

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S
HISTORY**

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Rev. Watson's talented sons

This is an appropriate moment in the narrative to provide a little biographical information about the inspiration behind the present book, the man who was responsible for the first *History of Great Staughton*, Rev. Henry George Watson. He began the work after his retirement from the incumbency of St Andrew's Church in 1909 and the book was published in 1916. The book, the first ever history of the village, was an immense feat of scholarship undertaken in an era when research had to be conducted either by personal visits to the archive (not easy with relatively poor local transport) or by correspondence. It is a great tribute to his industry that despite these formidable obstacles his work remains even now, a century later, an essential source of information.

Henry George Watson was born in London in 1838, the son of John Watson, a doctor. He attended St John's College Oxford where he was the Pusey and Ellerton Hebrew scholar. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1860, followed two years later by an MA. He was a curate in Tring between 1861 and 1869. In 1863, at the age of twenty-five he married the 24-year-old Lucy Eleanor Gillman. Between 1865 and 1880, the couple had ten children: seven sons and three daughters. Watson was appointed vicar of Long Maraton, Hertfordshire, where he served for two years from 1868. He then moved to St Leonards in Buckinghamshire where he was the incumbent until 1895, in which year he became vicar of St Andrew's Church in Great Staughton, a position he occupied until his retirement in 1909 at the age of seventy-one. He devoted the early years of his retirement to researching and writing his *History of Great Staughton*. Henry George Watson died in 1929 at the age of ninety-one.

The second of H.G. Watson's seven sons, William Stephen, was born in Bloomsbury London in 1866. His life is celebrated in a stained-glass window in the south aisle of the church, and a modest memorial plaque in the church briefly commemorates his life. It reads:

In loving memory of William Stephen Watson, dearly loved son of Rev. H.G. Watson, vicar of the parish. Born December 26 1865, died December 23 1900, at Mossel Bay, Cape Colony. In the hope of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ.

The year of his death and the geographical location may suggest that William Stephen Watson was another casualty of the South African Campaign, but this is not the case. William S. Watson was a highly qualified, experienced and well-respected engineer in the water, gas and railway industries. After schooling at St Marks, Windsor and Merchant Taylors School, London (following in his father's footsteps in the latter), William Watson became a student at the Royal College of Science, subsequently being elected by open competition to a free studentship in the College. In 1886, at the age of twenty-one, Watson became an Associate Member of the College.

His first position was with a company that made brewing equipment. He remained with Gillman and Spencer for eighteen months until December 1887; his major responsibility in the company was to supervise the erection of brewing equipment at Gordon Wharf, Rotherhithe. His career then took an upward turn when he was articled to Jabez Church, whose reputation in the gas, hydraulic, and sanitary engineering sector would greatly enhance Watson's curriculum vitae and his reputation in engineering circles. After completing his articles in 1890, Watson was

employed by Jabez Church as Resident Engineer on the construction of the Mid-Sussex Waterworks. A year later, on 1 December 1891, Watson was elected an Associate Member of the Royal College of Science.

His career continued to flourish. In 1892 Watson saw a better future for himself in the Cape Colony and for five years he worked with another reputed engineer, Thomas Stewart, on a number of varied projects. He undertook surveys for the Uitenhage and Bloemfontein Waterworks; he was involved in the Van Staaden River dam project; he worked on the Table Mountain storage-reservoir; and in particular, he designed a wire ropeway that brought materials and equipment for that project. He also worked on the reservoir at Kloof Nek. A more unusual project was the design and construction of a pier near Cape Town for landing fish. He further extended his expertise and experience in August 1897, when he was employed by the South African government to undertake a survey for the proposed railway connecting Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. He evidently impressed his employers because in 1898 the Cape Government appointed Watson as assistant engineer on the construction of the Oudtshoorn-Klippart Railway. The railway terminus was at Mossel Bay and in 1900, with the Boer War reaching a critical phase, Watson was duly transferred to that town to supervise the completion of the line. It was not however the battlefield that put an end to his life but enteric fever (typhoid), which Watson contracted in the winter of 1900 and on 23 December of that year, he succumbed to the condition.

William was not the only member of the Watson family to find himself in South Africa during the Boer War. His brother, Charles Gordon Watson, born 18 April 1874 in St Leonard's, Buckinghamshire, was the fifth son of Rev. H. G. Watson and his wife Eleanor. As an adult, in 1920 he changed his surname by deed poll to Charles Gordon Gordon-Watson. After studying at St Bartholomew's Hospital, Gordon-Watson qualified in 1898 and was a house surgeon at the hospital. He had already enlisted in the Volunteers, intending to pursue a military career, but world events overtook him and from 1899 to 1901 he served as a civil surgeon in South Africa and was awarded the Queen's South Africa medal with three clasps as a tribute to his work. He was described by fellow medics as 'an able surgeon, skilful with his hands, enthusiastic, and possessed of good judgment'. Although he described himself as 'an incorrigible Tory', Gordon-Watson was no stuffed shirt. In South Africa he enjoyed horse-racing (as a follower and practitioner), polo, trekking, climbing (Table Mountain) and golf, along with the more sedate pastimes of bridge and whist.

After returning from medical service in the Boer War, Gordon-Watson was anxious to establish his reputation, taking on posts in a number of London hospitals. He was commissioned as surgeon to the 3rd Middlesex Royal Garrison Artillery Volunteers and his connections to the armed forces was to continue until his death. He was Chief Assistant in the Orthopaedic Department of St Bartholomew's Hospital in the years 1904–1907. Gordon-Watson is perhaps best known for his pioneering use of radium in the treatment of cancer of the rectum, both at St Mark's and Bart's, and he conducted his first operation with the new treatment in 1910. His interest in proctology continued to grow and it was in this discipline, specialising in diseases of the rectum, that Gordon-Watson secured his enduring reputation.

A keen sportsman and man of the outdoors, he also enjoyed cerebral pursuits; he was an enthusiastic amateur actor and during the Edwardian era he was a regular theatre-goer. He assiduously collected the programmes of the shows he had attended. His theatre-going reached a peak in 1905 with no fewer than seventeen plays and various musical entertainments, a highlight of which was hearing Enrico Caruso in *La Bohème* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in

1906. Indulging his passion for daring exploits, he took part in motor-cycle races from London to Edinburgh and back, at a time when that mode of transport was notorious for its unreliability.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Watson was posted to a field hospital at No. 1 British Red Cross Hospital, Le Touquet, giving up an excellent practice in London. The hospital was considered by Sir Frederick Treves to be the best in France. Gordon-Watson was made a member of the Order of St Michael and St George, for services rendered in connection with military operations.

In 1917, he married Alice Geraldine Mary, daughter of Charles James Teevan. It was in March of that year that the third of the Watson brothers, Herbert Coleridge Watson, died from his wounds whilst on active service in France. His story is told in Chapter 31.

Gordon-Watson was one of the first to recognise the syndrome of trench frostbite, and to recommend an appropriate treatment for the condition. For his outstanding services to medicine, he was awarded the Order of St Michael and St George in 1916 and knighted in 1919. Watson was mentioned four times in despatches, one of which was signed by Winston Churchill.

In the 1920s, and now known as Sir Charles Gordon Gordon-Watson, he was elected to honorary positions in St Mark's Hospital and St Anthony's Hospital. He was also a founding member of the British Empire Cancer Campaign in 1923.

Major-General Sir Charles Gordon Gordon-Watson, KBE, FRCS, died at his home in York on 19 December 1949 at the age of seventy-five. He was buried at Dorchester, Oxfordshire.