac failure due to hypertension" having been admitted some months before in October, 1948. She had been married to Edward Coe of 31, Gilbert Street Enfield so there is no doubt as to her identity as my grandmother. There is no record of what disorder she suffered from.

Claybury now exists only as part of a large housing estate built after it was closed in 1997. It was built in 1893 as the Claybury Lunatic Asylum and had around 2,500 patients. It is a long way from Gilbert Street and there is no record as to why she had to be sent to a mental hospital to spend the rest of her days. aged just 62.

I am not sure if this rather severe but fine-looking woman is Selina. It is a photograph left by my mother and it seems most likely to be her probably taken with Gilbert Street in the background. Let us leave her there in peace.



Lillian Rose Bird

Born: 22, April, 1893

Died: 26, July, 1993

Lillian was born in Gilston, Hertfordshire which is where she was christened and which the 1911 Census records her as her birth place. The recorder in the 1901 Census omits to record any birthplace for the Bird's. She later moved with her family to Ware, Hertfordshire probably at 4, Bowling Green where her family lived in the 1901 Census. She had 2 older brothers, James and George, an older sister, Florence and 2 younger sisters, Mabel and Daisy, the last being but 6 months old. Her father, Charles, 41 years old, is recorded as being a blacksmith whilst her mother, Jane, was 33. Bowling Green no longer exists though there is a Bowling Road.

The next record is the 1911 Census which shows that she is still living with her family, though with its one elder brother, George, now recorded as working as a 'blacksmith's mate' presumably with his father, and 3 younger siblings, Mabel, now 14 years, and Ivy Winifred, aged 5, and Frederick Ronald, aged 4 years. Daisy presumably has not survived. Her new address is 1, Waterfall Villa, Hunsdon also in Hertfordshire.

These three locations are also quite close, geographically, though none now exist, so it may be assumed that the family moved around following their father's work. Hunsdon is recorded in the 1881 Census as being Charles's birthplace where he originally worked as a blacksmith, his own father being a labourer so perhaps they just moved back to the family village.



It was this move that marked out a great shift in Lillian's life as in 1911 she is recorded as being a 'general servant' probably in the nearby Hunsdon House as she told me stories about her life as what she called a 'tweeny-maid' that is a servant between the kitchen and being a lady's-maid. She probably went there when she was 14 or so.

Hunsdon House is an old foundation. Henry VIII once owned it and hunted in its deer-parks. However it had fallen into disrepair and had been largely rebuilt some twenty or so years before Lillian went to work there. She told me that it was owned by the Hennessey brandy family but I think her memory played her false. It seems to have been owned by a beer-magnate. It is much smaller than it was in Henry's day but it is still large enough to require a large staff.

Lillian told several stories about her work there. As a very junior servant, she was required in winter to creep into bedrooms to lay and light fires to warm up the rooms for the sleepers. This would have meant her leaving home and walking to the House very early. The most bizarre, not to say repugnant, aspect of her work was to hold bowls in front of some

ladies after meals so that they could vomit into them. In Edwardian times, the leisured class had four big meals a day, breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner so to preserve their wasp waists, ladies had to get rid of some of the calories.

In 1912 on 3rd. August, she married my grandfather, William James Prior, in the local parish church. The register was signed by her parents, Charles having to make a mark being illiterate. William is stated on the marriage certificate to be a “gardener” whilst she is classed as a “kitchen maid”. William’s residence is stated as being in Kent though the 1901 Census suggests that he was born and lived in Hunsdon. The story seems to be that he worked as a gardener in Hunsdon Hall and that Lillian and he met there and, let’s be romantic, fell in love and decided to make a new life elsewhere. which is why in 1914, she is recorded as living in Deal at 3, Beachland Cottages, Middle Deal Road.

One may assume that William worked locally in Kent as a gardener whilst Lillian looked after her children, my father Arthur, born in 1913, and Lillian May (always known as May) born in 1914. However William joined the army, was badly injured and retired with a small pension. His story is recounted below but, essentially, he never worked again and Lillian was forced to bring up the family with almost no income and no training. My father recalled that she did such as take-in washing whilst in summer. she would take in holiday lodgers whilst the children slept in a shed in the garden. He said that sometimes they had to eat dry bread and ‘spec’, that is damaged fruit bought late in the day at the market.

Lillian joined the Labour Party, I believe, in 1919 as well as the Canterbury Cooperative Society. She stayed in the Party all her life, latterly in the Tottenham constituency. She seems to have been active at least in the usual mundane tasks of leafleting and canvassing. At some point in the 1930s, she moved to London with William to 72, Braemar Road. Tottenham. I remember her living at 75, Cavendish Road, a street which I lived in much later. It was a pleasant upstairs flat with three bedrooms and I sometimes stayed there. Have no idea as to how she afforded these London dwellings. I suspect that my father and aunt helped. She went back to live in Whitstable for a while and at the end of her life after William died, she lived for a short time with my parents. Her last years were spent in a home in Herne Bay where, as the picture shows, she held my young son.

I have two rather different precise memories of her. One is being taught how to make pastry. The trick is to mix the butter and flour into something like breadcrumbs using the tips of one’s fingers otherwise the fat melt which is disaster. The second is of her meeting an Aldermaston March as it entered Trafalgar Square, possibly in 1959. She was clapping and gave me a broad smile as I marched proudly under my local youth CND banner. She was a good woman.



William James Prior

Born: 28 June, 1886

Died: 19 December, 1971

William James Prior was born in Hunsdon, Hertfordshire on 28, June 1886. I have his birth certificate in front of me though it does date from 1950. His birth was registered in Ware. His father Benjamin, was a farm labourer or 'agricultural worker' as one census recorder puts it. Although born in the nearby town of Magdalen Laver, Benjamin must have moved around a bit as two of his sons are shown as having been born in Darlington. His wife, Elizabeth, was also born in Essex so clearly this was where his roots were.

The family was large, William seems to have had some seven siblings though this is not entirely clear from the censuses. He lived with his father and mother at 39, Main Street Hunsdon in 1891 with three siblings but in 1901, he is recorded as living with his brother Edward, his wife, Clara, and another brother, Benjamin at 45, Hunsdon Street. He is stated to be working as some kind of decorator's helper seemingly hanging wallpaper. In 1911, He is living with Edward at Sundial Cottages, Hunsdon, with Clara and two sons. The house has four rooms with four men and two women living in it. At this time, William, is recorded as being a 'Gardener Domestic'. In 1912 at his marriage, his father, Benjamin, is shown as being a gardener so at some point he followed his father's new trade.



39 MAIN STREET, HUNSDON

None of these Hunsdon addresses now seem to exist though probably this the place now called High Street

I assume that this gardening work was done at Hunsdon House as there would have been little other opportunity for such work in a small village like Hunsdon. I also assume that it was here that he met my grandmother, Lillian, who would have been working as a kitchen or tweeny maid as detailed above. She would have been in her teens whilst he would have been in his early twenties. Let us again make the romantic assumption that they fell in love and decided to flee Hunsdon and set up house together. What is certain is that on 3 August, 1912, William James Prior, a gardener living in St. Leonards, Kent, married Lillian Rose Bird, spinster, working as a kitchen maid in Hunsdon Church. Both signed their names.

Just why the pair went to live in Kent is unclear. Perhaps they had friends there for I can find no family connection. Let us hope that they had a reasonably prosperous time. Certainly in May, 1913, they had a son, my father Arthur William, when living at 4, Fairfield Cottages, Great Mongeham in Kent. William is recorded as being a "Gardener Domestic" on his birth certificate. Great Mongeham is a village on the outskirts of Deal. A second child, Lillian May, was born in August, 1914 just as the event which was to shape their lives, WWI, broke out.

William James Prior joined the 3rd Royal Kent Regiment on 24 November, 1915. He was then living with his wife and two children at 3, Beachland Cottage, Middle Deal Road, Deal. He was 27 years and 179 days old and working as a gardener. The enlistment form also gives his physical dimensions: he was 5 feet 7 1/2 inches tall, with a 34 inch waist.

On 27 November, 1917 he was discharged as "no longer physically fit for War Service" He was referred to the Ministry of Pensions with the recommendation that he receive 27s 6d a week for four weeks then 13s 9d thereafter with a review in 48 weeks. He was discharged to live at 2, St Andrews Walk, Deal with £1 and a "suit of plain clothes." His disability was described as "D.A.H." which apparently stands for 'disordered action of the



heart' with symptoms including "breathlessness, palpitation, precordial pain, and exhaustion."¹ Just what gave rise to the D.A.H. syndrome is not clear. It does not appear to refer to any physical wound and the various references to it suggest that some form of physical activity is usually possible. In his discharge certificate, it is stated that he was discharged because of "strain of active service".

Just what gave rise to this "strain" is not stated but it was serious enough for him to have been sent home from wherever he had been stationed, presumably France, to hospital in Chatham from where he was discharged. The story I remember is that he was buried up to his neck in mud for 24 hours before rescue and that this had resulted in his discharge. Perhaps the best explanation of his condition is that he suffered from what would now be called PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder or as it was termed at the time, shell-shock.

It seems he never worked again, certainly not for any time and, as described above, the family went through very hard times. He is described in his death certificate as a retired men's tailor but I suspect that this was fabrication. It is very likely that even the meagre army pension would have been cancelled. I remember him as an old man sitting in the corner of the house he lived in with Lillian in Cavendish Road. He never said much, just groused a lot and I had the idea that this was pretty much what he had always been like. Certainly my father had little affection for him.

He died in December, 1971 at Bensted House, Faversham of heart failure. He was 85.

¹ The source of all this is www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2342343/pdf/brmedj06974-0005.pdf

Edward George Coe

Born: 23 June, 1886

Died: 18, December, 1965

Edward George Coe, always known as Ted, was born in 1886 to a family living at 35, South Crescent Mews in St Pancras, London. This road does not seem to exist today but was probably near the Argyle Street School, Tonbridge Street, WC1. It was a large family. In 1891, there was the father, Thomas, his wife Esther and seven children, Thomas, the eldest aged 20, then Arthur, 16, Elizabeth, 13, Christopher, 12, Grace, 7, Edward, 5, and Mark 2. In the census ten years previously, an older daughter, Esther, then aged 12, is mentioned but she is not there in 1891. Thomas was a cab-driver whilst the son, Thomas, and his brother Arthur are both recorded in the census as ostlers. It was clearly a rather horsey street as the immediate neighbours were also cab-driver and ostlers. Presumably there were stables nearby if not actually in the street. All were born in the neighbourhood.

Edward went to school when he was just six to the local Manchester School, renamed Argyle Street School in 1937. In 1901, he is still living in South Crescent Mews, now recorded as being an "errand boy". Arthur has become a "cab-driver/groom" as is his father, a trade brother Christopher would follow. The sisters, Elizabeth and Grace are recorded as being "florists" which meant they made artificial flowers, a trade that would occupy them thereafter.

By 1911, life has turned around for Ted. He is married in the slightly mysterious circumstances recounted in Selina's story above, he lives with his wife and two daughters, Selina and Grace in three rooms at 19, Rawston Buildings, St John Street and he is recorded as being a "diamond mounter".

Just how he shifted from being an errand boy to being in the rather skilled craft of diamond mounting is unclear. Presumably his father arranged for some kind of apprenticeship, possibly in the jewellery district of Clerkenwell nearby. The jewellery trade in the area may have originated with Huguenot immigrants in the 17th century and, oddly, my mother always insisted that we had Huguenot forebears though I have never found any direct evidence for this. Thomas clearly had ambitions for his younger sons as Mark became a skilled printer.

As with others in the family, WWI was a sad turning point for Ted. When the war broke out, the jewellery trade collapsed and he got a job with the Royal Small Arms Factory (RSAF) in Waltham Cross. My mother has described all this in some detail in her memoir though, as she was but five years old, I sometimes wonder at this detail. But never disagree with your mum.

The family, which by then had two small children, my mother, Selina (Lena), and Grace born in 1910, moved out to Enfield which was then quite rural. Lena describes playing in fields, loving the space after the crowded streets of St. Pancras. The RSAF specialised in making rifles, thus the Army's Lee-Enfield rifle which included the name of the River Lea which ran by the factory. Ted's job was repairing and cleaning rifles brought in from having been used in France, often blood-stained.

There was a short-lived boom after the war when the jewellery trade flourished and Ted went back to working with his old firm for good money. It did not last. he was sacked suddenly and, as his employer had not stamped his card, he had no entitlement to unemployment benefit. He never worked again as a jeweller though he did some odd jobs for a local firm and had a bench and tools in his bedroom. I have a couple of small rings, which

he probably made, which are in my mother's jewellery box My mother writes that all the other jewellery he had was pawned for food in the tough years. There is more about this life in Selina's story but life was certainly tough. At one point, Ted worked on building the new Cambridge arterial road as part of his unemployment

He did eventually get a job working as a night-cleaner in the new bus-garage built to provide for the expanding population of Enfield. In the 1939 electoral register for Enfield, he is described as a "general labourer". He later moved with his daughter, Grace and her husband, Charles, to Tylers Cross where he died in 1965 aged 79. His death certificate justly describes him as a retired jeweller. I fondly remember him as a quiet, gentle man with a kind smile



Epilogue

This to a limited extent work in progress. I have used all the resources of ancestry.co.uk and such small mementoes as I have to write these stories but, obviously, there gaps and some things I cannot explain. I have also drawn on my memory for three of the four for some personal fragments. One stark reminder of the world in which they lived is how few photographs I have of them; just the one, for example, of Lillian taken in her final days at a care home. Cameras were rare and film expensive. So different from now when hundreds of all of us exist on phones and computers.

One project which I hope to pursue when the world opens up is to visit the various houses in which they are recorded as living and photograph them. This is why I have been so precise in giving such addresses as I have.

The thing that strikes my heart when reading through these short tales is just how hard life was for all of them. Each of my grandfathers had their lives shattered by WWI with their families eking out lives of hardship after it. We need to remember this as we endure the small hardships of the plague.