

The Finmere Record

No. 6

SATURDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2001

FREE



Edmund Symes-Thompson's bookplate

Designed by John Leighton, the plate includes the arms of Symes, Watkins and Sydenham. The motto is 'Lux in Luce': 'in light, we shine.' A stethoscope is shown to the left of 'Lux'; Edmund's father was the first to bring this instrument to Britain after its invention by René Laennec in 1819. The volume of Hippocrates refers to the Hippocratic oath sworn by doctors.

The Finmere Record

SATURDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2001

'In Light, We Shine'

The Symes-Thompsons of Finmere House

In February, we received a very informative letter from Mr C. Stephen Dehn, great-grandson of Edmund and Lilla Symes-Thompson who lived at Finmere House. This letter was helpful in clarifying and correcting the text of the Millennium History. However, we did not have time or space to include all the details provided by Mr Dehn. Here we reproduce an edited version of his letter.

We will publish more material on Finmere House in future newsletters. We would particularly like to hear from any villagers who have memories of life at the House.

Andy Boddington, October 2001

Edmund Symes-Thompson

My great grandparents (Edmund and Lilla Symes-Thompson) researched much of the history of Finmere House when they bought the estate which included Gravel Farm. Edmund was an eminent Victorian physician and academic. His father (Theophilus) was a surgeon and introduced the stethoscope to this Country in 1828. The Symes-Thompsons were closely linked with the Brompton Hospital for diseases of the chest of which my great-great grandfather was a founder. The hospital is still considered to be the leader in the field of excellence in diseases of the chest.

Edmund Symes-Thompson set up (and largely paid towards) the building of the Training College for Teachers of the Deaf in Ealing. The science of teaching effective lip-reading to the deaf largely owes its foundation to him.

The family travelled extensively abroad: to Germany, Greece, Turkey-in-Asia, the Holy Land, Egypt, Algeria and most of North Africa, Madeira and South Africa. It was these tours which led him to become one of the pioneering members of his profession to promote high-altitude and dry climate as a cure for tuberculosis.



His research and input undoubtedly saved many lives at a time when tuberculosis was a huge killer. He was instrumental in setting up several 'Consumption' sanatoria, notably the Queen Alexandra Sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland built in 1907.

Like most of the Symes-Thompsons, he was a devout member of the church of England and saw his medical calling as a divine vocation. He was truly 'a follower of St Luke' and Provost of the Guild of St Luke for doctors.

He was appointed 'Gresham Professor of Physic' in 1866. Gresham College was founded in 1597 to further intellectual debate and education on a wide spectrum of subjects. It was considered to be the acme of intellectual excellence. He lectured tirelessly for nearly 40 years. The lectures were given first in English and then in Latin.

Henry Symes-Thompson

Edmund Symes-Thompson's son was my grandfather, called Henry Edmund Symes-Thompson (known in the family as Harry), he was also a doctor. He and my grandmother (Caroline Ada Chute Symes-Thompson, nee Tacon, always known within the family as Lily (sic), lived firstly in Cavendish Square near Barley Street and then at 3 Kent Terrace Regent's Park. He was also consultant to the Brompton Hospital and pursued a busy medical career in London.

In those days it was the custom for families to base themselves in London for the 'Season' (particularly if they had young unmarried daughters for whom they wished to find a husband) and so Finmere House was often let to friends (and sometimes patients) notably the Royal family who did not always behave too well. I have a set of enormous blue and white cups (and saucers) inscribed 'We'll take a cup o' kindness for Auld Lang Syne' the apologetic gift of the future King Edward 7th who had a rowdy house-party during which quite a lot of rather valuable glasses were broken! The family often travelled abroad during the winter for several months at a time and Finmere was also sometimes let whilst they were away on these tours.



From about 1941 onwards my grandparents moved full time to Finmere. Doubtless my grandfather was concerned about the safety of his wife and remaining family after his eldest Son was killed by enemy action; added to which food would have been more plentiful at Finmere with its chickens and nearby farms! My grandparents had three children:

(Richard) Edmund Symes-Thompson who was a doctor and killed during an air raid at St George's Hospital in London whilst performing an emergency operation.

George Kempthorne Symes-Thompson who was, alas, mentally handicapped and lived for most of his life at Finmere.

Avril Symes-Thompson, my mother, who married my father (Stanley Dehn) in 1950. He proposed to her in the rose garden of Finmere House.

Caroline Symes-Thompson

My grandfather died in 1952 leaving my grandmother a widow. She also had her mentally handicapped son, George Symes-Thompson, to care for. She worked hard for the village community, notably the cricket team and the football team for which she provided the field and the equipment. She was much loved by all the village for the care and concern she showed to all. She was an accomplished musician, being a licentiate of the Royal College of Music where she studied the organ. For many years she was the honorary organist at Finmere church which she attended every Sunday.

Leaving Finmere

Eventually my parents and my grandmother decided that Finmere and the considerable responsibilities which went with the estate were becoming too much to cope with. Like many ladies of her generation, my grandmother had never learned to cook and domestic skills were a hidden mystery to her (she could, however, drive well). Finmere was, prior to its division, a large house by any standards and domestic staff were becoming almost a thing of the past by the 1960s. My parents were also extremely concerned at what would become of uncle George if my grandmother should become ill or, indeed, after she was dead. My mother and father had a house of their own in Holland Park and my father's work was in the City; to move to Finmere was not considered a viable option. It was therefore decided to sell Finmere House. It was put up for sale.

A Mr and Mrs Flowers from North London bought it and used it as the base for their antique furniture enterprise, installing, amongst other things, a large chandelier and removing the original staircase! They very kindly agreed to buy a great amount of the older furniture and effects from my ageing grandmother. To create a showroom for their stock they knocked several rooms together. Much of the furniture which had been bought for the house in 1890 was displayed and sold under this new regime. My brother remembers being taken there as a boy of 9 or 10 and expressing great surprise that all the furniture which he had known so well all his life now had price tags dangling. A new era had begun for Finmere House.

My grandmother moved to Finmere Cottage with my uncle George; and there the two of them remained until she died. She died in 1967 and my parents tried hard to find a way to keep uncle George at Finmere. Alas, after several attempts—and much heart-searching—this was found to be impossible. He was moved to a beautiful private country house nursing home in Purley-on-Thames near Pangbourne called Purley Park, where he lived happily until his death aged 81.

Mrs Brenda Symes-Thompson also lived in the Village, near the church. She had two sons: Peter and Michael. My mother sadly died in 1988.

C. Stephen Dehn, St Valentine, 14 February 2001.