

VICARYS AND THE SEYMOUR FAMILY



Vicarys is the longest-established motor dealer in Battle. It occupies a large site in the centre of the town, down the lane that leaves the High Street next to the Nationwide Building Society. Though it has always carried the Vicary name, it has had virtually no connection with the Vicary family since the early 1920s, and before that only since about 1908.

ORIGINS

The founder of the business was Alexander Claud Vicary, born at Wandsworth in 1884. His father Edwin was a bootmaker, and the family had moved to Hastings before the 1891 census was taken. Edwin died in 1902; his wife Elizabeth moved to Battle (where she died in 1930) and it is likely that Alexander moved with her.

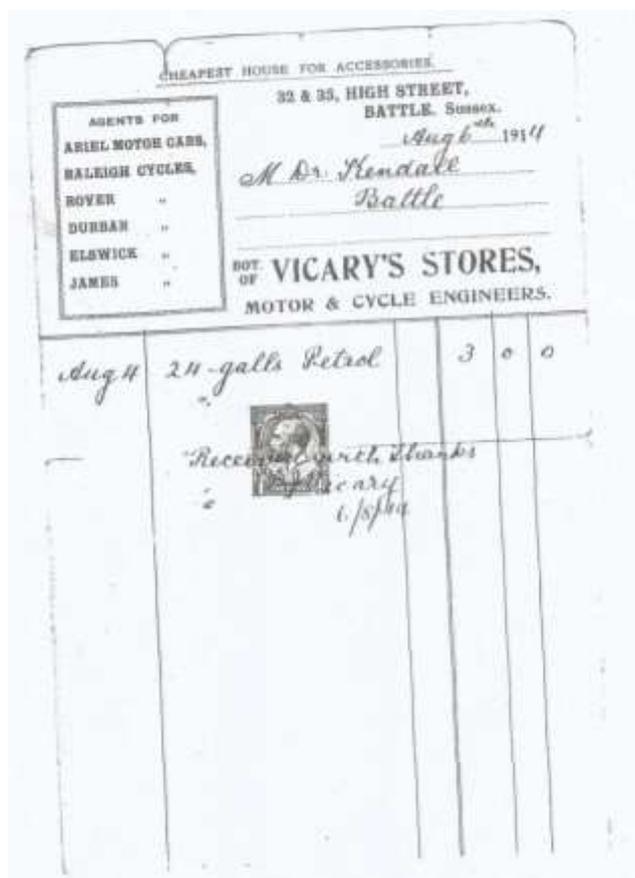
In January 1906 he was appointed a rural postman for the district between Battle and Ninfield, but this cannot have lasted long; in April 1909 he was licensed to sell petrol at 32 High Street,¹ sold in two-gallon tins rather than from a pump, and in 1911 the census recorded him as a cycle dealer. By then, in 1906 he had married Fanny Breeds (1884-1972) of Hastings and they were to have three children: Alexander Edwin James (1909), Vera Frances (1912) and Theresa Doreen (1914). Two of them are recorded with Fanny in 1939, at Starrs Green Farm. The young Alexander worked at Vicarys for a while and died unmarried at Brighton in 1970. Vera married Colin Jenner at Battle in 1935 and emigrated to Australia before 1939. Theresa married John Mills in 1945 and died at her house at 9 Netherfield Road at the end of 1988. No descendants are known of any of them, at least in the UK.



It is easy to see why a cycle dealer might provide good business. The design of cycles had been settled in the last quarter of the preceding century – after the high wheel of the penny-farthing and the solid pre-Dunlop tyres – and were increasingly popular, partly because of the increasing mobility of women. By the early twentieth they were the best way of getting around. Their price fell as sales increased. (At least at first, Vicary obtained his bicycles from Bridger of Croydon.) That said, Vicarys' early years were not an evident success: in 1910 he was the subject of legal proceedings for bankruptcy but managed to retrieve his business within the year set by the court. He was at first based at 35 High Street. (It is unclear why this number differs from that of the license to sell petrol. 35 High Street was the building

Vicarys at 32 High Street, about 1914. Alec Vicary is in the picture, probably in the centre.

immediately south of Martin's Oak.) In Kelly's directories for 1913 and 1915 he is listed as a cycle agent. Below, however, is an invoice of 1914 that describes the business as motor and cycle engineers. It was to George Kendall, the well-known Battle doctor, and came at a rate of 6.6d, or in modern money 2.75p, per litre.



After his early difficulty he managed a business that was to thrive. But he fell ill, and after about a year he died on 15 November 1920. He left £10199 14s 11d, not a bad sum for the time. In 1924 Fanny married James Beeney, who in 1939 was to be recorded as a farmer and horse dealer at Starrs Green Farm.

There are few records of the business between 1911 and 1920. In 1914 Vicarys was an outlet for the new all-steel Raleigh bicycle.² Vicary did not serve in the military forces, and when ordered to join up he appealed against conscription, at first in 1916.³ He was evidently successful because it was not for another two years that another newspaper report appeared:

Mr. Vicary said he was member of the Sussex Motor Volunteers. If he went there was nobody to carry on the business. He conveyed nurses daily to and from Normanhurst as they

had to lodge in Battle. He also conveyed wounded soldiers to church. Nearly every day he took the Inspector of Police around his district, and he occasionally took the Agricultural Inspector out. There were two other motor engineers in Battle, but they had not been before the Tribunal.⁴

His case was adjourned for two months. There are no further reports of it and his name does not appear in military records. Clearly the business prospered. His first advertisement read:

C. VICARY, telephone 3 BATTLE, is now open to accept orders for FORD CARS, CHASSIS, VANS & TON LORRIES. Every Spare Part in Stock. Repairs and Overhauls by Experienced Mechanics. Open Day and Night.⁵

Later in 1919 the following notice was published:

BUSINESS CHANGE. —The business of W. Davis, Mount-street, Battle, remains unaffected by departure of Mr. W. Davis from the town, it has been purchased by Mr. A. C. Vicary, and will be carried on as hitherto. Mr. F. Davis will manage the business, and all the old workmen are being retained.⁶

Davis's business was as a coachbuilder of 24 Mount Street. To a large extent this was a simple purchase: the business remained largely unchanged for some time and was managed by Frank Davis. The founder of the firm was Thomas Davis (1826-1888), son of a Salehurst farmer living at Silverhill; Thomas was listed in the 1861 census as a wheelwright living in Mount Street. He was successful: ten years later he was described as a coachbuilder in Mount Street; in 1881 he was at 26 Mount Street, employing six men and three boys. On his death his eldest son William took over, and in 1891, still at 26 Mount Street, he was described as manager of the coachbuilder business, with his brother Frank, 19, as a wheelwright, presumably working with and for William. The body shop was at 24 Mount Street, at the corner of the lane leading down to Little Park Farm.



The Vicarys (ex Davis's) coachworks at 24 Mount Street, at the corner of Park Lane and Mount Street shortly before demolition. The Vicarys name faces the lane.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the vehicles built by Davis would of course have been drawn by animals. This aspect of the business continued even after the First World War, when motor traffic was rapidly taking over, and when they began to make bodies for motor vehicles is unclear. By 1931, according to one full account,⁷ there were four staff at 24 Mount Street: 'Snatcher' Davis, the manager, a painter, a wheelwright and a blacksmith. Given the amount of carpentry needed there must have been more.

After Vicarys was bought by (Herbert) George Seymour in 1932 the two businesses of Davis and Vicary were largely integrated. They built the bodywork for a Morris Commercial Tonner (a travelling shop) of 1932, on show at the Motor Museum at Beaulieu for some years but



now restored and running; they built the bodywork for about one lorry a month in the 1950s and 1960s, including those for what became Stonegate Farmers, and one of these survives at Vicarys.

The now-restored Morris Commercial Tonner in the 1930s (from Peter Seymour)

The premises at 24 Mount Street were closed in the early 1980s, when only two men were employed there: Jack Hayward, a panel beater, welder and carpenter there since 1935, and Les Oliver, a car cleaner. For some years there had been a sharply declining call for body-building – the car and lorry makers did it themselves – and car crash repairs became the main activity, so it was no longer economic to continue. The premises were demolished in 1986 and houses were built on the site.

Records are sparse as to what happened after Vicary's death but we know that at some point the business was taken over by a man named Kennedy; from 1921 it ran regular advertisements in the press. We know nothing of Kennedy except that he lived in London and that his brother Donald became a not very helpful odd job man at Vicarys, living at the 32 High Street flat with his first wife Dorothy. In 1931 Kennedy, who was ill and the business was apparently not doing well, put it up for sale.

HERBERT GEORGE SEYMOUR

Before 1932 George Seymour was running a garage business at Balham. He was told of the opportunity to buy by his accountant Pearson; we do not know how Pearson knew of it but he might have known Kennedy. In any case Seymour bought it in 1932. His background is easily found in public records: born at Barnstaple in 1901, his first marriage produced one daughter and a son, Robert, who was to take over the business later. After his wife left him the family of three lived above the garage and then at Hartland in North Trade Road (named after Hartland village in north Devon). In the 1939 national register George Seymour is at Almonry Farm, Battle, probably with his children. At Battle in 1940 he married Winifred Lee, who had been born at Hastings in 1918. George Seymour being active in civil defence the couple were greeted by an archway of tin helmets as they came out of the Register Office.⁸ Their son Peter owns Vicarys today.

The Seymour family is traceable back to the Hinton St Mary area of northern Dorset where in 1841 Seymour's great-grandfather Ambrose Seymour was a farmer. At some point in that century the relevant parts of the family moved to Devon, probably in connection with the Ralph family with whom there were at least two marriages. The genealogy is given at the end of these notes.

George Seymour was born at Barnstaple in 1901. He was too young to serve in the First World War but registered under the Factory and Workshop Act in 1915 as he left school, working 'for army purposes'. He obtained his driving licence aged only 16, usually impossible but in his case allowed because of the shortage of older men (and driving tests were not introduced until the 1930s): his sponsor was a doctor who needed a chauffeur. Until 1925 he stayed in Devon, working in cycle businesses, and then he and his brother Robert moved to Elmers End, near Beckenham in Kent. In that year he joined the Metropolitan Police, where he served as a constable for just under five years. By 1930 he had already acquired the garage business known as Fundels, based just off Balham High Road, which he sold in 1933 after buying Vicarys. He must have done well because a police report of 1931 describes him driving a Bugatti Brescia.

Vicarys lost its Ford franchise in about 1922. Ford had required that Vicarys would sell its tractors and one duly arrived at Battle station. Vicarys refused to take delivery of it and the franchise was summarily withdrawn. However, the Morris franchise was awarded in 1924, and it and its successors were to stay with Vicarys for nearly seventy years. This was a period of major change in the motor industry, punctuated by the difficulties of the war years when fuels were strictly rationed and personal car travel was uncommon; the rationing of petrol did not end until 1950. No new cars were made during the war, the companies concerned working on Army and Air Force vehicles, so car sales collapsed. Repairs were few because the owners, not being able to fuel them, put them into storage awaiting better times. To keep the business going George Seymour started a taxi service and bought a tractor for use in contract ploughing.

Like so many others, Seymour took an active part in civilian organisation during the war. At the beginning of the war he was told that Army units were coming to Battle and that his workshops were to be used in the war effort. In particular he was to train some of the men in these units in the rudiments of motor engineering. It was therefore essential that he stayed in Battle. He became Transport Officer for the Civil Defence.

George Seymour was one of the few civilian drivers in the war. He reported:

I was on a journey to Winchelsea with a breakdown vehicle and had just got past Guestling when I saw a plane hedge-hopping towards me from the right. No sooner had I spotted it than it began spitting fire from its guns and then passed on low overhead. I pulled up and realised that not only had it been a German plane but it had been firing at me. I was lucky that the pilot was a rotten shot!⁹

THE PREMISES

Vicarys' first petrol pump was installed outside their premises in about 1920, on the pavement of the High Street (notoriously to modern eyes because closely above it was a gas lamp lighting that part of the street). Its replacement, the more adaptable Theo Multi, arrived in 1934 and remains in the wall where it stood and can be seen today at the southern side of the shop front. The pump (below) remained in operation until in about 1972 when it became illegal for vehicles to stop there, and the tanks were then filled in with concrete.



Ernie Beaney serving petrol from the Theo Multi petrol pump, about 1958. The car is a Riley RMF owned by George Seymour. Theo was the make of the pump and Multi meant that it could serve six different grades of petrol. When being operated, petrol from the underground tanks was pumped into a glass container that can be seen at the top of the pump. The wheel at the front, when turned, determined the amount of petrol to be pumped, to a maximum of six gallons. When the glass container was filled with the required amount, a tap at the end of the hose would be opened and the petrol would then fall by gravity to the car. Note the air pressure

gauge, seen on the fascia panel, used when air was pumped into tyres, and A.J. Lee's butcher's shop at 33 High Street.

Vicarys' premises, being in the town centre, inevitably had a complicated history. They were at 32/33 High Street, and the present workshop is behind these properties, Examination of title deeds shows that before 1857 they were held by Edmund Manktelow, a cabinet maker, and then by his son John, upholsterer as well as cabinet maker, who died insolvent in 1872. According to the 1842 register this was freehold property, no longer part of the Abbey estate. It was large: five cottages, three of which were along the northern wall of the yard which divides the property from 34 High Street, and a further two behind the shops. There was a slaughterhouse whose presence can still be detected along the northern wall. There was an extensive rear area with stables, outbuildings and gardens as well as the two back cottages. The northern cottages were demolished before the Second World War and the other two shortly after it, in the latter case to be replaced by workshops with flats above; later the workshops were converted to flats.

In 1873 Henry Newbery, founder of the confectionery and jam business, bought the property from Manktelow's creditors; he paid £1100. It is difficult to say what this represents today but it was a substantial sum then.* The two parts of the property were then leased separately. After Newbery's death in 1915 they were both bought by Vicary's wife for £1400.* After Vicary's death they were sold again in 1921 to Hugh Woffenden. Woffenden was not local but a Cheshire man listed as manager of a 'rubber reforming works' in the 1911 census, living at Hazel Grove near Stockport. (He died at Battle in 1970.)

* In 2018 values the lowest comparative figure for the 1873 purchase is £92,640 according to the retail price index; other comparators produce much higher figures. For the 1915 purchase the lowest figure is £106,600.

33 High Street was already a butcher's shop in 1861, run by Richard Button; the census shows him next door to Manktelow (the census did not show house numbers, but evidently Manktelow was at 32). Button was still there in 1881 but ten years later Charles Langley, butcher, is there. In 1900 33 High Street was leased to Sidney Smith and George Tully of Wadhurst, also butchers. By 1911 the butcher there was George Catt. The next records we have are that James Winchester, butcher, bought the property in 1923; it was leased to Ward and Billings two months later; and in 1930 it was bought by Alfred James Lee.

Here there is a point of unity, for Lee (1892-1991), born at Hollington, was the father of Winifred, who married Herbert Seymour, and their son Peter owns the garage there today. In 1915 Lee, then a horse driver in REME in the First World War, married Lilly Florence Blackman (1891-1970).

As to 32 High Street, George Seymour bought it (and the freehold of 24 Mount Street, the home of Davis the coachbuilder) from Woffenden in 1953. Buying 33 next door in about 1961 allowed major changes to be made. The two shops were amalgamated to provide a larger showroom for cars, and the entrances to the flats above were moved to the rear. The sliding doors on the north side allowed cars to be brought in but they were sealed when the property was again divided into two in 2004 when the showroom for cars was discontinued, to recreate two shops.

THE RECENT PAST



Vicarys' showrooms in May 1977. The workshop is down the lane. The pump is still there now, on the left.

Vicarys continued to expand in the 1960s, managing Jenner and Matthews, a Ford and Austin dealer at 56 High Street. After working for the British Motor Corporation for ten years, initially at Birmingham and then at Cowley, Peter Seymour ran the business with his father but left in 1970, joining the United Africa Company and working in Nigeria and Sierra Leone; he then moved to Singapore and worked for British Leyland and then John Deere.

On leaving the UK Peter gave back his half-interest in the business to his father; his brother Robert had the other half and shortly obtained his father's. In 1973 he sold the concern to the company secretary, Miss Peggy Doreen Eeles. Ten years later Peter received a telephone call from her when he was in Singapore, offering to sell the business to him, which he accepted; the purchase was completed in April 1984.

Then trouble arose. Austin and Morris had long been subsumed into the British Motor Corporation, which became British Leyland and then split. One part was the Rover Group, which in 1992 adopted a policy of reducing the number of its UK franchises by a thousand. These included Vicarys and other small local businesses, on a three-year notice. This was almost certainly a disastrous decision for the Rover Group and, as we know, that company was to decline to the point that it was sold off. In 1994 Peter formed a partnership and set up Vicarys Coaches Ltd..

Vicarys survives as a non-franchise motor dealer and its workshop continues to this day.

George Kiloh

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Sources

This account could not have been written without copious information from Peter Seymour, who also provided the pictures and a memoir by W H G Peters, who worked at Vicarys from 1931 to 1990, with intervals including war service.

The other source, where not listed in the end-notes after the genealogy, is ancestry.co.uk.

SEYMOUR FAMILY

A, B, C or D in front of a year refers to the quarter of that year, and the place given is the registration district unless more precisely known.

Dorset places are: Bagber, Buckland Newton (BN), Cheselbourne, Hinton (St Mary), Manhull, Stalbridge, Sturminster Newton (SN)

Devon places are Barnstaple, Kingsbridge, Parracombe, South Molton

The locations of other places are well-known.

Source: ancestry.co.uk, with corrections from maps. (Note: the censuses vary in the information given – that for 1841 is particularly sparse.)

TABLE 1

Ambrose Rake Seymour *Marnhull*
c1810-A1871 SN, m SN 29.05.1829
Elizabeth Burge Ralph *Stalbridge* c1810-
A1896 SN

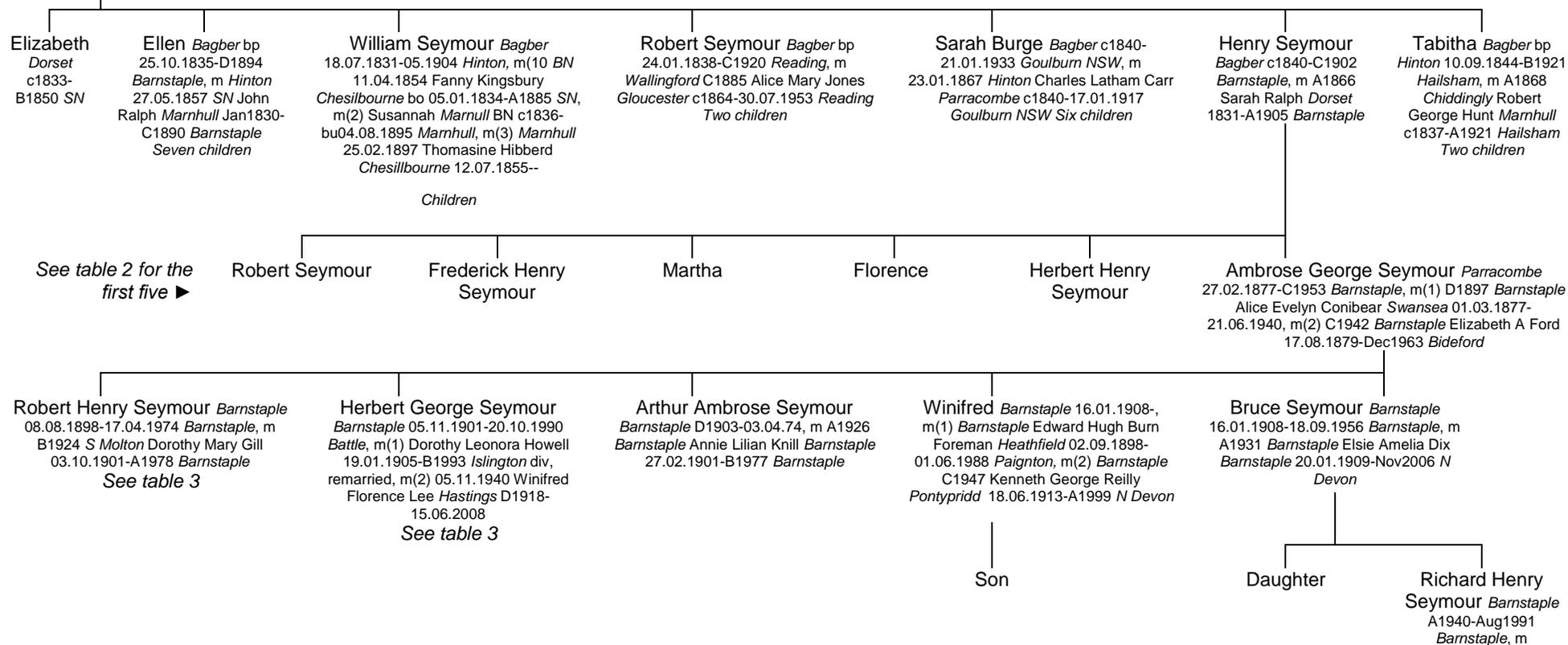


TABLE 2 FURTHER DESCENDANTS OF HENRY SEYMOUR 1840-1902 from table 1

Henry Seymour *Bagber* c1840-
 C1902 *Barnstaple* C1902 *Barnstaple*, m
 A1866 Sarah Ralph *Dorset* 1831-A1905
Barnstaple

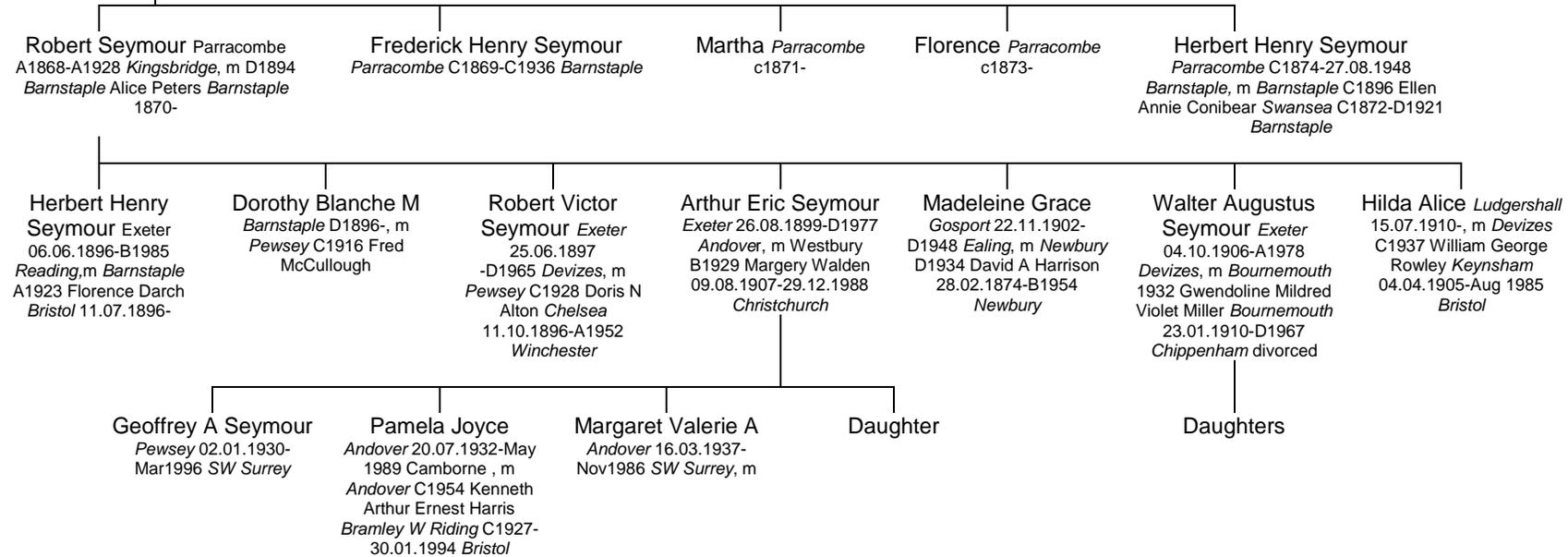
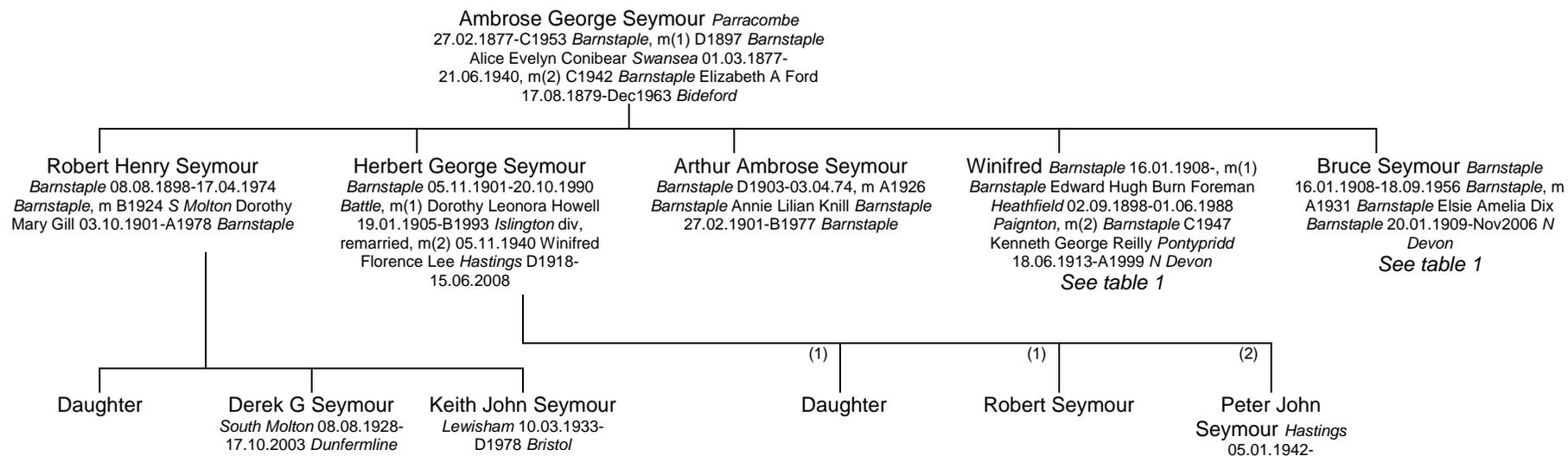


TABLE 3 THE FAMILY OF AMBROSE GEORGE SEYMOUR (1877-1953) from table 1



¹ Hastings and St Leonards Observer 10 April 1909
² Hastings and St Leonards Observer 14 February 1914
³ Hastings and St Leonards Observer 11 March 1916
⁴ Hastings and St Leonards Observer 18 May 1918
⁵ Hastings and St Leonards Observer 22 November 1919
⁶ Hastings and St Leonards Observer 25 October 1919
⁷ W H G Peters memoir
⁸ Notes by H G Seymour for a lecture, 1975.
⁹ As 8