

Part One

George White's Work and Life

Early life

George White, bank clerk and educated and cultivated man, had unlikely origins. His family were long-standing yeoman farmers in the Tolleshunt D'Arcy^[1] area of east Essex; it was here that George was born in 1817, the second son in a family of three boys and a girl. It was scarcely the place to give good grounding in languages and literature, classics and painting, and not least merchant banking in all of which George came to excel.

George's father, William, worked Skinner's Wick Farm where the family enjoyed modest prosperity and had strong local connections.^[2] He inherited significant sums from both his grandfather^[3] and his father^[4] and the family home, Skinner's Wick Farmhouse was both handsome and substantial.^[5]

William was twice married. His first wife, Jane, died very young in 1811 leaving two children, Emma and Charles.^[6] Two years later he married Susan Cawston, aged 32, of Mundon Hall,^[7] and they had four children. George Henry was the third and his siblings were William (later also known as Williams), born 1814, Elizabeth, born in the following year, and Richard, born in 1820. Susan turns out to be a woman of interest whose actions fundamentally determined George's future.

Things appear to have gone reasonably well for William and Susan; they raised £1,600 through land sales^[8] while Susan inherited a sixth share in her father's estate.^[9] All this suggests their close integration into the social and economic life of their part of Essex so it is utterly perplexing to find Susan and three of her children living in Peckham, London, by 1834. We know this because in that year George entered the employment of Baring Brothers, the City of London merchant bank. Essex yeoman farming had been swapped for City finance. By 1839 Susan was living at 1 Westmoreland (sic) Place, Camberwell, while the 1841 Census shows that George and two of his three siblings – Elizabeth and Richard

– were with her.^[10] Taking up residence in this rapidly developing middle class district of small, detached villas interposed with short terraces indicates that the Whites were not poor although certainly not rich.^[11]

By 1844 George's income tax returns reveal a new family home at 15 Hanover Street, Peckham, in the open fields and market gardens of a still substantially undeveloped, green, healthy and uncrowded suburb. It accommodated the White household for only a few years; sometime between 1848 and 1850 they moved around the corner to 1 Lyndhurst Road^[12] and at least by 1859 George and Elizabeth were further away at Clapham Park, where they remained until 1876.^[13] There they rented Langford Lodge.^[14] These moves reflected George's rising salary and took place despite a shrinking household. Susan had died in Hanover Street in 1847, aged 68, and Richard had moved out on marriage in 1852.^[15] Only George and Elizabeth remained.

This account of the White family is notable for the absence in it of two key members, George's father, William, and his older brother, also William. There is no evidence that the father – who may well have died in 1828 – moved with his family to London. In 1839 his wife, Susan, referred to herself formally in an insurance policy as a widow.^[16]

Brother William also left Essex for London but went his own way; by 1841 he had settled into the wholesale shirt trade in which he spent his career and prospered.^[17] Curiously, in 1851 he employed a 25 year old, Ipswich-born warehouseman by the name of 'George Henry White'.^[18] By 1861 he with his wife were living just off a fashionable Islington square^[19] and by 1874 they were at Sandown, Isle of Wight, where he died that year.^[20] His estate valued at 'under £10,000' indicates the achievement of significant prosperity but its administration suggests a rift with his brother, George; while brother Richard was to act as an executor (although replaced in 1874 on account of poor health) and receive £100 and while sister Elizabeth received £500, the will makes no mention whatsoever of George.^[21]



Off St Thomas, Virgin Islands, 18 February 1862 (DR11.99)

What happened to George's father, William, and why did he not lead – or follow – his family to London? It seems that he died in the Essex village of Stock in February 1828^[22] but why was he then resident there and was his family with him?^[23] Was his move caused by business failure or family disgrace? There is no evidence in the *London Gazette* that he became bankrupt^[24] and there is nothing to suggest disgrace but this evidence would be hard to find. And what happened to his two children – Emma and Charles William – by his first marriage? Little is known about Emma although she was still alive and unmarried in 1863. Charles, who died in that year, became a Royal Navy surgeon and may in the early 1860s have been supported financially by George – despite leaving an estate of around £2,000.^[25]

For whatever reason, the urge for Susan to exchange Essex for the relative anonymity of London seemed strong. And in bringing her children to this alien world she presented them with opportunities unimaginable in rural Essex. That she did this and that her children were able to grasp these opportunities is surely testament to a woman of remarkable courage and ambition.

Clerk at Barings

The White family's gradual but sure move to more commodious London residences reflected its upward mobility achieved through the inevitable, but inevitably slow, rise of George through the formal hierarchy of Baring clerks. Here promotion and years of service were inexorably linked – though as his contribution broadened and deepened, he was to burst through this ceiling.

Barings were based at 8 Bishopsgate and were already one of the mightiest pillars of the City of London's establishment. In the 1830s one of its partners reckoned it the most powerful financial house in the world, a greatness that was traced to the eighteenth and very early nineteenth centuries and to transactions such as the finance of the United States's purchase of the Territory of Louisiana from France in 1803. In 1817, on completion of another major financial operation for the French government, the Duc de Richelieu, its first minister, dubbed the firm the sixth great power in Europe. Subsequently the Rothschilds were to nudge Barings from this perch, something aided by the then senior partner's distraction from business to politics and society. But the arrival of two new partners in the late 1820s – Joshua Bates and Tom Baring – stopped the rot and placed the firm once more in the ascendancy.

Barings' business, broadly described, was formed of two parts. The best known was the issue of bonds in London for governments – soon to be joined by railway companies and municipalities – located around the world. The less known was the financing of the

international trade of merchants through the acceptance of their bills of exchange or through the making of loans to them. In all respects it was a very exclusive business. Entry into the ranks of its clerks was not easily achieved.

Given this exclusivity, it is simply not known how George White was able to cross the threshold of Barings' offices; on the surface his progression from a remote Essex farmhouse to a cosmopolitan and metropolitan banking hall seems unlikely if not impossible. For its part, Barings was well able to pick and choose from the candidates who presented themselves. In choosing their people, the firm's partners were attracted to those with the right sort of background and in possession of recommendation from the right sort of person. George surely had little to offer on either front; it seems that he travelled on merit alone.

And in the early 1830s, at the time of George's arrival, talent was much in demand as Bates and Baring set about turning around Barings' ailing fortunes. Clerks with aptitude and knowledge would surely be vital in this process and George would not be a disappointment. He was to prove himself to be very bright indeed, to the extent that he not only went to the very top in the hierarchy of clerks but came to straddle that undefined territory between the work of partner and the work of clerk. In this he was aided by his innate conviviality. David Robertson, leader of the Mexican bondholders and a very difficult man, found him in 1862 'so very modest and unassuming' and in 1872 expressed his 'so high opinion and sincere regard' for him.^[26] Major Ferdinand White, a Barings' emissary whom George accompanied to Buenos Aires in 1852, told the Baring partners of 'my admiration of his estimable character and talents'.^[27] In the context of Victorian propriety, this was high praise indeed.

What qualifications did George bring to his job at Barings? The answer to this is yet another mystery; no record exists as to the place or nature of his formal education. It may, of course, have taken place in London but it is quite possible that it was in Essex where the White family had access to a good school and had already made use of it. This was Maldon Grammar School, some seven miles from Tolleshunt D'Arcy, and attended in the 1810s by George's uncle, Edward White. Two of Edward's copybooks have survived and the worked examples contained in them give insight into the quality of mercantile education then available in that part of the Essex countryside. 'If 140 braces at Venice are equal to 156 braces at Leghorn and 7 braces at Leghorn equal to 4 ells English', ran one of the exercises, 'how many braces at Venice are equal to 16 ells English?'. Another, more to the point but requiring equal dexterity, went – 'If 30lbs at London make 28 at Amsterdam, how many lbs at London will be equal to 350 at Amsterdam'. This was the stuff of a merchant's training.^[28]



Unidentified buildings believed to be in Mexico (DR11.88)



Shipping at the port of Veracruz (DR11.85)

The Letters

Off St Thomas. 18 February 1862

We have arrived this far safely, after a pleasant passage, and without any remarkable incident. General Almonte (Mexican) is amongst the passengers, and intends I believe to go to Vera Cruz. I have not seen much of him during the passage this far, and he has never adverted to Mexican affairs. He is supposed to be on very friendly terms with the French Emperor, and to hold moderate political views, I may see more of him when the number of passengers diminishes...

Havana. 24 February 1862

We arrived here yesterday, after a pleasant run from St Thomas.

There is not much news from Mexico; but it appears certain that the allies will proceed as soon as possible to Jalapa, and establish their quarters there, as Vera Cruz is becoming very unhealthy and several Spanish troops have had to be sent to Havana for change. It is said that there are only 7 to 800 English troops at Vera Cruz, and that they are without any means of transport.

Mr Bowden is well - I find him very intelligent, and his manners rather popular - I have no doubt he will be of essential service when anything is to be done in the way of negotiation...

Vera Cruz. 3 March 1862

We arrived here safely on the 1st Inst, and were fortunate in doing so, for on the following day a strong north wind set in which had cut off all communication with the vessels lying off this coast.

The English, French, and Spanish Ministers are here at present, but are preparing to go up very shortly to Orizava in consequence of an agreement entered into with the existing Mexican government, by which the forces of the allies are to occupy certain places in the interior, whilst negotiations are carried on at Orizava. I enclose a translation of the agreement referred to, which is regarded here as a very favorable arrangement, although it is said that the foreign residents in Mexico are extremely dissatisfied with it. In consequence of this

agreement the Mexican flag has been hoisted on the fort and in the city, although these will still be held by the allied forces; and the Custom House will be restored to the Mexican authorities, but with intervenors to receive the proportion of duties belonging to the foreign creditors.

I have not been long enough to learn much, or to form any opinion as to the prospects of the bondholders' claims; but one thing is certain, that the country is entirely exhausted by the long state of anarchy under which it had been labouring, that business is almost wholly suspended, and the government without resources. It must therefore be a work of time to bring back the finances to a healthy state, but if a strong government can once be established, and maintained by foreign aid, there is every reason to hope for a better state of things, and for the eventual settlement of the heavy claims which will have to be adjusted.

I understand that the negotiations are to commence at Orizaba [sic] on the 15th April. After learning what I can here, I shall go to Orizava, and if practicable visit Mexico [City], and return to the former place in time for the conferences.

Private

Vera Cruz. 3 March 1862

I have written a separate letter containing all the information I have been able to gather respecting the present position of Mexican affairs...

... General Almonte and General Haro y Tamariz... have both spoken freely about Mexican affairs, during the last few days of the voyage, and are entirely in favor of intervention, being persuaded that nothing but a powerful government with foreign support can effectually remedy the disordered state of affairs. They consider that a radical change of the system is required, that a federal government is an absurdity in a country where the mass of the people are utterly ignorant and uneducated, that the frequent elections of presidents and governors afford plausible pretexts for revolutions, and that a wholesome despotism would be the best possible thing for the country. General Almonte is supposed to have come at the instance of the Emperor of the French in connection with the scheme of establishing a monarchy in Mexico;

I cannot judge if their [sic] is any foundation for the surmise, but the general is certainly in favor of having a king, only he thinks the plan must come from the Mexicans themselves, and not be thrust upon them by foreigners.

I saw Sir Charles Wyke yesterday, and I have no doubt he is very glad that the committee is dissolved, and that he will be relieved from a very voluminous correspondence. He thinks the rejection of his treaty very unfortunate for the bondholders, as it would have placed the Decree of 14 Oct 1850, which is their main reliance, under a British convention, besides securing the payment of the legation robbery. He also considers the triple alliance unfortunate for their claims, and as likely to increase the difficulty of coming to a settlement. The French claims will be enormous, and there appears to be a disposition on the part of their representative to press their admission without being properly investigated and substantiated. The Spanish claims are also expected to be very large, and English claims are springing up every where like mushrooms. The English claimants in Mexico are very hostile to the bondholders, and will do everything they can to obtain precedence over them. Sir C Wyke considers the arrangement by which the allied forces are permitted to go into the interior, and the intervention is received as a friendly measure, to be highly satisfactory. The hatred to the Spaniards was so great that he feels persuaded the whole country would have risen to oppose their hostile entry, and that a force of 80000 men would have been necessary to occupy the capital and keep open their communications with Vera Cruz; in other words they must have conquered the country. The present government of Mexico he thinks may prove more efficient than might be supposed. The President Juárez is not a man of much standing or influence, but General Doblado who is virtually the moving power, is a man of energy and determination, and knows how to deal with his countrymen... .

This morning I called on Mr Giffard, the Consul, who is also of opinion that the admission by the Mexicans of a friendly intervention is a very satisfactory circumstance; and he believes that if a strong government can once be established, the country will speedily right itself. The Mexican population, he says, may be divided into two classes, those who rob, and those who are robbed, and the latter will be thankful for anything which will remedy the evils under which they suffer... .

The British troops, amounting in all to about 800, were to have marched to Orizaba [sic] today, but the packet has brought out fresh instructions and the order is countermanded, to their great annoyance. Only the French and Spanish troops are to go into the interior. The English troops have suffered a good deal from dysentery, and the Spaniards from fever, and the weather had been unusually hot with very few north winds... .

Mr Bowden and myself received every possible attention from the captains of the steamers.

Vera Cruz. 7 March 1862

I send this letter by way of Havana, as there is a probability of its reaching you earlier than the correspondence by the next monthly mail... .

Sir C Wyke started this morning for Orizava, and I shall go there, with Mr Bowden, as soon as a conveyance can be procured, but the French troops came very ill provided with means of transport and every cart, diligence, and horse or mule, has been employed in their service.

This Custom House has not been delivered over yet to the Mexican authorities, but Sir C Wyke has given the government notice that it will be, provided the tax on foreign capital of 2½ pct is repealed, (not 1 pct as I said in my letter of the 3rd Inst), and intervenors admitted, to be paid by the Mexican government... .

At the present time Vera Cruz is the only port which contributes anything to the Mexican government or its creditors, all the other states although nominally part of the federation, are in fact independent factions and their respective governors do what they please with the revenues. Vera Cruz is the natural channel for the chief part of the Gulf trade, but the high rates of duties and the facilities for smuggling at various petty custom houses along the coast, divert a great deal of business from its legitimate channel, and will do so until there is a government capable of checking the evil.

General Almonte is much disconcerted at the turn which events have taken. He does not believe that the existing government is acting in good faith, but only to gain time; and is persuaded that forcible interference and occupation will be necessary at last. On the other hand it is contended that in the face of the larger force now in Mexico, the government dare not trifle with the allies, and must see that their only chance of continuing in power is to conciliate them and make the best terms they can... .

Commodore Dunlop is staying with Mr Price, of the firm of Graham Greaves & Co, who very kindly invited me and Mr Bowden to take up our quarters in his house, and has spared us all the dirt and discomfort of a Vera Cruz hotel even if we could have got accommodation in one, which is very doubtful. The commodore understands Mexican matters thoroughly, and I think will make a good commissioner.

Private

Orizava. 20 March 1862

I left Vera Cruz on 13th Inst and arrived safely at this place in three days. It is now currently reported in Mexico that the conferences are to be adjourned to Puebla, but neither Sir Charles Wyke nor General Prim have had any intimation from the Mexican government to that effect... .