

Florence, Third Lady Cottesloe - a strong Swanbourne woman

Florence Tapling, was born in 1875 in Brighton. She was the daughter of Thomas Tapling and Elizabeth Ann Keay. Her father was a businessman of humble origin, who made a fortune from the manufacturer of carpets and household furnishings. Her mother died at or just after her birth. Her father remarried in 1880 to Charlotte Gibbons, but he too died in 1882 when Florence was seven. Her brother Thomas Tapling became her guardian. He was a Conservative MP and one of the "fathers of philately". At the time of the 1891 census, Florence was living with Thomas and Charlotte at Gumley Hall in Leicestershire, but Thomas died a few days after the census at the early age of 35. On her brother's death, she became an heiress and was made a ward of court.



Florence Tapling when young

In 1896, at Cuckfield in Sussex, she married Thomas Francis Fremantle, a man more than 10 years her senior. They needed to get permission from the court of Chancery as she was a ward of court and, unusually, it was given. They lived in Paddington where Thomas Halford, Florence and John, her first three children were born. From 1890 to 97 the Old House was their primary country residence, but it was their custom to spend the winter in London. In 1897, her husband inherited Wistow Hall in Leicestershire from Sir Henry Halford, with whom he collaborated in work on the rifle.



Florence as a young woman



Wistow Hall

Her father-in-law (2nd Lord Cottesloe) died in 1918, and she and her husband became the 3rd Lord and Lady Cottesloe. From 1905 the family had been resident in the Old House in Swanbourne, and they decided to remain living in the Old House rather than move to the much larger Swanbourne House.

The Family

Lady Cottesloe had 7 children:

Thomas Francis Halford born in St Marylebone in 1897. Known as Halford (the surname of his father's friend), he died of wounds in Flanders in the 1st W.W. His brother Christopher spoke of how he watched the agony of his parents as they confronted Halford's death. He was much loved.

Florence Mary born in Holton Oxon, in 1898, Florence became a missionary in Palestine & then Egypt. She was a linguist at the foreign Office from 1941-2 and then worked for the BBC Arabic News Service.

John Walgrave Halford, born in Holton Oxon: father of the Commander (5th Lord Cottesloe) and his sister Ann

Edward St. John born Horton, 1901, he died of chicken pox while away in school, aged 11.

Margaret Augusta born Swanbourne 1905: Lecturer in Pathology at Oxford, Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall and research assistant to Professor Howard Florey, who shared the Nobel prize with Alexander Fleming and Ernst Chain for his work on the development of penicillin. She married Florey on the death of his first wife.

Christopher Evelyn born Swanbourne, 1906: worked for the Ministry of Information in the war and the British Council 1945-6, he became a pacifist, and wrote The Encyclopaedia of Textiles. He moved to U.S. He had 3 children.

Bride Faith Louisa born Swanbourne 1910 : M.A. Girton College. Married & had 3 children.

Katherine Dorothy Honor born Swanbourne, 1919: M.A. Cambridge, Ph.D London Moved to The Netherlands.



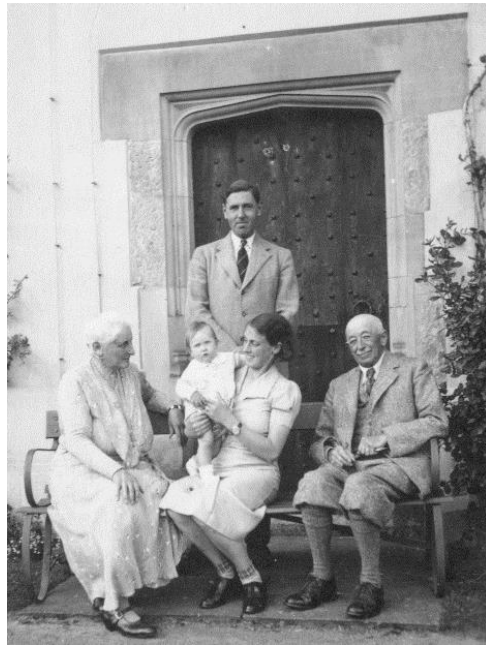
Family group around 1935:
Back row -Katherine, Christopher, Bride
Front row - Florence, Lady and Lord
Cottesloe and Margaret



Lord and Lady Cottesloe with King George VI



Lord and Lady Cottesloe at Bride's wedding to John Berry



John Berry (back) with Lord and Lady Cottesloe, Bride and William.



Lord and Lady Cottesloe on their Golden Wedding Anniversary



Lady Cottesloe and a child

Appearance and character, from memories of local people

She was a big woman, and clumsy looking with a deep voice. She had a way of drawing in her breath when she spoke that was very noticeable. She was a person of forceful character 'with a keen interest in social matters and no lack of reforming zeal' (Ken Reading). She was a very good person, full of good works, a very religious lady who took her Christian duties to heart. She had daily prayers for family and servants at the Old House, and was very busy in the church.

Her husband said, 'She thought she was democratic but really she was autocratic.' According to the Commander, she always knew what you wanted better than you knew yourself. She was a great organiser of people. Mr. Alcock was sent to work for Tapling and Son, the carpet business, on the death of the old Lord, but when she wanted him as secretary, she brought him and the family back to Swanbourne.

She made arrangements for the confinements of wives of employees, e.g. the birth of Jeane Dyke, daughter of William Wadd the butler & his wife Rhoda, and the birth of Ruth daughter of Will Sawyer, a farm worker and his wife Florence. She herself took the phone message of Ruth's birth from the Oxfordshire nursing home and sent it down to Will.

She organised Mrs. Alcock and got her making the children's birthday cakes. In the war, the lawn of the Old House was used for hay, and she always told Frank Alderman the farm manager when it was ready to cut. But he did it when he wanted to anyway.

She was very generous and sent gifts of honey, etc. to employee's families. In the Summer, the staff were taken to Wistow for holidays, and Ruth's parents who were agricultural workers stayed there for two weeks.

She was interested in education at all levels. Her daughters went on to University, which was unusual at the time. She did a lot for children's education. For example, she arranged for Jennifer Alcock (Palmer) to go to boarding school and when she, left arranged for her to go to the NCH children's nursery. She arranged, and where necessary paid for, the further education of those who would benefit from it, e.g. Chris Gurnett.

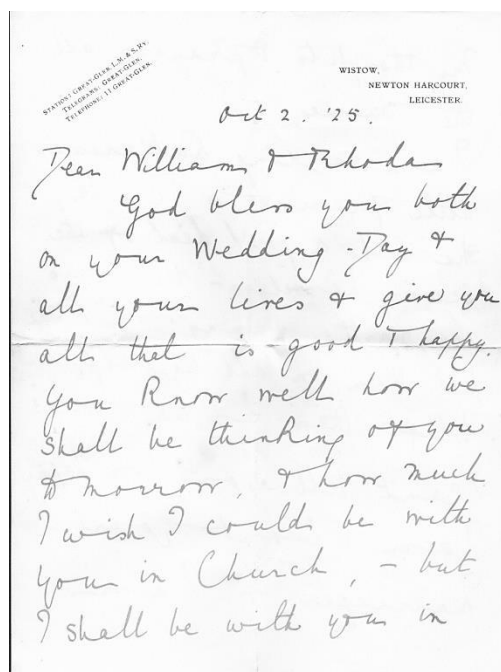
She was very keen on fresh air. She stood at the open window and took six deep breaths every morning and always had the windows in the car wide open. She was always concerned about health and hygiene. She took two cows in the guards van when the family went to Studland for holiday to make sure the family had TT milk. She was always nervous of infection, due no doubt to losing Edward so young. If there was illness in the village, Will Sawyer always had to leave the butter & eggs by the back door. When Grace Pitkin who worked in the Old House dressed up in one of Lord Cottesloe's tail coats, she came by and saw her and just said "How ridiculous, Grace."

She helped a lot of people. Ruth Rowe's mother's friend Lizzie was thought to be a little simple. She was befriended by Lady Cottesloe "The best friend I ever had" and Lady Cottesloe went to her funeral.

Many poor children she brought from London and settled in Swanbourne, and Jennifer remembers that the difficult ones went to her mum. She sent Malcolm Ash's parents a Barnardos boy, Ralph Knowles, and he went to school and then into the Naval Cadets. She had no hesitation in using any influence she had for the sake of others. She was very active cycling round the village visiting the cottages and Malcolm Ash remembers the bent handlebars which made it difficult to ride.

Activities

She organised an annual Missionary Fete in the Old House garden and it was 3d to go in. There was a sale and the proceeds went to the Church Missionary Society. A big marquee was erected and there were always 2 or 3 returned missionaries as speakers. Hymns were sung to the accompaniment of the piano that had been moved into the marquee.



Letter to William and Rhoda Wadd

Many evacuees were brought to Swanbourne in the Second World War. Many stayed at the Old House, and she employed a nurse for them who left because she found it too much. She billeted other children all round the village. Ruth remembers seeing Lady Cottesloe taking them out. Lord Cottesloe felt he was a stranger in his own garden. One evacuee is reported to have said to him 'Go away you nasty man'!

She nominated two candidates to the Parish Council. She saw to it that the documents were delivered to the Clerk with a personal letter to ascertain that the documents met the strict legal requirements.

She arranged an annual Christmas party for the children of house & estate workers. There was a Christmas tree in the library and the children sang carols and gifts were given. These were a Bible, a prayer book or pictures relating to the Bible.

In the 1914-18 war, she was Commandant of Wistow Auxiliary hospital at Wistow Hall. She was a member of the Parochial Church Council till her death. In the Second World War Wistow, became the home for a number of German Lutheran priests in the expectation that they would help re-build Germany after the war. Known to the family as the "Godly Germans", one remained after the war & ran the International Christian Centre for Friendship & Service. Many young people from Belgium, Holland, France & Germany were able to meet and form friendships. The concern was later taken over by the World Council of Churches, till the house was taken back to be restored by the family.

Lady C. was a leading figure in the voluntary work with the unemployed during the industrial depression in South Wales. She also helped establish the Manor House Old People's Home in Swanbourne & was Chair of the Management Committee until her death.

She was on the Board of Governors for the Charlotte Mason Schools Company Management Committee. This was linked to the Parents National Education Union, which practised a liberal form of education, stressing lively book-led lessons, lasting only 20 minutes or so for small children. Much importance was put on art, music and nature. Young people were to spend several hours a day outside. Each child was to be taught individually, so that they progressed at their own rate. Her involvement with these innovative teaching methods demonstrates that her interest in education was well-informed and theoretical as well as practical.



Lady Cottesloe (right) with her group at the PNEU Jubilee Gathering, Ambleside, April 1936.

She was responsible for initiating the District Nursing Association in Bucks and was secretary of Swanbourne & District Nursing Association & also that of Wistow. She brought Gladys Underwood (who later married Ted Alderman) to Swanbourne as a nurse and paid and housed her. Her obituary spoke of her interest in & help for delinquents.

Old Age & Death

She fractured a thigh some years before her death. She found the uneven levels of the Old House floors a difficulty. After this she had to walk with 2 sticks. She still attended Church in her large wheelchair and the marks it made can still be seen on the pew. She became hard-of-hearing and used a hearing aid, which had one large round earpiece & a box containing the microphone. She had it turned on for Canon Forrest's sermon, but when she had heard enough, she turned it off putting the earpiece next to the box. This caused a loud, shrill whistle which filled the church. She, of course, could not hear it, but everyone else could! Her sight also became poor and she used a large magnifying glass. She was only ill in bed for a fortnight or so before her death, but she then slipped into a coma living another 3 or so days before she died.

Her funeral at St. Swithun's was very well-attended by family, friends, workers from the house and estate and folk from the village. In her will, she left "The Coppice", her house in Newton Harcourt, to the Church Missionary Society. She wanted it used for a holiday or leave home for colonial or commonwealth students, staying or working in Britain, with a preference for those from Africa. If C.M.S. could not accept the legacy it was to go to Leicester Council of Churches for a Christian International Hostel, a children's home or a home for old people in distress. She left various generous bequests and annuities to former servants in Swanbourne and Wiston. The residue of her personal property went to her son Christopher.

Frankie Fisher