

# Chapter One

## The West family to 1900

William Westell West (WWW) was born in Steventon in 1847. At age 11, his father Daniel (b. 1813) must have seen his emerging leadership qualities, as he installed his son as Mill Manager at Lower Grove Mill (now demolished) along with his eldest sister Fanny, aged 15, as a housekeeper. WWW also supervised a miller and a carter as part of his responsibilities. There were several harsh winters in those years, and young WWW had to get up at 3 am to break the ice so that the water could flow to run the mill. He and Fanny were given 16 shillings a week for housekeeping and buying clothes. The census of 1861 confirms that he and Fanny were still there in that year. He married Sarah Aldworth in the Wantage Parish Church on Boxing Day in 1868, moving to Venn Mill in the following year.

Alan Stoyel, geologist and owner of Venn Mill in 1993, had early twentieth century Guardian of the Poor records in WWW's handwriting (along with a piece of wood from Venn Mill with "Percy" carved on it). WWW was also an overseer and school manager, travelling on foot or by tricycle. From 1894–1905, he was a supply (lay) preacher at the Grove Strict Baptist chapel. He does not appear in the census in 1901, most likely because he was beginning ministerial training, probably in Reading. In 1905, he and Sarah moved to Reading with Ruth & Molly, leaving Grampa John in charge of Venn Mill. In 1908, they moved to Heathfield, Sussex, where WWW was admitted to the pastorate of the Ebenezer Strict Baptist Chapel. We have a booklet of sermons which he wrote & preached during his final years. They lived at "Laurel House" on Burwash Rd. until WWW died in 1924, and then Sarah moved 2 blocks away to "Steventon House". During the war, or possibly during a later visit, Grampa brought a maple tree which was planted there (subsequently removed). WWW and Sarah are both buried in the chapel graveyard.

The headline of WWW's obituary in the Sussex Express of Dec. 5, 1924 describes him as farmer and preacher. His religious heritage from his parents, Daniel and Jane, was the Strict Baptist Church, a faith which he carried throughout his life. Like his father Daniel and son Percy, he served as a deacon of the church working with the bereaved. For 25 years he was "Guardian of the Poor" for Abingdon District (1885-1910). This meant that he served on a committee which decided who would and who would not go to the workhouse (a 19th century British institution which took care of the indigent and infirm, including many retired people). WWW was known as being particularly active against the custom of keeping husbands and wives separated in these institutions. From 1896 he was an itinerant preacher before being ordained and accepting a charge in Heathfield, Sussex in 1908.

Although various forms of farming were part of most rural households in 19th century England, his background, as his ancestors had been, was milling. Many generations of his forebears from nearby East Hagbourne and Blewbury were millers, but according to a





statistic of the time, 90% were operated by tenant millers. Traditionally, they used stone mill wheels, but in the last quarter of the 19th century, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, many milling businesses, large and small, turned to roller milling, which used much more metal than stone in the milling process. These were usually much larger, steam driven, corporate owned operations, and as a result, the smaller traditional wind and water powered mills like Venn Mill were driven out of business. Consequently, there was a general amalgamation of industries at the end of the 19th century.

Great Grandmother Sarah Aldworth was from a prominent Wantage family and experienced her own dramatic transition from a prosperous family to one in financial difficulties. Our knowledge of her is largely from family verbal history. We know that her father was one of the builders of the Wantage Baptist Church (not Strict Baptist), and when she was young, the family lived in a large house (Camel House) outside of Wantage. She grew up with horses and she spoke of “royalty” in her family when on a number of occasions she visited Aldworth cousins in Ireland. These were undoubtedly the descendants of Sir Richard Aldworth (d.1629), who had settled at Mallow in County Cork, as part of land grants to English peers in the 17th century.

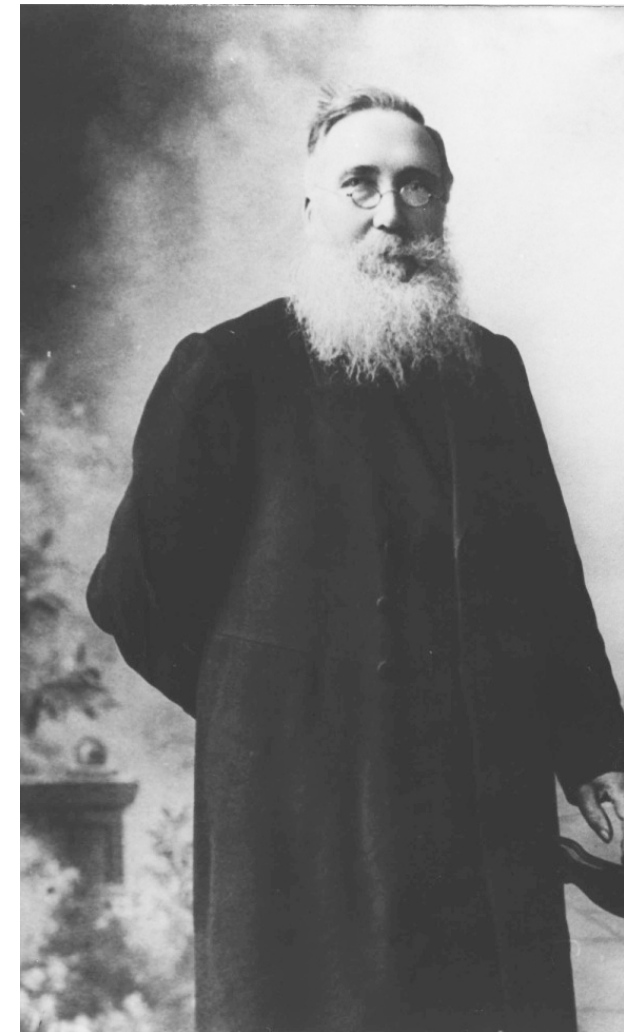


Sarah Aldworth / West

WWW and Sarah started their family at Ham Mill in 1868, where William Daniel (Will) was born. They then moved to Venn Mill in 1869. In addition to all of the household (and farm) chores, Sarah sewed the clothing and brewed the beer. At first I was surprised at the notion of a Strict Baptist minister’s wife making beer, but it was apparently a beverage of choice in most households at the time, low in alcohol and not to be confused in any way with the “demon rum”. She was reportedly a great herbalist. Her recipe for yarrow tea was so noxious that the children refused to admit when they had a cold. (*Add 1 teaspoon of dried yarrow flower to one cup of boiling water. Cover and steep for 30 minutes, then strain and serve.*) Grampa, asked later if he still used it, said “No, I had enough for 3 generations.” She died at Heathfield in 1939 and is buried beside WWW. Her will (see appendix) is an elaborate list of pieces of furniture and possessions bequeathed specifically to each of the children (which included a “headless dragon tea set service”, divided in equal parts among the four girls). The remainder of the furniture was divided among the children. Interestingly, the last clause in the will states that the remainder of the estate will be divided among the four daughters, Heber and Fred (none to Asher, Will, Grampa or Percy).

Although there were 21 years between the oldest and youngest siblings, all 10 were entering their adult years around the turn of the century. We know that Grampa’s eldest brother Will travelled to Canada in the 1880s, as a teenager, through his stories of being in the wilderness and having wolves howling outside his campsite at night. Back in England, Will settled down and married Eleanor Winter in 1903. With the decreasing viability of the mill as an income provider, WWW passed the operation of the mill on to Grampa. Upon Grampa and Gramma’s departure for Canada in March of 1908, the tenancy of the mill/farm property passed on to the Cotterel family. Heber & Fred had left for Canada sometime before that, and Asher with his new bride (Mary Elizabeth Herman from Widcombe, Bath), left in 1906. Percy stayed in Wantage and married Letitia Oldacre in 1903. Two of the sisters, Elsie and Molly, pursued drapery and millinery businesses in Sussex, and Emma and Ruth stayed with their mother and father as they moved to Reading and later to Heathfield Sussex. For many years I wondered why only three of the sisters married, until I became aware of the huge number of English males that were killed between 1914 and 1918 - at least 700,000. There were just not enough “husbands” available.

It is never a surprise to see such large families in those times, WWW & Sarah with 10 children being an obvious example, but interestingly, Grampa & Gramma’s was the only one of size amongst Grampa’s siblings. Heber had two children, Percy and Frederick had one each and the rest had no children. Three of the four sisters never married and the fourth had no children. As a result, we had only two English resident second cousins in our large family; Mary Irish and Dennis West. Grampa’s brother Heber came to Canada also, fought in the First War, married Victoria Lawrence, and after the birth of Arlet (AKA Ruth) and Robert, the family split in 1928. Ruth attended several BC family picnics in the 70s. Frederick also came to Canada, returned to England, married and then left his wife Minnie and son Dennis behind in England. The greatest continuing connection with our England family, however, was Percy’s daughter Mary Irish (see inside cover).



William Westell West