

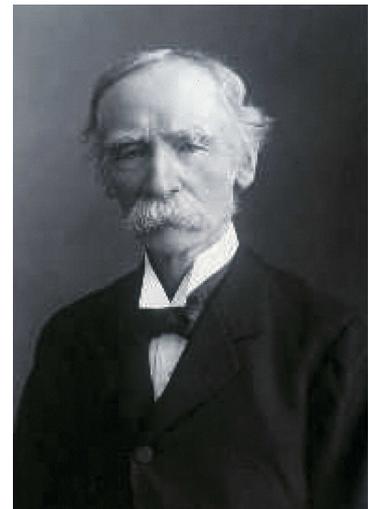
## The Bicknells of Barcombe

- **Algernon Sydney Bicknell (1832-1911),**
- **his wife Rosa Louisa née Wild (1814-1913),**
- **three sons (Lt-Col Maldion Byron, Leoline, Ethrayne) and three daughters (Virna, Zylida and Hermielle)**

Source: papers of Algernon Sydney Bicknell deposited at the East Sussex Record Office at The Keep, Brighton under the reference ACC 8490 1 and 2. This paper written, and Bicknell's words transcribed, by Martyn Webster of Brighton Sussex, 25 September 2015, whom we thank. Further edited and illustrated by Marcus Bicknell, 19 December 2015.

The following obituary was published in **"The Times" on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1911 :**

"By the death last Friday of Mr. Algernon Sidney Bicknell, of Barcombe House, near Lewes, probably the last intimate friend of J. M. W. Turner, the artist, has passed away. Mr. Bicknell was the son of Elhanan Bicknell, whose "renowned collection" of pictures was dispersed at Christie's in 1862, whose Turner pictures are frequently referred to by Ruskin, whose residence at Herne Hill was a well-known resort of men famous in artistic and other circles, including Burton the traveller. Mr. A. S. Bicknell, who was born in 1832, was a



soldier, author, scientist, and traveller. In 1861 he published a book entitled "In Trace of the Garibaldians. " He preserved up to the last a vivid recollection of his friend Turner, and in a letter to the *Athenæum* in January, 1909, settled an important point of connexion with a portrait of that artist—reproduced on the title page of Sir Walter Armstrong's "Turner, " where it is stated to be by J. Linnell and in the possession of Mr. James Orrock. Mr. Bicknell there stated that this portrait was surreptitiously sketched at a party at his father's house about 1847 by Landseer, with D'Orsay acting as a screen: the sketch was given by Landseer to D'Orsay, who, after redrawing it, sold it to Hogarth, the dealer of the Haymarket, for 20 guineas. It was lithographed and published in 1851. Mr. Bicknell, who had been in

failing health for many years, was engaged at the time of his death in writing upon archæological subjects. His brother, Herman Bicknell, was also a traveller, and was one of the first Englishmen successively to penetrate Mecca. He described his journey in *The Times* of August 25, 1862. In May, 1869, he entered in disguise the shrine of Fatima in the sacred mosque of Kum, which, it is believed, had been only once before (in 1821) by a Christian. ”

A more pithy and succinct obituary appeared in a contemporary report of the council to the **Royal Astronomical Society**:

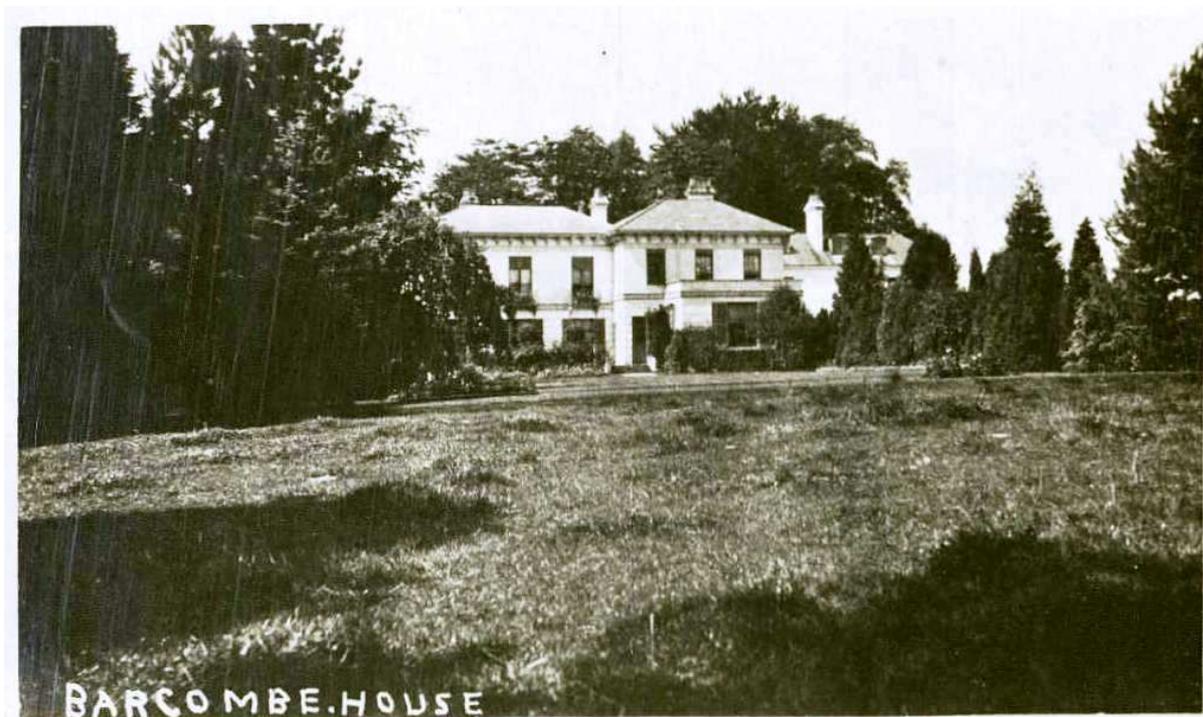
“Algernon Sidney Bicknell, son of the late Mr Elhanan Bicknell, of Herne Hill, a well-known collector of pictures, was born on 1832 October 9. Possessed of independent means, he followed no profession, but devoted himself to travel, to Alpine climbing, and to an extensive acquaintance with many branches of science. At Staplefield Place, Sussex, where he lived for many years, he possessed a well-equipped observatory, though he contributed no observations to the Society. At one time he held a commission in the militia. He was a liveryman and sometime master of the Vintners’ Company. Mr Bicknell married in 1857 Rosa, daughter of the late Mr Wild, of London, who with two sons and four daughters, survives him. He died at Brighton, after an operation, on 1911 October 26. He was elected a Fellow of the (Royal Astronomical) Society on 1890 January 10. ”

*A.S.Bicknell, circa 1850, after a daguerreotype by Kilburn, right*



## **Barcombe**

The Barcombe House referred to in the first obituary is located at Barcombe Mills and is today a listed building. In its day it was a fine period residence with grounds, built in about 1843 on a site of human habitation dating back to the Domesday<sup>1</sup> Book and situated on the only little piece of ground raised above the level of flood from the marshy plain of the nearby river Ouse. A delightful place of country retreat with outstanding views of the South Downs especially for anyone who was a former city dweller, and well served in its day by through trains to London Lewes and Brighton from Barcombe Mills station on the Lewes to Uckfield line (opened in 1858 and closed in 1969). As such it was home to the said Bicknell family between the years 1898 and 1945.



For Algernon Sidney Bicknell and his wife first moved to Barcombe House in 1898, each then at the respective ages of 66 and 58. Algernon was an extraordinary enigmatic man by any standard, even controversial in his day. He was certainly a real challenge to his own family with whom his relationships were not at all easy. They came there from Staplefield Place near Handcross, their previous country residence outside London since 1887.

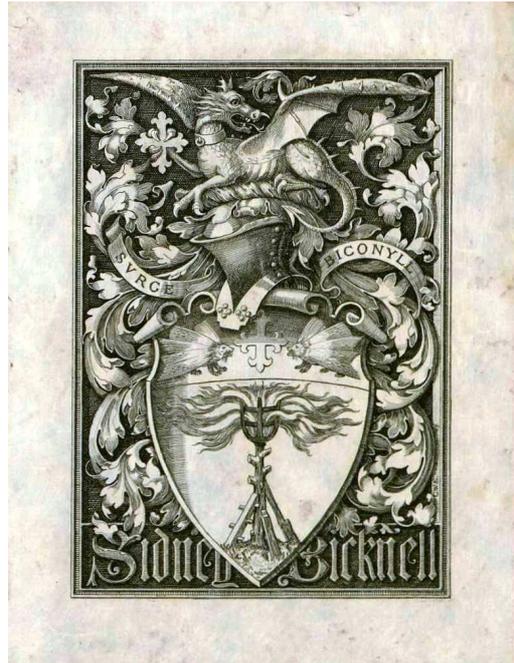
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<sup>1</sup> Spelling *sic* MB

## Sources

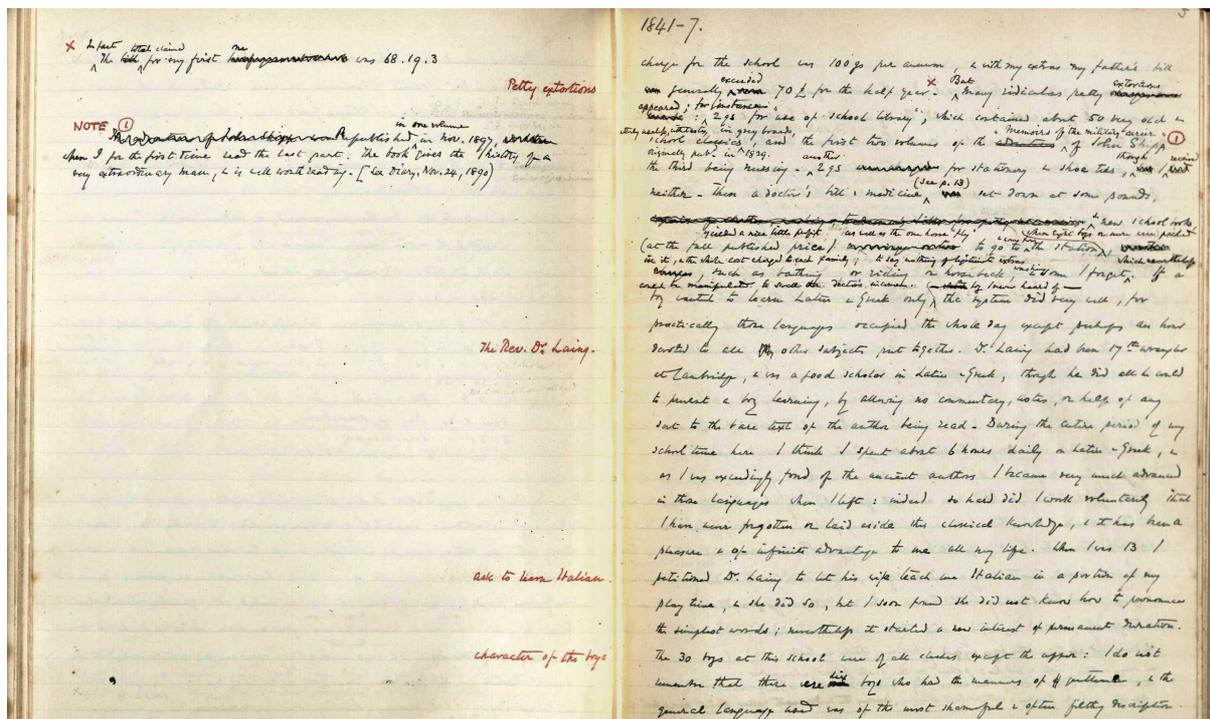
Algernon Sidney Bicknell's personal papers are deposited at the East Sussex Record Office (The Keep) under reference ACC 8490. They are a valuable un-researched family archive and social history of the first rank, an incredibly rich source well worthy of transcription and publication for their sheer range of detail unmatched elsewhere. It is astonishing that they have never come to light before now: a huge treasure trove and pot-pourri of information about travels, comments on every aspect of life and above all else some amazing detailed family trees of himself, his wife and his mother drawn up in a meticulous hand that are a veritable researcher's Pandora's box of delight.

*Bicknell styled himself just Sydney on his bookplate in the inside front cover of his memoirs at The Keep*



The deposited archive consists of two thick bound volumes in the author's own distinctive handwriting entitled "Notes for autobiography by Sidney Bicknell" covering periods 9<sup>th</sup> October 1832-9<sup>th</sup> October 1883, then 9<sup>th</sup> October 1883-December 1910 respectively : a memoir with photos and subsequent additions from elsewhere by Algernon's eldest son Maldion, and a bound incomplete volume of notes on Algernon's mother's family the Brownes. It is a matter of great regret that only snippets from these papers can be quoted in this necessarily limited account. They recount very extensively on his travels made around Europe, north, central and south America, the Middle and Far East, right round the world, up to the end of his life – and are a travelogue and history in themselves - yet they remain curiously sparse with detail of his own immediate family of whom, apart from his wife he often speaks in acerbic disapproving tones. His finances for all of this appear to derive largely from allowances and trust funds inherited from his family wealth made in whale oil of which next to nothing is said. and for all we know the sales of his

inherited artworks. His mother's family, the Brownes had been London city merchants. There is no doubt that these accounts, intended for a published autobiography, are truly a fabulous travelogue of their time. No words can adequately convey, even in extracts, the wealth of minute detail of almost every moment of this extraordinary man's life which apparently was spent mostly in travel. It seems he must have spent as much time writing about his life as actually in the living of it. Hopefully one day a transcriber will come along and produce a transcript of the whole work for publication as was its author's original intention.



Bicknell's memoirs are written in two bound books, the text mostly on the right page with headings added later in red ink to help find a subject. Sample page above.

In opening his first volume of notes in 1904 it is clear that Algernon Bicknell is referring back to copiously written diaries<sup>2</sup> from his past. He dedicates his work cryptically to “those of my family who love me - if any there may be - and who believe that in my life I have contributed something to human knowledge”. This in itself indicates the fragility of his family situation largely due it seems to a very obvious overbearing personality on his part of which more later in this account.

<sup>2</sup> More than one of which are in Marcus Bicknell's possession.

## **Brighton**

Family put aside, it is well worthwhile to quote here his references to his experiences of Brighton. He opens thus:

“When my father was living at Herne Hill in the beautiful house he had built for himself, which I have often heard called a Palace of Art Treasures, I came into the world on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1832, a year I always remember without an effort because the Great Reform Bill was passed in it. I was the third of my parents’ children. My father, sometime a Unitarian, or thinking he was, did not have me christened but registered on Dec 23, 1837, in Dr Williams’ Library, then in Red Cross St, Cripplegate, the books of which are now preserved by the Registrar General, Somerset House.

The first thing I can recollect is being at a house in Cannon Crescent, Brighton, and hearing some guns fired at the battery just opposite, for the accession, I suppose, of Queen Victoria, 20 June 1837. A battery of six 32ft cannon used to be in front of the parade, a little east of where the Grand Hotel now stands.

Eight years and ten months old I was packed off to school. My school was at Rev Dr Laing’s at 10 Sussex Square (Brighton) which was moved to no 11 at the next Xmas. I remained here until Michaelmas 1847.

I wish to record as forcibly as words can do it, my hatred of Dr Laing’s school of Brighton. No place, except Dickens’ Squeers, could have been worse in any respect, and it was certainly owing to my own energy and love of classical knowledge, that those 5½ years were not entirely thrown away – the glare, the dust, the bitter winds, the hideous playground and the monstrous tramps up and down the Kemp Town parade, have left a feeling of disgust in my mind which to this day makes me almost shudder at the name Brighton.

In 1907 11 Sussex Square was let on a lease for 7 years at £160 a year, and still remained empty in Nov 1909, but the block of building, in which the schoolroom and school dining room were, was let off separately to a dairyman, and a side entrance door added to it. I never see this school house without a shudder.

It appears to me that Brighton today (1906) has scarcely altered since my school days. Kemp Town extends no further now than Sussex Square, and thence to

the Steine as far as the Grand Hotel now is, which stands on the site of a small crescent having in front of it a battery of six old 32 pounder guns and a flagstaff. Only half of Adelaide Crescent was built in that period and it formed the extreme W end of the town. All the houses further west have been added. To reach Hove church one had to cross two fields and stiles. ”

Algernon Bicknell's lengthy descriptions of his sufferings at Dr Laing's merit a whole account in their own right. They are a revelation. Whatever else he may say however he had had a classical education there which must surely have formed the basis for his incredibly perceptive and descriptive, almost obsessive, mind for the world around him.

### ***Algernon Sydney Bicknell's life in brief***

From 1847 there then followed a desultory period during which Algernon Bicknell spent a year at University College, London (1849-1850) followed by a further year at his father's office in Mincing Lane (1850-1851) but he was clearly not cut out for such things and his rakish travelling adventures soon began in earnest.

At the age of 25, Algernon Bicknell recorded the following: “On Nov 13<sup>th</sup> 1857 I married Miss (Rosa Louisa) Wild at the church of St John the Evangelist in Westminster, without the knowledge of either family, and with no one excepting my uncle, Hablock<sup>3</sup> Browne, and official witnesses attending the ceremony ”Rosa Wild (born 11<sup>th</sup> February 1839) was the daughter of William Wild Esq. of Denmark Hill and St Martin's Lane, Cannon Street, City. However this was not a marriage which received much family blessing on either side for whatever reason.

After countless travelogues and adventures abroad (written out in immaculate script with illustrative inserts here and there in his archive ) Algernon Bicknell (who clearly favoured Sussex to live ) aged 56 then recording the following:

“Having brought my bicycle, I thought I would ride down to Lewes (from Heathfield) and take the first train back. Just as I was starting a man dressed like a carpenter came up to me and said “I begs your pardon, Sir, but wasn't you looking

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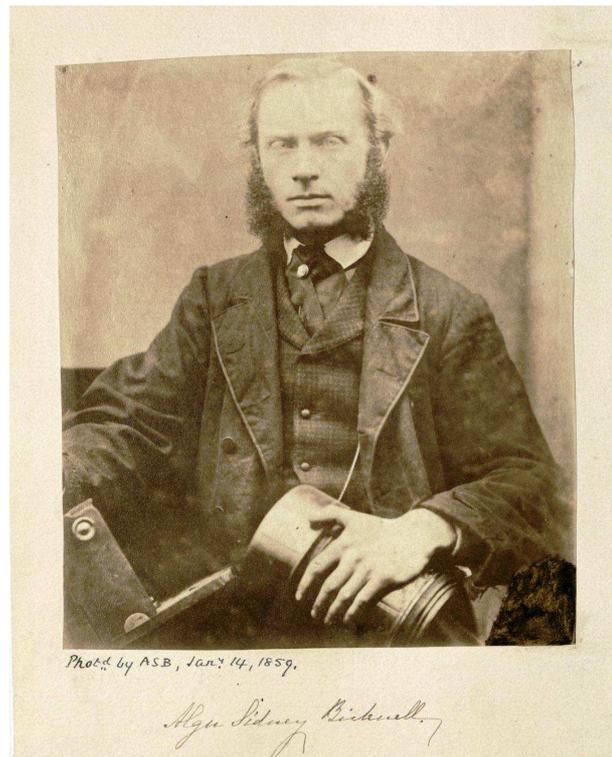
<sup>3</sup> Hablock is an incorrect spelling of Hablot who is better known as Phiz, Charles Dickens' illustrator.

for a house? If so, there's a big 'un at Barcombe Mills, just off your road, if you're agoin' to Lewes"

And so it was that Algernon Bicknell and his wife, who whose London home was at 23 Onslow Gardens, Bayswater and then sold, moved from Staplefield Place to Barcombe House on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1899 having purchased it at a price of £4000 from a young widow Mrs Elmore whose husband, a very old man, was a "brother of an academician".

The photo, right, shows A.S.Bicknell in 1859  
aged 27 but looking older

Algernon Bicknell, whose universal waistrel travelling continued unabated, enjoyed altogether some ten years at Barcombe House. When he died his estate quite naturally passed to his widow Rosa Louisa. However she did not survive him for long and herself died just over a year later on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1913. The Sussex Express of 10<sup>th</sup> January 1913 reported thus:



"Barcombe has lost a good friend by the death of Mrs Rosa Bicknell, widow of the late Mr A. S. Bicknell which occurred at Barcombe House on Wednesday morning. The deceased lady, who had attained the age of 73 was only ill two days. She had resided in the neighbourhood about twelve years and took a kindly interest in local organizations. Mrs Bicknell was a devout churchwoman. Her husband who predeceased her just over a year ago was an antiquarian of considerable repute. Deceased leaves two sons (one of whom is in India) and three daughters. The funeral takes place at St Mary's church Barcombe on Saturday at 2. 30" On 17<sup>th</sup> January 1913 the Sussex Express reported: "The funeral scenes were of an impressive character. Despite the drenching rain and boisterous wind mourners assembled in representative numbers to pay a last tribute to the departed. Four horses drew the hearse and the body was met at the church door by the surpliced choir and clergy. The service was deeply quiet and impressive..."

The imposing grave of the deceased and her husband may be seen conspicuously to this day in Barcombe churchyard. Barcombe House now passed to the ownership of Bicknell's eldest son, Maldion Byron Bicknell, a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Artillery serving in India who retired from the army at the time of his mother's death presumably to look after the estate (to be continued in parts 2 and 3). His was quite a different story.

### ***Barcombe after Algernon Sydney Bicknell***

Barcombe House passed on the death of Rosa Louisa Bicknell, widow of Algernon, in 1913 to her eldest son Maldion Byron Bicknell, Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Artillery in India for many years who retired from the army at this point at the age of 50 to take over the family estate which had been theirs since 1898.

Maldion was in fact the third child of the family and had been born on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1862 at 23 Onslow Square, Kensington, the Bicknell's then London home. His two older sisters were Virna ( 1859-1921, later Warburton) and Zylde (1860-1933, later Hinds). His younger siblings were Leoline ( 1866-1951), Ethrayne (1873-1923) and Hermicelle (1884-1927). The obituary for Rosa Bicknell was incorrect in stating there were three daughters when there were actually four. The eclectic choice of names for all these six children is as yet unexplained but must have been of esoteric significance. Descendants today of the family come down through the Maldion, Zylde and Ethrayne lines, the remaining children all subsequently dying unmarried in adulthood. But theirs is another story.

Maldion himself was married twice. His first wife was Nina Emily Catherine Grey of Cowley Grove, Cowley, Middlesex, whom he had married on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1891 at Christ Church, Folkestone in Kent where Maldion was probably in army camp. He was then 29 and she was 21 years of age. His father Algernon Sidney, according to his memoirs, had attended. After marriage the couple immediately departed for India where Maldion was already established but alas Nina succumbed to the risks of India and scarcely having arrived died at Ambala in the Punjab on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1891 where she was buried. They had been married but three months. Just two years later on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1893 at St Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta Maldion married for the second time Mildred Mary Bax-Ironside, born on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1864

at Cheltenham. She was a daughter of John Henry Bax-Ironside (1827- 1879), of Houghton-le Spring, County Durham who was in the Bengal Civil Service at Bombay and his wife Sarah Elizabeth Hughes (1833-1899, born Agra, India) There were altogether four Bicknell daughters: Thelma Maud, later Durman (1893-1969, born Kirkee, Maharashtra, India), Winever, later Powell ( 1895-1966 , born Woolwich, England), Esme Marcia, later Gibson ( 1897-1993 born Kirkee) and Helen, later Phelps Stokes/Merrill/Bush (1905- 2004 , born Kirkee). The family relationships between these parents and their children was to be every bit as fraught, if not more so, as it had been between Algernon and his children and in the case of Helen, the last born, unique . All with lasting implications for Barcombe House itself and the wide world beyond.

Maldion Bicknell, unlike his father, had had a distinguished career in the service of his country in gainful employment. He had been educated at Eton and the Royal Academy, Woolwich. He had been commissioned in 1882 and served in the Egyptian campaign in 1884 and the Burma campaign in 1885. From 1891 until 1913 he was in the Indian Ordinance Corps. During the Great War he had served under the Ministry of Munitions. In 1930 he was elected Master of the Vinters' Company. He involved himself in a number of activities in the village of Barcombe, was a school manager, secretary to the trustees of the Barcombe recreation ground and was a warden at the parish church. When he died on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1931 at the age of 62 he had been in failing health in painful terminal illness with cancer of the tongue and the stomach. His very large funeral , with no mourning at his request, at Barcombe was fulsomely reported in the Sussex Express thus : "In a coffin made of deodar cedar grown in the grounds of his house, draped with the Union Jack, and carried to the churchyard in a farm wagon, the remains of Lieutenant Colonel Maldion Byron Bicknell who died on Friday were laid to rest in the Barcombe parish churchyard on Wednesday afternoon. It was Colonel Bicknell's expressed wish that the coffin , the fittings of which were of oxidised silver should be made from timber grown in the grounds of the house which has been in the occupation of his family for so many years". A full list of the many attendees was added to the account.

Barcombe House then passed to his widow Mildred who survived to the redoubtable age of 97, outliving her husband by some 30 years and dying at Barcombe on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1961. After her husband's death in 1931 she had kept on at

Barcombe House but then in the 1939-1945 war it became too expensive to run and was sold at that time. A Mrs Winifred Corke, who had first been cook and then companion-housekeeper offered Mrs Bicknell a home in her cottage near the big house and it was there that she then lived out her very long life. She is buried with her husband in Barcombe churchyard. And so ended the Bicknell family connexion of 63 years with their adopted village.

However the Bicknell archive at The Keep holds two fascinating postscripts to this story:

Firstly an anonymous five paged memoir was added sometime later to the original deposit of Algernon Sidney Bicknell's archive and opened to public view after a period of closure. It detailed what was clearly a contentious disposal of the family estate in the years subsequent to the house sale all the while Mrs Bicknell was still living. The following extract however is very telling: "She (Mrs Mildred Bicknell) had always been a woman who adored her husband, had no time for her daughters and had no business head...the background to the dispersion of what must have been a well-equipped large house of some taste is that this Anglo-Indian family had three daughters while in India, sent them back to Mrs Bicknell's sister to be brought up and hardly knew their own daughters, felt guilty about them and were on very poor terms". Clearly the lack of a son had played on her.

Of course it is not the purpose of this article to pass judgment on such matters of exclusion. What is absolutely fascinating however is that the Bicknells actually had four daughters during their time in India and not three as the memoir asserts and it was this their last and youngest child who outlived and outshone them all by a long chalk. The other daughters are stories for another day.

Helen Bicknell was born 28<sup>th</sup> October 1905 at Kirkee cantonment near Poona India where her father was in ordinance at the major British Army depot there. Her three older sisters, Thelma, Winever and Esme had already been taken in and were being raised by their mother's spinster sister Helen Maud Bax-Ironside at the family home belonging to her older brother George at Herenden House in the village of Eastry near Sandwich in east Kent. It was to that house that baby Helen was also soon sent, all four of the siblings being separated from their natural parents after birth with the view that life for them in India would be too hot, too disease ridden and

foreign for the proper raising of children. The Bax-Ironside family were like the Bicknells a British Anglo-Indian family in the original sense of that term. There were three siblings, Sir George Outram Bax-Ironside, a twice married, widely travelled, posted and experienced diplomat being brother to Helen Maud and Mary Mildred Bicknell. Even with their combined resources, a fourth child to raise was too much for them and baby Helen was put up for adoption. As a result to this end in October 1906 there arrived at Herenden House from the United States a childless married couple from New York by the name of Edith Minturn and Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (a very wealthy architect, socialite, keen historian and iconographer, a substantial benefactor of material relating to the Dutch origins of New York upon which he was the acknowledged expert now forming a major family archive with the New York Historical Society) both 39 years of age. Their bond with the child was immediate and they returned to America with her and her English nurse, formal adoption papers being issued in New York in 1908. It is not known how the Stokes first became aware of the child's availability for adoption but from that point on Helen Bicknell, now Phelps Stokes' future was assured and very rich for life. The book "Love, Fiercely – A Gilded Age of Romance" by Jean Zimmerman published in the USA in 2012 gives the whole history of the Phelps Stokes family whose wealth and privilege afforded them a life filled with mansions upstate, balls, summer homes, fine New York apartments on Fifth Avenue and Gramercy Park and European vacations. During the Bicknell girls' childhood, the Phelps Stokes and young Helen would cross the ocean to visit each other at Herenden, and Helen Bax-Ironside and her trio of charges would be welcomed back to America too. The on-line UK passenger lists (1890-1960) confirm this.

When Helen Phelps Stokes' natural parents died in 1931 and 1961 respectively she was by turn 26 and 56 years of age but she could hardly have known them or cared less. Perhaps not so her aunt Helen Bax-Ironside who died at 7 Palmeira Avenue Mansions, Hove, Sussex on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1930 and is buried alongside the Bicknells in Barcombe churchyard. Helen's adoptive mother Edith died in New York in 1937 after progressive ill health and her father Isaac in 1944 in much reduced circumstances when Helen was by turn 32 and 39. Their ashes were laid in twin vaults at St Paul's Chapel, Columbia University, upper westside New York City. Helen herself as the sole survivor of the Barcombe Bicknells lived to the astonishing

age of 99 years dying as recently as August 2004, her funeral having been held at St Matthew's Church Bedford, Westchester county, NY. She had spent most of her life at Bedford Hills and in Fifth Avenue apartments, being twice widowed. Her first husband (1928) was Edwin Katte Merrill (banker)(1902-1963) and her second (post 1978, year uncertain, after the death of his first wife) Donald Fairfax Bush (banker) (1919-1985). She had four Merrill children and by them numerous grandchildren, among them scientists, bankers, lawyers and schoolteachers. Alas no photograph of her can be traced for this account. A life a far cry from what it might have been had she remained in England.



*Photo, above. Algernon Sydney Bicknell, circa 1905. The others in the group are not identified.*

## ***The value of the memoirs***

The truly remarkable memoirs of Algernon Sidney Bicknell deposited at The Keep which have been evaluated in parts 1 & 2 of this account are of such a scale and minute detail of description that it would take many a long day for anyone to properly absorb them all in one reading, or indeed more than one reading. To do so would be very time-consuming, if not mind-numbing, within the confines of a record office, and whenever a transcriber does come along a really monumental task, if at all feasible. There is no way the whole thing can ever be done in one go. This is a great pity as this archive is a real gem as it tells as much of the writer as it does of what is being written about. It is a commentary on contemporary society. It is also illuminative in the sense of containing many accounts on the most esoteric of subjects with inserted photographs, drawings and plans etc. too numerous to list here. Included, to quote a topical example, alongside an account of the hundredth anniversary of the death of Nelson, which occurred in 1905, there are some rare photographs of Horatia Nelson Ward, Nelson's daughter by Emma, Lady Hamilton and probably the only photo in existence never before seen, a photo of the house, destroyed in World War 2, in Calais where Lady Hamilton died in penury in 1815, two hundred years ago this year.

The last words, next page, must therefore rest probably with the best evaluator there ever will be in the person of A. S. Bicknell's eldest son and heir Maldion, taking the form of copious manuscript notes at the end of the memoir upon the death of the subject. It is very clear that he wanted to get a lot off his chest and what is reproduced here is but an expurgated version. Father and son despite their many differences nonetheless lie buried beside each other in Barcombe churchyard.

***“Note by Lieut. Colonel M. B. Bicknell R.A., eldest son of Algernon Sidney Bicknell” (added to the bound memoirs)***

The concluding events of my Father's life up to within a few days of his death will be found detailed in his Diary. On October 14<sup>th</sup> 1911 he entered a nursing home at Brighton, where on the following day he was operated on by Dr Jowers for the removal of a species of morbid internal growth – a complaint for which he had already undergone a severe operation 7 years previously. My Father had been suffering acutely, for some time prior to his death from this & other disabilities, which were of a nature to have confined almost anyone but a man of his extraordinarily strong will & energy to bed: but he allowed them to make little or no difference to his usual mode of life, & continued to industriously to occupy himself up to the hour he entered the nursing home. His courage in submitting himself again to a dreadful & almost certainly fatal operation (at his advanced age) when he could have lived on more time longer only with impaired comfort needs no comment. The operation, though considered at the time successful, resulted in his death eleven days later on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1911. He was buried on Octr 30<sup>th</sup> in Barcombe churchyard, where a handsome gray granite stone marks his grave. His most loving & devoted wife Rosa Louisa (nee Wild) who died suddenly of heart failure on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1913 after only a day's slight illness lies next to him in the same churchyard.

M. B. Bicknell

Barcombe House

Barcombe

Jan 14<sup>th</sup> 1914

## ***Memoir (extract) of Algernon Sidney Bicknell***

***by Lieut. Colonel M. B. Bicknell R. A.***

It has occurred to me that those of his descendants who may read the extremely characteristic and interesting autobiography, diary & journals of my Father may not be averse to having a few observations by me as to how far in my opinion his character & attainments agreed with those depicted by himself in his M. S. S. To enable a correct knowledge to be joined to my Father's disposition, & a proper estimate to be made of his acquirements, it seems necessary to regard him impartially, and, as it were, under the cold light of history rather than with the biased feelings of relationship, if a faithful picture of the man as he really was is to be given to those who come after him, & who might otherwise easily form an entirely erroneous opinion of him from reading what he has written about himself. In doing so, I am afraid I cannot at times help impinging Cicero's maxim: as in writing of the dead, I shall have to record not only that which is wholly good: otherwise my memoir will be of little value. My Father would I am sure forgive me a frankness which he habitually practised himself when writing about others nearly related to him. I hope, therefore, I may be pardoned if, at the beginning, I boldly state that in my opinion my Father was to some extent posing (possibly quite unconsciously) throughout his autobiography and diary. By this I mean that he frequently expresses sentiments he did not really feel and opinions which he did not really hold: also that he pretends to possess some qualities which he did not possess except, perhaps in a minor degree. I could give many instances of this peculiarity, but perhaps a few may suffice to show my meaning: -

(1) My father persistently inveighs against the moneyed and leisured classes, people without ambition, & all who show no desire to raise themselves above their peers. He himself wished for nothing more than riches, a life of leisured ease, & freedom from all restraint: he at no time showed any desire to enter a profession or make a career with a view to improving his position or prospects. He cannot, therefore, have had any real ambition.

(2) He insists that, in pursuing his various objects, he never worried about or considered the possible danger to his health. In reality he was over-anxious regarding it, & and took great care to avoid all risks.

(3) He pretends to despise sportsmen & all field sports & games. Actually, he was proud of such proficiency in many exercises as he possessed, & deeply regretted he had not more. The reason of this habit of posing was, I consider, that he was imbued with a species of unconscious vanity, which caused him to wish that after his death he might appear to readers of his M. S. S. as a man of the most correct ideas & feelings.

I hold my Father's disposition to have been briefly as follows: -

Temper, not naturally good but nearly always kept in excellent restraint.

He was possessed of a strong will & great force of character.

He was seldom affectionate, & never sentimental.

He was not charitable, except in a few individual cases.

He was careful & saving as regards money, especially in small matters, but very lavish & generous at times.

He was of a very proud, independent, self reliant, yet sensitive, nature.

He possessed quite abnormal energy.

His power of application, industry & thoroughness, were very good up to a certain point.

He was very punctual, neat, careful, accurate & methodical.

He had great versatility, wide interests, & a capacity for making acquaintances.

His taste was always correct, & judgment excellent.

He did not forgive easily, except in certain conspicuous circumstances

His manners were inclined to be brusque, with little outward display of politeness

He was a good animated talker.

He was of an inquiring and rather suspicious turn of mind.

He was very upright and honourable in all business and money transactions.

He had little regard for the convenience of others, but was self-denying in matters of his own personal comfort

He was amazingly vain, easily flattered and assertive of his knowledge and exploits.

It is apparent to everyone, before he has read many pages of my Father's M. S. S. that he had an excellent opinion of himself. He takes frequent opportunities of impressing upon his readers that he was possessed of an unusual degree of most mental and many physical attainments, and that he outshone in these respects mankind in general and his own family in particular. Later on I will endeavour to discuss how far this claim was justified: but I will first try to complete the picture of his disposition as it gradually unfolded itself to me during the last 10 years. I will not give my earlier impressions.

My Father's disposition was undoubtedly a severe one, and he was always ready to discipline his wife, his children, household and in fact all who came in contact with him. He was intolerant of contradiction or the slightest opposition to his wishes and could be harsh to a degree with anyone who offended him, however slight the cause of offence might be. By this I in no way mean to imply that his nature was an unkindly one since it was far from being so..."

This astonishing critique continues on for many pages more in similar vein and amounts almost to a diatribe. What could have motivated this outpouring of acerbity is anyone's guess and must be left to the reader to make up his or her own mind. Like father like son? I record all these handwritten words with no judgment intended nor ill reflection on the family in general as this is now a public record for all to read. Here is the man and this is his book. Judge for yourselves.

If you have the chance and are interested to read more, go to [The Keep](#) and look out this astonishing archive.

For further wider family information I recommend the website entitled “On Beacon Hill” [www.bicknell.net](http://www.bicknell.net) and [www.marcusbicknell.co.uk](http://www.marcusbicknell.co.uk) and [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com) (Clarence Bicknell was Algernon Sydney’s brother).

*Martyn Webster, 15 September 2015*

*This version published by Marcus Bicknell – [marcus@bicknell.com](mailto:marcus@bicknell.com) 19 December 2015*

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