

Gillian's Family Background

Author's note

Gillian's [memoir](#) "An Oxfordshire Childhood" written over the course of several years and including input from her sister Pat, gives a vivid picture of what life was like for the two girls growing up in the 1930s and early '40's. The biographical and genealogical notes provided below provide additional background on the lives of her parents and her stepfather Conan Aske. George Mackie, (mackie.geo_at_gmail.com). October 2013, <https://sites.google.com/view/mackiefamily/home>

Gillian's parents and stepfather

Roland Faulkner (b. July 22, 1896), known as "Ronnie", was the son of Bennett Wilkins Faulkner, a grocer's assistant at the time, and his wife Ada Maria¹. He went to Magdalen College School in Oxford. He was clever and won a national competition for an essay he wrote, and then a scholarship to read English at Oxford (Pembroke College) in 1913 but in 1914 he joined up in the Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment and was commissioned as 2nd Lieut on Sept 5, 1915. He served on the Western Front earning the Military Cross "for conspicuous gallantry and ability in action. When the C.O. was wounded, he handed over command to 2nd Lt Faulkner, who set a fine example of cheeriness, coolness and resource at a critical time. He was himself wounded next day". He was promoted to Captain in September 1917. After the war (May, 1919) he was seconded for service with the Indian Army as a Captain in the 6th Gurkha Rifles. Over 6ft



¹ Bennett Wilkins Faulkner was born in about 1863 in Paulerspury, Northants. George Hamber has traced the Paulerspury Faulknors back through Bennett's father George (b. 1836/7) to his grandfather John (b. 1813), both farm labourers. At the age of 18 Bennett was a Grocer's Porter in Towcester. In 1891 he was living in a house in Headington and four years later (1895) he married Ada Maria Canter there. Ada was born in Dorking, Surrey in 1871, daughter of Andrew J. Canter (b.1842/3) and his wife Alice (b.1845/6). Andrew was a carpenter and eventually builder, with 7 men and an apprentice in his employ according to the 1881 census. George Hamber has traced the Canter line back to Andrew's father John (b.1789/90), a baker by trade and his wife Jane. In 1891, the twenty year old Ada was working as a book-keeper and living with her aunt Elizabeth and her husband Thomas Higgs, a farmer, in Marston, Oxfordshire. A year after their marriage in 1895, Bennett and Ada celebrated the birth of their son Roland (b 1896) followed by daughters Gladys (1899) and Olive (1906). In 1901 Bennett was listed as "shopkeeper, grocer" living at 24 Southfield Rd, Oxford and this remained the family home until Ada's death in 1951. In 1911 the household consisted of Bennett (48), Ada (40), Roland (14), Gladys (11), Olive (5) and Susannah Wilkins Faulkner (79), Bennett's elderly mother. Bennett died on June 7 1937 at the Radcliffe Infirmary, aged 74. Ada lived on until 1951. Named in her will at probate were Frederick Thomas Burton (Olive's husband) and George Mallett (husband of Gladys), but she also gave Gilli and Patsy £500 each.

tall he must have seemed a giant to the small but tough little men under his command. On leave in England in March 1923 he married Vera Rowbotham, who was then still only 18, at Iffley. Ronnie had known her brother Lad (George Vallance Rowbotham) in their school days.²

Vera was born on October 2nd 1904. She claimed she was born in the year that Iffley Mill burned down, but that happened four years later in 1908 according to the Iffley Historical Society. She went to school at the City of Oxford High School for Girls. She was especially gifted in art, but also played the piano (given her by Lad) and was working toward the LRAM when she got married.



After her marriage to Ronnie, Vera planned to join him in India and had a trunk all packed with her things to take with her, but Ronnie was out of the army and back in England before this could happen. The circumstances of his sudden departure have always been mysterious though it was evident that he had returned under something of a cloud (see Gillian's memoir, *A Childhood in Iffley*). Uncle Lad may have wished to protect Gilli and her family from knowledge of what had happened when he told Richard Mackie that it was something to do with him becoming redundant. The truth began to emerge when George Hamber discovered an entry in the London Gazette, issue 32926 published on the 11th April 1924. "Capt. Roland Faulkner, M.C., 3rd Bn., 19th Hyderabad Regt., is dismissed the Service, by sentence of a General Court Martial, with effect from 15th Jan. 1924." Gillian and I have since written to the Army Personnel Centre in Glasgow and have obtained the

paperwork dealing with the court martial and it appears that Ronnie when drunk "caused two prostitutes to be brought from the bazaar to the Officer's mess." The offence was considered serious enough to warrant his dismissal from the service but not so serious as to justify his deprivation of his Military Cross, awarded in 1916 "for conspicuous gallantry and ability in action", as the official report noted. The salient point here is not that he consorted with Indian women (he was surely not the only young officer to do so) but that he brought the girls into the Officers Mess, thus exhibiting "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline". On the more serious charge of

² Lad like Ronnie distinguished himself in WW1. His citation for the MC reads: "Few battalions of the British Army could boast a finer feat of arms than the holding of the Enghien Redoubt by Captain Rowbotham, 2nd Lieutenant Cunningham, Regimental Sergeant -Major Douglas and some 150 men of D Company and Battalion Headquarters. From 10.30 a.m. till 4.30 p.m. on March 21st, 1918, these brave soldiers, enormously outnumbered and completely surrounded, stemmed the great tide of the German attack and by their devoted self-sacrifice enabled their comrades to withdraw in good order."

"behaving in a scandalous manner unbecoming the character of an officer and a gentleman" the court acquitted him.

Reference to Incoming Passenger lists shows that Ronnie was back in England on March 14 1924, only a year after his marriage to Vera. "On return" Uncle Lad wrote to Richard "he joined his father's business but never fitted very well or so I believe". The idea that his father (Bennett Faulkner) committed suicide, shamed by the disgrace Ronnie had brought on the family, can be discounted because he, Bennett, lived on for another 13 years, dying in hospital in June 1937. On his return, Ronnie went to live with Vera in Iffley, first at Court Farm House, and then at Old Nans built for them by Ronnie's father Bennett on land given them by Vera's grandfather Thomas William White. Vera had a stillborn son not long after their marriage and later a miscarriage, but their daughter Patricia was born in March 1928 and another daughter, Gillian, in May 1931. Ronnie was now comfortably settled as a married man with his talented wife, lovely daughters and (presumably) his army pension. Uncle Lad told Richard that he "had everything, nice house and all that fishing which he loved, everything".



Around 1938 they moved to 253 Woodstock Rd in Oxford as Patsy was going to Greycotes School, as Gilli also did a few years later. While at Woodstock Rd, Vera went for lessons at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford. She often made outings around Oxford to paint. Gillian remembers going for walks with her mother, who carried a big canvas bag containing a stool, an easel and painting things, and she would sit down and paint. She was first and foremost a water colourist; her work was exhibited at galleries in London and she later taught at St James School for Girls in West Malvern. In March 1960, she wrote to Gilli "the Royal Institute accepted 2 [thrice underlined] pictures but wrote a regret they could only hang one [for reasons of] space. I am delighted at this because it is the R.I.'s [Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours] own exhibition in its own gallery, 195 Piccadilly, and I feel it to be a lot higher than the other two [previous exhibits at the R.I and Royal Watercolor Society]. In fact there isn't anything higher in water colours." Not long before she died she started painting in oils and produced some very striking work. The picture on the right shows her in her studio.

Vera was an artist in everything she did, not just in painting but in the kitchen, in the garden (she was a keen gardener) and had a good eye for furniture and natural good taste, but she was sensitive and highly strung and subject to depressions and migraine headaches which made life difficult at times for her and her daughters.

Ronnie may have had a job to supplement his pension after his return from India but this is unclear. Pictures of him at this period show him as a genial, pipe smoking chap, typically with a pint of beer at hand, his dog



nearby, in a punt or a pub by a fishing river. He was an expert fly-fisherman and still holds a record for the largest pike caught in the Thames one year. Sadly however he and Vera were experiencing marital difficulties. These culminated in a major fight, traumatically witnessed by Patsy and Gilli, and Vera then took the girls back to her mother's in Iffley. The girls now had to go to school by bus. Vera worked for a while helping people who were writing their memoirs or other books, acting as note-taker and amanuensis. When Lily White died in 1940, Vera could no longer stay there and she moved to 10 Ship Street in Oxford. She had various jobs, including one as a Probation Officer, making arrangements for delinquent teenagers. She made cloth puppets that hung by strings. While at Ship Street she worked with Helen Muspratt of the firm of photographers Ramsey and Muspratt, delicately colouring black and white photos with



water colour paints. Another job was at Lincoln College repairing books, a skill she learned at the Bodleian Library.

Ronnie's doings after the breakup have not been recorded and neither of his daughters remembers having any contact with him after the breakup. (He did however write Gillian a nice letter in 1955 when he saw our wedding announcement in the Times.) At the outbreak of World War 2, at the age of 43, Ronnie joined up again, this time in the Royal Artillery. The medical examination carried out on all new recruits showed that he was six foot and half an inch tall and weighed 236 lb. He had scars on both thighs, possibly from the WW1 injuries mentioned in his MC citation. He had blue eyes (like his daughter Patricia), dark brown hair and a ruddy complexion. His service records show that he rose rapidly from Gunner to Bombardier to

Troop Sergeant Major and finally to Battery Sergeant Major, (the senior Non-Commissioned Officer in a unit the size of an infantry Company). He was posted to Gibraltar in 1943 and served with the 175th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Artillery until June 1945, a point of personal interest to me for five years later I too served in an AA Regiment in Gibraltar as a National Serviceman - an unexpected link with Gillian's family.



Vera was reluctant to divorce Ronnie while he was a serviceman during the war and as a serviceman's wife she automatically received the army allowance. She insisted this go entirely toward school fees and related expenses for the girls, so she worked to help support the family.

In 1959, Vera (who had remarried and was now Lady Aske) came to visit Gilli and her family in Canada. There were

some fun times and nice outings with the children, but the visit was clouded by her depressions. She had been ill on the voyage and wasn't in the best of health which was certainly a contributing factor. But she didn't much like our house on 83rd Ave, and found it hard to accept that her much loved daughter now lived so far away and in such an unappealing place. I remember how she ran upstairs in tears and shut herself in her bedroom, not wanting to upset the children. Every bit as much as us, Vera tried to make the visit a success and there were good times we can look back on with pleasure. For years, however, she had been subject to depressions, triggered by a variety of upsetting events, and sometimes lasting for days. At Ship Street, Gillian had often looked after her mother during these downers, doing the cooking, bringing her cups of tea and trying to make peace after domestic squabbles. When not depressed Vera was energetic, high spirited and fun to be with.

In April 1960 she told Gillian "I feel a bit queer at times with this high blood pressure". In May she and Conan were planning a holiday. She was lying in bed when she had a sudden stroke. She died a few days later aged only 56. Conan told us later that her BP was an astronomical 260/120. If drugs like amlodipine or enalapril had been available back then she would surely have lived much longer.

Three years later, when Patsy and Gilli were both in the UK, they went in Pat's car to visit their father, whom they believed to be living in Wolvercote. They were met at the door by his widow, Joyce. Ronnie had married her (Joyce Eleanor Hall) in the spring of 1955. He had died at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, aged 66, on June 26, 1962. Thus, the girls never had the chance to meet him as adults. While Vera was alive, neither of them wanted to upset her by seeking to reestablish contact with their father, and in any case, both girls were abroad between 1955 and 1963, Gilli in Canada, and Patsy working on cruise ships as a children's hostess. They had no contact with their father and did not know that he had remarried.



Patsy and Gilli, 1947

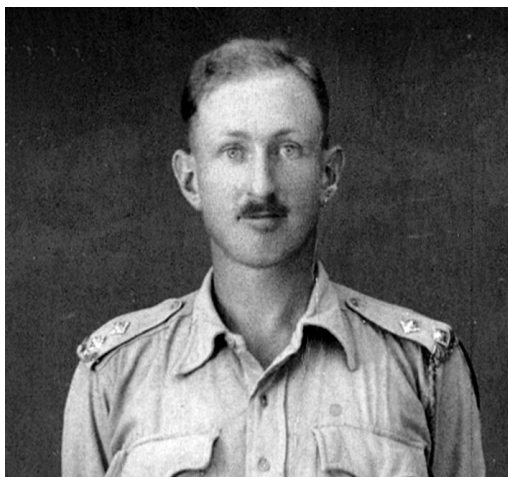
In June 1948, Vera and her daughters went to visit Norman Constable (her friend Hilda's husband) who was Factor to the Marquess of Bute on Arran, a memorable visit and the last such time the three of them went on holiday together for in December that year Vera married her old friend Conan Aske, scion of a family famous in English history for the Robert Aske who in 1536 led the noble but unsuccessful Pilgrimage of Grace. Conan was born on April 22 1912, a week after the sinking of the Titanic. His father Sir Robert William Aske (1872-1954) was a lawyer, admitted to the Middle Temple in 1914, KC in 1934, but he was knighted much earlier, presumably for public service, and was created Baronet in 1922. He

was Liberal MP for Newcastle-on-Tyne between 1923 and 1924 and again between 1929 and 1945. Conan was his elder son and succeeded to the title of 2nd Baronet Aske of Aughton on March 10 1954. Thus Vera became Lady Aske in 1954 six years after her marriage and six before her death.

Conan went to school at Rugby and thence to Oxford (Balliol), where he studied law but apparently only got a double 4th in his Bachelors exams. This however was seamlessly transmuted into MA (Oxon) in the Oxford tradition. At around this time, in the early 1930s he got to know Roland Faulkner probably initially as a drinking pal in the Kings Arms in Oxford. Conan told me not long before his death that, despite the 16 year disparity in their ages, he and Ronnie had been "boon companions". Later Conan came to be a friend of the whole Faulkner family. He was good with Patsy and Gilli and spent a lot of time reading with Gilli and helping her learn things by heart. Gilli was particularly fond of him as he was one of the few adults who liked her better than her blue-eyed sister with her curly, blonde hair. He once brought her a present of raspberry jam, knowing she was a picky eater. The girls invented the name Thomas for him after the hero in the poem by A.A. Milne:

So ever after, more and more,
The men of Kent would proudly speak
Of Thomas Tom of Appledore,
"The Knight Whose Armour Didn't squeak."

As a family friend he stayed in touch whilst "articling" (working as an apprentice in a law firm) in London and after he joined up in the East Yorkshire Regiment at the outbreak of WW2 in 1939. He served in France with the British Expeditionary Force and was



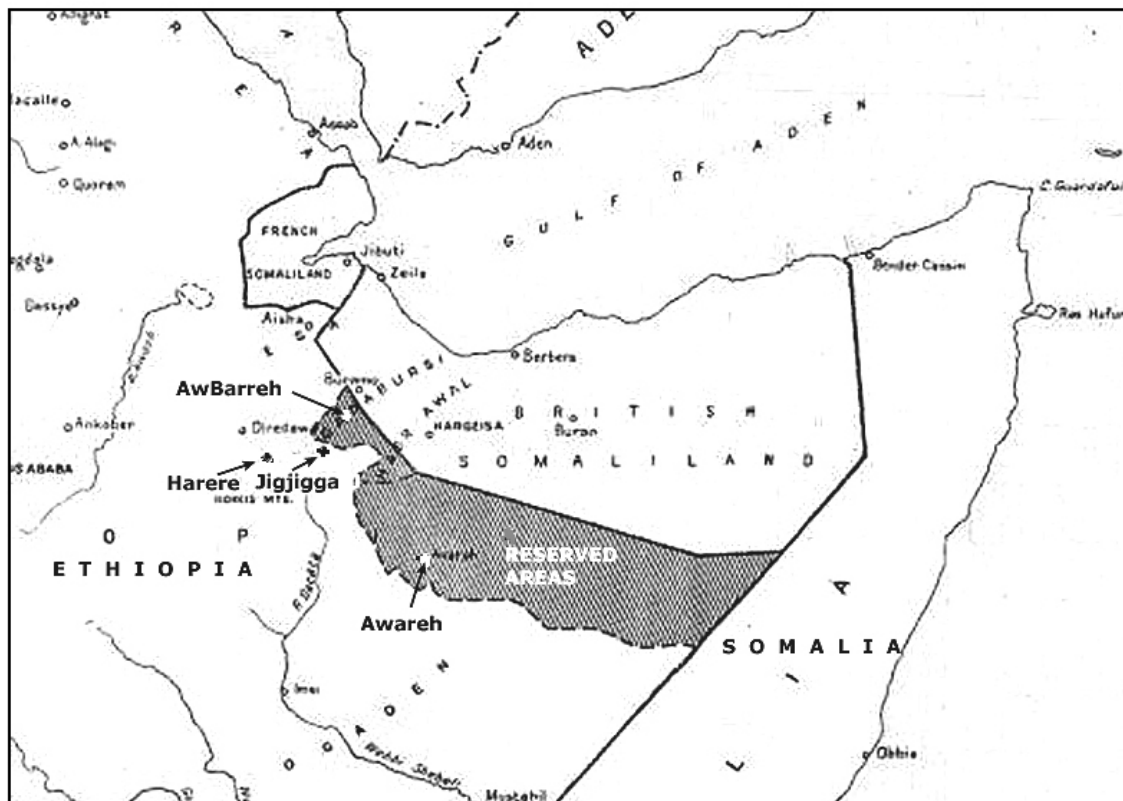
evacuated safely from Dunkirk. His regiment saw active service in Palestine and was with the 8th Army in North Africa in 1942 and he later served as an officer in the Sudan Defence Force, at Juba and Torit in what is now South Sudan. His postal address was El Bimbashi C. Aske, c/o HQ 79 Sub-Area, Sudan Defence Force. (A Bimbashi was a Major in the Turkish Army in Ottoman times but the term was adopted for British officers serving in the SDF). Writing to Gillian in November 1944 Conan, still unattached had 60 days leave coming up and was wondering where to go. Kenya Uganda and Tanganyika were very pleasant but expensive

and he would have liked to go to the Belgian Congo but military personnel were barred from crossing that border. No doubt he was often lonely and uncomfortable in South Sudan, ("too much sun"), but in his letters home he always tries to sound cheerful. At times during the war he did go back to England and Gillian remembers staying at a B & B with her mother and Pat at Swanage, close to the army base at Worth Maltravers. Conan was then in command of army units at Corfe Castle, Winspit and Worth Maltravers, all close to Swanage, and he was billeted in Swanage at Forres School (an independent prep school, now closed). Possibly Vera chose Swanage as their holiday venue for that reason. In any event, Conan's marriage to Vera on Dec 13 1948 was clearly a wedding of two old friends.

In 1949 Conan found himself in a corner of what is now Ethiopia called the Reserved Areas of the Ogaden. He was part of the British military administration of

200,000 square miles of dense shrubland, bush grassland and bare hills, essentially a barren plain between British Somaliland and the Ethiopian Eastern Highlands.

After they conquered Ethiopia in 1936, the Italians merged it, along with Eritrea and their colony Italian Somaliland into Italian East Africa, to which in 1940 they added British Somaliland after driving the British out. The British however retaliated and took



these territories back in 1941. They returned Ethiopia and most of the Ogaden to sovereign status under Emperor Haile Selassie but, ostensibly for wartime strategic reasons, they kept control of the northern part of the Ogaden along with a corridor through which ran the railway connecting Dire Dawa to Jibouti (Djibouti) on the coast. This was the Reserved Areas, roughly indicated on the above map. The town of Jigjigga (Jijiga) was just within the reserved areas, not as shown on the map. The peoples of the Ogaden are Somalis, alien to Ethiopians in race, language and religion and the British intention was to bring them together with British Somaliland and the former Italian Somaliland to create a Greater Somalia. This proposal came to naught and in 1954 the British returned the Reserved Areas to Ethiopia. British Somaliland eventually became Somaliland, French Somaliland became Djibouti, while Italian Somaliland became Somalia. All three are now independent republics.

Conan Aske was stationed at Awareh in the Reserved Areas, functioning for all practical purposes as District Commissioner with judicial as well as administrative responsibilities. Vera, now Mrs Aske, joined him there in 1949. They planned to have Patricia and Gillian come out on visits but this would require the Governor's permission and at first seemed impossible. Nonetheless both girls did fly out on visits the following year. Writing from Awareh in January 1950, Vera describes how they were living under

canvas while their house was being finished, “about 8 Somalis thatching the roof and singing wild chants ... throwing bunches of grasses up on the roof and arranging them haphazardly” Even during this temporary phase the living arrangements were “quite comfortable and surprisingly civilized” as there was lots of space, a garden, horses, chicken run, separate huts for kitchens, dining area and bathrooms and they were looked after by three servants, Yunis, the No 1 boy and cook, Isman who did the washing and dirty jobs and a small boy. “Conan has a driver, an interpreter, a guard, etc etc, quite the little lord of creation here and he loves it”. The whole compound was surrounded by a hedge and guarded by three illalo (tribal policemen, recruited locally). Vera rode horses, made a rockery garden and tried to grow melons but her dog Sally dug them up and ate them! They could grow vegetables but in the dry climate the gardens had to be watered by garden boys every day.

Social life had its ups and downs. Conan and Vera were befriended by the Governor and given the use of His Excellency’s country lodge at Sheik (probably Hart Sheik), 7,500 ft up on the mountains, arousing the envy of Major Hextall, Conan’s immediate superior. “Hex” and his wife were “very second rate really” according to Vera, and fond of large noisy parties, which Vera hated. “Rene tells rude stories mainly about her husband’s physical attributes....She threw a tin of cigarettes at him, hit him on the knee, and then spent a while on the floor kissing the place”.

One difficulty about living at Awareh was that there were no postal services and someone had to take letters to Hargeisa, capital of British Somaliland, to get them sent off, and perhaps for this reason there are relatively few letters relating to their lives there. The same was true at AwBarreh, a Somali town in the Reserved Areas on the ancient trade route between Jigjigga and the sea, to which Conan was posted that summer. There are no letters covering the period of Gillian’s visit in the summer of 1950 but we have her own photos and recollections to draw on. Gillian left England in June 1950, aged 19, after completing her first year at Oxford, and stayed for the summer. When she went to the Passport Office in London to get her permit, she met a young man called David Sellers who had just returned from doing his national service with the Somaliland Scouts, a British Army Brigade charged with defense of the Protectorate of British Somaliland. He was able to fill her in on what to expect in the Ogaden. They became friends and met regularly for tea in his rooms at Christ Church while both were still at Oxford. Gillian’s flight to British Somaliland involved stops in Rome (two nights, and sightseeing with family friends) and Malta and two nights in Cairo. She visited the museum there and has



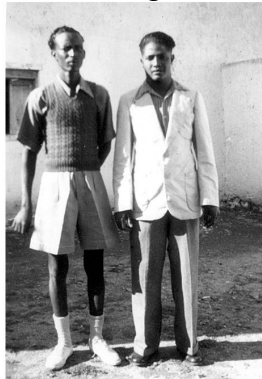
vivid memories of King Tutankhamen’s tomb and grave goods. The next leg of the journey was to Asmara in Eritrea, with its pink and ochre Italian colonial houses, and then on to Aden for another two nights hosted by family friends, finally a short hop across the Gulf of Aden to Hargeisa where Conan and Vera met her and drove her to AwBarreh. (You can now fly from Gatwick to Hargeisa in 14

hours, with only one stop!). Returning to England at the end of the summer Gillian stopped again in Cairo and went to see the famous Sixth Dynasty tombs of the High Priests of the sun god Ra. Conan and Vera's house at AwBarreh was a former Coptic monastery that had been taken over and done up by the Italians. Conan's headquarters were in another building within the same walled compound. The sign at the compound gates in the above photo can (just) be read as saying **British Military Administration Civil Affairs Office**.

Yunis and Isman had come with them from Awareh and daily life in AwBarreh was probably much the same. The house was quite comfortable – as converted monasteries go! There was a pepper tree in the garden - the only native tree for miles



Vera and Gillian with dog Sally outside the house. Note Coptic cross on the wall.



Yunis and Isman

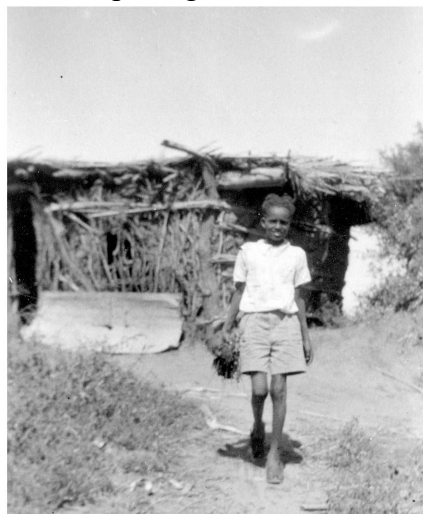


Gillian with Aoul, her pet gazelle fawn

around. Gillian got the impression that the local Somali women did all the work while their men, literally, sat around sharpening their teeth. Vera (who was never without canine companions) had a dog, a local mutt called Sally, resembling a whippet. One of Isman's jobs was to look after the dog but this was a problem as dogs are unclean to Moslems. Isman said it was ok to touch the dog provided he washed seven times afterwards! Gillian had a tame gazelle fawn, Aoul, a delightful creature but one that liked eating paper - including candy



Conan and Vera



Typical village hut, sticks and mud

wrappers and Conan's official documents. One letter from Vera has the corner of the first page nipped off by Aoul. Not only did Aoul cause problems, Yunis turned out to be dirty and dishonest and was replaced by Elmi. Isman got into a fight with another servant (the kitchen/laundry boy, or chokra) when Patricia was visiting in October. Pat found her

One letter from Vera has the corner of the first page nipped off by Aoul. Not only did Aoul cause problems, Yunis turned out to be dirty and dishonest and was replaced by Elmi. Isman got into a fight with another servant (the kitchen/laundry boy, or chokra) when Patricia was visiting in October. Pat found her

mother shouting and struggling and trying to pull them apart. She went and fetched an Illalo and the chokra was put in the guard house. There were several incidents of employees getting stoned on khat (qat). On returning with Conan from a safari to Golgolcha and Jigjigga Vera found that one of the gardeners had picked and hidden the ripe pawpaws (papayas) for himself leaving mostly unripe ones on the tree. Vera told her daughters she was even worried about Conan. We find “he’s behaving sweetly just now” but at other times he “has fits of awful bad temper and says it’s me”. Conan was told by a friend that if he had blackouts he *must* stick to beer. And so on, life is never smooth sailing for long.

Vera’s life of a ‘memsahib’ then was not as idyllic and trouble free as it must have seemed at first. She had servants to do everything but she also had the responsibility for seeing that they did their jobs properly. So too with Thomas, the pay was good, all his needs were looked after, but he must often have had to make very difficult decisions in attempting to settle disputes, in determining responsibility for criminal acts, and in dealing with offenders. His monthly safaris must often have been hot and uncomfortable, indeed dangerous at times. However, the Somali people in this area were apparently content to have their affairs run by the British and would certainly rather have them there than the Ethiopians. Only a year before, there had been a Somali uprising in Jigjigga in defiance of the proposed takeover of the area by Ethiopia.³ They apparently felt they got fair treatment and justice under British law to the extent this was possible in such a



neglected backwater of the rapidly shrinking Empire. They may well have desired independence but the country was riven by intertribal disputes and at least British rule provided some stability. While Gillian was at AwBarreh (Aw-Barre) the villagers had a party with fellow members of their tribe from across the border in which after much dancing, drinking and singing they gave a rousing display of loyalty to their British friends. The picture above shows their leader saluting Conan.

³ In 2016 conflict between separatist groups such as the Ogaden National Liberation Front and the Ethiopian government continues to be reported.



Gillian was struck by the hard life the people led, especially in the dry season when the women had to dig holes in mud of the dried up river bed and wait for water to collect and then haul it out for their livestock and themselves, as shown in the picture on the previous page.

Conan travelled periodically around the main settlements in his area with his interpreters, servants and soldiers in a convoy of 15 cwt trucks. Gillian, accompanying him and her mother on one such occasion recalls him setting up his seat of judgment - a folding chair and card table under a thorn tree - and listening to cases for hours, shaded from the blazing heat. There were disputes about wells, theft of livestock, the right to plant gardens. The way the map had been drawn, people frequently found themselves on the wrong side of the border without access to their wells or traditional grazing

grounds. Quarrels over water rights were common and Conan's successor was killed at a



Conan on safari administering justice under a thorn tree

well by shiftas (bandits). Proximity to the border was also a problem for the British as shiftas would come and steal or vandalize their equipment and then retreat across the border into Ethiopia. Theft of livestock was also a problem, as Conan described in a letter to Gillian. This episode illustrates the difficulties a man on the spot like Conan had with an administrative superior who was more concerned with protocol than with effective management at the local level.

“On Wednesday morning at 7.00 am I went off in Motor Transport with a young Lt of the Somaliland Scouts and a platoon of 30 men on a camel snatch. The usual story- last year some time a tribe called Hersi Dalal made a surprise raid on the Isaak rer Arab (mere names to you) and stole about 120 camels: later 50 were returned, leaving an outstanding balance of 71. So I went out to get them: the Hersi Dalal are a cunning little lot, and had envisaged some such raid, thinking we were coming to get their rifles (about 40, so it is rumoured) not the camels. And so they had all cleared off to Abyssinia, or Ethiopia as it should be called these days. I followed, and penetrated some 15 miles over the border where after a stern chase we rounded up some 400 camels from which we eventually sorted out 71. There was no opposition and no sign of any rifles. I held a conference at which I explained that I suspected we were over the border but the people all said “Oh no! we belong to British territory, and claim British protection from Araweh!”

So I said OK, I have two of your men as prisoners in Awareh gaol, if you agree to my taking these camels, I will release the two men. And so we parted: the camels driven on foot while the Lt and I went fast back to Awareh.

Poor old Dennis Hextall the CAO was wild: (i) how could I explain that the camels had been taken on Ethiopian territory? (ii) how could I explain our trespass (iii) what did I mean by taking camels from the Hersi Dalal which were not the original camels stolen from the Arab ?

So there was nothing for it but to pack my gear again and [take the camels back.]”

Gillian vividly remembers one trip to Jigjigga, a Somali town at 5000 ft elevation in the Eastern Highlands. There were rocky outcroppings with troops of baboons and Gillian was told not to go too close to them because they threw stones with deadly accuracy. The road ascended the scarp by 22 zigzag bends and at the top the convoy was brought to halt. The road had been washed out by a rainstorm and a truck got bogged down. They camped and got out their camp cots and slept where they were. Waking at 6.00 am, Gillian found that an entire village had gathered around them in a circle and were watching with evident interest to see how their white-skinned visitors handled the business of getting dressed!

In Jigjigga they stayed in a 16th century fort built by the Portuguese. At dinner with their host General Asfar Nagash, the food served was so hot that it burned the lips while still inches away. The only drinks on offer were neat gin, whisky and brandy. On another occasion Gillian went with her mother for a week up to Harar, 5600 ft up in the Ethiopian highlands, a beauty spot with Bougainvillea and Jacaranda trees, paradise compared with the hot, dry Ogaden.

On completion of his overseas service, Conan returned to England and lived with Vera, first in the Chilterns, and then in West Malvern at "Daisy Bank". He got a job teaching at Hillstone, a boys' preparatory school. To go for a drink with his cronies at the Foley Arms in Great Malvern he had to walk



across the Malvern Hills - several kilometers up and down, and then home again the same way, dissipating the effects of his beer intake. Later they moved to Carr's Cottage on St Ann's Rd near the well that is the source of Malvern Water, known for its beneficial properties for over 400 years. Conan's father Sir Robert died in 1954 and he inherited the baronetcy, becoming Sir Conan Aske Bt, much to the delight of the school he taught at.



This is a digression, but I would like to mention how I visited Gillian and her family at Daisy Bank in 1954, not long before we got married and I got to know Vera and Conan much better than I had before. It was a happy time. We went for walks on the hills, I got a long ladder and painted one side of the house. I was impressed with Vera's deftness with the secateurs in pruning the roses. She was not depressed and produced wonderful meals.

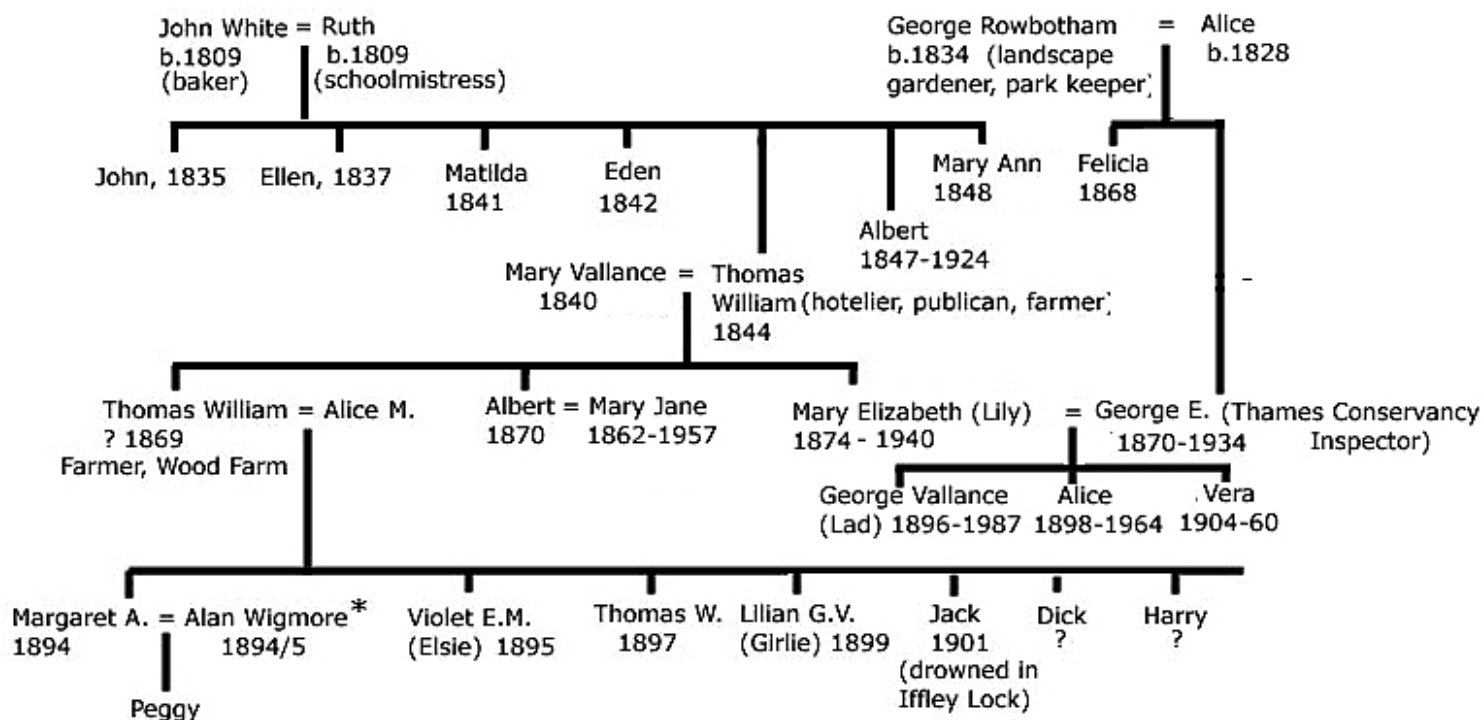
Conan had a long standing ambition to become a clergyman but he was married to a divorced woman which meant he could not be accepted at a theological college for training. After Vera's death this no longer applied and he went back to Oxford, underwent training at Wycliffe Hall and was ordained as a minister in the Church of England in 1972. Thereafter until shortly before his death he carried out the duties of a priest, though he never had his own parish as a vicar. He got married again in 1965, to Rebecca Grant, known in the family as "Bobs". He died in May, 2001 and was buried in the churchyard of All Saints Church at Aughton in the East Riding of Yorkshire. The baronetcy passed to his nephew Robert Aske.

Perhaps from his years living far from civilization in the Sudan Conan had acquired the habit of frugality. He found it hard to throw away anything that could possibly come in useful, and the house filled up with stacks of newspapers and cans of nails painstakingly removed from packing cases. He wrote his stepdaughters long, affectionate letters and was friendly and helpful to me. He had simple tastes, he grew lots of vegetables, he liked walking in the hills and drinking beer in pubs with his pals. Best of all he was tolerant of Vera's ups and downs and was there for her in every way right up to her untimely death. If the couple's lows were miserably low, their highs were wonderfully high as this except from a letter Vera wrote to Gillian from Awareh in March 1950 shows – and let it be their epitaph:

"Life here is paradise – really. Riding early in cool sunshine. Full moon last night fit for reading. No work at all. Chickens, a puppy, horses, all for the asking. No stockings, no fuss. And Conan – you wouldn't know him – he sings around the place and sang me to sleep yesterday, told me his marriage was the high point of his life."



Gillian's maternal forebears

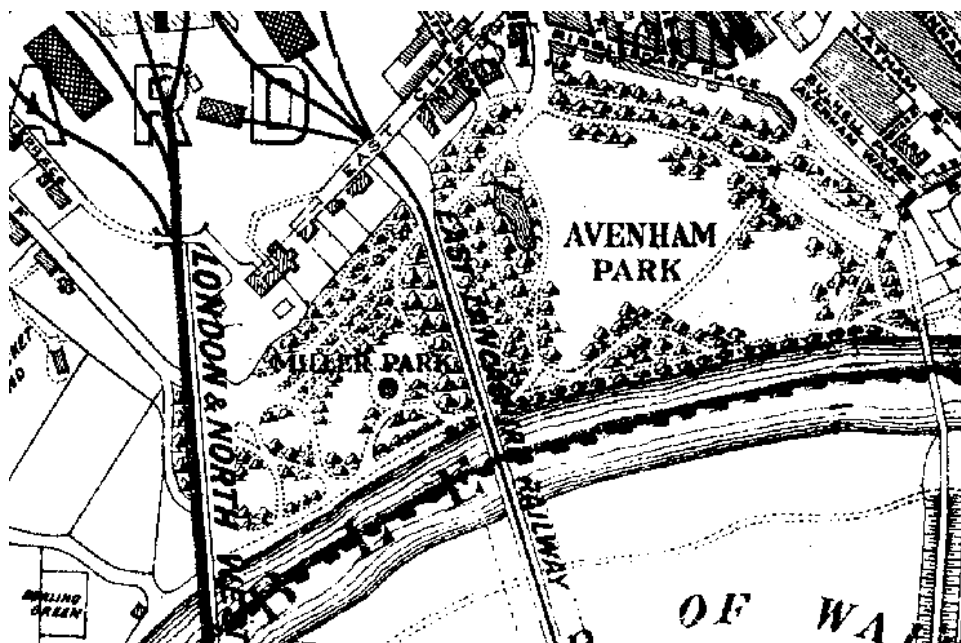


* Alan's father was Frank Wigmore, b.1844. In 1891 he was a dairyman living at 77 St Aldates, Oxford, with his wife Edith, three teenage sisters, his sister in law Mary, his one-year old daughter and a maidservant Annie. Alan came along later. His daughter Peggy was bridesmaid at Vera Rowbotham's wedding. Wigmore's Dairy milk delivery floats were still a familiar sight around Oxford in the 1940s

George Rowbotham Senior (b.1834) The 1871 census for Lancashire shows George Rowbotham, Landscape Gardener & Park keeper" living at Avenham Park Cottage in Preston, Lancs. His age is given as 37 and his birthplace as Newborough, Staffordshire. If born in 1834, he might be expected to appear in earlier censuses for Staffordshire but he does not seem to be listed in any of these, and we know nothing of his forebears. George is shown as married to Alice, 43, born at Aldcliffe, Lancashire and the couple have two children, Felicia (3) and George E. (1). Elizabeth Pratt, domestic servant lived with the family.

Avenham Park still exists as a public park close to the centre of Preston, sloping down to the banks of the River Ribble. It is an English Heritage listed park designed by Edward Milner and built in the 1860s. Milner Park lies adjacent to Avenham Park, originally separated from it by a tramway which crossed the river on a trestle bridge, now

replaced by a modern footbridge built in the same style. (see Wikipedia for historical details, and Google Earth for the present day layout).



Avenham Park in 1889 The fate of Avenham Park Cottage is unknown to us at the present time.

George Rowbotham Jr. (1870-1934) In 1901, at the age of 31, George is listed as “Thames Conservancy Inspector” living in Iffley, Oxfordshire, and married to Mary Elizabeth (Lily) White (1874-1940). They have three children, George Vallance (“Lad”) (4) and Lillian Frances Alice (2). Rosina Duffield (14) was a domestic servant at the house. Another child, Vera was born a few years later. Vera told her daughter Gillian that she was born in the year Iffley Mill burned down (1908) but she was actually born in 1904. The family home named Avenham after the park in Preston, may have been designed by George himself. It was right next door to Lily’s parents’ home at The Red House. Gillian gives her and her sister Patricia’s recollections of their early years at Iffley Their grandparents and their Aunts Jane and Felicia were all still alive. (see “An Iffley Childhood” by Gillian Mackie).

John White (born 1809 in South Weston, Oxfordshire) The 1841 census shows John White, born at South Weston, Oxfordshire, agricultural labourer, and his wife Ruth (born at Rookley, Isle of Wight, Hampshire, in the same year as her husband) living in Iffley with four children, John (6), Ellen (4), Emily (2) and Matilda (7 months).

Ten years later (1851) John is now listed as “master baker” in the village at Iffley and Ruth as “schoolmistress”. Their first born son John (16) has left home, their eldest daughter Ellen, now 14, is “engaged at home”, and there are three more sons, Edwin (9), Thomas (8) and Albert (5) and a daughter Mary Ann (3).

In 1861 all four of the older children are unlisted and are presumably married or gainfully employed and living elsewhere. Edwin, Thomas and Albert are all listed as

“baker” like their father. Ruth is no longer shown as “schoolmistress” but as “baker’s wife”.



In 1871 John White now 62 and his sons Edwin and Albert are all master bakers. Their youngest child Mary Ann has left home. However, daughter Matilda, now Matilda Giles, is back at the family home employed as a servant and with a daughter (?)Florana (6), born in Camberwell, London. The family have moved to the Tree Tavern, Iffley along with John’s son Thomas (“Publican”) and his family (see below). The Tree Tavern household consists of 12 people, including a general servant (Sarah Vallance, listed as “visitor”, the younger sister of the Mary Vallance who married Thomas White, and a teenage nurse (Eliza Davis). Neither John nor Ruth White is listed in the 1891 census for Oxfordshire and it seems likely they died before that date.

Thomas White (born 1843/4 in Iffley) sixth child of John and Ruth White. As noted, Thomas joined his father and two of his brothers in the family bakery and became a master baker, but in 1871 at the age of 28 he is listed as “Publican” at the Tree Tavern. In 1867 he married Mary Vallance born in 1840 at Bretby, Derbyshire, daughter of William Vallance, a wagoner, and his wife Elizabeth. Thomas and Mary had two children, Thomas (2) and Albert (1). Vallance was the given name of at least three descendants, Lilian G.V. White, George V. Rowbotham and Gillian V. Faulkner. The



sampler shown here, made by Mary Vallance at the age of 13, is now owned by Alexander and Kjerstin Mackie. Alexander is Mary Vallance’s great great grandson.

Prior to her marriage, Mary Vallance had been one of four kitchen maids and one of a total of 29 domestic servants at Althorp, the Northumberland seat of the Spencer family. John Spencer, 5th Earl was only 25 at the time but later he became a prominent minister in the government of

William Gladstone. Lady Diana Spencer, who became Princess Diana, was the daughter of the 8th Earl Spencer and lived at Althorp before her marriage.

In 1891, Thomas White, now 47, and Mary (51) are still living at the Tree Hotel. He is listed as “Licensed Victualler - Farmer”. Their elder son Thomas William (22) is

“Assistant Manager” at the hotel, and their younger son Albert John (21) is “Professional Cook”. No occupation is given for their daughter Mary Elizabeth (Lily) White but it seems likely she was also involved in running The Tree Hotel. Thomas’s younger brother Albert who like him started as a baker in the family bakery has also gone into the hotel business. He is listed as “Hotel Keeper” at 13 New Road, Oxford, with wife Mary.

In 1901, Thomas and Mary with their son Albert were still running the Tree Hotel, aided by a general domestic servant Elizabeth Mary Ives. Their daughter Lily was no longer part of the household – she had married George Rowbotham and given birth to two children, George and Alice. A third child Vera was born in 1904.

By the time of the 1911 census, Thomas, now 68 and Mary, 71, had moved the Donnington Farm, Iffley

The Whites of Wood Farm Thomas William White (Uncle Willie) was born ca.1869, oldest son of Thomas William White and Mary White, who ran the Tree Inn at Iffley. His occupation in 1891 was “Assistant Manager” at the Tree Hotel. Later (1901), he is listed as “farmer” at Wood Farm, St Clement. Thomas and his wife Alice (b. 1874) had 7 children. The oldest, Margaret (1894) married Alan W. Wigmore of Rivermead, St Clement. Their daughter Peggy was bridesmaid at Vera Rowbotham’s wedding. Alan’s father Frank Wigmore (b.1844) is listed in 1891 as “dairyman” living at 77 St Aldates St, Oxford with his wife Edith and his three unmarried sisters, aged 12, 14 and 16, and a daughter Alice (then 1 yr old), plus a teenage servant girl. Wigmore’s Dairy milk deliver floats were still a familiar sight around Oxford in the 1940’s.



Other children of Thomas and Alice White were Violet E.M. (“Elsie”, 1893), Thomas W. (“Tom”1887), Lilian G.V. (“Girlie”, 1899), Jack (1901), Dick and Harry. The last two were born after the 1901 census and are known to us only from oral history. Girlie was godmother to Gillian, daughter of Vera Rowbotham and Roland Faulkner.

Acknowledgements George Hamber and Richard Somerset Mackie helped with important aspects of the research. I thank them both, and also Alexander Mackie for the picture of the sampler made by Mary Vallance. Above all I thank Gillian Mackie for telling me about her family and her recollections of her time in Somaliland. Bruce Rowbotham sent me the information regarding his father’s war record <https://oxfordshireandbuckinghamshirelightinfantry.wordpress.com/2009/12/24/captain-george-vallance-rowbotham/#comment-1095>

White, Rowbotham, Faulkner, Canter

