

Edgar Gilkes: famous in Middlesbrough, anonymous in Grange over Sands

Edgar Gilkes died, aged 73, on 18th December 1894 at his home, Westholme on Fernleigh Road, Grange over Sands. He was buried in Grange cemetery where his grave is marked by a headstone with a simple inscription. There is no indication of the triumphs and tribulations of Edgar's life; his rise to become one of the ironmasters of Middlesbrough, Mayor and Alderman, or his links to the Tay Bridge disaster.

Edgar's career on Teeside. Edgar Gilkes was born on the 22nd February 1821 in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire. He was one of seven children born to Benjamin Gilbert and Marian Gilkes. After completing his schooling, he trained as an engineer with Messrs Barrel, Exall & Andrews in Reading. By 1839 he had moved to the north east of England and was an engineer with the Stockton and Darlington Railway (SDR) based at their Shildon works. Mr Gilkes' older brother Oswald also moved north and became manager at Shildon in 1840. In 1843 Edgar Gilkes was transferred, as manager, to the new SDR branch works, known as the Tees Engine works, which was established at Middlesbrough. This works focussed on the repair of SDR rolling stock. In 1844 Edgar joined with Isaac Wilson to establish the Gilkes Wilson Engineering Company and take over the Tees Engine works. Jeans (1875), in his book, 'Pioneers of the Cleveland Iron Trade' states that 'it may be said of these works that they pioneered the engineering trade of the Tees'. It was expanded to both repair and build steam locomotives; some 250 locomotives were built at the plant. The company worked closely with Robert Stephenson & Co in making the locomotives used in the North of England. They were also involved in the construction of the famous Deepdale and Beelah viaducts between Barnard Castle and Kirkby Stephen.

Edgar Gilkes' business interests grew rapidly, including both engineering works and iron furnaces, and he becomes one of the key 'ironmasters' who led the expansion of the iron industry and engineering in Middlesbrough. The company later became Hopkins and Gilkes and, at this stage had its own blast and puddling furnaces and was manufacturing a wide range of iron products including rails, pipes, and stationary and moving engines for customers across Britain and overseas.

Gilkes became an important member of Middlesbrough's commercial and social societies. He was one of the original members of the Council Board which established the Borough, became a member of the Corporation, Mayor (the tenth) in 1863, and later an alderman and borough and county magistrate. He was an important benefactor in the area, sponsoring schools, helping establish the cottage hospital and a range of other civic initiatives, and there is a street in Middlesborough named after him. Jeans, in the book referred to above, states that Mr Gilkes was 'connected more or less intimately with nearly every society, association and institution in the town'.

The Tay Bridge Disaster. In the 1870s one of Edgar's companies, Hopkins Gilkes, was involved in the construction of the ill-fated Tay Bridge, which collapsed in a storm on the 28th December 1879 as a train was crossing the bridge. All 75 people on board were lost. The bridge had been designed by Sir Thomas Bouch but was built by Hopkins Gilkes who also provided all the ironwork. The inquiry held after the disastrous collapse, identified problems with the design but also placed part of the blame for the collapse on substandard ironwork. The ruling of the inquiry had a major impact on the reputation of the Hopkins and Gilkes company. The Long Recession of the 1870s had already damaged the company and this added to the loss of reputation resulted in the company being wound up.

The Gilkes Family. Edgar had married Emma Hutchinson in 1847. They eventually had five children, four daughters and one son. In 1861 the family were living in Southfield Villas in Middlesbrough. The Villas were built in the 1850s and were a row of 10 large houses built on the edge of Middlesbrough as it then was. When built, the villas would have had splendid views towards the North York Moors. The style and size of the houses conveyed the status of the inhabitants. The family had live in servants and the children were educated at home by a governess. The family moved to Stockton in 1882 and at about this time Edgar's health began to fail and he gradually withdrew from public life. His health continued to deteriorate and in 1887 Edgar, Mrs Gilkes and their daughter Emma moved to Grange over Sands and took up residence in Westholme on Fernleigh Road. Over the last few years of his life Edgar was an invalid.

The Gilkes' oldest daughter Emily also moved to Grange and ran a small private school at Sunny Brae on Rockland Road. It is not certain when she took over the school. She was still living at the family home in in Middlesbrough 1881 but is at Sunny Brae at the time of the 1891 census. It is likely that she moved to Grange around the same time as her parents.

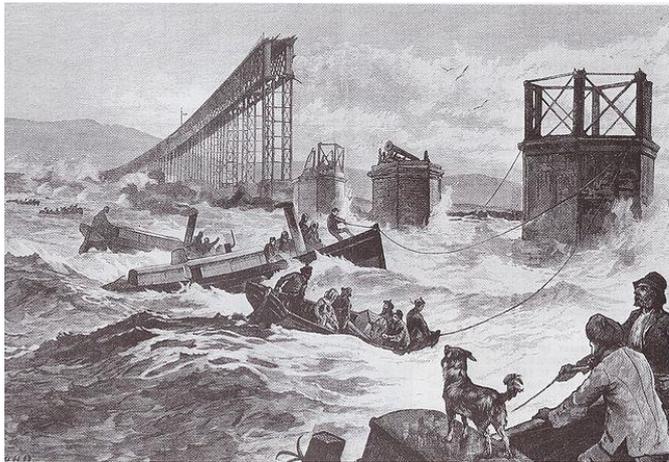
After Edgars's death in 1894, Mrs Gilkes remained at Westholme with her daughter Emma until 1902 or 1903. She then moved to Clare House with daughter Emma and remained there until her death, aged 89 in 1915. Emily Gilkes joined her mother at Clare House after leaving Sunny Brae School and she died in 1913, aged 64. Mrs Gilkes was buried with her husband Edgar in Grange cemetery and is commemorated on the headstone. Either additional text was added to the headstone at this time or a new one was put in place. The headstone also commemorates the Gilkes' son Edgar Louis who died in November 1916 in Coolgardie, Western Australia and is buried in Coolgardie cemetery. Emily Gilkes is buried in a separate grave that is located adjacent to that of her parents.

The link to Gilbert Gilkes & Company of Kendal. During the late 1850s a Gilbert Gilkes, a nephew of Edgar, was apprenticed to the Gilkes Wilson Company in Middlesbrough. Gilbert had been born in Dublin but had come to Kendal at some time and attended Stramongate School. Between 1865 and 1875 Gilbert worked as a railway engineer for Gilkes Hopkins, another of his uncles companies. In 1866 Gilbert was engineer in charge of building the iron bridge over the River Dee at Kirkcudbright. In 1881, he bought Williamson Brothers engineering company in Kendal and changed the name to Gilbert Gilkes & Company. The company purchased the water power business of James Gordon & Company in 1928 and the company became Gilbert Gilkes & Gordon Ltd.

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Edgar Gilkes 1863/64 (C/O Middlesbrough Reference Library)



A contemporary illustration of the Tay Bridge Disaster
(From Wikipedia – open access)