

The intriguing life
of
Solomon Sly

An outline for Matt and Hannah
researched by Colin Alsbury © 2008



WEYMOUTH

In the book "Wanderings in Wessex" by Edric Holmes (publ 1922) the story of Weymouth is described: "The fashionable Weymouth of to-day is the Melcombe Regis of the past, and quite a proportion of visitors to Melcombe never go into the real Weymouth at all. The tarry, fishy and beery (in a manufacturing sense only) old town is on the south side of the harbour bridge and has little in common with the busy and popular watering place on the north and east. Once separate boroughs, the towns are now under one government, and Melcombe Regis has dropped its name almost entirely in favour of that of the older partner.

How many towns on the coast claim their particular semicircle of bay to be "the English Naples"? Douglas, Sandown and even Swanage have at some time or other, through their local guides, plumed themselves on the supposed resemblance. It is as inapplicable to these as it is to Weymouth, though the latter seems to insist upon it more than the rest. Apart from the bay, which is one of the most beautiful on the coast, boarding-house Weymouth is more like Bloomsbury than anywhere else on earth, and a very pleasant, mellow, comfortable old Bloomsbury, reminiscent of good solid comfortable times, even if they were rather dowdy and dull. Not that Weymouth is dull. In the far-off days of half-day excursions from London at a fare that now would only take them as far as Windsor, the crowds of holiday-makers were wont to make the front almost too lively. But away from such times there are few towns of the size that make such a pleasant impression upon the chance tourist, who can spend some days here with profit if he will but make it the headquarters for short explorations into the surrounding country and along the coast east and west, but especially east."

"It is to George III that Weymouth owes its successful career as a watering place, although a beginning had been made over twenty years before the King's visit by a native of Bath named Ralph Allen, who actually forsook that "shrine of Hygeia," to come to Melcombe, where "to the great wonder of his friends he immersed his bare person in the open sea." Allen seems to have been familiar with the Duke of Gloucester, whom he induced to accompany him. So pleased was the Duke with Melcombe, that he decided to build a house on the front—Gloucester Lodge, now the hotel of that name—and here to the huge delight of the

inhabitants, George, his Queen and three daughters came in 1789. An amusing account of the royal visit is given by Fanny Burney. The King was so pleased with the place that he stayed eleven weeks, and by his unaffected buorgeois manner and approachableness quickly gained the enthusiastic loyalty of his Dorset subjects. Miss Burney's most entertaining reminiscence of the visit is the oft-repeated account of the King's first dip in the sea. Immediately the royal person "became immersed beneath the waves" a band, concealed in a bathing machine struck up "God save Great George our King." Weymouth is in possession of a keepsake of these stirring times in the statue of His Hanoverian Majesty that graces(?) the centre of the Esplanade."

THE SLY FAMILY

The 'Sly' family had been in Weymouth throughout the eighteenth century and witnessed its growth as a seaside resort. As the Napoleonic Wars drew to their close, some time about 1814 or 1815, Solomon Sly was born the son of William Sly and Frances (nee Brown).

Solomon Sly's first marriage did not last very long. The parish registers for Wyke Regis record that Solomon Samuel Sly Bachelor of Weymouth Parish & Betsy Ann Percy Spinster of the same Parish were married on 14th April 1836 by Licence. Witnesses to the ceremony were Jane Andrews, John Bussel, and Thomas Payn.

Little more than a year later, on 18th June 1837, their daughter Frances Sly was baptised at Melcombe Regis. The registers describe Solomon as being a victualler at this time. Before the end of June 1838 Solomon's wife, Betsy Ann, is registered as having died within the Blandford registration district.

Solomon Sly and his daughter, Frances, now lived with his mother, also Frances, who since the death of her husband, William, in 1825 aged 50 had married John Jarrard, by licence, on 11 Aug 1831 at Melcombe Regis.

CATHERINE BROWN

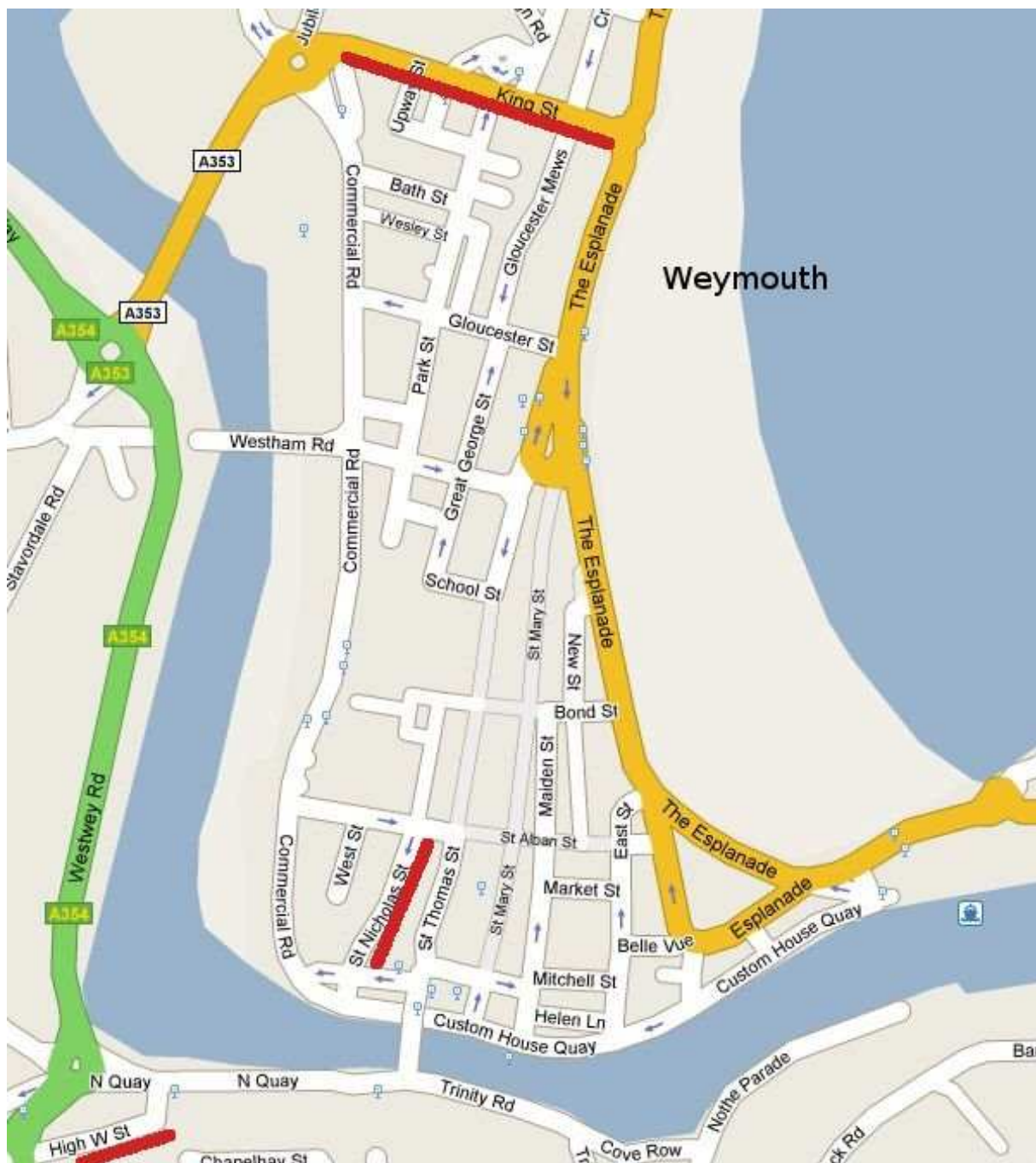
Solomon now began a relationship with one Catherine Brown. Catherine was a year or two younger than Solomon and came from out of the county. She had been married to John Brown, a mariner, and their son, John Richard Brown, had been baptised at Melcombe Regis on 24th April 1836. Of her husband's fate there is no information to hand, but by 1841 the relationship between Solomon and Catherine resulted in their first child together - Rosina Felicia's birth was registered in the first quarter of 1841 with the surname Sly. However her baptism later in the year on 29th September at Melcombe Regis firmly describes her as Rosena Felicia Sly Browne, illegitimate daughter of Catherine.

Catherine Brown, with her older son John (aged 4) and new baby Rosina (age 5 months) are found living in Bury Street, Weymouth on the 1841 census (taken on 7th June). Solomon, now aged 25 and described as a rope maker, and his daughter, Francis (aged 4) are still living with his mother and stepfather in High Street, Wyke Regis, Weymouth.

Solomon and Catherine had a further daughter, Julia Salmochia or Julia Salmana, together whose birth was registered (surname Sly) in the first quarter of 1845 and whose baptism (surname Browne) took place on the 19th March in Melcombe Regis.

ALL CHANGE

Solomon's affections obviously shifted during the next couple of years as on 3rd November 1847 he was married to Elizabeth Bowring, daughter of William Bowring, at Radipole. Their first daughter, Mary Sly, born on 17th Feb 1848 (just three



Map of Weymouth town centre area

months after their marriage), was baptised at Melcombe Regis, on 8th October 1848. Solomon is again described as a victualler by occupation.

Catherine Brown died early in 1848 aged only 31 and was buried on 2nd February at St Mary's Church, Melcombe Regis. John, the child of her marriage to the mariner, together with Rosina and Julia, daughters from her relationship with Solomon Sly are now left as orphans. By the time of the census in 1851 (30th March 1851) we find them living at 7 Nicholas Street in Weymouth in the household of Louisa Russell, a 41 year old charwoman. The full household included Louisa's daughter and two sons, Catherine's three children, and one other orphan. The older boys were all apprenticed, John Brown as a carpenter, and the younger children all described as scholars.

Meanwhile, at 1 King Street, Solomon Sly is a beerhouse keeper, living with his new wife, their two children, Mary (aged 3) and Solomon (born mid-summer in 1850) and a housemaid.

Solomon and Elizabeth went on to have more children: The baptism records gradually change their description of Solomon's occupation - from Beerhouse keeper to Inn keeper to Publican and then Licenced Victualler.

One of their children, John born in 1859, lived for only some six months but the others survived and in 1861 we find the family at the 'Fountain Tavern', 3 King Street, Weymouth comprising of Solomon, now aged 46, with his wife Elizabeth, now aged 34, and five children at home: Solomon (aged 10), William (aged 8), Emily (aged 6), Susan (aged 4) and Jane (aged 8 months) ... as well as four servants living on the premises, one working as a nurse to the children and three working as barmaid, chambermaid and waiter. Their older daughter, Mary (now aged 13) was away at school at Grosvenor house, Shaftesbury. Solomon's older daughter, Frances, from his first marriage, is now aged 22 and married to Frederick Davis, working with him in the hairdressing trade and living in South Molton Street, London.



High West Street, Weymouth

Catherine's orphaned children are no longer living with Louisa Russell by 1861. By this time Julia Brown is in service at 6 High West Street in the household of Alexander Gunning (Town Missionary) and his wife, Mary. Alexander and his wife had lived next door to Louisa Russell in Nicholas Street in 1851 and would have come to know Julia when she was living there.

Through the next decade, Solomon and Elizabeth had further children, Jessie (born 1862), Annie (born 1864), John (born 1867 - died 1868), John Jerrard (born 1869).

HEADLINE ATTENTION

Weymouth had become famous as a resort partly through George III's visit and use of the bathing machines. By 1869 Solomon Sly had become custodian of the bathing machines and it was through this that his name attracted attention in the press across the country. In the first week of September 1869 a case came before the borough magistrates which was to be reported in such varied newspapers as the 'Daily News', 'Edinburgh Newspaper' and the 'Liverpool Mercury' - the latter coming up with the headline 'Solomon Deposed'.



Georgian style Bathing Machine at Weymouth

The fullest report, in the 'Daily News' of 9th September records that:

"A very curious case of assault was heard before the borough magistrates on Tuesday. Although the summons was for an assault, the main question at issue was whether Weymouth Sands was or was not public property. A Mr William Wynn, a resident of London, but now on a visit to Weymouth, summoned Solomon Sly, the custodian of the bathing-machines, for assaulting him. The case occupied the attention of the bench for nearly three hours, and considerable interest was manifested in the proceedings, a large number of visitors being present for the hearing of the case. The facts are briefly these. On Monday morning between eleven and twelve o'clock Mr Wynn was playing on the sands at trap and ball with his son. At this time the water was low and the machines not in use were some 30 or 40 yards distant from where Mr Wynn was playing. Seeing Mr Wynn at play with his son, Mr Sly came up to him in a very authoritative way, and told him to go off the sands. Mr Wynn demurred, saying the sands were public property, where upon Mr Sly, who was in a very excited mood, told Mr Wynn that the sands were his, as he paid 40l [£40] a year for them. Mr Wynn still refused to leave, upon which Mr Sly thrust him aside in a violent manner, hit him, and kicked over the trap. Mr Wynn at this time had a small bat in his hand, with which he struck Mr Sly, who put himself in a fighting attitude, and wanted to fight for 5l [£5]. The assault on either side was not a violent one, and Mr Symonds, of Dorchester, who appeared in support of the charge, admitted that if the case had been one of common assault only his client would not have troubled the bench with it, but he came forward on public grounds, in order to ascertain whether the public had a right to the sands or not. If they had not the sooner it was known far and wide the better, so that persons might not be deprived of that which they visited Weymouth to enjoy. Mr Howard, who appeared for defendant, said that of the thousands of persons who visited the town, this was the first case which had ever been brought against his client by one of them. The facts of the case, as he was instructed, were simply these—Mr Sly, perceiving Mr Wynn and his son playing trap and ball near the machines, asked them to desist, giving as a reason that only a day or two previously a lady, whilst in the act of crossing the sands, was severely struck by a ball in the face. On Mr Wynn refusing Mr Sly pushed him, at the same time using no more force than was necessary. He (Mr Howard) contended that Mr Sly had a perfect right to the sands, because the proprietors of the machines paid the corporation 40l [£40] a year for license to run them from the sands to the sea. There was no doubt the sands were open to the public, but it was at such times

committed Tucker for trial.

THE RIGHT TO THE SEA BEACH — A curious case of assault came before the borough magistrates at Weymouth on Tuesday. An action was brought by Mr Wynn, a visitor from London, against Mr Solomon Sly, the custodian of the bathing machines. The plaintiff and his son were playing at trap and ball on the sands at a time when the water was low and the bathing machines were not in use. Mr Sly, on seeing them, came up and in an authoritative tone told them to leave the sands, as they belonged to him, as he paid the Corporation £40 a year for them. Mr Wynn refused, and the defendant thereupon gave him a push. The case was not one of violent assault but was brought principally with the view to decide whether the sands were public or private property. The magistrates assured the plaintiff he had as much right on the sands as any other person, and fined Mr Sly 10s and costs.

A SERIOUS FIRE occurred on Thursday morning at Horselydown. The building in which the fire

One of the newspaper reports of the case

when they were not required for the purpose of bathing. The Mayor said the bench were of opinion that an assault had been committed, and very much regretted it should have occurred. They, however, thanked Mr Wynn for coming forward on behalf of the public, for he could assure him that he had as much right to the sands as any other person. The bench were aware that Mr Sly, or those whom he represented, paid a license to the corporation, and they would give him every facility for using the sands for the purpose of bathing. Fined 10s and costs."

Solomon Sly lived a couple more years, dying in mid 1871 and being buried on 8th May at St Mary's Church, Melcombe Regis. He was still innkeeper at the Kings Head, 18 East Street, living there at the time of the 1871 Census with his wife, Elizabeth, and children William (aged 18), Emily (aged 16), Susan (aged 14), Jane (aged 10), Jessie (aged 7), Annie (aged 5), John J (aged 2) and also one servant. Their oldest son, Solomon Sly (born 1850) was now living in St Michael Wood Street, London.

Meanwhile Frances, Solomon's daughter from his first marriage, was still living with her husband Frederick Davis in London, now in Limerston Street, Chelsea, and they had six children.

JULIA BROWN / SLY

Julia's life began as the youngest of three children of a single mother, being the second of her children by Solomon Sly. Left as an orphan at the age of three, she and her siblings had been cared for by a charwoman alongside her own children. Her early employment had been in service to the family who had lived next door. Eventually she had married and had a family of her own.

By 1871 Julia with her husband, Edwin Knight, and two children Edwin (aged 3) and Ellen (aged 2) were lodging at Adelaide Cottages. By 1881 they were living at 5 Albert Street, Weymouth, with children Edwin (aged 14), Ellen (aged 12) and Thomas (aged 10).

Meanwhile Solomon's widow, Elizabeth, kept control of the Kings Head and was still there as hotel proprietress in 1881 with one daughter, Susan, working as a barmaid and two other daughters, Jane working as a drapers assistant and Jessie as a milliner. Their youngest son, John, was away at school at Stourpaine House School.

In 1891, Julia and her husband, Edwin (still a labourer) are found living at 3 Al-

bert Street, Melcombe Regis and have a visitor, Effie Dibden. Their son, Edwin John Knight had married Edith Agnes Dibden late in 1888. Edwin is by 1891 working as an engine driver's fireman and they are living at 11 Unity Street, Aberdare, Glamorgan.

THE NEXT GENERATIONS

By 1901 Edwin has become a railway engine driver and their home, with children Edwin J (aged 11), William George (aged 9) and May D (aged 2), is at 44 Capel Street, Newport, Monmouthshire.

Not very far away at 56 Jones Street, Newport, George and Elenor Holt are living with their children Ernest (aged 19), Caroline (aged 17) and John (aged 14). Their older sons have already left home, one of whom, Thomas Edward Holt is married and living in Wolverhampton.



Thomas Edward Holt with wife and daughter, Edith Lilian (married Charles Edward Alsbury) in their garden in Wolverhampton in 1903

AND FINALLY...

And one day, William George Knight's descendant, Hannah, would meet Thomas Edward Holt's greatgreatgrandson, Matthew ...

... and another story would begin!