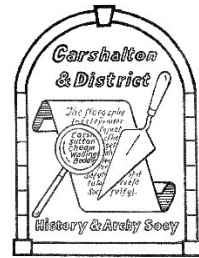


Carshalton & District History & Archaeology Society

Local History Note 10



Frank Baisley: Sutton's motor-sport pioneer

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Introduction

Following my study of *Benfleet Hall*, a large house which stood in Benhill Wood Road until its demolition in 1938,¹ I decided to study the lives of some of the volunteers who worked there when it served as the *Benfleet Hall Hospital* from 1915 to 1919. I was particularly interested in a group of staff who shared the same address – *Mulgrave House*, at the corner of Mulgrave Road.² One of them was Kathleen Baisley, whose family lived close by at *Kelso House*, in Worcester Road. To try to suggest why she might have chosen to live elsewhere, I looked at other members of her family, and came across the fascinating life of her father, Frank Cyril Baisley,³ who became the subject of this Note.

Early life and career

Frank Cyril Baisley was born in 1873 in Fenny Stratford, Buckinghamshire (now part of Milton Keynes).⁴ His father James Baisley was a hay merchant.⁵ Frank took an active part in the social life of Fenny Stratford, being a member of the local Liberal Association,⁶ presiding at a Gospel Temperance Meeting,⁷ and debating at the Mutual Improvement Society.⁸ In 1896 Frank started to work for the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company,⁹ and married Kate Marie Bowerman at St Giles', Camberwell, in December of that year,¹⁰ moving to Underhill Road, Dulwich.¹¹ In 1897 he made the first of many trips abroad, sailing on the RMS *Ophir* from Tilbury in February¹² and returning from Melbourne in July.¹³ Kathleen was born in 1898¹⁴ and her sister Gwendoline in 1900.¹⁵ Sometime between 1907 and 1909 the family moved to *Kelso House*.¹⁶ Three successive Censuses give an outline of Frank's career:

1891: Patent Agent's Clerk, Huddersfield,

1901: Patent Expert and Agent (employed),

1911: Patent Expert to Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Co. Ltd.

Frank worked for Dunlop until 1906, rising to the position of London Manager.¹⁷ In 1905, he represented the company at the Vanderbilt Cup motor race in New York State.¹⁸ The annual event had been founded in 1904 by William Kissam Vanderbilt Jr, heir to a railway fortune,

in an attempt to encourage American manufacturers to get into racing, a sport already well organised in Europe and which was yielding many improvements in motor vehicle technology. The first race took place in October 1904, consisting of 10 laps of a 30-mile circuit of public roads in Nassau County, Long Island. The course had a macadamized (crushed stone) surface, which had been oiled with 90,000 gallons of raw petroleum to lay the dust. There were numerous hazards: large sharp stones, giant holes up to five feet in diameter, and five railway crossings, where cars had to come to a halt before crossing. One nearly hit a train. There were also compulsory stops in two villages for safety reasons, and the manufacturers had repair stations at various points around the course, mainly at corners. Crowd control was a major problem. Spectators were allowed to walk across the track and were expected to jump out of the way if they saw a car coming. One instruction to spectators was "Chain your dogs, and lock up your fowls". At the end of the race, many spectators set off for home along the track before the tail-enders had finished, causing some confusion as to the race placings. The race was unpopular with local farmers; some were reported to have strewn nail and glass on the track.¹⁹ Punctures were common and the time taken to change tyres was an important factor in the race, It may have been this aspect which led Dunlop to send Frank to attend the second race in 1905, but whether to see what could be learnt from the experience, to extol the quality of Dunlop tyres, or for some other reason, I do not know. In 1906 he attended the Circuit des Ardennes Race in Belgium.²⁰

The motor-sport years

In 1907, Frank left Dunlop and became manager of The Gladiator Co. (England), which had offices in Long Acre, London WC2, and was the English agent for the Gladiator Company.²¹ He may well have maintained his connection with Dunlop, as The Gladiator Co. (England) was controlled by Harvey Du Clos, M.P., Chairman of Dunlop.²² Gladiator was a French car manufacturer, originally known as Clément-Gladiator after its founder Adolphe Clément, who also held the manufacturing rights for Dunlop tyres in France.²³ England was a major market for Gladiator: in 1902 over 800 of their production of over 1000 cars were exported there.²⁴ In that year, a bridegroom caused a stir in Sheffield by arriving for his wedding in one.²⁵ Second-hand Gladiators were being widely advertised in England by 1904.²⁶ Gladiators took part in many races and trials: the earliest that I can find was in 1903, when Dorothy Levitt's car was entered for a Glasgow to London non-stop race.²⁷ Such contests were often judged on multiple criteria, such as fuel consumption and reliability as well as sheer speed. In their advertising The Gladiator Co. played on their successes in such events, and made claims for the silent and smooth-running nature of their cars.

There followed three hectic years for Frank (1907-09), entering Gladiators in many forms of motor sport, sometimes driving himself and at other times entering a car with another driver. He was involved with the Brooklands Motor Circuit, driving a party from London to inspect the construction,²⁸ and entering a 22.4 h.p. Gladiator in the Manx Stakes at the Second Brooklands Meeting in July 1907. The race was over 29 miles and had to be

completed on one gallon of petrol. The Gladiator ran out of fuel and failed to finish.²⁹ He also entered for the annual Tourist Trophy Races³⁰ and the accompanying International Heavy Touring Car Races³¹ on the Isle of Man, Reliability Trails in Scotland³² and Ireland,³³ as well as hill-climb events such as the Aston Hill Climb in the Chilterns.³⁴ This event, also known as the Aston Clinton Hill Climb, later gave its name to the Aston Martin make, founded by Lionel Martin. It's perhaps not surprising that in 1907 Frank was fined for dangerous driving at Alconbury Weston on the A1 near Huntingdon.³⁵ Debates about the availability of garages capable of changing tyres remind me of current discussion about the provision of electric charging points. In 1907 he announced that two of the Gladiator models, the 18-24 h.p. and the 60 h.p., would be made at the Austin Motor Company works in Birmingham.³⁶ In 1909 he took part in his strangest event: an experimental military mobilisation, in which some 1000 soldiers were transported in 300 cars from Chelsea Barracks to Hastings. Frank had the role of a route marshal.³⁷ Add to these events his attendances at Motor Shows in London,³⁸ Manchester³⁹ and Edinburgh,⁴⁰ and many celebratory dinners,⁴¹ and we have a picture of a busy and popular man.

Back to Dunlop

This episode came to an end in 1909 when Gladiator was taken over by its rivals Vinot et Deguinand,⁴² who had their own agent in England, so there may have been no room for Frank in their plans. It may also be significant that his son John was born in October 1909,⁴³ and that all three of his children were baptised at St Nicholas, Sutton, in May 1910.⁴⁴ Domestic pressure may have contributed to his decision.

Frank went back to work for Dunlop,⁴⁵ and in 1916 he became a Director of Dunlop's newly-built D.R. Cotton Mills, usually known as Castleton Mill, Rochdale, which made canvas for their tyres.⁴⁶ It was extended in 1919,⁴⁷ and at its peak employed over 3000 workers.⁴⁸ He worked there until at least 1918 (when he was joint managing director).⁴⁹ In 1917 the Dunlop Rubber Company opened their new factory, Fort Dunlop, in Erdington, a suburb of Birmingham.⁵⁰ In 1918 Frank announced a new endowment (i.e. pension) scheme for Dunlop employees,⁵¹ and explained it and their existing education scheme. He seems to have been transferred to Fort Dunlop in 1919, because in that year he and Kate Marie announced the engagement of their daughter Kathleen to Captain James Joseph Horgan-Gaul from *Four Oaks House*, Four Oaks (a very affluent village, close to Erdington).⁵² Kate Marie died in Birkdale (a few miles north of Liverpool) late in 1922.⁵³ In September 1924 Frank married Florence Law, who was younger than his daughter Kathleen, at St Alban's, Rochdale.⁵⁴ She had lived in Castleton all her life,⁵⁵ and may well have worked at the Mill. Was this an example of the boss marrying his secretary? He died less than eight months later in Erdington.⁵⁶ Florence remarried in 1926.⁵⁷

Frank was a much-travelled man. He made at least three trips to the USA: in 1905 (see above), in 1916 (the last time I can find him recorded as returning to *Kelso House*),⁵⁸ and in 1919, travelling on SS *Rotterdam*.⁵⁹ He may also have gone there in 1914, when he was

curiously listed as 'American visitor to London'.⁶⁰ There were also trips to Australia in 1897 (see above) and to India in 1912,⁶¹ and there may have been more trips that I have missed. I wonder if all this travelling on behalf of Dunlop contributed to his early death.

¹ Clive Orton, *Family home, Hospital, School; the Story of Benhill House (later Benfleet Hall) in Sutton*. CADHAS Local History Note 9, 2020.

² A Note on the staff who shared this house is in preparation.

³ 1911 Census.

⁴ 1881 Census; England and Wales Birth Registration Index, 1837-1915.

⁵ 1881 Census.

⁶ *Buckingham Advertiser & Free Press*, 3 Mar 1894, p.5.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.8.

⁸ *Buckingham Advertiser & Free Press*, 3 Nov 1894, p.8; *ibid*. 14 Mar 1896, p.8.

⁹ www.gracesguide.co.uk/F._C._Baisley,

¹⁰ London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1932.

¹¹ London, England, City Directories, 1736-1943; 1901 Census.

¹² *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 6 Feb 1897, p.28.

¹³ *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 5 Jul 1897, p.24.

¹⁴ Sutton, Surrey, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1915.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ *Cambridge Independent Press*, 12 Jul 1907, p.7; London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1965; Sutton, Surrey, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1915.

¹⁷ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 9 Jan 1907, p.4.

¹⁸ *The Referee*, 8 Oct 1905, p.10.

¹⁹ Details of this event are taken from firstsuperspeedway.com/sites/default/files/Vanderbilt_Cup_Races.pdf.

²⁰ *Morning Post*, 17 Aug 1906, p.3.

²¹ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 9 Jan 1907, p.4; *Northern Whig*, 9 Jan 1907, p.10.

²² *The Bystander*, 6 Mar 1907, p.56.

²³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gladiator_Cycle_Company.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 4 Dec 1902, p.3.

²⁶ For example, see *Eastern Daily Press*, 29 Aug 1904, p.4; 9 Sep 1904, p.4.

²⁷ *Belfast News-letter*, 15 May 1903, p.7.

²⁸ *The Referee*, 17 Feb 1907, p.10.

²⁹ *Globe*, 13 Jul 1907, p.9; 17 Jul 1907, p.8; 19 Jul 1907, p.4; *The Scotsman*, 22 Jul 1907, p.5.

³⁰ *Morning Post*, 29 Sep 1906, p.3; *Belfast News-letter*, 2 Mar 1907, p.3; *Sheffield Telegraph*, 30 Sep 1908, p.5.

³¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 May 1907, p.9; *Morning Post*, 31 May 1907, p.5.

³² *The Bystander*, 3 Jul 1907, p.37.

³³ *Waterford Standard*, 16 May 1908, p.7; *Sporting Times*, 12 Jun 1909, p.11; *Northern Whig*, 9 Jun 1909, p.3.

³⁴ *Sporting Times*, 31 Jul 1909, p.9.

³⁵ *Cambridge Independent Press*, 12 Jul 1907, p.7.

³⁶ *Globe*, 25 Oct 1907, p.8; *Morning Post*, 5 Nov 1907, p.3.

³⁷ *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 20 Mar 1909, p.9.

³⁸ *Morning Post*, 18 Nov 1905, p.5; 22 Nov 1906, p.5; *Daily Telegraph & Courier (London)*, 12 Nov 1907, p.5.

³⁹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 10 Feb 1908, p.11.

⁴⁰ *The Referee*, 24 Feb 1907, p.12.

⁴¹ For example, *Daily Telegraph & Courier (London)*, 7 Jan 1908, p.6.

⁴² *Op cit*. note 23.

⁴³ Sutton, Surrey, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1915.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ 1911 Census.

⁴⁶ *Rochdale Times*, 20 Sep 1916, p.4.

⁴⁷ *Rochdale Times*, 5 Mar 1919, p.3.

⁴⁸ www.gracesguides.co.uk/Dunlop_Rubber_Co.

⁴⁹ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 7 Sep 1918, p.5; *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 28 Sep 1918, p.24; *The Sphere*, 26 Oct 1918, p.22.

⁵⁰ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Dunlop; gracesguides.co.uk/Dunlop_Rubber_Co.

⁵¹ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 7 Sep 1918, p.5; *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 28 Sep 1918, p.24; *The Sphere*, 26 Oct 1918, p.22

⁵² *The Tatler*, 6 Aug 1919, p.38.

⁵³ England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995.

⁵⁴ Manchester, England, Church of England, Marriages and Banns, 1754-1930.

⁵⁵ England and Wales Birth Registration Index, 1837-1915; 1901 Census; 1911 Census.

⁵⁶ England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995.

⁵⁷ FreeBMD.

⁵⁸ UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960.

⁵⁹ UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890-1960.

⁶⁰ *American Register*, 15 Mar 1914, p.11.

⁶¹ *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 11 Jan 1913, p.29.