

MEMORIES 1857 to 1941

Of Lenie Freer-Smith (nee Wilson), Recorded April 6th, 1941.

The Wilson Family

George Wilson and Emily his wife (My Parents)

George - Eldest Son

Jack - Second Son

Emmie - Eldest Daughter (afterwards she married Sir Wilson Mappin, 3rd Baronet)

Lenie - Youngest Daughter (Afterwards married Commander Sir Hamilton Freer—Smith, R.N., C.S.I.)

Tom - Youngest Son.

I apologize for writing this - I feel my memories can be of little interest to anyone else, though perhaps a grandson might get a smile out of them in years to come. I am nearly eighty-four; cannot walk far; have no chauffeur - the car is at a garage. I *am* sick to death of crochet - have made a hundred and fifty khaki scarves, a good many Air Force blue ones, several sweaters, fourteen charity coats and a few odd shawls for old ladies. Wool is ten shillings a lb now so I am really hard up for something to help pass away the long days. We are in the midst of a terrible war which shows no signs of coming to an end. This is my apology for writing rubbish.

Well, to start off; I am, as I previously told you, nearly eighty-four. I was born at the “Mount”, a terrace of houses just off the main road that runs steeply uphill all the way out of Sheffield towards Manchester. When my father brought his bride to the “Mount”, it was looked upon and spoken of as Flockton’s Folly”. It was considered so far out of Sheffield that no-one would ever want to live there. From the windows there was an unbroken view of fields right across to the Moors.

However, Father took a chance, and he and Mother took the two end houses of the Terrace and by knocking a door through on the several floors, made it their home and brought up their family there. In front of the Terrace there was a good strip of land making a garden; a big summer house with a thatched roof stood at the tapering end. This became our Robbers’ Den in our games, our “Home” when we played Hide-and-seek or Bears - we seemed partial to playing Bears, a nasty rough game which consisted in one of the oldest of our gang being the Bear and the rest of us being chased screaming till caught and brought home to the Den. Behind the “Mount” each house had its own smaller garden and a paved court where Father kept his shooting dogs, and behind that again each house had its stabling for two horses and a good coachhouse. I think Mother’s first horses were greys and her Lauri and Marner’s brougham was a very smart one with a cream-coloured brocade for the lining and cushions — this was always covered by brown Holland covers except when the carriage was lent for weddings or any special occasion. Then the Holland covers came off and the glory of the cream brocade appeared in all its smartness.

Our coachman, Alderson, was a distinct character. In those days, when you dined out your coachman put up his horses and came in to help wait. On these occasions he shed his gaiters of cream plush and appeared in silk stockings and buckled shoes and stood behind his mistress’s chair and helped more or less in the waiting. I don’t think Alderson could have been very “au fait” at the job - once when handing Mother a rather rickety jelly he was heard to murmur

aloud, "Whoa Horse" - and another time when, in the fashion of the day, Mother had supplemented a curl on her head that did not grow there, Alderson caught one of his silver buttons in it and was removing it altogether, but the old Vicar of Sheffield, a dear old man of ready wit, caught it deftly off the coat at the critical moment and pushed it back quickly into Mother's hair, saying beneath his breath as he did so, "Oh, the superfluities of this wicked world."

It was this old cleric, too, once when Mother had given a most successful afternoon party and had provided an entertainer from town to give a "thought reading" show (then a new thing in Sheffield) who, when thanking Mother as he said goodbye, exclaimed, "I have enjoyed myself so much, Mrs Wilson. You see, we parsons can't go to the Music Halls and you have brought the Music Halls to us." Mother thought he might have put it rather differently that time.

It was this same old, man, Canon Blakeney, when Sheffield was passing through some grim days after a long and unusually severe winter - many works were closed, men hungry and becoming desperate had started looting and robbing the big houses - who marched at the head of the Hunger Processions through the town, his presence doing wonders to control what might have been a nasty moment.

But I have wandered away from old Alderson. I must tell you of two more incidents I remember about him. It was the fashion then at some of the more unworldly houses, after the dinner parties were over and the guests were making ready for home, to collect the whole party including maids and the visiting coachmen into the Hall or dining-room and for the Host to read evening prayers. At this particular house the party were always collected in a long Hall with a polished floor and not a sign of a carpet to kneel on. This was bad enough for ladies in their smart evening gowns, but Alderson in his silk stockings considered that to go down on his bended knees was really too much. He looked at Mother, rubbing his knees, and when she nodded, piously went down with a grunt of loud disapproval.

Alderson's last feat was the means of his dismissal. We were sent into the kitchen to tea on Sundays when Nurse was out and very often Alderson was there too. I suppose Emmie, my elder sister, had been talking too much - she had a ready tongue at all times - but Alderson stopped her then by clapping a plaster of treacle across her mouth - this was the last straw and Mother gave him notice there and then.

Sundays were rather dreary days to us when young. On Saturday night all our books and toys were collected and put out of reach till Monday morning. We were only allowed a Noah's Ark with all the animals' legs broken off, which made it impossible for them to stand up for long, and in the proper order of procession - two by two - one always fell over, knocking several more down, too. Beyond this, we had only a box of bricks which made Jacob's Dream - impossible angels on a ladder passing into Heaven - and Daniel in the Lion's Den. Father and Mother always went to church again at night, and we were left much to ourselves and a cross Cook who resented our appearance to tea in her kitchen and only, on very rare occasions, let us make toffee, which Nurse always resented too as we were all sick and cross the next day.

I think we were really a very united family and had few rows, but I do remember howling bitterly when George, my eldest brother, tied my best doll by a string round its neck and dragged it up and down from the top of the back stairs, poor miserable me racing down in anguish trying to reach and rescue her at each landing. I think Tom (the baby) was the most

spoilt. I can quite well remember being in my cot with high sides one morning engaged in picking off the mattress the bits of bright red wool that buttoned it down, when old Nannie came in unusually flurried and informed me I had a baby brother. I don't think I was much interested then, but we were jolly good friends later on and had many good times together, especially when we were grown up and the others had married and left the nest.

We were at Tapton then and Mother gave us a free hand and we entertained quite a lot in the dear old house that made it all so easy. We had dances, one a great success, a cotillion which woke up old Sheffield properly at the time. We gave our guests that night lovely flowers — the men buttonholes, the girls bouquets. Also, the men had little tie pins, the girls little safety pin brooches, I wonder how many of those survive now? I saw my own this morning, oddly enough. We had outdoor parties too - skating and hockey and dancing on the frozen pond, and a band to keep the ball rolling. The poor musicians were fed constantly with hot drinks or else their fingers would have frozen. We had toboggan parties, too, down the field. One night when we tried lighting up the run with candles stuck in bottles, we nearly had a nasty accident - one amateur let his sledge run away, taking the whole line of bottles and banging into the wall at the end of the rim and nearly smashing himself up. We certainly enjoyed life. I suppose people might say now we wasted money over it all, but we were young and we had the money then to spend - I don't regret it. There isn't much fun in life when you get old. I like to see young people having a happy time, and I know we did, and thank goodness for it now. But I am wandering away from my younger days — forgive me meandering.

I think at the "Mount" we were friends with all the rest of the people in the houses. Next to us, when I was very young, lived the Sheffield poet James Montgomery. He was considered rather a wonderful person then. He made friends with Emmie; she was a very pretty child and always ready to talk to everyone, in fact very socially inclined (so different to me). Montgomery gave her a signed book of his poems. After he died an elderly lady and her two sons took that house next to us. She was an invalid and wore long red flannel trousers which intrigued us children. We got a good view of them under her skirts as she stood at the top of the steps at her front door waiting to get in - we had no latchkeys in those days. We had no gas either, only oil lamps and candles. Lamps in the sitting-rooms - except on party nights, when enormous long wax candles were the rule - they dripped and sputtered when a door opened and the slightest draught flickered them.

Mother's drawing-room was considered very charming. The walls were hung with bright yellow watered silk - in the centre panel of each wall a cut glass lustre was fixed with three arms for the candles. The sofa settee curtains and chairs were all yellow silk too - it was called a Sunshine Room and much admired. Mother loved entertaining and gave a great many dinner parties, everything of the best and most expensive. Flowers from Covent Garden, great pines on the great silver centre dish, clusters of grapes on both sides of it - all of which we looked forward to enjoying later on. Once George and Jack got into dreadful disgrace; they did not wait for the oyster sauce to come out of the dining-room but sampled it on the way in and nearly finished it.

I don't think we had anything like the same amount of sweets children of the present age enjoy. Nannie used to encourage us to go into Mother's big store cupboard on the stairs and snatch a handful of dates and raisins - it was not considered thieving, though I suppose it really was. I know once when I was in the cupboard gathering provender, Mother, seeing the door ajar, locked me in and I had a horrid fright, but Nannie, who knew quite well where I was, soon rescued me and I escaped a wigg that time. Store cupboards were much in evidence in

those days. Things were bought in large quantities and the poor cook came every Saturday morning with a tray and was given her week's supply - three sugar basins and three tea caddies were filled - one for the dining-room, one for the nursery, and one for the kitchen. She had also to remember things like rice, raisins, soap, candles, poor dear. How could she tell exactly what she would need for the whole week? I am sure it was a poor economy really, and how any cook stood it I can't think.

In the middle house of the Terrace lived a large family called Newton. The children must have been rather older than us, but I know we played a lot together and the girls were good to me. They had a wonderful collection of dolls, all with trousseaux of clothes. I loved dolls, but poor dears, I fancy their garments were by no means numerous and mostly very badly sewn and fastened on with pins, but I loved them dearly all the same. In another house lived the Fred Fowlers who rejoiced in five daughters. They always went out in pairs and it was a problem to us what happened to the odd one. It was at a children's party there that Mr Fowler and a man friend had a bet about Emmie's wonderful hair. They did not believe such masses of it could all grow on one small head, and Emmie, who never was shy, suddenly undid all her plaits and stood in the centre of the room to prove the bet with all her lovely hair flowing down her back. Mother shuffled her off upstairs very quickly - she did not approve of the performance and thought Emmie was being too forward. Mr Fowler never forgot it and often reminded her of it. He won the bet.

At the other end of the Terrace some other George Wilsons lived which caused some confusion about letters and parcels. Once, after a big entertainment at the Cutlers' Hall, when Father went out and asked the Policeman at the door in charge of the traffic to call up his carriage the man, who must have been something of a wit said, "Well, sir, tell me, which George Wilson are you? There are Shares, Steel and Snuff here tonight." Father, who thoroughly enjoyed the joke, said, "Call Snuff, please." He was very fond of telling this story afterwards but Mother, who always tried to keep up the dignity of the family, was not a bit pleased at being labelled "Mrs Snuff".

When I was about five years old, Father bought Tapton Hall from Mr Vickers and we all moved there, and many happy years I spent there till I married. The day we moved, Mother carefully arranged that we children should all spend the day at the Mills so she might have a free hand and get things settled down without us, but about tea time Father, who naturally wanted to get home, carted us all up to Tapton, much to Mother's horror and we all demanded tea. We were pushed off into the housekeeper's room and given a very scrappy tea and then thrust out into the garden where we worked our wicked will on the plums. I still remember how good they were — great yellow ones, hot from the walled garden, simply delicious.

We loved the big garden, the croquet lawn, the roses on the terrace, the dell full of bluebells and best of all, the little stream running away from the pond where Tom and I spent endless afternoons wading, and jumping from stone to stone. Fortunately, as a rule not much water ran down, but it was a mystery to Mother how often we managed to get so muddy and dirty. We never told how we walked the stream. There was lots of stabling at Tapton and we children started riding. A dear old pony called Taffy was the first - he lived to be quite old - but later on we added to the horses. Mother had a jolly pair of blacks and very smartly our coachman, old Allen, turned them out, too. Then George had three hunters and when I was older I had two cobs, a chestnut to ride and a brown cob to drive in a high two-wheeled dogcart. The chestnut was a joy to ride, just like a rocking horse and with a mouth like silk, but a perfect demon in the stable. No stranger was ever allowed in his stall - he was not a quiet mount, had serious

objections to a good many things, paper especially or a wheelbarrow, and a train drove him silly.

I remember once a very exciting ride along the Buxton road, where the train keeps popping out of tunnels and runs nearly alongside the road. I was rather glad that day when I got to my journey's end in safety; the chestnut had done *most* of the last miles on his hind legs, and my old groom Sam said he saw his heels constantly above my top hat. Another time when I was driving him in the cart Hamilton took us, most unwisely, inside the Dockyard at Portsmouth - and a train carrying troops suddenly appeared out of the blue quite close to us. The chestnut naturally resented it and we very nearly all went to glory. The Tommies thoroughly enjoyed themselves watching the performance; it must have seemed to them rather like a free visit to the Circus.

Another time on which the chestnut behaved extremely badly was on a certain August 12th, the great day of grouse shooting, always a busy one with all the Wilson Family. This year, we had been foretold, was to be an extra good Season, as indeed it proved to be. The Moscar Moor made its highest record that day - five hundred brace for five guns, these being my three brothers George, Jack and Tom and two cousins, also Wilsons, and all good shots. George, who had heard we were to expect big bags and wanted to save Mother from getting fussed over the numbers, had arranged with me that I should go up to the Moors in my cart and bring home the morning bag. I had taken a large hamper in the cart, but when I got to the farm and began to load up the birds, I found the basket quite insufficient, so we piled them up loose on the floor of the cart and they mounted up right to my high driving seat so that I was actually seated on grouse. We started off and proceeded all right till we reached the gate half way up the Farm lane. This had to be opened and closed behind us on account of cattle. The chestnut walked through the gate quite quietly, but on the other side, whilst my groom Sam was closing it behind us, he suddenly decided to play up and did so most vigorously. The two-wheeled cart began to tip and out rushed the grouse behind in a perfect stream. Poor Sam did not know whether to hang on to the chestnut's head or to pick up the grouse. It took us quite a long time before all was well and we could start again. I have often wondered since, how many grouse we left down the bank that afternoon.

As soon as we got back to Tapton the whole household started to pack up the grouse. It really was a great business. Nothing was ever sold in those days, all the game was given away and sent off to friends and relations and to hospitals and charitable institutions. In the present day a motor comes up from the local fish shop and the game is driven off to town and a cheque follows in due course - a far easier method, but Mother would not have approved of that sort of proceeding. The birds to go by hand were tied with a long looped string for easy carrying, a bunch of heather and the addressed card tied round their necks. The ones to go by post were packed into cardboard boxes, the feathers smoothed down and heather put under each wing most carefully. Then the gardeners appeared and were sent off on a round with a careful list. They never objected to carting birds out, for it meant quite good tips from the recipients.

My father did most of his early shooting with an old-fashioned gun, a muzzle-loader. I remember quite well the large flasks of powder and shot and the little rounds of felt that went between, and even later on when he adopted a new gun, he made all his own cartridges. We girls used to help sometimes, but far fewer were needed then - it was all shooting over dogs - no-one had thought of driving grouse till much later. Father was a good shot and took every care his sons should be the same. They all started at fourteen and most of them went on doing it till very near their death. George was not so keen as the two younger ones - he liked hunting

and I don't think ever bothered to shoot anything but grouse on the family moor. Jack and Tom each had big pheasant and partridge shootings of their own.

The Moscar Moor was a great asset to all the family, not only for the shooting (the female element on shooting days were firmly told to stay at home) but at other times when it provided the whole family, young and old, with days of delightful fun and picnics. We paddled in the streams, always very cold even on the hottest summer days, we tickled trout, or tried to - I think George was the only one who became an expert at that. Over the one big stream we always built a bridge, the excuse being that Mother could then get across it dry-foot. I don't suppose, poor dear, she really had the slightest inclination to get over it at all, but we spent hours carrying stones and splashing them into the stream and got thoroughly wet, dirty and happy. We used to peel the rushes and make baskets out of the pith - if ever it lasted long enough, which I fancy was seldom. Then there were bilberries to gather and eat - a very messy job which meant crimson hands and mouths for the whole family. Once a year there was a regular business of gathering the stag moss that grew wild in some of the bogs. This was much esteemed by the gardeners for the pots in the conservatories.

But the one great thrill was the stiff climb to the "Coach and Horses" - a great block of stones on the highest peak of the Moor, which, when seen on the skyline really did look rather like a big coach with horses in front. The Moscar Moor has provided much fun and, happiness for three generations of Wilsons. I wonder what will happen to it later on? Mother always said the only time she ever saw my father really excited was the day he bought the Moscar Moor. He did not turn a hair when he bought Tapton, but the Moor was really very near his heart always. I hope he knows how we have all loved it, too, down to the great-grandchildren.

When we were quite young we were all taken to St Mary's in the town, an old-fashioned church with narrow, very high pews. I could only see over the ledge by standing on the biggest footstool that held the prayer books. I always sat by Father and during the sermon generally went to sleep on his arm. He often produced "Pomfret Cakes" out of his pocket to keep me quiet - these were odd little black sweets with Pontefract Castle stamped on them and much appreciated by me. We drove to church in the carriage, arriving early so that the Coachman, if he liked, had time to come into church - he went out in the last hymn so as to get the horses in again and bring the carriage round to the church door. The maids had a pew to themselves in front of ours. I suppose to ensure their being there. They were all dressed in plain black coats and dresses and wore neat little black straw bonnets tied with black ribbons under the chin - how a modern maid would resent this! I remember our under nurse did even then - Nannie found her at the gate one Sunday pinning a large red rose on the top of her bonnet. Poor dear, and why ever not? She was very much regulated. I am afraid old Nannie was a distinct tartar, but good to us all the same. She was a fisherman's daughter and used to tell us wonderful stories of the sea and her childhood days.

All girls in those days were taught to play the piano regardless of whether they had any musical talent or not - a fact that must have tried the patience and temper of our governesses sadly, not to mention the anguish and often bitter tears it entailed for the children. I still remember a trio we performed for Mother's guests one winter. Emmie and I kept together sometimes but by no means always and Tom, in the centre, never did by any chance - he fortunately had only a few notes to play, but in spite of a good deal of elbow pushing from each side at the critical moment, he never struck those few notes when he should - it must have been a trial for our listeners if any of them had musical ears. When I was grown up and went out to dinner Mother insisted I took a song with me and if asked, sang it. I remember all one

winter it was a silly thing called “Auntie” in which I assured my audience (if they were foolish enough to listen) “I should always be an old maid and no-one would ever ask me to marry them.” I was about eighteen then which added to the stupidity of the words. Oddly enough Hamilton was there one night when I sang the silly ode. I think about that time I really had a hankering after being a useful old maid and helping my sisters and brothers with their children in times of stress or illness. I did take charge of the Mappin twins pretty often just then - they were such jolly little chaps. Well, I am glad I altered my mind later on. I can look back to many years of very happy married life and what I should do now in my old age without my dear children and adorable grandchildren I shudder to think.

All my life I have had a great love of reading. I get my head thoroughly into a book and become deaf and blind to anything that goes on around me. When I was young, for some reason my mother objected to this habit - she thought it was far better for me to be up and doing and when she caught me nicely settled down with a book would always invent something for me to do - something to fetch or a message to be given. I well remember several occasions when, torn from a book like this I was sent upstairs to fetch something I was sure she didn't really need, I said on every one of the steps as I climbed up them in the Tapton Hall “she is a beast, she is a beast”. Really a good idea as by the time I got to the top landing I was feeling much better, my naughty temper gone.

When young, Mother always dressed Emmie and me alike, which led to some troubles for me. Emmie was a bit of a tomboy and sometimes her clothes wore out sooner than mine. I remember once her best hat came to grief and she borrowed mine to go out calling with Mother and I was left with her tumbled one. Very naturally, I resented this. Another time, two smart fans had been given us – hers got broken and she took mine without any permission and broke that too! A generation later the same sort of thing happened again. My mother bought back from Paris two charming hats alike, one for my daughter Florence, and the other for my brother's daughter Kathleen. My naughty child, seeing a hat on Kathleen's head she thought was hers, snatched it off and yelled aloud “Beastly Kathleen – got my hat”- but later on in life they were good friends all the same.

At the beginning of this Autumn Kathleen took her three young children out of England hoping to save them from the trials and horrors of war. She sailed to Vancouver. I don't know that she has found it altogether a success - they had a very unpleasantly rough voyage, the children fearfully sea-sick. On arrival, she took a small house all fitted up with the most marvelous electrical gadgets for labour-saving, which was as well perhaps as she found it impossible to get any help and is obliged not only to look after the children but also to do the housework too. The money question also is a serious problem, Kathleen was only allowed to take £20 out of England and she now finds, though she has plenty of it here, she can't get it out to her by any way at all and has therefore been obliged to borrow and is unable to repay the debt till the war is over - rather a trying predicament with three children to educate, clothe and feed for an indefinite period.

To return to my memories of long ago. Medicines (in that faraway time when I was a child) were by no means as well arranged as now. In the nurseries everywhere as spring came round you would find a very large bowl of Sulphur and treacle which it was Nannie's duty to spoonful each morning down our unwilling throats. Also another dreadful mixture of a pink colour - Rhubarb Magnesia - was an invariable epilogue to every childish tea party. Seidlitz Powders too were often to the fore - two horrid packages of nasty stuff mixed in a glass of

water and drunk whilst spitting and fizzing in your eyes. As I was inclined to be more delicate than the rest it was my painful duty every morning at eleven to go to Mother and partake out of a large green glass which was supposed to conceal the horrid contents but didn't, a large portion of cod liver oil and sherry, not at all the tasteless liquid cod liver oil children know in these sensible days, but a nasty solid green lump of abomination. The sherry was supposed to take off the taste, but I can assure you it didn't - it just meant for me two abominable tastes instead of one. I can never look at sherry even now, in my old age, without a shudder.

Well! I think that is the end of my small reminiscences. Those days, so peaceful and happy seem far away from me now, when we are in the midst of a dreadful war. England with her back to the wall, fighting practically alone not only for her own life, but for the Peace and Sanity of the Whole World. France and Belgium have ratted on us - Holland, Denmark and Norway given in - little Yugoslavia and brave Greece still doing their bit - the brunt of the war just now in the Balkans. How it will all end only God knows.

I have been in two raids - here at Stanmore Cottage and again in Sheffield where I had hoped to find quiet and rest and came instead into a dreadful raid. Twice I have had tiles off the roof, the windows smashed and the doors blown in, but thank goodness none of us hurt. I sincerely trust it won't be my Fate to go through that experience again, though we are told worse things may yet be in store for us, possibly invasion or gas attacks, or something even more horrible which Hitler has not yet revealed. Surely evil cannot always win - God grant us speedy Victory and lasting Peace.