

A Name on a School Certificate: Glimpses of the life of Maria Markis Soane



Background

In 2024 Battle and Langton School was offered a framed "School Certificate" presented in 1868 to Maria Soane on leaving the school at age twelve years. The certificate had been passed down through the family and the current owners were pleased to be able to donate it to the school.

Description

The certificate is in what appears to be an original roughly hewn wooden frame, and is about 7in x 10in and is in remarkably good condition. Maria, we are told, attended the school for five years, could read well, write a good hand, "work sums as far as practice", her needlework and spelling were "good", knowledge of scripture and the church catechism "good", knowledge of grammar "fair" and her conduct was described as "very good". It is signed by the head of the girls' school, Emma Ganly, a "certified" teacher and three "managers" of the school, J W Hallaway, B H Thorpe and Fred Ellman, together with the Dean, Edward N Crake and R L Roe, Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools. The three "managers" were local men: James Hallaway was a banker living in 1871 above the former National Westminster Bank at 11 High Street, next door but one to Benjamin Thorpe, a shoe manufacturer, while Frederick Ellman was a local solicitor living at Upper Lake.

School Certificate of Maria Soane





Education in the 1860s

In the 1860s when Maria attended Battle and Langton school, education was not compulsory for all, nor was it free, and parents of pupils at National Schools, like Battle and Langton, were charged a nominal one penny per week for each child attending. Children left school at twelve years old proficient in the three Rs (reading, writing and 'rithmetic) to start work. Boys additionally learnt "scriptural geography" and girls needlework and home economics. Battle and Langton's Master (for the boys) and Mistress (for the girls) were required to be members of the Church of England and in 1868 were Robert and Emma Ganly, both certificated teachers, who in 1871 census are seen living at the school in Marley Lane in the schoolmaster's house, together with their children Edward Arthur aged four, Margaret Anne aged three, Selina aged two and Annie, aged seven months. One wonders how Emma fitted in teaching! She must have been kept very busy, although she had the help of a servant, Mary Ann Honisett. By the time of the 1881 census Emma and Robert were living in West Ham, still both teachers, and Walter, Harriet, May, Alice and Frederick had been added to the family. They must have left Battle by 1874, as Walter was born in Walsall that year, with Harriet also born there two years later. Emma's signature appears on Maria's certificate.

Maria would have walked to the school in Marley Lane with her siblings and no doubt other children living nearby. There were two large classrooms at the school – one for boys and one for girls – and discipline would have been strict, with children seated in rows not permitted to talk to each other during class. Assistant unqualified school teachers may have helped the Master or Mistress deliver lessons, as would older pupils at times. School log books (required to be kept from 1861) for Battle show that in April, July and September large numbers of mainly boys worked on local farms, planting, haymaking, hop picking, harvesting and weeding rather than attending school. School was also missed when there were local events such as fair days at Whitsun and November, May Day celebrations, when the circus visited and at Parliamentary elections. Attendance also fell when there was heavy rain and snow or bouts illnesses such as measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever, mumps, whooping cough, influenza, ringworm and TB. Despite this, School Inspectors reported in the 1860s that the school was "in all respects exceedingly well conducted."¹

Family Life of Maria Soane

But who was Maria Soane? Throughout the records through which Maria's life can be glimpsed the surname Soan appears variously as Soan, Soane and sometimes Soanes. Maria was baptised Maria Markis Soanes on December 2nd 1855, in St Mary the Virgin, Battle, by the curate D W Leape. Her father is shown as Henry, a labourer. Henry Soan had been married to Maria's mother, Maria Eaglesden, at Battle church in 1851 by the Dean at the time, John Littler, on 13th February 1851. Henry was a widower, previously married to Mary Freeland, and by whom he had one son, Alfred, born in 1847. Maria had not been married previously, but at the time of the marriage had a daughter, Fanny Eaglesden, from a previous relationship. The blended family of Henry and Maria Soan can be found on the 1861 census living at "The Old Workhouse" on Battle Hill. Henry is described as a "dairyman", living with his wife Maria, her daughter, Fanny aged 16, his son Alfred aged 14, then Henry and Maria's children Mary aged 12, Stephen aged 8, Maria M aged 5, Arthur aged 3 and Martha aged 1. The location of his home can be precisely identified from the tithe map of

¹ For further information on Battle and Langton School see *England's Rural Revolution: Battle 1830-1870* by George Kiloh.

1860, which shows a small area of land, plot 208, with a cottage, owned by Thomas and Frederick Smith and occupied by Henry Soan, right next to The Railway Inn at plot 173.



Henry, Maria's father, seems to have had something of a temper, if newspaper reports are accurate, and liable to lash out if angered. The Sussex Advertiser on 1 September 1846 reports that Henry Soane appeared before Battle Magistrates accused of "assaulting William White of Battle, by beating him with his fists and knocking him down while playing with some more boys". It would seem that Henry had run after William, caught him and beat him, on account of him having been seen pulling some newly trussed hay to pieces. The boy's father said he witnessed the attack, to which Henry said that "he would serve him the same if he did not like it". Henry asserted he did not hit the boy with his fists, but had only boxed his ears. He was fined 2s 6d, with costs of 17s. The Southern Weekly news reported on 17 March 1877 that Henry Soane, a farmer, was brought before magistrates at Battle for assaulting his brother Stephen. The two had apparently quarrelled over money, with Stephen (a much older man than Henry) ending up in the gutter. Henry was fined 5s plus costs. One can only wonder what family life for Maria must have been like, if he was happy to "box the ears" of a child who was not his, presumably his own children would receive the same if they stepped out of line. It should be remembered, however, that some corporal punishment was more accepted at the time.

Having left school it is likely that Maria went into service – perhaps as a kitchen maid or helping with looking after the children in a wealthy family. No trace can be found of her in the 1871 census but the rest of the family are listed as being on Battle Hill, between St Mary's Villas and still next to The Railway Inn. By this time Henry had been added to the family and was nine years old. Fanny, Alfred and Mary had all left home. Henry by this time appears to have obtained a better job, as he is now described as a farmer of 40 acres. The next time we see Maria is in the 1881 census aged 25, where she is working as a parlour-maid for James Tillard, the Chaplain of Baldslow Church in Hastings. He and his wife had four children and lived on The Ridge at Ripon Lodge. Maria was one of six staff looking after the family – a Governess, Cook, parlour-maid, housemaid, nurse and nursemaid. It is likely that Maria has made her way up the strict hierarchy of domestic service at the time, to become the parlour-maid, beneath the cook but above the housemaid. As a parlour-maid she would have served at table and answered the door, in addition to some cleaning duties in the main reception areas. In 1881 Maria's parents were still at the same address – this time being described as "nr the railway bridge" and falling between The Railway Inn on the one side and Battle Hill on the other. Henry is once again a dairyman, now aged 63 and living with his wife Maria aged 62 and his son Henry, also a dairyman, aged 19.

Life, however, was about to change for Maria as in 1882 Maria Markis Soane married Harry May, a labourer from Catsfield who was a year older than her, at 27. Maria's father is listed in the register as Henry Soane, a milkman, while Harry's father is Henry May, a labourer. The "officiating minister" at the wedding at St Mary's Battle was none other than James Tillard, Maria's employer. James' direct involvement in the wedding suggests that Maria was held in high regard by the Tillard family, no doubt a trusted and well-liked staff member. Sometime in the 1880s Henry Soane (this time spelt Soan), Maria's father, moved to Ninfield, as in a Register of Electors in 1888 he is shown as living at Ninfield Green. He cannot have lived there long, as on 29th January 1891 he died. His death certificate records the cause of his death as bronchial pneumonia. He was still working, for there were no pensions at the time, as a dairyman, aged 73. His son, Harry Soane, Maria's brother, was "present at the death" and reported the death which occurred at The Green, Ninfield. The 1891 census reveals further changes to the family – Maria and Harry May are living at Trout Stream Cottages in Skinners Lane, Catsfield, and since their marriage Maria has had three children: Harry,



aged 7, Lilian aged 6 and Ernest aged 1. Harry is at this time an agricultural labourer. Having become a widow so recently, Maria's mother has moved in with her. Maria's brother, Harry Soane, who had been living with his parents in 1881, seems to have left the area and moved in with his elder brother Stephen, a storekeeper, and his wife Jane, in Lewis Street, Newington, London and has become a "house decorator". He may well have made this move after his father died, when the house on The Green may have reverted to its owner. Before the end of 1891 Maria's mother had also died, and both she and her husband Henry were buried at St Mary's Church in Ninfield.

By the turn of the century life for Maria had changed yet again. Not only had she lost both her parents but her father-in-law, Henry May had died in April 1899. The Bexhill Chronicle of 21 April 1899 reports his death aged 83, a farm hand who had liked to wear a smock in the traditional style and had worked for Lord Brassey, of Normanhurst, for over twenty years. Harry, his son, meanwhile, is revealed to have improved his status, he is now a farm bailiff, or manager, to the Earl de la Warr, a wealthy landowner. He lives in Bexhill, and his father Henry had come to live with him and Maria when his health began to fail. Henry snr. is described as having been "of a novel and impressive character" and "a keen sportsman, a good farmer and a kindly man withal, and one of those links with the past which are so much missed." His coffin was transported to Catsfield Church for the funeral in a large farm wagon drawn by two black horses, with the mourners following in a carriage lent by the Earl de la Warr, who had taken an interest in the deceased in his latter days. The 1901 census shows that Maria and Harry lived at Cooden Farm, where Harry is the farm bailiff, Maria a dairywoman and their son Harry, aged 17, a farm carpenter, Lilian, 16 and Ernest 11 have no occupation given. Maria's brother Harry Soane, meanwhile, had moved to Sunninghill, Windsor, Berkshire, where he was a "beer house manager" at the Seven Stars.

During the next ten years much change happens. From the 1911 census we see Maria and Harry now live, together with son Ernest, a gardener, in Nutley, Sussex. Harry May is still described as a Farm Bailiff and presumably still works for the Earl and Countess de la Warr. Maria's son Harry has left home and is a chauffeur, living in Ascot, Berkshire. Her daughter Lilian is a cook in the household of Howard and Elizabeth Case, living in Coventry Grange, Ascot. The household is obviously wealthy, having a butler, cook, kitchen maid and two housemaids. Howard is a "managing director oil" and he, his wife and three children were all born in America. The First World War brought tragedy to the family, as it did to so many. Maria's son Ernest William May, born 1890 in Catsfield, had joined the Royal Sussex Regiment at Eastbourne. He was posted to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force and his death on 18 August 1916 taking part in the Battle of the Somme is recorded on the Thiepval Memorial in France. At the time he was a Lance Corporal, the son of Harry and Maria Markis May, who at that time lived at 1 Rupert Villas, in Bracknell, Berkshire. Their older son, Harry, would probably have fought in World War I as well, but so far no record of his service has been found.

The 1921 census shows Maria and Harry living at Warren Farm on Wimbledon Common. Harry, at 66, is again Farm Bailiff and is recorded as working for the Countess de la Warr. Maria, 65, undertakes home duties, while their daughter Lilian, 36, once more lives with them and undertakes dairy work. Son Harry is still in Berkshire, and is a garage proprietor and motor engineer, living with his wife Rose and two children, Henry and Joan. In 1934 Maria's daughter Lilian Frances makes a late marriage to John Company, thirteen years her senior and a widower. He had been a coachman in 1911, living in Bexhill, but 1921, still in Bexhill, was a taxi driver. By the time of his marriage to Lillian he was a gardener aged 63, living in Sidley. One can only speculate as to how they met, but perhaps John knew Harry and Maria when they all lived in Bexhill. The couple moved to Eastbourne by 1935,



as shown in Electoral registers, probably setting up home there immediately after their marriage and living at 32 Eshton Road, Eastbourne. In the 1939 register Maria and Harry can be seen to have joined them at 32 Eshton Road, where John was now a grocer and Harry and Maria, now 85 and 84, were listed as retired.

Final glimpses of Maria's life can be found in newspaper reports. The Eastbourne Herald of 22 August 1942, reports her Golden Wedding celebrations. By this time Maria and Harry were both 87, and, the article tells us, in addition to surviving children Harry and Lilian, had four grandchildren and one great grandchild. They received telegrams of congratulation from both The King and Queen and the Earl de la Warr. Maria, it records, had been in the service of the Countess de la Warr for 33 years. The last record of Maria's life is another report in the Eastbourne Herald of 22 May 1943, telling of her death on 20 May and burial at Langney Cemetery, Eastbourne. Her husband Harry lived on until 20 February 1945 when he too was buried at Langney Cemetery,

Sources

England's Rural Revolution: Battle 1830-1870 by George Kiloh.

Battle and Langton School Log Book (held at The Keep)

Parish records, census records, military records and electoral rolls on Ancestry.co.uk

1921 census on Findmypast.co.uk

Newspapers from the British Library Archive on Findmypast.co.uk

Battle and Langton Infants c1900

