

WILLIAM DYKE WILKINSON

The Man who bought Moseley

William Dyke Wilkinson, always known as Dyke (his mother's maiden name), was born into a poor family in Lower Brearley Street, Summer Lane, Birmingham. His father was an educated man, but he made no attempt to get any schooling for his son. Dyke attended a dame-school, but claim he learnt nothing. He could go only when his mother could Afford the twopence a week. His date of birth was around 1835, and his earliest memories are of being taken to see the first train into Birmingham at Curzon Street in 1838, of Chartist Meetings in Snow Hill, and of celebrations for the wedding of Victoria and Albert. He claimed that he learnt to read by studying tradesmen's signs.

Before the age of eight, Dyke was sent to work at a button-makers, Hammond Turner of Snow Hill, at 1s/6d a week 7½ new pence), and a little later at Pemberton's brass-foundry at two shillings. His father at about this time came into a legacy of £200, and bought the Dog and Pheasant Public House, but the improvement in the family fortunes does not seem to have done Dyke any good from an educational point of view.

At the age of 12½ years, he was apprenticed for 8½ years (until he was 21) to Routledge, rule-makers, of St Paul's Square. "I shiver now" Dyke writes "when I recall how I suffered during that damnable apprenticeship. There were twenty apprentices and very few men, no one to control us or show us a way to good of any sort." He and two other apprentices decided to run away to London and go to sea. The weather turned out to be very wet and cold, and they had no money, and eventually they turned back. A little later he made another attempt, and got away to London on his own, where he attended a debate in the House of Commons. On his return he was arrested for failing to honour the term of his apprenticeship, and was put into prison, in solitary confinement for two months, and the indentures were cancelled. During this time he had managed to teach himself to write, and he read everything he could lay his hands on. He told stories to his fellow apprentices, and wrote their love letters for them.

His next job was more successful. He was working at a bench and he soon saw that a simple machine would enable the work to be done in one tenth of the time. He called at a small workshop in Mount Street, where his friends the Tangye brothers had started an engineering business, and they produced a prototype for him. When his employers found that the machine would do the work of ten men, he very soon became unpopular with his workmates, but he now began to earn good money. At about this time he followed a girl to Sheffield, where he played for a time in a local theatre.

At the age of seventeen, Dyke attended the Mount Zion Chapel in Graham Street, run by George Dawson, and here he made the acquaintance of R. V. Dale of Springfield College, and of Charles Vince. He must have made a good impression on these young men, who almost persuaded him to study for the Ministry.

Dyke had such an eventful life that it is difficult to establish the sequence of his various enterprises, but he started his own business with a partner, producing articles in metal and glass for the Jewellery trade. He built the business up until he had a factory in Bradford Street, employing a hundred and fifty men, and he opened another factory in Camden Street, making "bright gold", presumably an untarnishable alloy.

At this time he was attending Severn Street Sunday Morning School, in company with other men who were making their way in Birmingham, notably Joseph Lucas.

Always a lover of sport, his prosperous businesses were abandoned when he heard of an infallible system of betting. He left his chapel-going friends behind him, and travelled

the country with his partner, using the name "Dyke and Jackson", attending racecourses, prizefighting and cockfighting. He soon lost all his money, but by abandoning his system he became a successful bookmaker. At this time there were large numbers of small racecourses, including Balsall Heath, Sparkbrook and Hall Green.

Dates are hard to track down, but he originated the first halfpenny newspaper in the country, "The Banner", a temperance paper. At some stage he joined the "Penny-a-liners", freelance journalists in London, and later he founded the South Birmingham News, which he afterwards sold to George Cadbury. In the 1870's Dyke was living in Moseley, and he bought the Trafalgar Public House as a speculation. He converted the bowling green into a large skating rink when "rinking" was all the rage. This gave much pleasure to the local young people, and brought much -profit to the house.

Dyke foresaw that Moseley would become the most popular suburb of Birmingham, and that the cross-roads would be the market centre, and he bought up property near to the railway line, including all the cottages between the Fighting Cocks and St Mary's Church. These were later sold to developers, and a piece of land was sold to the Church to extend the graveyard. He tried to buy Moseley House opposite to the church, with its beautiful grounds, but the owners sold it direct to builders, 'who erected the three-storey terrace of shops, and the small terraces of artisans' dwellings, now under the car park.

Dyke became involved in public affairs while living in Moseley. He formed a pressure group to demand street lighting, but held public meetings at his house to oppose the siting of a gasworks at Kings Heath. After the success of this campaign he was chosen to stand in the first County Council election for East Worcestershire, and chose Balsall Heath as his constituency, but he had to fight John Holder, and he lost the day. But he became a member of the King's Norton Board of Guardians and other bodies.

Dyke met Smith Ryland, the owner of much land in Moseley, at a Derby Day meeting in Epsom, and over a drink persuaded him to donate a piece of land at the corner of Ladypool Lane and Brighton Road to the people, for a public park.

He wrote several books, including "The Story of a Wasted Life" and "Rough Roads", both autobiographical. His articles in the Birmingham Mail were published under the title "Bygone Birmingham". At the age of eighty he produced a novel about the turf, "Her Ladyship".

Dyke's later years were spent mainly in London. He joined a literary club and the National Liberal Club. He became friendly with Arthur Conan Doyle, Max Pemberton and Geoffrey Farnol, and was sometimes in the company of the future King Edward VII.

When he retired, he moved to Bournemouth, but was soon back in London in charge of the old cable tramway in Highgate. Later he built a bungalow in Gloucestershire. Portraits of him at this time show a handsome gentleman with the inevitable Vandyke beard. He moved back to Moseley, and died in his ninetieth year on 16th March 1924, at his home at 31 Queenswood Road. He was buried at Key Hill Cemetery. He left a set of Geoffrey Farnol novels, which the writer had presented to him, and a large chest containing his manuscripts, to Charlett and Ernest Renn.

Fred Price.