

Alfred Drakeford – The Engineer (1847-1926) by Roger Hall

How the daughter of an illegitimate Warwickshire boiler maker came to be married to the Professor of English at Yale University (there's a tiger in the story)

Alfred Drakeford got off to a bad start in life: he was the illegitimate son of Eliza Drakeford, eldest child of John Drakeford, ribbon weaver, of Bedworth, Warwickshire, England, and was brought up by his grandparents. He worked as a boilermaker and engineer and married a local girl, but in 1878 his business was wound up and soon afterwards he and his wife made the month-long sea voyage to India, where Alfred found work building bridges on the rapidly expanding railway network. His wife died of 'Indian fever' after two years and he married again, but this marriage quickly ended in divorce, and then, in Calcutta on 25th June 1886, he married Sophia Manook. Their only child, Grace Elizabeth Eugene Drakeford, was born 6 months later.

By 1901 they had returned to England. In the summer of 1907 Alfred, Sophia and Grace (now 20) travelled from Liverpool to New York on the SS Campania to visit Sophia's brother-in-law. Alfred is described on the passenger list as a 'gentleman'. Also on board for the 8 day voyage was a 24-year-old American student, Charles Frederick Tucker Brooke, who was going home at the end of a three year Rhodes Scholarship at St John's College, Oxford. Charles was the son of Henry St George Tucker Brooke of Charles Town, West Virginia, a lawyer and professor of law at West Virginia University, and his mother was the great great granddaughter of Samuel Washington, brother of the first president of the USA.

The Drakefords stayed in the USA for about 10 months, then returned to England. In June 1909 they crossed the Atlantic again, this time, according to the passenger list, to join their friends Mr and Mrs St George Brooke of Charles Town. And on 27th July 1909 Grace married Charles at the Zion Episcopal Church in Charles Town, at a ceremony attended, according to the newspapers, by 'many guests of prominence'. A couple of months after the wedding Alfred and Sophia returned to England. During the following years they made two extended visits to their daughter Grace in America and one to Sophia's relatives in India, and in 1923 they finally settled in America. In 1925 they were living with Grace and Charles in New Haven, Connecticut, and Alfred died there, aged 79, on 27th April 1926. Sophia died 7 days later.

Charles became Professor of English at Yale University and one of America's leading Shakespeare scholars.

In later years Alfred and Sophia became the stuff of legend. According to family letters and newspaper articles Alfred kept a pet tiger and was "A British Engineer, who built railroads in the Andes Mountains and in the jungles of India", and Sophia was descended from Byzantine royalty.

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