

From Riches to Rags: the BIGNELLS in Sandown

As part of our ongoing events to promote the County Record Office, we have been undertaking research into a family local to a particular town/area and then creating a display in order to showcase the documents and resources available at the Record Office. Our display designed for the event at Sandown Library highlighted our research on the BIGNELL family who lived in Sandown for many years before moving to Shanklin.

James William BIGNELL was born at Martyr Worthy, near Winchester in Hampshire, in 1835. His father was William BIGNELL, a carpenter. His mother was Eliza GILLINGHAM, who was born in Winchester in 1817; her father James is listed as a stone mason. Eliza died in 1838. It appears that William subsequently married his late wife's sister Amelia GILLINGHAM in Portsea, Hampshire in 1841.

James William BIGNELL married Ellen Emma WARNE in Sandown on 16th June 1870. He and his father William BIGNELL are listed as gentlemen on the marriage certificate – we were a bit puzzled by this initially, as we thought his father was only a carpenter, as listed on James's baptism entry. In his obituary, however, it mentioned that he had lived in Barcelona. Subsequent research revealed that William was instrumental in the building of wooden railway bridges in Spain, working with William MACKENZIE. William MACKENZIE was an Anglo-Scottish civil engineer and civil engineering contractor who was one of the leading European contractors in the 1840s. In an article (in Spanish) which describes the construction of the Barcelona to Mataro railway in 1848, it states: "At the orders of J. Robson there were three foremen, upon whom three brigades of workers depended. Each one had a specialization: William BIGNELL was especially dedicated to building the bridges with his carpenters."

<http://www.spanishrailway.com/2012/02/13/barcelona-a-mataro-port-bou-y-cerbere/>

Ellen WARNE was the daughter of James WARNE, who was a wine and spirit merchant with a premise at 2 Wilkes Terrace in Sandown. According to the Isle of Wight Observer article, their wedding was a festive affair, held in her father's garden with 30 guests sitting down to a "sumptuous" wedding breakfast in a decked marquee and lasting into the evening with music and dancing.

Their first child, Helena Laura Louise BIGNELL, was born in May 1870 but unfortunately passed away at 10 months old in February 1871. The BIGNELLS had 11 children in all, but lost 7 of them (including a set of twins) at an early age.

James BIGNELL owned several properties in Sandown over the years including furnished apartments at Stewart Villa in Grafton Street and was the proprietor of several businesses. These included The King's Head hotel from 1870 - 1875 (as shown in Hill's Directory of the Isle of Wight) and he is listed in the 1878 History Gazetteer and Directory of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight as the owner of The York Hotel. He was also a mineral water manufacturer – this business is listed as being in

the Sandown Old Town Hall in the 1880's (Steven's Directory of the Isle of Wight). Interestingly, he is recorded as being an Annuitant (this being someone who receives an annual income) on the 1881 census.

Unfortunately, James BIGNELL was declared bankrupt in 1890 and it was reported in the Isle of Wight Observer on 15th November that the "statement of affairs shows gross liabilities £3119". Amongst his debts were the mortgages to four properties in Sandown, these were Parterre, Barcelona, Stewart Villa and Arthur Villa. As a result of the bankruptcy, James was forced to sell his properties at auction. Parterre is now self-catering apartments.

The BIGNELL family subsequently moved to Shanklin and ran the Fern Cliffe refreshment rooms near the Esplanade from 1894 until 1920.



James William BIGNELL passed away in 1916 and Ellen died in 1920.

In regards to the surviving BIGNELL children, we have been unable to discover exactly what happened to Arthur James BIGNELL and Leonard BIGNELL, but as we can't find anything regarding their marriages or deaths, it's likely that they moved abroad. Arthur is last found on the 1891 census, aged 18, but his occupation is unclear. Leonard is last listed on the 1901 census, aged 20, as a painter's apprentice. I have found a Leonard BIGNELL on the U.S. census for 1920, who was born in 1880 in England, but we have no way of knowing if this is the same individual.

Alice Isabel BIGNELL married Percival George RUNDLE, a post office clerk, in 1912 at St. Saviour's church in Shanklin. I found a son born to them in 1914, Reginald J. RUNDLE but it appears that he died in 1933. I found an entry from 1916 in a Hampshire Directory showing that the couple were living at a house called Wistaria, in the Bitterne Grove area of Bitterne. Percival died in 1949 and Alice died in 1957.

Stewart Gillingham BIGNELL was described as "feeble minded" on the 1911 census and as a "general helper" at the family café. In 1939, he was living at the "Forest House & St. Mary's Hospital" (i.e. The House of Industry), Parkhurst, working as a gardener. He died in 1950.

The BIGNELL family was chosen at random to be the focus of family history research, but their unexpected connection with Barcelona and the construction of the Spanish railways made it all the more interesting; it also highlights an example of people living on the Isle of Wight who had a link to historical transport developments in Europe.