

## Alfred Summerson - Local lad makes good

Transcript of a talk by Jim Ainscough to the Pocklington and District Local History Group on 21st September 2017



Alfred Summerson

One of the most important roles of a society like ours is to research and preserve the story of the growth and development of the town and district and the lives of its inhabitants. And it's very satisfying to me at the start of another season of activities to be able to kick off with a presentation about the town a century ago through the life

of one of its most prominent and influential citizens.

Two of the leading men in Pocklington life 100 years ago were Major Percy Stewart and Alfred Summerson, the one a traveller, big game hunter and benefactor related to aristocracy; and the other a solicitor and town clerk. Both were regarded at the time as leading citizens but for different reasons. Today many people in the town know the name of Major Stewart because of the bequest of his house, museum and gardens to the people of the town (although the credit for this should really go to his wife Katharine whose money had purchased them!). It is doubtful

whether most people today know anything at all about Alfred Summerson - perhaps that a row of terrace houses is named after him -

Pocklington's first council houses. Yet I contend that Alfred Summerson is more deserving of being

remembered than Percy

Stewart - that the town and community owe more to the solicitor who grew up and spent his working life in the town than to the man of leisure whose brief career as a schoolmaster at the grammar school was eclipsed by a life devoted to enjoying his wife's wealth; and this evening I want to try to explain why I believe this.

The Summerson family do not have long roots in

the town - indeed there are no Summersons here today - they lived in Pocklington for only two generations - hence the difficulty in discovering much about Alf the man and getting photographs. Alfred's father, Dawson Summerson, was a blacksmith and when he was 25 in 1847 he came to the town from Hutton Cranswick drawn by the chance of work on the new railway. He found it and stayed. He succeeded Mr Vause in business as a blacksmith in "Bay Horse" Yard off George Street ( although I can find no mention of this on Watson's maps of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pocklington ) He developed the agricultural side of his business which prospered in the mid-century boom in agriculture - a period known as "the Golden Age of English Agriculture" ( when it flourished briefly before free trade, the opening of the American prairies and the invention of refrigeration brought cheap wheat and meat to British markets). Later Dawson moved to larger premises in Deans Lane. The roads on which he and his family lived tell the story of the rise of a successful businessman - a yard on George Street, Dean's Lane, Union Street, (one of the new houses built by Thomas Grant) and latterly at Oakdene House in New Street.

But Dawson's personal life did not proceed as smoothly as his business appeared to do. In 1849, two years after he settled in the town, he married Nancy Siddell an Allerthorpe girl. Two years later, in June 1851, Nancy died in childbirth and their son George died aged just 5 months in November. Not yet 30 and Dawson was a widower and he had lost his only child.

Four years later, in 1855, Dawson re-married at St. Catherine's Church at Barmby Moor - his bride was a Catherine Horsman. (I have been unable to discover anything about Catherine's ancestry). Dawson and Catherine had two children, Harriet born in 1859 and Alfred in 1861 (almost 10 years after the death of Dawson's first-born). The Summerson family seem to have been very close.



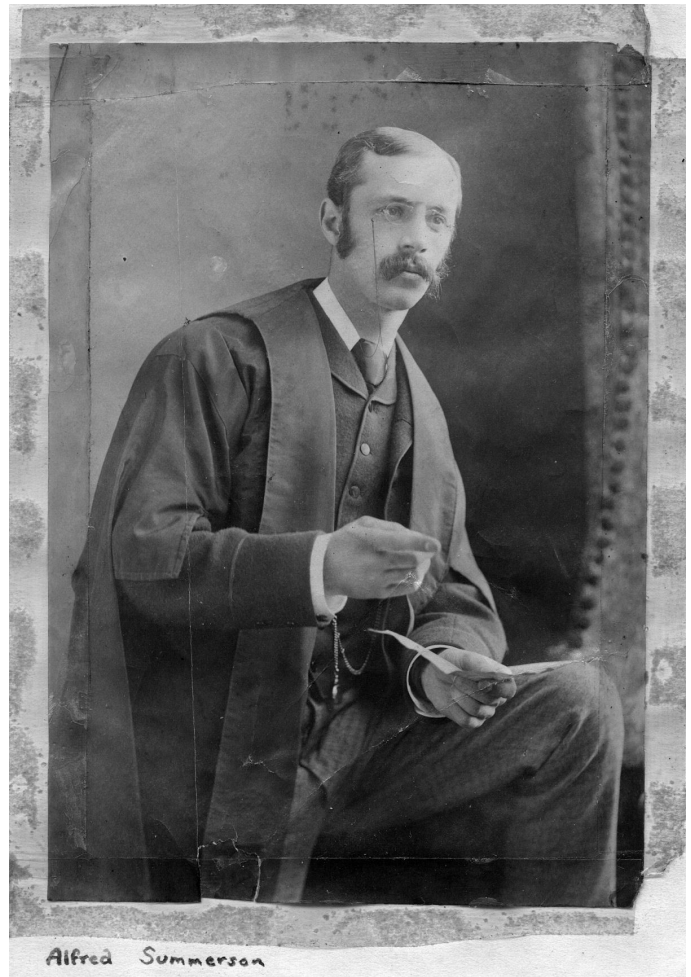
Summerson Terrace

Dawson and Catherine's marriage was to last for almost 40 years until Catherine's death in 1894 when both her children were in their thirties and still living at home. As we know the business prospered and so did the family. Alfred was educated at Pocklington School; Harriet remained at home to share in looking after the family.

Dawson is an example of an industrious, upwardly-mobile craftsman-cum-small businessman whose life centred on family and ambition for his children and whose successful business illustrates the Victorian entrepreneurial spirit upon which British prosperity was based in the nineteenth century. He was clearly very ambitious for his son - wanting the son to do better than the father - and perceiving that the best route upwards, both financially and socially, was through education. Perhaps the death of baby George in 1851 meant that Alfred was particularly precious to him and he wanted to give him the best possible start in life. Between 1873 and 1879 Alfred attended Pocklington Grammar School. It must have been unusual for a blacksmith to send his son to such a school. The records do not exist to indicate whether he was a scholar or a fee payer - in 1870 about 12 local boys were scholars - but even on a free scholarship only classical tuition was free and other lessons such as modern languages had to be paid for. So his father would have a termly bill and how would a blacksmith afford this? Well Dawson was no ordinary blacksmith - he was running a very successful business servicing the needs of local agriculture.

And in 1872, the year before Alfred started at Pocklington School, Dawson sold his business - was this to release the funds to pay for his son's education? Alfred was a pupil at the school immediately after the reforming headship of Frederic Gruggen, when the school was led by Rev. C G Wilkinson (1872-84) who continued Gruggen's reforms and implemented the changes determined by the Endowed Schools Commission. We know little of Alfred's time at the school. We know he did not excel in sport although he obviously had to take part. Where he stood out was in public speaking or what was known as Declamation - at Speech Day he read Shakespearian speeches, appropriate practice for a budding solicitor? Alfred left school in 1879 and having achieved sufficiently to take Articles with a

firm of York solicitors, Crombies of Stonegate. He passed his Intermediate exams in October 1882 shortly after his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.



Alfred then set up as a solicitor in a rented office in Railway Street, a property which he purchased over 30 years later in 1912 and which remained his office until 1925 when he moved to Brunswick House. The Urban District Council was to meet in the first floor office for over 30 years. His competitors were the old-established Powell practice (known in 1881 as Powell and Sargent) and Thomas Robson in Waterloo Buildings. Between them these two firms dominated legal services in the town and surrounding district and provided legal advice and clerking for the town's public offices. Alfred had a real challenge on his hands trying to set himself up as an inexperienced solicitor in a small town which already had two respected practices. The scale of this challenge may be illustrated by the entries in Kelly's 1889 trade directory i.e. 8 years after Alfred set up as a solicitor. The Robson entry runs to six lines compared with Alfred's one.

*"Robson Thomas, solicitor, & commissioner for oaths & perpetual commissioner, clerk to the*

*guardians of the Pocklington union, clerk to the rural sanitary authority, assessment committee & school attendance committee, clerk to the magistrates of the Wilton Beacon & Holme Beacon divisions, steward of the manor of Pocklington, of Barmby-upon-the-Moor & Allerthorpe-with-Waplinton, & agent for the Sun Fire & Life office, Waterloo buildings “.*

*“Summerson Alfred, solicitor, Railway street”*

Alfred worked hard to establish his reputation and build up a clientele. Having grown up in the town his familiarity with the young business community would no doubt be helpful. The career breakthrough came for Alfred in 1894 and he owed his good fortune to Pocklington's unsanitary condition. It was primarily to address the issue of poor sanitation that the incompetent Sanitary Authority was abolished and replaced by two bodies, a Rural and an Urban District Council and Alfred was appointed as clerk to the new Pocklington Urban District Council a post which he was to hold throughout its 40 year existence until the merger of the two councils in 1935.

By the end of the nineteenth century after almost 20 years of effort and toil Alfred had established himself as a leading professional in the community. His organisational skills, his financial acumen and his integrity were in demand by local charities and Alfred seemed always willing to oblige; after all, it introduced him to potential clients in an age when solicitors were forbidden to advertise. Two examples will suffice: in 1889 he became Honorary Treasurer of the newly-formed branch of St John's Ambulance; in 1900 he undertook the role of Hon. Secretary of the War Relief Fund for the Boer War. Alfred could always be relied upon to open a sale of work or a charity's fund-raising function. Politically he associated with the Liberal Party (the other solicitors in the town were Conservatives) and represented it when electoral lists were revised.

Whilst establishing himself as a solicitor and leading member of the community, Alfred was living modestly at home with his parents and sister Harriet as we have already seen. Although the family would be relatively well-off by the 1890s and living in Oakdene House only in one

of the three censuses covering the time they lived there tell us they had a servant (possibly when mother could no longer cope at the end of her life). Alfred must have learned economical ways at home and frugal habits stayed with him throughout his life. A constant theme throughout his personal and public life is thrift; the town's ratepayers had good cause to appreciate his oversight of the council's affairs with his concern for frugality and economy. Alfred's concern for value for money is obvious throughout his life. On thanking a speaker for a talk about Cornwall at a meeting of the Literary Society in 1915 he said that he hoped to have the pleasure of visiting Cornwall after the war “if the Income Tax was not too high and petrol not too dear”. He became a local property-owner in 1891 purchasing six adjacent properties in New Street for £295. This was not unusual; it was a steady investment providing a regular rental income. But he was happy to spend his own earned money for example, somewhat unusually for the time, on travel - Alfred was a keen traveller in Britain and the Continent and gave lantern-slide lectures about the countries which he visited.

Most of the information about Alfred comes from the Pocklington Weekly News and is mainly factual. But occasionally you find an item which tells you something about the man himself. It was clear from the praise heaped on him by his contemporaries when he married in 1901 that he was well thought of. The Council members on PUDC held a special meeting to present him with a clock to which the townspeople also contributed. Councillor Fred Smith referred to his kindness and courtesy. The presentation was made by Richard Massey English, local auctioneer and miller, who had known Alfred from a lad. He commented that any verdict Alfred had arrived at had never been contradicted. The newspaper report suggests that all the councillors spoke including councillor Todd who claimed to have known Alfred from childhood as most of them in this small community probably had. In reply Alfred expressed his thanks and claimed that he had always striven to make things run smoothly. Although one must always treat comments on such occasions with some circumspection, clearly Alfred was valued and respected as a thoughtful, thorough and effective solicitor and organiser. Twenty years after setting up as a solicitor, Alfred

had become a leading member of the community valued for his ability to get things done, his legal skills and knowledge, his attention to economy and the ease with which he got on with people.

On 17 July 1901 aged 39 years Alfred married 35 year-old Mary Alice Gillah the second daughter of Henry Quarton Gillah, a landowner, farmer and cattle dealer of Wilberfoss. The Gillahs were referred to in the Weekly News as “an esteemed family”.



Wilberfoss Church

The “fashionable wedding” which took place at the bride’s church, St John the Baptist in Wilberfoss, was a lavish occasion. The church was full and the weather was glorious. The pathway to the church was covered with crimson carpet and lined with a welcoming crowd of well-wishers. The bride wore a cream dress, carried a bouquet of orange blossom and wore a turquoise and diamond ring.

The happy couple received over 130 wedding presents which were displayed at the reception in the Gillah family home. The gifts included a piano from Alfred’s sister and “a massive black marble table” from George Crombie with whom Alfred trained to be a solicitor in York 20 years earlier. The couple travelled to Scotland for their honeymoon. Alfred’s success in his professional life and his good marriage must have brought pleasure to his father, Dawson, whose own ambition and success in business had given his son the opportunity for professional and social

advancement. Alfred had seized the opportunities which his education opened up for him and was well on the way to doing better than his father had done. Just a few months after Alfred and Mary took up residence at Wilberforce House Dawson Summerson died. (28 December 1901)

If Dawson required any more evidence of his son’s success in life then this was the home of the newly-weds. Alfred and Mary were to spend their married life at Wilberforce House, one of the finest residences in the town. Wilberforce House was built by Thomas Grant about 1867, for the Pocklington grocer John Coverdale. Interestingly, young Alfred would no doubt as a 7/8 year old been mightily impressed to witness the erection of this house in the 1860s. Following the death of John Coverdale in 1900, his niece and heir Mary Empson rented Wilberforce House to Alfred Summerson for £30 per year with the option of purchase when she died. And on Mary’s death in 1908 Alfred bought the property for £1000. The double-fronted 4 bed roomed property stood in 1.5 acres including an orchard, glasshouses and 2 large vineries. Built with white stock bricks, its striking feature is its lantern light in the roof. The acquisition of this property, one of the outstanding domestic properties in the town, is testimony to Alfred’s hard work and accumulation of wealth over 20 years. Living at home and remaining single for so long had brought its reward. He was to remain at Wilberforce House during his remaining years in the town living comfortably but modestly and, as we shall see, indulging his passion for plants and gardening.

In the months leading up to his marriage Alfred organised the decoration and furnishing of Wilberforce House. His surviving notebook, correspondence and photographs give us some insight into the kind of man he was. We have been fortunate that one of Alfred’s grand-daughters returned these items to the town some years ago and I very much appreciate being able to consult them in preparing this presentation. Alfred’s life so far had clearly not given him the opportunity for home-making and his lack of experience and caution show through. As does his concern for value for money. These records show Alfred planning the furnishings and decoration for the new home and looking for reassurance about them and at the same time applying his lawyer’s



Wilberforce House in Pocklington

forensic eye in working through in meticulous detail the selection of wallpapers and paint and items of furniture for each room. This exercise produced two lists, the second a cheaper version of the first. Frugality was always close to Alfred's heart. His aim was to create a "comfortable and home-like" residence. So, for example, he insisted on maintaining two old-fashioned fire grates but a concession to modernity was the replacement of the hearthstones with tiles. To get some free advice Alfred consulted a magazine called "Hearth and Home", this sort of magazine which was popular at the time with upwardly mobile folk like Alfred who aspired to be fashionable on a budget. Alfred wrote a four-sided letter together with a list of preferred wallpapers and paints to Mrs. Talbot Coke, part owner of the magazine and one of the leading female journalists of the age, seeking constructive comments on his plans. A contemporary wrote ( in Pearson's Magazine in 1896 ) that Mrs Coke's aim was to provide decorative advice for people who desired "pretty rooms and harmonious surroundings". Through the pages of her magazine she replied to his letter with warning and some reassurance and recommendations.

She obviously thought that his questions were over-detailed with the lawyer's need to have all avenues covered; in a personal reply to Alfred she insisted, "I have given as long an answer as I possible could but one cannot go into every little detail as I would never get through". She doesn't seem to have had a high opinion of his colour sense. Her sharpest criticism came at the start of her two-sided reply; "I am not much enamoured of some of the wallpapers you have chosen and fear you will find the hall one a very startling welcome when hung. It will also make the hall look narrower". Unfortunately we do not know whether Mrs Coke's advice was acted upon. Nor do we know how the conflict between quality and value played out in terms of the final choices - List 1 or 2? Even more intriguing, we do not know what his fiancée Mary's contribution was to the house planning. Alfred's letter to Mrs Coke was written in the first person but in one sentence he did reveal that "they" would shortly be visiting London to choose furniture. Would Alfred be accompanied by his fiancée or his sister?

By August 1914 Alfred could look back on the

establishment over more than thirty years of a successful solicitor practice; he was also approaching his 20<sup>th</sup> year as clerk to the UDC, enjoying his first year as a magistrate, was happily married and watching his twelve year old daughter and only child, Katherine, move on to secondary education at the Mount School in York. He was a well-known and leading figure in the business and charitable life of the town with his tarbrush moustache and (at that time) his dark-rimmed spectacles. And he appeared to be respected by his contemporaries. But what do we know about his opinions and beliefs? He certainly enjoyed the cut and thrust of debate. He was a prominent and active member of the Literary and Philosophical Society set up in 1888 by Dr. Trotter initially to discuss matters concerning the welfare and destiny of mankind. (by the end of the century Alfred was its president and he continued to hold office within the Society until it folded in 1932). And he enjoyed writing incisive letters to the Pocklington Weekly News usually about controversial issues on which he had clear and forceful opinions. Unsurprisingly education was a subject close to his heart; his opportunity at PGS had been provided for him through his father's diligence and he had seized it and become a solicitor. His ambition was to encourage young people to follow his example. He became a manager of the County School, the school which was established and run by the County Council when the Wesleyan elementary school folded in 1906 (and of course continues to this day) and he attended functions assiduously. On one occasion the Weekly News reported that Mr Summerson who "always takes the warmest interest in the children and their doings was kindly present throughout the proceedings". On another occasion when the children had entertained parents and displayed their work, he thanked the teachers and commented that " what they had seen that day showed that Education not only provided the means of earning a living but also of pleasantly and profitably employing leisure hours".

In terms of citizenship and political ideas Alfred was mainstream Liberal. He admired an open meritocratic society which offered opportunities to all its citizens for self-improvement and removed obstacles to freedom wherever

possible. In return citizens owed patriotic loyalty to King, country and Empire. Following a procession through the town on May Day (24 May 1917) to mark Empire Day Alfred made a speech to the children in which he said, “ ... the boys and girls of today will grow up to be the men and women who will be the mainstay of this glorious empire in years to come.... In order to be true citizens they must live proper lives, always speak the truth, be loyal to their king, obedient to their teachers, and then they would be fit to take their rightful place in this mighty empire in the years to come”.

As a liberal, patriotic Englishman and campaigner for equality of opportunity Alfred’s views would tune in well with contemporary opinion. The evidence suggests that Pocklington was politically Liberal although the parliamentary seat of Howdenshire was staunchly Conservative even in the Liberal landslide of 1906. But where he differed from most of the town’s leading citizens was that he did not attend any of the town’s churches. Indeed, he was hostile to all forms of organised religion and expressed vigorous opposition to church teaching in the correspondence columns of the Weekly News. What aroused his particular anger was when religious teachings were asserted as truths when they were, in his opinion, speculations. He argued that the Churches wanted the best of all worlds for God claiming credit for Him for the blessings of life but denying His responsibility for evil. He saved his most virulent condemnation for the Catholicism championed by Father McCabe. (who was a ferocious and outspoken defender of the Catholic Church and its teachings and a leading member of the local Conservative party). For example, in the Weekly News of 21 March 1914 he wrote, “ the whole history of the Catholic Church is redolent of persecution, massacres and attempts to stifle the truth; the Church fattens and battens on intolerance, ignorance and gross superstitions.” When challenged about his own philosophy of life, Alfred expressed a humanist view. He said that he was content with “the religion of co-operative human endeavour

towards the perfect life of the individual, of the township, of the state and of the whole collection of states that make up the world”. He believed that man had the capacity for endless development towards a more perfect state without the need for organised religion.

And then in 1914 the First World War broke out. Approaching 53 years of age he was much too old for military service. But from his position as a leading citizen and as Clerk to the Council Alfred was to make a significant contribution to the war effort. From the start, as a supporter of the Liberal government and as a patriot, he backed campaigns to encourage young men to volunteer. He spoke at a meeting held at the City Hall in Hull later in August 1914 in support of the appeal made by the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Nunburnholme, for young unattached men to join the armed forces. Throughout the early months of the war, before conscription, he was a recruiting officer for the Yorkshire Regiment and spoke at several rallies in the town. Together with



5th September 1914—Rally to raise money for the Prince of Wales Relief Fund

members of the UDC he was prominent in money-raising campaigns for wartime charities. We believe that this photograph was taken on 5 September 1914 at a great rally to raise money for the Prince of Wales Relief Fund - to support the wives and children of members of the armed services. Alfred made a rousing speech justifying

Britain's role in the conflict Alfred. He reassured people about the cause for which they were collecting in a very Summersonian manner - "Every half-penny that you contribute will be given to a very useful purpose, and not one penny will be squandered uselessly". ( We know that platform members included Councillors Procter and Powell, Alderman Fred Smith and AS so I guess that xxx is him). Alfred was also soon active as Hon. Sec. of Pocklington's Belgian Relief Committee established to support Belgian refugees who fled their country to avoid German occupation. The committee collected donations of cash and practical gifts to furnish the 13



Dewsberry House on the left

bedrooms of Dewsberry House ("rambling and inconvenient" but vacant!) on Union Street. The appeal to the residents of Hull through the pages of the Hull Daily Mail in November for extra beds, mattresses, blankets sheets, etc to avoid having to spend the money raised on anything other than personal care for the refugees, has all the hallmarks of careful and economical Summerson planning. He even persuaded the Liberal and Conservative agents for the constituency to arrange for the free collection and transportation of donated items. The letter to the Hull Daily Mail, almost certainly penned by the clerk, claims that "we are being strictly economical" and "our scheme is under most careful management". Twenty-one refugees eventually arrived and eight were still in the town in early 1916. Everything did not go entirely smoothly; the Committee had to deal with awkward issues such as the occasion following the shortening of drinking hours when several young Pocklington drinkers thought it was in order to barge into Dewsberry House and continue carousing there! Alfred also traded

blows through the correspondence columns of the Weekly News with the Father McCabe over the Father's apparent unwillingness to accept that not all Belgian refugees were Catholics. Father McCabe also claimed that members of the committee were bribing the refugees to attend protestant churches! Father McCabe's outbursts would only confirm Alfred in his well-known views about religion, namely; "Nothing is more beautiful in the whole of our literature than the moral teaching of Jesus but organised Christianity, as displayed in History.... has discarded these very teachings and is nothing more than an organised sham." The Belgian refugees were expected to stay a matter of weeks but in fact the last didn't leave for well over two years having been supported and sustained throughout this time by Alfred's Committee and the community's voluntary effort.

The 1914-1915 programme of his beloved Literary Society was already arranged when the war broke out and it was decided to continue. Although the decision was communicated through the pages of the local newspaper by the joint secretaries, there is a Summerson tone to the announcement. "Outside this Society most forms of what might be termed frivolous amusements will probably be considerably curtailed and the public will be glad of the opportunity of a respite such as the highly interesting, instructive and intellectual entertainments of this Society will provide to relieve the mental strain during the war". The Society attempted during these years to educate and inform about the war. "Great Earthquakes" was cancelled in March 1915 and replaced with "Strategy and tactics of the Great War". The 1915/16 programme contained several war topics including one on a post-war settlement designed to prevent conflicts in the future. Alfred is reported as saying that human nature stands in the way of achieving an idealistic solution for prevention of future wars. Lighter talks had their place including the one we have mentioned on Cornwall.

Perhaps Alfred's major contribution to the war effort was through his role as Clerk to the Council. As the effort required to win this war became clear and warfare began to affect more civilians, e.g. air-raids, rationing and conscription, so the concept of "total war" grew. Under the Defence of

the Realm Act government took greater powers for example to conscript fit citizens for war service; and the implementation of many aspects of the government's decisions was delegated to local government i.e. Pocklington Urban District Council and, of course, the UDC's decisions were implemented by its clerk. (some were the responsibility of the magistrates and since 1914 Alfred was a JP.). During the war years Alfred's workload must have increased significantly; the recruitment of additional special constables; the conduct of tribunal hearings for men appealing against conscription; the implementation of air raid regulations. All this work passed across his desk - a lot of responsibility in one man's hands. There was scarcely any aspect of the war in the town which he was not involved in. For example, in January 1917 he helped set up the town's branch of the War Savings Association. For Alfred contributing one's savings to this was both patriotic and made good financial sense - he was reported as saying "It is the very finest thing that was ever put before the public as an investment, whilst as security it had the whole of the Empire at the back of it". (15/9 became £1 after 5 years) And the extension of government interference

generated much controversy-for example, people didn't take kindly to the interference in their liberty by obeying regulations about not showing lights at night and Alfred was first in the firing line for expressing their annoyance and anger!

Two further things must be said about Alfred's role during the war. First, he (and his wife and daughter) continued their good works e.g. fund-raising for the Literary Society and York County Hospital; but now included causes related to the war such as help for the Belgian refugees and supporting the children of wounded soldiers ("our Pocklington heroes, both officers and men, who have brought a very large amount of glory and honour to the town by their many deeds of gallantry"). Second, as clerk to the council, magistrate, respected citizen and someone too old to go and fight, Alfred saw it as his duty, and he claimed pleasure, to help people who (as it was reported at a Council meeting in May 1917) "found themselves in strange and novel positions" as a result of the war. At this same meeting one of the councillors (Mr Scaife) "referred to the kind action of Mr Summerson, who, on more than one occasion had given valuable legal advice to poor bereaved people without charging a single penny.



Pocklington Urban District Council c1933



It made one feel proud of their Clerk”.

After 1918, as the flow of government war directives ceased, the pace of Alfred’s life slackened somewhat although activities abandoned during the war started up again. His beloved Literary Society resumed its programme and the Horticultural Society started up again in 1922 - always strongly supported by Alfred as an officer and exhibitor at its Shows. As one might expect he played a leading role in fund-raising for the memorial for Pocklington’s fallen. And, of course, he continued to oversee the work of the town council with his usual attention to detail and economy but now as Executive Officer rather than mere clerk. 1924 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> year of the life of PUDC. Little was it suspected that it would not complete a fourth decade. It had come into being in 1894 to replace the ineffective sanitary authority which had failed to provide adequate water and sanitary facilities for a modern town. Under the guidance of its canny clerk the Council had established a reputation for effectiveness and economy. By the late 20s the infrastructure required by a modern town had been put in place; road surfacing and maintenance, street lighting, fresh water supply and refuse disposal, fire service and slum clearance. And the town’s first council houses were being planned. This was

accomplished with rates lower than in the neighbouring Rural District and the Council’s strong financial situation left it well-placed to meet its current and future responsibilities.

So it came as a great disappointment when the County Council proposed in 1931 that the Urban District Council should merge with the Rural District Council. In the interests of efficiency and economy, the 1929 Local Government Act required County Councils to draw up plans to reduce the number of district councils and create fewer but larger units better placed to meet the challenges of local government. Pocklington was the smallest of the East Riding’s eight Urban Districts with a rateable value under £10,000. Members of the Council supported by Alfred and the other officers organised a ratepayers’ protest meeting in the Victoria Hall on 28 October 1931. The strong feelings of anger prompted by the threat to remove the town’s control over its own affairs were reflected in the huge attendance. A petition to the County Council highlighted the deep sense of injustice about a proposal which would strike at the town’s sense of corporate identity. When the petition was put to the meeting, attended by between 500 and 600, there was only one dissenting voice.



Grove House—the location of the last Urban District Council meeting in 1935

For almost three years the clerk organised and drove forward a campaign to halt de-urbanisation. It was claimed that non-residents would make decisions for Pocklington and “many persons who now take a deep interest in its development will be denied the privilege of serving on its council”. There was also a strong suspicion that rates would rise. The County Council was unable to fault the Urban District Council’s handling of the town’s affairs. It was fulfilling its responsibilities for house - and road-building and its low rates, rents and improving transport links were proving attractive to people who worked in York. The Rural District Council was equally opposed. It noted that Pocklington’s issues were not principally agricultural. It also noted, tellingly, that meetings of the Urban District Council were held in the evening as the councillors were all working men whereas the RDC held its meetings in the afternoon. “At the present time, the Rural District Council cannot visualise any important service of a representative and general nature which would be substantially expedited and benefited by the accretion of Pocklington”. Although neither UDC nor RDC could find merit in the proposal to de-urbanise Pocklington, the County Council’s proposal, backed by the need to satisfy government expectations, was pressed forward. The climax was reached in November 1933 with a 4-day Ministry of Health Public Inquiry in Beverley. Alfred Summerson’s health broke down under the strain and the town’s case was presented by Mr Butterworth, District Surveyor, and the chair of the UDC (and manager of the co-op), William Haw. In spite of a robust defence of the case for the continuation of its Council, the Inquiry sided with the County Council. On 28 March 1935, Pocklington UDC held its final meeting and the next month an enlarged Pocklington Rural District Council based at Grove House came into being. The town’s local affairs were to be run by an enhanced local council which still exists. In less than twelve months Alfred Summerson had left Pocklington.

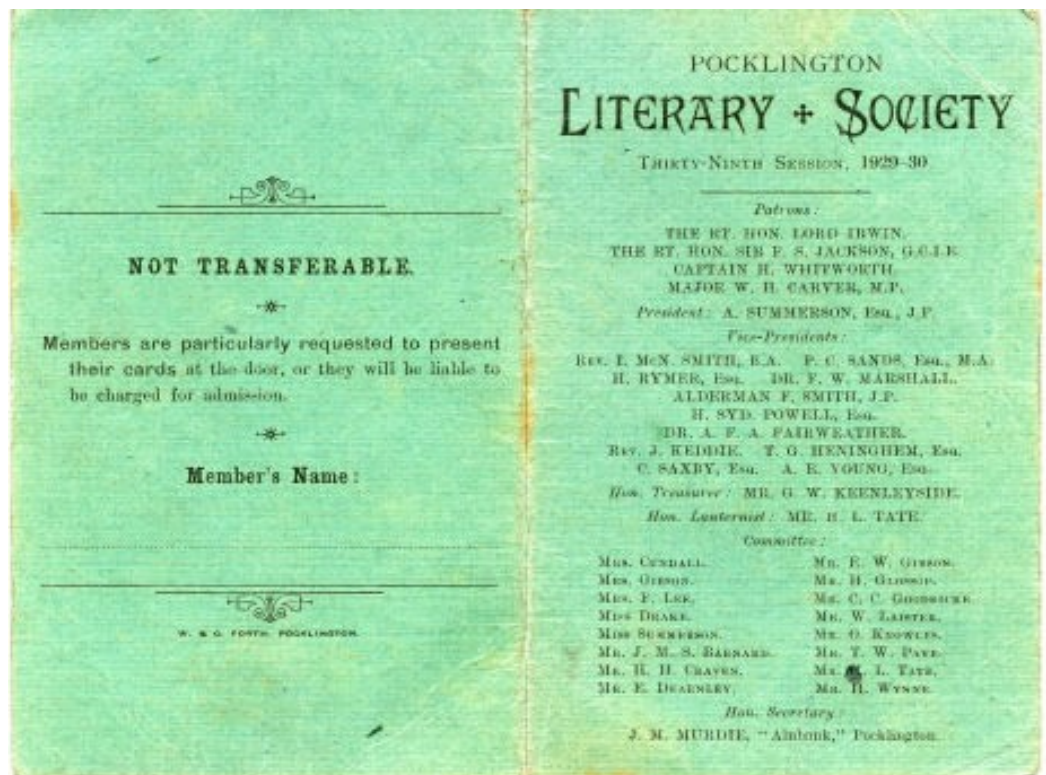
By the time he left the town in 1936 Alfred could deservedly be regarded as one of the town’s leading citizens. The foundation of his eminent position was a successful solicitor practice which he led for 45 years until he stepped down at the end of 1927 and an unrivalled record of

voluntary activity particularly in organising great events like Jubilee or Coronation celebrations. The local newspaper claimed he had been “prominently connected with every phase of public life in the town and the district for over 40 years”. Throughout its existence he guided the town’s council as it complied with the growing demands of national legislation. The disappointment he must have felt when the council was abolished is reflected in the Yorkshire Post’s comment that he “saw the authority rise from a Local Board and now witnesses its fall to the status of a parish council” (1 April 1935). A fitting tribute to his years of service was the naming of the row of the Council’s first 12 council houses in his honour.

He retired from the bench in January 1935 after dispensing justice to local small-time malefactors as a magistrate for 21 years. His colleague Mr Heninghen claimed that “he brought into the Court his wide knowledge of the law, of human nature and wide travel”. In reply Alfred outlined the three criteria which informed his approach; “to study the position of the unfortunate defendant who had to appear, not to prejudge any case and to temper justice with mercy”.

These contributions and achievements would be enough to secure Alfred’s legacy as a leading citizen. But **he** may have emphasised something else. His father had clearly laid much store on education defying the common expectation that his son should serve an apprenticeship and pursue employment in a craft like himself. Dawson employed his capital on investing in the best education then locally available - at Pocklington Grammar School - which prepared Alfred for a career in law. Alfred clearly shared his father’s respect for education and the nineteenth century value of self-improvement. Alfred repaid his debt to his former school as a governor from 1919 and chairman of the Old Pocklingtonians in the 1920s. He sponsored a prize in Declamation and Recitation (1923), in which he himself had excelled, and a Junior Athletics Cup in 1933 an area in which he certainly did not excel!. He also commissioned an oak rostrum in 1928 for the opening of the New Hall. In the town he was a Manager (governor) of the Council School where he and his daughter provided 7 annual prizes for writing and

composition. He read all the entries - often well over 100- before awarding the prizes. But undoubtedly his major contribution to the town was his championing of the Literary Society which began in the late 1880s and, apart from the later war years, provided education and entertainment for the townspeople during the winter months. The Society's programme reflected Alfred's interest in literature, politics, science and travel. Serious lectures were arranged on science and literature examples being "Science and the Invisible World" in 1924 and "Time, Space and Matter" in 1931. In 1896 an author and populariser of cutting-edge science, Richard Kerr, lectured on, and demonstrated, X-rays to a packed Odd-fellows Hall; the chairman (Alfred Summerson) "saw the bones of his hand and arm (the arm not being bared) distinctly outlined.... Mr Kerr predicted a great future for the discovery, pointing out what an invaluable aid it would no doubt become to the surgeon and the physician". Talks were given on the works of major authors such as Charles Dickens and these were balanced by more popular activities like play readings, travel talks (often given by Alfred), folk singing, concert parties and magic shows. Prominent local people debated with each other - in 1927 the Rev McNaughton Smith and Mr Heninghen, a sport-loving solicitor, argued over the motion that "gardening is better recreation than sport"; the vicar lost convincingly! The following year, as the franchise was extended to women between the ages of 21 and 30, the Society debated the provocative motion "that the encroachment of women in a man's sphere is a grave menace to society". During the 1920s the Literary Society also put on plays. In the performance of "Jane" in December 1929 the leading role was played by Alf's daughter. Frequently, a simplified version



places large enough to hold their members. So they appreciated the facilities offered by the Majestic Hall which opened in 1927 with seating for 700. But this good fortune did not last. The Victoria Hall closed its doors in 1932 and at the same time Alfred Allison decided that the Majestic Hall's commitment to host the Literary Society's fortnightly evening meeting between October and March was interfering with the running of his cinema following the boost to cinema attendance by the introduction of the talkies. No appropriate alternative venue could be found which was capable of accommodating its 416 members and so, perhaps at the height of its popularity fuelled by the opening of the lending library at

the end of 1927, the Society ceased to exist in 1932. The Pocklington Weekly News was fulsome in its appreciation of the Literary Society which "has rendered great public service in providing intellectual lectures, artistic concerts, plays and other high-class entertainments, which have been the means of intellectual improvement and broader outlook of its members who have greatly appreciated the cheapness of its high-class fare provided for their benefit".

When the Literary Society lost its meeting place in 1932 nobody stepped forward to fight for its survival and Alfred, now over 70 years old and heavily engaged in the campaign to save the UDC, probably lacked the energy to act decisively. The following year his health broke down in the struggle to keep the Urban District Council in existence. By this stage he lived alone in Wilberforce House. Sadly, his wife Mary had died in August 1922, aged just 55, from influenza and meningitis. Alfred's sister Harriet, who lived independently at Hosner Lodge in Percy Road since her father's death, died in Wilberforce House in 1929. The happy news in the family was the marriage of Alfred's only child, Katherine (or Kit as she was known in the family), in 1930 at the parish church, to Josiah Eccles. Josiah was an engineer and industrialist who was to have an eminent career in the electricity industry rising to be Deputy Chairman of the Central Electricity Authority and becoming Sir Josiah. However, this occasion was tinged with the sad knowledge that she would now move away with her husband to Edinburgh.

Alfred's professional life and his voluntary activities meant that he had many friends in the town. But Alf was always foremost a family man and he would not have been happy living alone in his mansion although we know he was much attached to its gardens and greenhouses. Several of the photographs returned by his granddaughter show the garden, vineries and greenhouses at Wilberforce House; their existence indicates the importance to Alf of plants and gardens. Alfred ceased to practise as a solicitor at the end of 1927 when he was 66. Then Kit's marriage in 1930 and departure for Edinburgh followed by the demise of the Literary Society in 1932 and the UDC in 1935 would help to make up his mind to leave the town to live with

his daughter and family at 50 Grange Road, Edinburgh. (One assumes that Katherine and Josiah were amenable to this arrangement).

So in January 1936 Alfred Summerson departed Pocklington for Edinburgh. The Pocklington News reported that AS had been "prominently connected with every phase of public life in the town and district for over 40 Years". It continued that his keen interest in literature had inspired his devotion to the Literary Society - "many illustrious travellers and lecturers addressed the Society". "In connection with the local Royal Coronation and Jubilee celebrations Mr Summerson was the pivot of successful organisation. A genial, courteous gentleman whose generous assistance to all who needed help and advice, he will be much missed by a very large circle of friends...". He did not cut the final link with his old life for another two years. There was one position which he did not relinquish in January 1936. Only at the end of 1938 did he resign as a governor of Pocklington School. Perhaps he was reluctant to break the tie which connected him with the institution which his father's hard work and determination had made it possible for him to attend and which had opened the door to his successful professional career. Had living with Katherine and her family not worked out he might have returned to Pocklington where he could resume his role as a governor of his old school.

Alfred Summerson's life and career is important at several levels. Firstly it illustrates the nature of English society at the time which sustained and renewed itself by enabling able boys from humble origins to make good and use education to rise through society's ranks. Creating a society which recognised and rewarded ability rather than privilege was fundamental to Gladstone's Liberal Party which Alfred supported. ("A career open to the talents").

Secondly, his successful long tenure as clerk to the Urban District Council and his quarter century stint as a magistrate illustrate the developing nature of British democracy. During this period local government and the local bench were gradually removed from the exclusive control of landowners and shifted

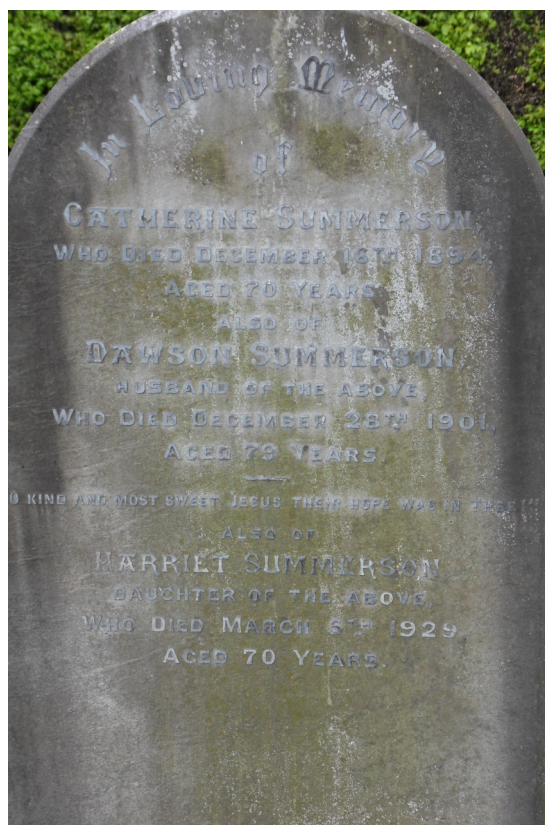
towards the business and commercial community particularly in urban areas. Before the twentieth century it is most unlikely that a landless solicitor without connections like Alfred would have been invited to join the bench.

Thirdly, his contribution to the life of the community reflects the role of local voluntary effort in an age before satisfaction of social needs was transferred to an all-embracing welfare state and satisfaction of leisure requirements fell under the domination of the mass media. During the years before the 2WW Pocklington's community was in good heart. Its population of less than 3000 supported a wide range of sporting and leisure activities and AS was associated with the Golf Club, the Rugby Club and the Horticultural Society as well as the Literary Society; all the churches had extensive programmes of youth, musical and sporting activities all underpinned by voluntary effort and time freely given; charitable effort flourished including the Red Cross and support organisations for York County Hospital. Alfred Summerson's "generous assistance to all who needed help and advice" (The Yorkshire Herald), his unstinting support for education in its widest sense and in particular his constant support for the Literary Society both set a high standard for the voluntary principle and indicated what a community could achieve through unselfish commitment to the general good. The town's generous response to the challenges of the 2WW was to reflect the approach of men like Alfred Summerson who found time in busy lives to work for the health and well-being of the community within which they lived and worked.

Alfred maintained his agnosticism until the end. His parents and sister were buried in St Catherine's churchyard at Barmby Moor but Alfred and Mary were interred in Pocklington Cemetery. The dedication to Mary was simply, "sweetest memory". For himself, "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die".



Wilberforce House—Residence of Alfred Summerson



Summerson Gravestone