

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER XX

and

Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

January, 2025.

He stood five feet and eleven inches in his stockinged feet; James Aleman was the son of a coal miner. His father, and many generations of fathers, too numerous to disclose, had all been born and raised in the Forest of Dean and therefore their birthright included an automatic licence to mine for coal in the forest. There were some who worked a mine on their own or with the help of their families or a few hired hands, but the Aleman family had always employed miners to do the hard graft, while the family managed the coal mines, gradually adding more to their portfolio.

James was a younger son and not very interested in extracting coal from below ground level. His ambition was to own a brewery and so, when he became of age and in order to preserve the family inheritance, their father proposed to his two sons, James and John, that John inherit the coal mining enterprise and that by way of generous compensation, he grant James a tidy sum with which to establish a brewery once he had mastered the business of brewing ale, beer, stout and whatever else. James was delighted and wrote numerous letters to breweries offering his services in order to study the business.



William McEwan.

There were many rejections, but then one day he received a letter from the Fountain Brewery of Fountainbridge, Edinburgh offering him the managerial apprenticeship he desired. James worked and studied hard and soon won the admiration and approval of William McEwan the owner.



Fountain Brewery, Dundee Street, Fountainbridge, Edinburgh.

The site chosen for his brewery, which was to cover twelve acres in north central Edinburgh was determined by the geological survey he commissioned to determine the availability of well water, and also the proximity of the “Caledonian Railway” and the Union Canal. It was near the end of his period of studying the trade in all its aspects that Moira arrived. She did not so much arrive as floated into his life. James had called on one of the breweries customers in the Royal Mile, about one hundred and fifty yards below the castle when he saw a vision from heaven tripping along the pavement towards him. Without hesitation he raised his hat to her and enquired if he could be of service. A bold move and he would later wonder at his impertinence. Expecting her to flounce off with a toss of her head, she stopped and enquired if he knew of any respectable dining rooms nearby. When James escorted her into the tavern he had just vacated and arranged a room on the first floor she was impressed, and doubly so as it was obvious that her young companion was known and shown every courtesy and consideration. Why she felt safe in his company she would never be able to explain. A girl from the western isles she had never visited Edinburgh before nor any of Scotland’s cities save a day in Inverness.

The pair got on like a house on fire much to the astonishment of James and the delight of Moira. She was the girl with the flaxen hair, a pure yellowy blond and as far as the smitten young man could tell, a figure to match. He would later discover that her waist measured eighteen inches, whilst her bust and hips were each thirty-six inches. Her carriage was perfect, a light step as she tripped along none of the heavy plodding with arms swinging as though on a route march which was much in evidence amongst some of the lower-class women he had seen in the city.

All too soon it was time for Moira to depart, a “Caledonian Railway” train would carry her far away through the Highlands to home on the Isle of Skye via the ferry. They had exchanged addresses and although Jamie, she always used her native version of “James” wrote to her he wondered if she would reply. True to her word she wrote back to him without delay. In due course James journeyed to the island and was pleased to find that contrary to popular Scots logic “If you cannot see the island it’s raining and if you can see the island it’s about to rain” there was very little rain, and they enjoyed glorious weather.



Loch Coruish, Isle of Skye by Sidney Richard Percy, 1874.

From here on everything progressed with astounding speed. James proposed marriage to Moira, and she accepted. The prospective bridegroom then approached the laird, Moira’s father who gave his blessing and a week later on the 27th April, 1858 the happy couple were married in accordance with the right of the Scottish Kirk.

Travelling south Jamie explained his aim to establish a brewery with the knowledge he

had gained at William McEwan's Fountain Brewery and the funds his father had provided for him. Together they set about the task and from small beginnings established a brewery in Drybrook in Gloucestershire where the railway both to Cinderford and Ross via the junction at Mitcheldean Road facilitated the transport of the beverage.

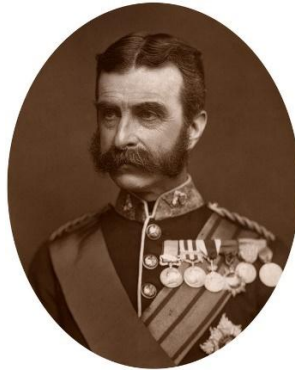


The Cross, Drybrook.

The brewery known as “Bonnie Moira Brewery” prospered as the good people of west Gloucestershire and south Herefordshire sated their thirst on the bonnie brew. To James Moira was always the bonnie Scots lassie. She bore him four children, three boys and a girl. They were a very happy and contented family save for the deaths their second son in infancy, and their daughter at the age of ten years from diphtheria until disaster struck in 1879.

They had all enjoyed a happy Christmas with James's family mostly in the larger house of his parents situated adjacent to Plump Hill on the west side of the main road before the decent into Mitcheldean which commanded an excellent view across the lower land towards the estuary of the River Severn. There was however one missing, which would be an ominous sign, their eldest son Ernest for whom had a 2nd Lieutenant's commission had been purchased in Her Majesty's 24th Regiment of Foot. The family would have celebrated his appointment at Christmas but because of ominous and foreboding developments in South Africa in November he had sailed on the first available ship to join the Regiment as soon as possible.

The formerly independent Boar territory of the Transvaal having encountered dire financial difficulties was annexed by the South African colonial government in Cape Town. When the king of the adjoining Zulu territory of Zululand, Cetshwayo, refused to comply with the terms of an ultimatum issued by Sir Bartle Frere, the High Commissionaire of South Africa, the Government declared war, the objective being to curtail the warlike activities of the Zulus.



Lieutenant General Frederick Thesiger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford, GCB, GCVO

The Major General who held the local rank of Lieutenant General Frederick Thesiger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford, GCB, GCVO was appointed to command the army of invasion, and on the 11th January, 1879 the army, split into three columns, began crossing the frontier into Zululand. The 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 24th Regiment formed the bulk of the army, some 3,000 officers and men, (who would later become the South Wales Borderers) and it was this group that Ernest had joined marching into enemy country. After nine days plodding across open country the centre of the three columns crossed the Buffalo River on the 20th near Rooke's Drift and arrived at the hill known as Isandlwana, (whose outline when approached from the west resembled the sphinx on the regiment's badge awarded for their achievements in the Egyptian campaign of 1801) where a more permanent camp was established over an elongated area under the western shadow of the kopje.



Ernest had been posted to the 1st Battalion, and thus when the Commander in Chief decided that most of the 2nd Battalion should conduct a reconnaissance in force of the country to the east, Ernst remained in the camp. He was not very sure that the arrangement had been well planned, it proved to be far worse than he imagined. Sometime in the late morning of the 22nd January the Zulus attacked the camp in force; to those defending the camp, a tidal wave swept up to and over the reduced force. Although Ernest would never know the full strength of the camp's defenders he would have been aware of the two field guns of "N" company Royal Artillery, the large number of the Natal Native Contingent and other native troops. The defensive perimeter was far too extended with great gaps in the line some 200 to 300 yards wide and whilst the 7 pounder field guns opened fire with canister there were only two and grossly insufficient to cope with the emergency.

Rather than lager the wagons to provide a defensive ring they were parked in a line furthest from the exposed west flank, with the 2nd battalion 24th Foot ammunition wagon furthest way from the battalion. At 1300 hours and for shortly after the moon passed

between the Earth and the Sun cloaking the unfolding horror in an eerie penumbra and a temporary reduction in the ferocity of the Zulu onslaught.

The effectiveness of the troops was further hampered by a quite unnecessary shortage of vital ammunition caused by a blind obedience to army regulations which Ernest was to discover when a lance corporal and two privates who had been sent to obtain ammunition from the wagon parked, as has been mentioned, furthest away from where the soldiers of the 24th were deployed, having failed to return Captain Lloyd, who hailed from the City of Worcester, despatched Ernest to investigate. He found Quartermaster Blomfield in command of the ammunition wagon of the 2nd/24th refusing to release supplies to any other battalion even though troops were being slaughtered all around. He was just in time to witness Transport Officer Lieutenant Horace Smith-Dorrien of the 95th Foot take command ordering the reluctant Bloomfield to issue supplies of ammunition. Unfortunately, the chronic shortage was not solved as the lids of the boxes were not secured with snap fastenings or nails but screws and there was a total absence of screwdrivers. On a front of over a mile wide the negros swarmed all around and over the defenders who were massacred attempting to hold the line.



The Last Stand at Isandlwana by Charles Edwin Fripp.

Ernest died attempting to return to the regiment when an impi suddenly appeared to his front, but there was another on his left side which should have been fairly safe. As he raised his service revolver to despatch the savage warrior ahead the unseen impi to his left and slightly behind drove his assegai, a short broad bladed stabbing spear, into his left flank so deeply the point was visible on his right side. Collapsing to the ground the Zulu warrior still holding the assegai was shot by a soldier of the 1st/24th who happened to be nearby, and the Zulu minus half his head, died instantly. Ernst died within some three minutes in profound agony the longest three minutes of his short life.

There were precious few survivors, and Ernest not being one of them, neither was a young officer of the Natal Native Contingent, one John Charles Bullock, Quartermaster Sergeant, whom Ernest met on the march eastwards and the two became good friends. They would never know what happened to each other though they died within 500 yards of one another. In St. Peter's Church in Stow on the Wold his parents funded a stain glass window in his memory, an example of how the war thousands of miles away impacted on

the lives of families in both east and west Gloucestershire and numerous other parts of the country.



The Memorial Window in the west wall of the south transept of St. Peter's Church, Stow on the Wold.

The total number of regular army troops participating in the war amounted to 6,700, plus 9,000 African soldiers and 800 auxiliaries, whilst the Zulu forces totalled between 35,000 to 50,000. The Zulus lost some 6,930 killed and 3,500 wounded. Our losses were 1,902, whilst 50 imperial officers and/or men escaped including Lieutenant, later General Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien.

Was it this tragedy or another similar error which spurred Field Marshall Earl Kitchener of Khartoum to declare “Regulations are for the guidance of wise men and the blind obedience of fools”, it may well have been.

News of the terrible defeat and the tragic death of their son Ernest reached the Able family during the first week of February to the pitiful grief of all three, James, Moira and Archibald now the only surviving child, though at eighteen years of age he was no longer a child but assisting in the running of the brewery. James had decided that Archibald, known within the family as Archie should start at the bottom and learn the operation of the brewery. He argued that you could not manage employees if you did not know what was involved in any task you set an employee to undertake. Very sound logic. Archie was a good lad who willingly applied himself to whatever he was given to undertake, and with advancing knowledge of the firm and brewing he was able to relieve the pressure on his father. Ernest was not forgotten, but time can be a gentle healer of grief, and meanwhile there was much to be done.

The year 1879 was an awful time for the local farms, in fact for all farming both in the

British Isles and in the northern continental countries, the wettest and coldest year, so the “Gloucester Chronicle” would later report, since 1695. Evergreen shrubs died of the cold during the winter months and agriculture would not recover whilst the flow of cheaper wheat from the North American prairie territories of Kansas, Oklahoma and others decimated farming revenue.

Elsewhere on the 3rd February Moseley Street in Newcastle was the first public thoroughfare in the world to be lit by electric incandescent light. Abroad, on the 5th April war broke out between Bolivia, Chile and Peru, the War of the Pacific, and on the 1st June the heir to the Bonaparte family, the Prince Imperial was killed by Zulus, the same war in which Ernest had died in January.

In October the “Morning Post” reported the establishment of a Dual Alliance (7th October) between the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, whilst the “Ross Gazette” would report the opening on the 13th October of Lady Margaret College in Oxford, the first to not just admit female students but exclusively for ladies.

Autum did not bring any relief from the foul weather as reduced rainfall gave way to increased storms and bitter cold.

Then just before Christmas Moira received a letter from her sister Isla informing her that her husband, Hamish, her brother-in-law, had met with a serious accident and wondering if she could spare the time to visit as she was finding nursing him and all else very exhausting. They both knew that Isla and Hamish lived in Lossiemouth on the north east coast and had been having trouble financially. Moira showed the letter to her husband for his advice.

“Of course you should go.” Said James, it seemed to him that his wife thought she should go, and he also thought the change of scene and Scottish air would help revive her spirits. Family discussion followed and “Bradshaw’s” was consulted. James perceived that it would be possible to travel on Boxing Day, the 26th December from Drybrook to Mitcheldean Road, then a change of trains to Hereford via Ross-on-Wye. From Hereford on the “Midland Railway” to Birmingham, arriving there at midday. From Birmingham New Street the “London & North Western” would convey Moira and Archie, it had been decided that Archie would accompany his mother, to Carlisle where they would spend the night at the “L&NW’s” luxurious hotel.

The following day the “Caledonian Railway” would speed the pair into southern Scotland passing Gretna Green, through Ayrshire and Glasgow to Edinburgh, in time to board the “North British” using the faster route across Loch Tay to Dundee where they would stay the night at the North British Hotel before travelling on the Lossiemouth mainly by the “Great North of Scotland Railway.”

The efficiency of the railway booking service in Gloucester had secured the arrangements and James travelled with his wife and son as far as Birmingham where he wished them both a safe and hopefully not too an uncomfortable journey. The weather on route had been dreadful, buffeted by storms which rocked the railway carriages. North of Edinburgh the railway ran westwards towards Stirling before turning to the northeast making in the direction of the North Sea and the estuary of the River Tay. The new bridge across Loch

Tay avoided the long detour to Perth before turning east along the north shore of the Tay for Dundee. Now, with the Tay Bridge, it would be just under two miles from the southern shore to the city where mother and son would be spending the night of the 28th December. Approaching the loch, it seemed to Archie that the storm had increased in intensity with both wind and rain hurtling horizontally at the train. Although Archie had no way of knowing the wind speed was in excess of 100 miles per hour causing the waters of Loch Tay to be whipped into a furious tempest.

From the carriage window as the train, with a blast of steam and smoke from the funnel began to clear the station buildings, the last stop before the bridge, Archie glimpsed a young woman with a small child standing in the approach road to the railway station entrance. The girl child was most unhappy, and mother, struggling to stop bonnet, cloak and child from being swept away by the fury raging all about, appeared quite distraught. Archie was unaware that the pair had just missed the train, and it was her husband who was the guard. They were to have travelled free in the guardsvan. For the moment she was spared the grief of seeing the train vanish into the Tay by the driving wind and rain obscuring her vision. The fury of the gale also prevented the footplate crew, driver and fireman, seeing the peril ahead as the train began to transverse the bridge with sparks flying from the wheels as the now exposed position threatened to fling both carriages and locomotive into the foaming brine.



The morning of the 29th December, 1879, the damaged bridge across Loch Tay.

Seated facing forward, towards the engine, Moira was flung forwards as the first-class carriage was swept together with the whole train over the edge where the central span of the bridge had already disappeared into the loch by the violence of the storm. Moira's head collided with considerable force with the metal frame of the luggage rack, normally above the passenger's heads but now at eye level, she was immediately rendered unconscious and only seconds later the whole train was consumed by the icy cold waters of the North Sea and the freezing water of the Loch Tay. They were destined not to spend the night in Dundee or anywhere else again.

There were no survivors, 75 souls died, everyone on the train that terrible night. Few mourned the passing of 1879; what had they done to enrage the gods of Mount Olympus to wreck such havoc and misery on the country?

At Blackadder in Berwickshire a temperature of minus 23 degrees Fahrenheit was recorded.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



At the Sales.

The mad scramble for bargains in the New Year Sales of the 1920's and 1930's.

Trailer for February.

James Aleman is left with insoluble grief. There is no point in continuing, he just gives up. It is ten years before the Mortgagees force James to sell and George decides to purchase Bonnie Moira Brewery in Drybrook, but matters do not proceed without hindrance.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st January, 2025.