

Alfred Miles – the coach building antiquarian and local politician

Alfred Miles was essentially a Victorian and Edwardian gentleman, who made a significant contribution to Cheltenham. A deeply religious and family man, he directed a coach building firm of some renown, he was heavily involved in local politics and the town's religious life and he diligently pursued the history of Cheltenham and its immediate area for at least thirty years.

Alfred Miles 1853 – 1932

Alfred's father Samuel was baptised at the Stroud Wesleyan chapel at Woodchester in 1817. He married Sarah Jane May in April 1838, when his occupation is recorded as coachmaker. Sarah Jane's family came from Winterborne, north of Bristol, where her father was in the building trade as a tiler and painter.

Alfred was born 21 July 1853, into a family of four siblings. The family moved around the south of England, working in the coach building business in Bristol, Speen, Berkshire and Salisbury, Wiltshire. By 1861 they were resident in Cheltenham. Alfred would have been around eight and he must have been educated in the town, though he does not mention at which school. He later recalled the town's lively 1865 election as *'noisy, boisterous, fighting, quarrelling, drink being poured out to any so-called voter ...'*.

Alfred himself states that he was apprenticed at the age of 10 and by 19 was *'in a very large establishment of coach builders in Long Acre, London'*. The 1871 census notes that his father, Samuel, was a light carriage maker and that Alfred was a coach maker's apprentice. Alfred claimed that the family *'had been coach builders for generations past'*, and on his return to Cheltenham he *'at once set to work to build up a business which soon had the trade of the County'*, implying that he was in business by the late 1870s. By 1881 he is listed as being at 19 Albion Street and employing four men and four boys. He was by then proud of the fact that as a coach builder of quality he claimed he was *'master of over fifty departments ... designs, draughtsman [sic] ... [of] timber, iron, steel, cloth, leather, paint and varnish ... for it was a Trade commanding Art, Taste, Talent and Fashion'*. While 'departments' seems to be a stretch of his imagination, it is certain that all these trades were used in producing coaches.

The business continued to expand, and a showroom was opened in Winchcombe Street in 1896/7. A trade card, announcing 'Carriages Built for all Parts of the World', also shows a two-storey showroom featuring several carriages. As the use of cars grew, so the demise of carriages was inevitable: *'coach building has departed in peace'*, to quote Miles. By 1919 the firm was being managed by Felix, Alfred's son, and the business turned to the building, maintaining and hiring of cars. They later expanded into commercial vehicles, including fire engines. The premises continued to expand with a manufacturing unit in Kingsditch. In 1959 the firm was bought out by Hawker Siddeley and moved to Staverton.

Apart from building up and then expanding a fine business, he spent 50 years working in local politics: he was on the Education Committee of the County Council; a Borough Councillor for the Central Ward, Cheltenham and was active on the Borough Library and Museum Committee. He was a passionate Wesleyan for 70 years, with an open-minded attitude to all religious faiths. He was a dedicated supporter of the royal family, proud of his nation and the part they played overseas, and of the role played by his son, Samuel, in the Boer War.

Alfred probably began his retreat from active management in the late 1910s, before retiring in 1925, when he embarked on a second career as an antiquarian. Alfred notes that the collecting bug had started when he was ten, by which time he was in Cheltenham. His interest in the area's history must have gained a considerable grip on him, and two conversations seem to have inspired him to compile what became his ten-volume history of the area. Miles records a conversation with Canon Johnstone of All Saints church. Apparently, Canon Johnson said that Miles should write '*an account of the worthies of the town.*' Alfred initially recorded 2,000 names and considered writing a single volume. A later comment by Dr Ritson of the Bible Society that '*Cheltenham had no history as it was a new place*' appears to have annoyed Alfred and spurred him on.

Evaluation

Alfred Miles was very much a man of his time. His attitudes and the manifestations of them in his scrapbooks do not now equate to 21st century standards. Also, it must be remembered that our understanding of history has changed markedly in the last hundred years. This is especially apparent in his interpretation of pre-history, and of the 'Dark Age' and medieval periods. Some of his 'statements' are now inaccurate or misleading. Like all memories the mind can play tricks and some personal recollections can seem contradictory.

His chief aim in compiling the ten scrapbooks was to bring together in one place, as much information on the area as was available. With this end he records the same information as it appears in several primary sources, such as Atkyns (1712), Rudder (1779), Rowe (1845) and Goding (1863). This repetition enables one to compare the accounts, often presented in one scrapbook, but equally has made the cataloguing task rather tedious at times. The most valuable information for the researcher is the history Miles records from when the family came to live in the town in the 1860s to early in the 1930s.

The Miles Scrapbook Project would be pleased to hear any further information on the Miles family, or any inaccuracies in compiling the spreadsheets from the images.

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