

Family life at Wingfield Station – stories and personal connections



The Wingfield stationhouse was constructed in 1840 by the Midland Railway Company at the same time as the station building to provide accommodation for the Stationmaster and his family. It was built using the same blocks of “regularly coursed ashlar gritstone”. Today, it is a grade II listed building in recognition of its important heritage and is under private ownership.

Family life of Thomas Robinson (Wingfield Stationmaster 1908 – 1919)

When Thomas Robinson arrived to take up his appointment as Stationmaster, the Wingfield stationhouse provided living accommodation comprising 6 rooms, not including a separate outdoor “privy”. These would be the kitchen, parlour and dining room downstairs and 3 bedrooms upstairs. At this stage of their lives, the Robinson household consisted of five people: Thomas, his wife Mary Ann and three of their children. The accommodation was perfectly adequate for their needs by the standards of the day and meant that his two daughters probably shared a bedroom. The house had a good-sized garden for growing vegetables and flowers and this was where Thomas raised his prize-winning chickens.

It would be hard to escape the daily routines of station life with steam trains stopping and passing throughout the day, carts delivering and collecting goods, the noise of the goods sidings where coal and materials were loaded and unloaded into waggons and the shouts of the workers as they shunted waggons.

Mary Ann – the stationmaster’s wife

Mary Ann Geary was born in Hinckley, Leicestershire in 1854. She was the oldest daughter of John Geary, a stocking weaver, and his wife Hannah who signed Mary Ann’s birth certificate with her mark X meaning that she could not write.

Mary Ann began her early life working in a stocking weaving factory. She probably worked in the same factory as Thomas Robinson who worked initially as a stocking weaver in Hinckley.

Thomas and Mary Ann married in 1878, once he had solid employment prospects and a good enough income from the Midland Railway Company. Together, Thomas and Mary Ann would spend the next 41 years living at five different station locations where Thomas served as Stationmaster.

During her married life, Mary Ann gave birth to 4 daughters and one son, the final child being born when she was 46 years old. Mary Ann and Thomas were fortunate that all of their children survived into adulthood although Mary Ann did not outlive her daughter Annie who died just a few months before her.

Mary Ann would expect to keep the station household running smoothly - shopping, cooking, washing, cleaning and having family meals ready to fit around the train timetable and sometimes to provide meals for other station staff or visitors. It is unlikely that Mary Ann had any active involvement in the running of the station itself, although elsewhere on the railway network at smaller stations, it was not unknown for wives and daughter to help out with station duties if needed.

There is no evidence of any domestic servant living within the household so it can be assumed that Mary Ann took on the bulk of the “domestic duties”. It is possible that the family paid someone from the local community to provide daily domestic help or that their oldest unmarried daughter Annie took on a share of the household tasks. At Wingfield, Mary Ann no doubt had close daily contact with Rosetta Selby who lived in another smaller property on the station site and was the wife of Thomas Selby, a Midland Railway Foreman supervising Platelayers. Throughout her life, Mary Ann was a committed member of Wesleyan Methodist Chapels wherever she lived and this was her main activity outside of the stationhouse. Mary Ann lost regular contact with her family back in Hinckley but, as a stationmaster’s wife, she lived a relatively comfortable life with a reliable income, decent house provided and a good social standing within the local community.

Mary Ann and Thomas would be married for long enough to celebrate their Golden Wedding in 1928. After Thomas retired in 1919, they moved to New Whittington, Chesterfield. When Mary Ann Robinson died at age 77, she had been married to Thomas Robinson for almost 54 years.



Thomas and Mary Ann Robinson early 1920s (studio portrait)



Golden wedding Aug 1928 – Mary Ann and Thomas Robinson in their garden of 31 High St, New Whittington



Mary Ann and Thomas in their garden at 31 High St, New Whittington, Chesterfield

Annie – the stationmaster’s daughter and a dressmaker

Annie was the second oldest daughter of Thomas and Mary Ann Robinson, born in 1882 while Thomas was working as stationmaster at Chorlton-cum-Hardy. After leaving school, she became a dressmaker, probably working from home, taking small commissions from “local ladies”, around her family’s

commitments to the railway. What room within the stationhouse did Annie use for her dressmaking?

In February 1914 when she was age 36, Annie married a Wingfield coal miner, John Edward Bramley, who was 7 years her junior and the oldest son of John and Pamela Bramley of Airedale House, South Wingfield. The wedding took place at the United Methodist Chapel, South Wingfield and she wore “a dress of pale apricot spotted silk” which she presumably made for herself. Annie left the stationhouse to live with her new husband in Alfreton. Annie gave birth to their first child, Doris, in late 1914 and later to a son, Sydney, born in early 1918.

Her life, however, involved loss and grief; in 1915, she gave birth to another son Edward Roy but the baby died in infancy and then in November 1918, her husband John died from influenza which means that he was a victim of the Great Flu Epidemic that killed millions of people across Europe.

After the death of her husband, Annie remained living in Alfreton with her two surviving children and did not return to live in Wingfield. However, once her parents retired to live in New Whittington, Chesterfield, Thomas had sufficient funds to buy two adjoining properties and so Annie and her children moved to live with Thomas and Mary Ann.



Golden Wedding of Mary Ann & Thomas Robinson 1928, New Whittington, Chesterfield. L to R: Mary Ann Robinson, Thomas Robinson and Annie Bramley (nee Robinson). This is the only known photo of Annie currently located.

Annie died in 1931 so Thomas lost both his daughter and his wife within a few months. He continued to look after Annie's children (then age 17 and 14) until Doris married in 1936 and Sydney joined the Royal Navy when war broke out again in 1939. Sydney was killed in action in February 1943 while serving on HMS Valiant and was buried at sea, just a couple of weeks before the death of his grandfather Thomas Robinson.

Florence Mary – the stationmaster's youngest daughter and a primary school teacher

Florence Mary was the 4th daughter born to Mary Ann and Thomas Robinson in 1891 while they were living in Unstone. She attended Unstone Board School, where her father became the Vice Chairman of the School Board. In 1904, Florence was appointed as a Probationer Teacher at an annual salary of £6 – maybe a case of nepotism on the part of her father! By training to becoming a teacher, she followed in the footsteps of two of her older sisters, Ellen and Lillie. It seems that Thomas and Mary Ann supported the idea that their daughters should establish themselves as school teachers as this was seen as a respectable job for young unmarried women. This perhaps reflects an aspiration that their children should have a more promising start in life than they'd had themselves.

When the family relocated to Wingfield in November 1908, Florence transferred to work as a Probationary Teacher at South Wingfield Infant School, becoming fully qualified in 1912 after struggling to pass all of the qualifying examinations.

When her family moved to live at Wingfield, Florence, then aged 17, crossed paths with Wingfield's railway clerk, George Henry Farr, who was 3 years older. He had been transferred to work at Wingfield from Bolsover station in February 1907. We can imagine how the romance blossomed between these two young people given daily opportunities to meet around the station grounds.



George Henry Farr was the youngest son of Thomas Farr, a bootmaker, from Alcester. Like Thomas Robinson, George took the opportunity to leave his childhood home and make a working life for himself within the expanding Midland Railway. Did Thomas Robinson see something of himself in George and encourage his ambition, possibly to become a Stationmaster eventually? Unfortunately, the advent of WW1 impacted on George's opportunities to progress.

At some time between 1908 and 1911, George was removed from Wingfield to work at the station at Elmton-with-Creswell. Did Thomas Robinson find George's work at Wingfield unsatisfactory or was he concerned that the relationship between his Clerk and his daughter was inappropriate or undesirable? Maybe the Midland Railway Office simply made the decision to transfer George on the basis of needing to fill a vacancy.

In July 1914, war was declared and in September 1914, Florence Mary Robinson, the stationmaster's daughter, married George Henry Farr at South Wingfield Parish Church. By this time, George was living in Leeds and working for the Midland Railway as a booking clerk at Horsforth on an annual salary of £85. How had they managed to keep their romance alive over this distance? Why were they married in the Parish Church when the family were such staunch Methodists?



Wedding of Florence Mary Robinson and George Henry Farr at South Wingfield Sept 1914. L to R: Willie Mason (brother in law of bride), Miss A Barker (friend of bride) George Henry Farr, Florence Mary Robinson, Thomas Robinson, Miss Lily Robinson (cousin of bride).

Looking at the one surviving photograph of that wedding day in Sept 1914, what story does that photograph tell? The photo appears to be taken in the

station grounds with the gritstone blocks of the stationhouse walls in the background, the characteristic fencing and distinctive cobbled setts at their feet. Like so many couples of that time of great uncertainty, did George and Florence rush to marry in 1914 in the expectation that he would be sent away to war? After the wedding, she moved to live with him in Horsforth and left her teaching job as was the requirement for a married woman.



In December 1915, George enlisted in the Army Reserve. After some initial training, he continued to live and work for the Midland Railway in Leeds while awaiting further mobilisation instructions.

By 1916, Florence was pregnant with their first child Cyril but by July 1917, George had been mobilised to join the Royal Naval Division (RNVR) and was drafted to join Hawke Battalion (part of the British Expeditionary Force) and was involved in some active service in northern France.

We don't know exact details about his wartime experiences but they undoubtedly haunted him for the rest of his life. Florence and her young son came back to live at the stationhouse at Wingfield with her parents and probably lived there until George was demobilised in April 1919.

The couple had a further son, Arthur, born in 1927 but their relationship broke down at some time in 1940s. They separated but never divorced. Eventually, Florence returned to work as a Montessori primary teacher and George worked for the LMS railway as a Head Clerk until his retirement.



Florence Mary Farr nee Robinson with her older son Cyril, photo taken probably mid 1930s

Sydney Thomas – the stationmaster's son

Sydney was the youngest child and only son born to Thomas and Mary Ann Robinson in 1900 while they lived in Unstone. He attended school in Unstone, South Wingfield and Clay Cross and then joined his father as an employee of the Midland Railway. He was registered as a member of the National Union of Railwaymen under Sheffield No 6 Branch as a clerk at age 17.



Sydney was conscripted into the British Army on his 18th birthday in Jan 1918. By that stage of the war, the army could no longer rely on volunteers and the huge loss of life on the battlefields of France and Belgium meant that conscription was introduced. It was probably therefore a huge relief to his parents when Sydney was posted to serve in Ireland rather than sent to fight in the trenches. Regiments from the British Army was being sent to quell an Irish nationalist rebellion. For Sydney, this was still a dangerous posting but not with the same scale of slaughter taking place on the battlefields of northern Europe. Unfortunately, his Army Records have not survived but after demobilisation, Sydney came back home to continue working for the Midland Railway.

Sydney Thomas Robinson married Hannah (known as Annie) Roberts, daughter of local Wingfield innkeeper John William Roberts and his wife Mary Ann, at All Saints Parish Church, South Wingfield in April 1924. Hannah was well known locally for being the organist at All Saints.



Wedding of Sydney Thomas Robinson and Hannah Roberts, South Wingfield 1924.

Seated L to R: Mary Ann Robinson, Thomas Robinson, Hannah Roberts, John William Roberts.

Standing L to R: Annie Vaughan (niece of groom), Sydney Thomas Robinson, John Roberts (brother of bride), Mary Ann Roberts, Ellen Roberts (sister of bride).

Copy of photo supplied by Mary nee Robinson, daughter of bride and groom.



Sydney Thomas Robinson and Hannah Roberts (early 1920s).

Copy of photo supplied by Mary nee Robinson, their daughter.

The couple moved to New Whittington, Chesterfield to live next door to Thomas and Mary Ann and where their only daughter, Mary, was born in 1932. Mary remembered going for local walks with her grandfather Thomas and that he appeared to be a very well-known and respected man who enjoyed nothing better than watching a game of cricket on the local park. At some point after the death of his father in 1943, Sydney and his family moved to Lichfield where he worked as a railway clerk until his retirement.

Discovering family connections with the Wingfield station – finding railway ancestors and their stories

Researching family history researching is like piecing together a jigsaw with many options to explore and puzzles to solve. It involves detective work, lateral thinking, using healthy scepticism about the reliability of sources of information and a degree of persistence.

After my father-in-law Arthur Farr died in 2003, we brought home a bin bag full of photographs and documents, mostly unlabelled, that had been stored in the bottom of a wardrobe. In amongst that collection was one black and white wedding photograph and a marriage certificate dated September 1914.

Arthur was a person of few words and he had never spoken about his early life or his parents. Like so many people, we regret that we never took more time to listen to the stories that he may have had to tell.

Arthur had three interests: trains, photography and hill-walking. It was only after he died that we came to realise how his interest in trains was born out of his family background.

By pure coincidence, we moved to Derbyshire in 2003 and as the availability of online family history resources grew apace at that time, we began to chase up the story of Arthur's family. It was quickly clear that the 1914 wedding photograph was of the marriage of Arthur's parents and that his grandfather, Thomas Robinson, had been the Stationmaster at Wingfield at that time.

We managed to contact other descendants of the Robinson family and by sharing information, this enabled us to delve deeper into the story of the life of Thomas Robinson.

We read newspaper articles mentioning the poor state of the Wingfield station building and bemoaning the potential loss of such a significant listed building. We decided to make a passing visit to the site of the Wingfield station to look for ourselves at the place where Thomas and his family had lived and worked. The sorry sight of the derelict station building was a huge disappointment and we wondered, at that time, if there was any possibility that it could be restored and brought back to life. We were therefore delighted to find out, a few years later, that Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust had taken possession of the building with a view to restoring the station to its former glory.

Prior to uncovering our link to Thomas Robinson, we had limited knowledge about railway heritage. By getting involved with the Wingfield Restoration Project, we have met some inspiring and highly knowledgeable people who have made the Midland Railway story come alive. Thinking about what life was like here at Wingfield station has been a fascinating journey into industrial heritage and a period of significant social change. It has also been an opportunity to think more about lives of the less visible people in this railway station story. The lives of the station's women and children were also shaped by the Midland Railway and in their own ways, women like Mary Ann Robinson also contributed to station life.

Thomas Robinson was born in 1954 into a family of factory workers living in poor conditions. When he died in 1943, he was a respected and notable member of his community, a man who owned his own home and he had become a self-confident and trusted man across his wider family. Something happened over his lifetime that made this difference, and that something was the Midland Railway.

Thomas was just one of tens of thousands of people whose lives were shaped by working for the Midland Railway. We hope that by contributing some knowledge of the life of Thomas Robinson, his family and the railway staff of his era as Stationmaster at Wingfield, we have contributed in some part to an understanding of the impact of working for the Midland Railway.

Kathy & Martin Farr

