



THE MYSTERIOUS MR & MRS ALEXANDER RIDLEY

Most people who know a little about Tenterden know that Mr Alexander Ridley was, for many years in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a pharmacist, chemist, optician, bookseller and photographer (and much more) in Tenterden High Street. The pharmacy lives on but what of Alex and his wife? Alex Ridley was an enterprising man but we know very little about him and his family. There are few known publicly available records of his personal life but, most helpfully, memories of his time in Tenterden and of his business activities were recorded, on separate occasions, by H V Roberts and R S Spelling. In 2016, Tenterden Museum gave Smallhythe Place some interesting and amusing letters from Ellen Terry to Alex Ridley and, as the volunteer researcher, at Smallhythe, I decided to dig a little deeper into the story of this mysterious couple.

Alex Ridley PhC, MPS, FSMC appears to have been well equipped to be the local chemist. He qualified in London as a Chemist and Druggist in 1891 and as a Pharmaceutical Chemist in 1892. He was a Member of the Pharmaceutical Society and a Freeman of the Spectacle Makers Company (a Livery Company).

In 1896 Alex Ridley acquired from Stephen Willsher his thriving pharmacy at 60 High Street. The building, like its neighbour No 62, is one of the oldest in The High Street, dating from about 1480. There had been a pharmacy on the site since at least 1790 when John Breden, the Parish Clerk, opened a bookshop from which he also sold patent medicines. From the 1850s the business at 60 High Street also included the sale of photographers' chemicals.



Stephen Willsher, who took over the pharmacy business in 1867, was also a member of the Tenterden Volunteer Fire Brigade and, from 1882 until his retirement in 1896, was Captain of the Brigade. Willsher retired from the pharmacy in the same year.

Ridley expanded the non-pharmaceutical side of the business, leasing and then, in 1910, obtaining the freehold of 62 High Street. This enabled him to broaden the scope of his business, which already included agricultural chemicals, animal food manufacturing and bookselling, to cover stationery, pottery, glassware, leather goods, fountain pens, artists' materials and photographic goods. He also had time to be an agent for Sun Fire and Life Assurance and Railway Passengers Assurance.



Ridley traded under the name of "The Pharmacy Stores" and outside the front door he hung the traditional sign of a pharmacy, the red bull's eye lantern, which still hangs there today. Ridley also became a photographer, as did many in his profession, and for 25 years he photographed a large number of the buildings and scenery in the Tenterden area and much of the Kent and Sussex Weald which he published in

the form of picture postcards. He also produced albums of his photographs. In 1906 he built a photographic studio and dark room in part of the garden behind 62 High Street, where local gentry and celebrities such as Ellen Terry came for their “studio portraits”. In 1912, Ridley purchased the freehold of the remainder of the premises.

Ridley was born in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, in 1868, one of 6 children of Arthur Ridley and his first wife Amelia Symonds also of Bury St Edmunds. Arthur Ridley was a Coal, Iron and Nail Merchant. Alex’s birthplace was probably 22 Northgate Street, Bury St Edmunds where the Ridley family were resident at the time of the 1871 Census.

In 1891, Alex was studying Pharmaceuticals in London and boarding at 26 Finsbury Park Road, in Hornsey, Edmonton, Middlesex, with 4 other people. According to entries in the appropriate professional yearbooks, Alex was registered as a Chemist and Druggist on 22 October 1891 and as a Pharmaceutical Chemist on 26 April 1892. Why he came to Tenterden in 1896 and what he did between qualifying and taking over the business is unknown.

Alex travelled back to Suffolk in 1907 to marry Ella May Barker of Winston, Suffolk. The marriage took place in Plomesgate, Suffolk. Ella May was born in Bosmere, Suffolk in 1882. The Ridleys were popular in Tenterden. Ella May is recorded as having a fine singing voice and often sang in local concerts. There is no record of any children.

Alex Ridley retired in 1928, the same year that Ellen Terry died, and the business was acquired by J J Loughran of Brighton. However, the new owner continued to use Ridley’s name, describing the store in advertisements as “Ridley’s Pharmacy” and “Ridley’s Studios and Photographic Department” as well as using Ridley’s business name “The Pharmacy Stores”.

Ridley remained in Tenterden for a while, living at his home “Crowhurst”, the location of which is uncertain but may have been Pope House on Ashford Road, Tenterden. At the time of the 1911 census George Kelson was living with his family in Pope House and gave “Crowhurst St Michael’s Tenterden” as his address. This is the only mention of Crowhurst in contemporary records and on this basis I am inclined to think that Pope House was, for a period, known as “Crowhurst”.

In 1930, advertisements published in local directories show that Ridley was engaged in preparing and selling, direct and through agents, a product called “Haffenden’s Balsamic Tincture”, one of the many home remedies or “cure-alls” then available. His advertisements claimed the tincture had been in use for nearly 200 years for the treatment of “Asthma, Bronchitis, Coughs, and Throat and Chest Troubles”. It is not known for how long Ridley continued to make and sell the product.

In 1970 the High Street premises, still a pharmacy selling book, gifts, cosmetics, stationery, were bought by Paydens Ltd which operates a chain of pharmacies in South East England. The company still owns the business. The premises and the range of goods on sale today are very much as they were in 1970 and probably not much different from when Ridley retired.

Alex Ridley left Tenterden (reason and date unknown) and moved to the West Country where he lived at 26 Southfield Avenue, Paignton, Devon. He died in Paignton on 16 June 1943, aged 75. He left no Will and Letters of Administration were granted in Ipswich on 31 December 1943 to John Ridley, retired builders’ merchant, and Rosa Plaistowe, widow. John and Rosa are most likely to have been Alex’s elder brother and younger sister of the same names. The value of Alex’s effects was £8,232, which is £355,300 at 2017 prices.

Alex’s wife Ella May died two years later, on 18 November 1945, at the City of London Hospital in Dartford. The hospital has since closed. It had been founded in the 19th century to provide medical facilities for the destitute of London but by the early 20th century also took in privately funded patients with mental illnesses. Whichever category she came under, it was a sad end to her life. She was only 63. Ella left effects valued at £1704 2s 8d (£67,516 at 2017 prices).

If you have any information about Alex Ridley and his wife, I would dearly love to hear from you. Please contact me by email to maurice.dalton@talktalk.net or by telephone on 01580 765781

References

H V Roberts, Pharm Hist (London) 1998; 28(3): pages 35-42

R S Spelling “Tenterden” page 18

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