The Anglican Milners of Cheshire

by Karen Milner

The first recorded member of the Milner family was Thomas de Molendarius de Pudsey who married the heiress of Pudsey at some time during the thirteenth century. The Milners continued in Yorkshire until it was realized that the custom of allowing the youngest son to inherit all the property was holding back the aspirations of generations of eldest sons. So, in the late sixteenth century, the eldest son bought the family home from the youngest son and all the members of the family split up and went in different directions.

The third son at this time was called John and he moved to Frodsham on the Cheshire coast, a backwater but with the coming of the industrial revolution, Cheshire was to prove to be an important county.

John's great grandson moved inland when he married Sarah Barrow at the end of the seventeenth century and went to live in an old house called Hall Green in the little hamlet of Acton. Cheshire had always been a centre of non- conformism and had supported Parliament against the King in the civil war and a substantial number of the members of the Milner family were Quakers; however, since nonconformists did not have civil rights, it was important that one branch of the family should be members of the Church of England, and the family at Hall Green were the Anglican connection. They were on friendly terms with their Quaker relations and sometimes Anglican daughters married into Quaker families, but there was not a great deal of social interchange between the two groups and the family trees in the writer's possession only show the names of people who were members of the Church of England until, in the late nineteenth century, only Quakers were left in Cheshire.

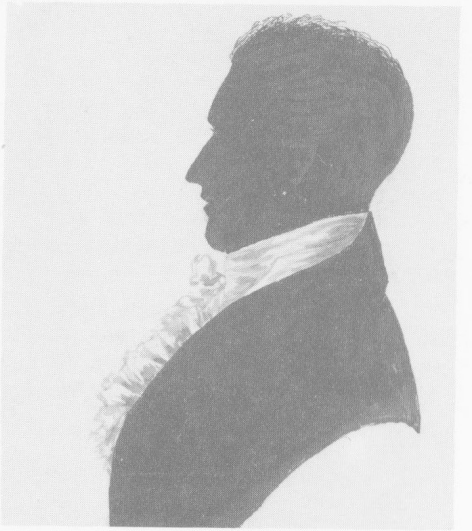
Alfred, Viscount Milner who declared that he had been born with a copper spoon in his mouth.

Daniel and Sarah had three sons, the eldest Daniel was an invalid and did not marry, Nathaniel married a wealthy heiress called Sarah Dennis and the youngest son, Thomas, married Martha Antrobus in 1733 and his bride too appears to have brought him a comfortable dowry. Nathaniel and Thomas had nine sons between them and it was the task of Daniel, as head of the family, to provide houses and enough land for each of the males and a husband of the same social class for the females. Daniel and his son, Daniel junior known as Tightrope, worked indefatigably at this task and Tightrope built or renovated houses for his many nephews.

It was only possible to achieve this standard of living for everyone by intermarriage and by the next generation nearly all the Milners living in and around Acton were the children of first

cousins, so that when disaster struck, everyone was affected. Tightrope had arranged a marriage between John (eldest son of Thomas Milner and Martha Antrobus) and Katherine, who was John's rather mysterious first cousin, and he had given the young couple the fine new house called Lower Green that he had built not far from Hall Green.

John and Katherine had four children of whom two were twins called John and Daniel, and at a very early age the twins were discovered to be homicidal maniacs. What made matters particularly terrifying to their relatives was that in between their bouts of madness, they seemed like ordinary young men and clearly had no idea that their behaviour had been other than normal. No-one knew that had caused this terrible affliction but it was not difficult to suspect that as the twins (together with all the other young people in the family) were the children of first cousins, inter-marriage must have played some part in the disaster. For the Milners of Cheshire the belief that schizophrenia was the result of inbreeding was a nightmare that lingered for many generations. The condition of the twins was kept a



Ann Milner, given away with the furniture

secret as much as possible, but when they had been particularly violent and their father was at his wit's end, he would send them off to Mr. Topham's madhouse where they would have to be chained to the wall.

However, when the fit had passed and they were clear-headed again, they would write to the local gentry and magistrates (for they were the social equals of anyone in the county) and these worthies would descend in their carriages and demand that the twins be released at once.

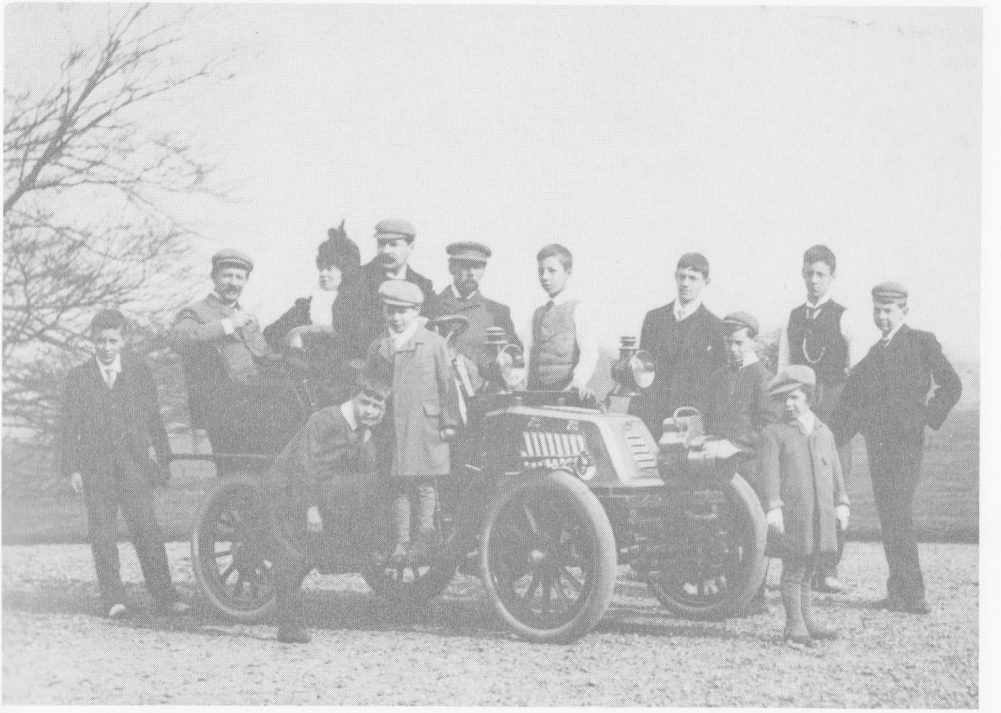
One by one the young men of the family slipped away from Cheshire, the girls had to remain and die old maids. Since Tightrope had no children, his brother Nathaniel's eldest son became the head of the family in due course, but this son (who was called John) had only daughters and the one daughter who married was the wife of her first cousin Nathaniel Dennis Milner. While Nathaniel Dennis lived out his life in the dreadful atmosphere at Acton, his son Dennis left for good, lived in London and became a successful lawyer. When in due course the last member of this branch of the family was killed at Anzio in 1944, it

was believed that the Milner family of Acton had completely died out.

Nathaniel's third son was called James and he moved to Barton-upon-Irwell near Manchester. He had several sons, most of whom lived and worked in Manchester, but his eldest son James Richardson Milner, joined his father in an import export business with Germany. James was in England and James Richardson lived in Germany where he married Sophie von Rappard and had six children. Most of James Richardson's descendants remained in Germany and their names do not appear on the family tree; in fact until recently there was no knowledge of them in England. However, it now appears that one descendant is a professor in the Otto von Guericke University at Magdeburg.

One grandson who did retain his British nationality was Alfred, who was successful as a diplomat and a statesman, but nevertheless referred to himself as having been born with a copper spoon in his mouth, clearly he was one for whom the melancholia induced by the twins lingered on. Alfred was a brilliant scholar, going to Balliol College, Oxford, and then to a glittering career in the diplomatic service and after as a Minister of the Crown. He could well have risen to the highest posts in government but for his untimely death from encephalitis lethargica (sleeping sickness).

The person most closely affected by the twins was their younger brother Thomas. There were times when he was the only one who could make any sort of contact with his brothers, so although he was permitted to leave Acton, he could not go very far away. He went to Liverpool and trained as a bookseller and in due course opened a



The last of the Milners of Acton to live at Hartford Manor near Warrington. The father of City University's John Milner is second from the right

shop. Within a year, the success of his shop was assured for Prince William, who had met and greatly admired Isaac Milner of Cambridge, recognized the name painted on the sign over the shop door and immediately granted the great Isaac's namesake a Royal Warrant. Thomas only enjoyed his good fortune for a short period for he fell ill with meningitis and after ten months as a total invalid, he died of typhus at the age of thirty. Thomas had married while in Liverpool, rather by accident, for he had been given his bride Ann who was an orphan, by his landlord. Ann, who was starving, had gone through a form of marriage without making many enquiries about the status of her bridegroom and when after a few months her 'husband' brought back another lady who he said was his wife, Ann was not perhaps quite as surprised as she pretended to be. However, she made so much fuss that the lodger (who was Thomas Milner) was called downstairs and given the furiously angry girl together with all the furniture. When they learned that Ann's bigamous husband had died, Thomas and Ann were married and when poor Thomas died without making a will (leaving Ann with three small children) she had no choice but to go to Acton and find out what Thomas's secret was.

She proved to be of invaluable help to John Milner in his efforts to cope with the twins, and when he died in 1820, he had made her his executor. Ann was in no doubt about what to do, she packed the twins off to Manchester lunatic asylum to join their mother, and they never came out again, then she sold up Lower Green and its contents and taking her children, went to join the Quaker community in near-by Warrington. It is likely that the people of Warrington knew nothing about the twins and when Ann's descendents grew old enough to understand, they were simply told about the funny old gentlemen in Manchester who left substantial sums of money to the Quaker Milners when they died. This started a persistent rumour in the family that the twins were really perfectly sane and had only been locked away to give their rapacious sister-in-law a chance to get at their money. However, this is quite untrue, and when Ann's eldest son became the father of twins himself, she left his house and would never go back to it. Some of the descendents of Thomas and Ann did well and had quite an effect on the infant British chemical industry, but being Quakers, their story rightly belongs to the history of the Quaker Milners of Cheshire.

Sources: Unpublished family papers, including letters from the twins John and Daniel.

'MILNER - Viscount Milner of St. James's and Cape Town' by Terence O'Brien published by Constable 1976.

Forster's Yorkshire families.