



## *Brighton and Beyond* A History of the Cowley Family

### ***Henry John Cowley, MBE – The Only Way Was Up!***

*The following account of the life of Henry John Cowley (1898-1969) was sent to me by Keith Brewer, Henry John's son in law, and is reproduced here with his kind permission. It is, without doubt, one of the most moving and inspirational stories that I have come across whilst researching the Cowley family history.*

*Peter Cowley*

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When tracing a family tree, unexpected situations may be found, and such was the case for my father in law, Henry John Cowley.

Henry John Cowley, known to family and friends as 'John', was born on 26<sup>th</sup> December 1898 in the Newhaven Poor Law Union Workhouse to Mildred Cowley (b abt 1878), an unmarried domestic servant of Rottingdean. There is no name for his father on the birth certificate, although on his subsequent marriage certificate, he gives his father as Joseph Cowley (deceased). Joseph Cowley (1844-1930) was in fact Mildred's father, and Henry's grandfather.

The 1891 census of Rottingdean, shows that 'Millie' Cowley, aged 13, was a servant in the house of John Steinmetz\*\*, a 51 year old baker who was born in Germany, and his wife, Alice, a 40 year old midwife born in Kensington, London. They were living at 71, High Street, Rottingdean, next door to Mildred's uncle, William Cowley and his wife, Elizabeth.

Mildred was 20 years old when Henry was born, and one can only imagine her anguish at giving birth on Boxing Day in such a place. The records show that she discharged herself and her son on 26 January 1899 to Rottingdean. The 1901 census shows them living at 99, High Street, Rottingdean with Mildred's father, Joseph, who was born in Rottingdean and is listed as a widower aged 56, labourer / gardener working on his own account.

In the 1911 census Henry, then age 12, is listed as 'adopted' and living with Alfred Morley (b abt 1871), a biscuit baker, and his wife, Alice Mary (nee Sayers – b abt 1871), a teacher, at 14 Down Terrace, Brighton. It is believed that Alfred Morley worked in the Cowley bakery business (later known as 'Ye Olde Bunn Shoppe') in Pool Valley, Brighton. The owner of the business at that time was Caroline Cowley, cousin to Henry's grandfather, Joseph. It would appear that Mildred either did not want to look after her son or did not have the resources to do so. Although there are no formal records to confirm this, it is assumed that the Cowley family connections to Alfred and Alice Morley, who had no children of their own, resulted in their adoption of Henry. Mildred Cowley did marry in abt 1905 and by 1911 had two daughters but, for whatever reason, she apparently never sought to be reunited with Henry.

Alfred and Alice Morley, always known to Henry as 'uncle and auntie', brought him up and ensured that he received a good education. Henry attended St Luke's School in St Luke's Terrace in the Queens Park area of Brighton. Whilst there he was awarded a Junior Scholarship from the Philip Hedgcock Charity for four years at Varndean School, Brighton.

Henry left school at age 16 at about the time of the start of the Great War. He was apparently given a white feather by an unknown lady, implying that he should be a soldier and fight for his country. (Source: Wikipedia – *White Feather*: “In August 1914, at the start of the First World War, Admiral Charles Fitzgerald had founded the Order of the White Feather with support from the prominent author Mrs Humphrey Ward. The organisation aimed to coerce men to enlist in the British Army by persuading women to present them with a white feather if they were not wearing a uniform”.)

This encounter caused Henry to ‘increase’ his age to 18 and to join the army. He served with the Gloucester Regiment and with The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers as a machine gunner. He saw service in France and Belgium and was wounded. In February 1919 he was demobilised from the Army and joined the RAF in September of that year. He was posted to RAF Blandford in 1920 where he met Florence Frampton, who was serving in the Women’s Royal Air Force. They subsequently married in Battersea on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1923.

Henry’s next posting was to the London Recruiting Depot which entailed tours to various towns, one of which was Birmingham where his daughter Betty was born on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1924. In 1925 he was posted to Iraq, serving in Hinaidi, Baghdad and in 1927 to Abu Suier and Aboukir in Egypt. After his return to the UK in 1930, he was posted to Upavon and subsequently Kenley. With the Munich crisis in 1938 he was posted to Balloon Barrage group in London until 1940, when he was commissioned. He served in the Air Ministry until 1945 and then Coastal Command. During this time he went to many RAF establishments including the Azores.

Retiring from the RAF in 1953 as a Wing Commander, Henry found some resentment in ‘Civvy Street’ towards a retired officer who wished to continue working. In 1954 he found a job which satisfied his abilities as ATC (Air Training Corps) Adjutant to the County of Middlesex Wing comprising 27 Squadrons, and eight troops of Air Scouts. During his time as Adjutant, 114 (Ruislip) Squadron won the Alan Lees Trophy for being the best squadron in the country, two years in succession. He enjoyed the work and finally retired in 1964.

In the 1965 New Year Honours, he was awarded a well-deserved MBE in recognition of his ten years with the ATC.

In late 1968 he became unwell, and in March 1969 he had a heart attack and died in Haslar Hospital at the age of seventy, cutting short his anticipated permanent retirement.

From a very humble and unpromising start in life, which was always in the background and caused him concern, he became a well-respected person and achieved more than most people during his too short life.

Keith Brewer  
September 2010

**\*\* Editor’s note added 15 January 2014:**

The original name for Millie Cowley’s employer in the 1891 census was shown in this story as ‘Sleinmety’ and the transcription of the census document on Ancestry.com shows the name as ‘Slemmety’. However another researcher of Sussex history has suggested that the correct name is actually ‘Steinmetz’. Research of the births and baptisms of the children of John and Alice Mary Steinmetz in Rottingdean supports this correction.