

Henry Oliver Fry

Henry Oliver Fry (12 Feb 1863, Westbury-on-Trym - 8 Nov 1933 Ryde, Isle of Wight), was born the second son of Richard and Margaret Fry of Bristol. His father was part of the Quaker Fry chocolate manufacturers. Henry stood 5' 7 ¼", had a fair complexion, grey hair, brown eyes and a mole in his right eyebrow.

As a birth-right member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Henry was listed as a member of Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting until 1894. Thereafter his membership transfer, termination or resignation is not yet traced.

Henry trained as an accountant, but did not follow his father's profession but bought a partnership in the iron and tin-plate firm of Godwin, Warren, Fry & Co., Redcliffe Street, Bristol.

On 12 July 1890 he married at Christchurch, Clifton Edith Elinor Williams (1864, Newport, Mon. – 19??), daughter of William Williams and Elizabeth Milner née Jones, of Clifton Bristol. The presiding minister was assisted by the Rev. Frank Ernest Williams, cousin to the bride and the couple's honeymoon was in Switzerland.

By the time of the 1891 census Henry, Elinor and their 2 months old daughter were living at The Lawn, Silver Street, Nailsea, Bedminster, Somerset. Henry was doing well as an iron merchant and they had a nurse, butler, coachman and a house maid.

By 1901 the family had moved to Oakleigh, Leigh Woods, Long Ashton, Somerset and there had a butler, cook, house maid, kitchen maid, as well as nurse. The two children of the marriage were Margaret (9 Feb 1891 (prematurely) – 1977) who joined the Sisters of Charity in Knowle, Bristol, and seems to have taken the religious name Margaret Michael, and Richard Oliver (6 Dec 1892 – 30 Mar 1960, Hythe, Kent) who was educated at Blundells School, Tiverton, Devon and married Dorothy Baines in 1944. Neither had any children themselves.

However, after 18 years with the firm all was not well as on 28 Oct 1903 the partnership between James Colthurst Godwin, Robert Hall Warren & Henry was dissolved.

Henry had had an advance on his future inheritance to buy into the firm and despite the substantial £16,000 he'd contributed, he'd run up huge debts for the firm, some £13,000, and most probably for himself too. His wife moved to 55, Victoria Road, Deal, Kent and he joined her there in July 1905 a bankrupt, reportedly having gone through most his wife's not inconsiderable inheritance she had received on the death of her father in 1896. Around 1904 Henry is also recorded as being of Paget House, Ryde, Isle of Wight.

More trouble was coming. Before moving to Kent Henry had, the London Bankruptcy Court heard, been trading as a money lender in Davies Street, Berkeley Square, London in the name of Robert Cleveland. He attributed his debt to living beyond his means and estimated his liabilities at £16,000 - £6,000 alone due to his wife - and his assets at £150. Some of the money he is reported to have borrowed at 60% interest!

You might well ask where he had obtained money to operate as a money-lender. Sadly he seems to have been lent in July 1904, £1,900 by an old friend of more than 30 years, John Atkin Waller (1856-1937, ironmaster and owner of the Eagle Steel Works, Bristol) of Pen Park, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol to lend on again, so Henry said, to a lady in Yorkshire in hope of realizing a £600 profit within a few months. This story turned out not to hold water, nor the £2000 he had been asked to repay to a trust, and when in May 1905 an execution was levied on the Davies Street building Henry moved to Deal. John Waller was the chief creditor in the defendant's ensuing bankruptcy, but had not had a penny returned to him. In May 1906 Henry was remanded on bail.

Towards the end of 1907, Henry, an aristocratic-looking man was placed in the dock on a charge of fraud, on a warrant in the name of Major Fryer for having received a banker's cheque knowing full well it to have been obtained by false pretences. He had asked a Folkestone shopkeeper to cash a £1 cheque for him made out by Mary Moore to Mrs Fryer, who he said was his wife. The shopkeeper discovered the next day that 'Major Fryer' had left town. He was arrested in London at Hunter Street police station and confirmed his address as 28 Victoria Grove, Folkestone. Brought back to Folkestone he said he could not state that the cheque shown to him was *the* cheque, but that he had cashed a cheque for 20s near the post office. He was remanded to Canterbury Gaol for a week.

'Major Fryer' and 'Mrs Christine M. Fryer' happen to have made a practice of answering newspaper advertisements for household help, purporting to recommend their own 'Caroline Mathews'. They then corresponded, accepted employment but then requested the fare to the new place of employment to be paid. Incoming cheques were cashed and No 'Mrs Mathews' ever arrived at her new place of work. Maud Long of Dorsetshire and Maud Pritchard and at least 16 others from all over the country were defrauded. Even the expensive stationery they used turned out to have been stolen from London and various local Folkestone traders were owed money – for example, the fishmonger: £3 12s.

In Sept 1907 as Major and Mrs Moody, the couple engaged in the same frauds from a village near Market Harborough, absconding after 3 weeks, leaving 12 complaints from around the country and again from local tradespeople.

The letters were not in Henry's hand, but he wished to take full blame for them – having dictated their contents. He was sorry for the debts left behind and for cashing the cheques. In mitigation he pleaded bad health, eczema and neuritis, and disappointment at not obtaining employment. His relations in Bristol were annoyed with him and refused to assist him, he said. From June 1907 he had had no allowance and no income. He had since however received 45/ from a brother, but his recent search for work had come to nought. He had been in custody in Brixton Prison since 6 Dec. Henry was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for nine months. He served out his sentence in Canterbury Gaol being released to Folkestone on 22 Aug 1908.

Henry Oliver Fry of 23, Melville Street, Ryde, Isle of Wight died 8 Nov 1933, and was buried 3 days later. Probate was granted to Henry's intestate estate of £191 6s 6d at Bristol 24 June 1960 [sic] to his daughter Margaret Michael, formerly Fry. This was ca. 3 months after the death of her brother Richard in March 1960, when it may have been realized that their father's probate had not been administered.

The Frenchay Village Archives, Bristol have portrait photographs of both Henry Oliver and Edith Elinor Fry (ref.89 & 90).

Whilst Edith and her daughter are recorded at central London addresses in 1911 and 1914, Henry and his son's whereabouts are unknown. I would be most grateful for any further information on the people mentioned here, particularly post-1908.

David Irwin
Great, grand nephew of Edith Elinor Fry, née Williams
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