

1 Yorkshire Heritage: The Family Background

*The whole world is an hour glass
In the lean hands of Time;
He turned it once, long long ago,
And still the faltering sand slides slow,
And still like a forgotten rhyme
The generations pass.*

K.M. Briggs, 'Lost Country'

In the early years of this century, a little girl, Katharine Mary Briggs, played in the garden of a corner house in Fellows Road, Hampstead, not far from where unceasing traffic now roars past Swiss Cottage. In 1902 she was four years old, the eldest of three sisters, and had already begun to play imaginary games with her adored father, based on the stories he told to her. The earliest of these, she believed, had been *The Water Babies*. By 1906, when she was allowed to stay up until eight, a whole world of literature was opening out before her, for her father read to her in the evening shortened versions of the immortal books of high adventure, *Treasure Island*, *Quentin Durward*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lorna Doone* and the like. The inspiration of these readings influenced the games played in the back garden of 102 Fellows Road, which survives much as Katharine describes it, with a straight path running between the two lawns from the billiardroom door to the toolshed, and a gate in the side wall leading into Kings College Road. This simple setting was the stage for many an exciting drama. It was, as Katharine wrote in 1980,

a very good place for playing. There was a high wall between it and the road, over which you could only see the tops of people's heads, but there was one solid wooden gate rather lower than the road [?wall], and ill-bred people used to stand and look over ... to watch us playing. I used to stop and stare at them furiously, but they never took any notice, and I often wondered what kind of insensitive creatures they were.¹

This was a sheltered existence for a sensitive, imaginative child,

with a mother who ran the house with serenity and efficiency, and a father always ready to reveal to her a wonderful world of youthful heroes and inspiring exploits against dastardly foes, together with two younger sisters who grew up to follow her lead unquestioningly. But the larger family into which Katharine was born belonged to a different, harsher world, that which E.M. Forster in *Howard's End* called 'a life in which telegrams and anger count.' 'This other life', admitted one of his characters, 'though obviously horrid, often seems the real one — there's grit in it. It does breed character.' Ernest Briggs, Katharine's father, had been born into a wealthy Yorkshire family in 1866, intended by his parents to take his place in precisely that kind of world. He started his training in Leeds as a mining engineer, in order to enter the family business, a limited company founded by his father and grandfather to work several coal mines in the West Riding. The reason why he changed course was said to be the heart weakness left by an illness, but an even stronger force driving him could have been the absorbing passion which he felt for the world of mountains and rivers, and his two favourite occupations of water-colour painting and fly-fishing. His marriage in 1893 to a farmer's daughter was also outside the normal family pattern.

'I knew myself very lucky', Katharine remembered at the end of her life, 'to have an artist for a father.' She was amused and fascinated by the visits of her father's many artist friends to Fellows Road, and the endless technical discussions to which she sometimes listened, head bent over a book. This was clearly a most satisfying way of life to her; she remembered feeling sorry for 'little girls whose fathers went to offices in the morning and came home tired and cross at night.' But she respected the alien world of commerce, coal-mining and industry through which the Briggs had built up their fortune. Meetings with aunts, uncles and cousins, of whom there was a seemingly endless supply, must have made her familiar with it, although it never absorbed any of her immediate family group. Indeed in 1935, when she was living in Scotland, 'Miss K.M. Briggs, Great Grand-daughter of the Founder' was to write a short account of Henry Briggs, Son and Co. Ltd, Whitwood Collieries, Normanton, illustrated by photographs of mining shafts and lines of trucks bearing the family name.² She kept at a respectful distance from this demanding industrial world, and never herself went down a mine, but she was proud of the family achievement. These sharply defined contrasts in Katharine's background may account for what an Oxford

Table 1 **The Briggs Family**

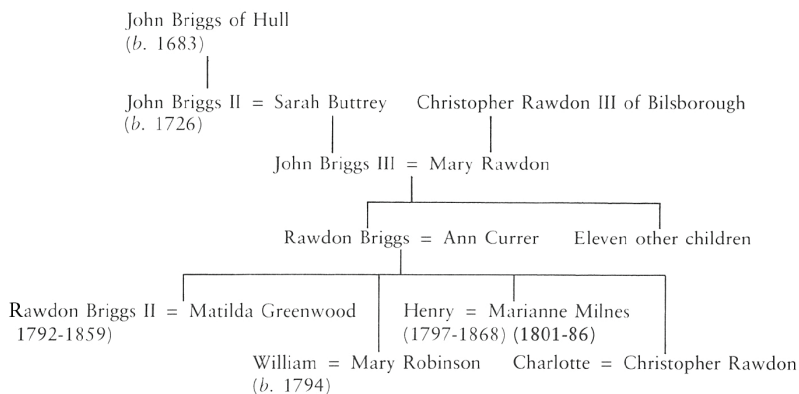
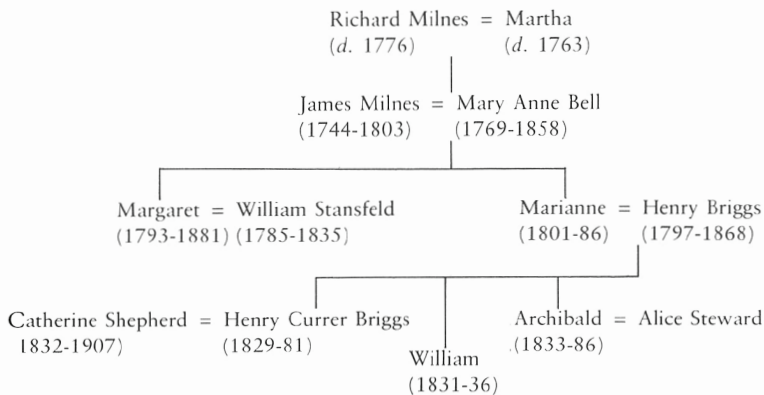


Table 2 **The Milnes Family**



friend described as ‘the admirable balance between her fine reason and gritty Yorkshire commonsense and a daring range of response to things beyond the ordinary experience.’³

Because of Katharine’s pride and interest in the past achievements of her family, and the effect of this on her own development, it is necessary to spend some time on this Yorkshire background. The Currers, a name retained by many of the later Briggs, seem to have

had little direct influence. Henry Curren took over Kildwick Manor, near Skipton, in the mid-sixteenth century, and built the beautiful manor house, which still stands today.⁴ The main male line of the family came to an end in 1756, and the only direct link with the Briggs is the marriage of Rawdon Briggs to Anne Curren, daughter of William Curren, Vicar of Clapham in Craven, in 1791, resulting in the setting up of the firm of Curren, Briggs and Curren to run a mill producing woollen yarn and carpets at Luddendon Foot. Until recently, the first Briggs about which anything was known was John Briggs of Hull, born in 1683, but further work has now been done on the family genealogy by Noel Curren Briggs, Katharine's cousin,⁵ and this John is found to be the son of an earlier John Briggs, a barber-surgeon and peruke-maker. The younger John married Sarah Buttrey in York Minster, and her ancestry has yielded some surprises: it can be traced back, mainly through the female line, to Cerdic, King of Wessex, in the sixth century, Arpad, King of Hungary who died in 907, and Erc, a fifth-century king of Dalriada, while one of her forbears, Isobel, was the illegitimate daughter of William the Lion of Scotland. There was thus a link between Sarah Briggs and the Macbeths, and this would assuredly have amused and delighted Katharine, with her love for Scotland and for Dalbeathie House not far from Birnam.

Sarah's husband, John Briggs, was a merchant in Yorkshire and a dissenter, who helped to build a small chapel in Bowl Alley Lane in Hull in 1725. Many such chapels were built in the years following the Toleration Act of 1689, to house congregations unwilling to accept everything in the Book of Common Prayer. Some of those which were fairly orthodox at the beginning came to adopt Unitarian opinions, and the Briggs were firm supporters of this movement, so that Katharine was brought up as a Unitarian. This did not mean deliberate opposition to the Church of England; the main principle of the Unitarians was refusal to limit their faith by creeds and written definitions, and to strive for religious tolerance. Many had their children baptized in the Church, and attended church services as well as their own chapels. The Unitarians had a strong sense of moral responsibility, and their religion was very much a practical affair; there is a constant record of the Briggs giving money and other forms of help where they felt it was needed. Family solidarity was strong, and the sons were loyal to their fathers and prepared to support the family business when their turn came. They were prompt to help

fellow Unitarians, and also felt concern for their workpeople, taking part in all kinds of charitable and educational schemes. There was much interest in education and science, under the influence of leading men in the movement, like Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, and they supported the new northern Universities, with their emphasis on science and technology and freedom from religious tests. Katharine's father and two of his brothers were sent down from Yorkshire to University College School in London, where teaching standards were high and there were no religious obligations on staff or pupils.⁶ While their outlook might be serious, the Briggs and their friends were not puritanical, but enjoyed giving lavish hospitality and had an enthusiasm for amateur theatricals, while some were gifted musicians and artists. But for the leading men of the family, nothing was allowed to interfere with their ambitious business enterprises. They seemed possessed of untiring energy and determination, and were resourceful and adaptable, with a gift for running firms, factories and mines efficiently. They never shrank from taking on new projects, and it is hardly surprising that many of the Briggs men did not attain old age, but left wives to survive them for many years.

During the eighteenth century the family operated in the area around Wakefield and Halifax. The river Calder was a convenient route for sending manufactured goods to the coast, and later the Rochdale Canal provided a link with the Mersey. The Briggs were manufacturers, underwriters and bankers, with interests in shipping and the export trade. When a marriage took place, it usually meant an alliance with another hard-working Unitarian family, and a new business partnership. There were two such alliances with the Rawdon family, well-known in Yorkshire, who were manufacturers of woollen cloth at Hebdon Bridge near Halifax, which proved very profitable for both sides.⁷

The Briggs were ready to experiment in many different directions. In 1807 Rawdon Briggs took over the Halifax Commercial Bank, and ran it very successfully as a family concern.⁸ His sons turned it into a joint stock bank, and Rawdon Briggs the second, a man 'of high and unimpeachable character' as a contemporary described him,⁹ was the Chairman; he also stood for Parliament and represented Halifax for two years in the Reformed Parliament of 1832. His younger brother Henry was Katharine's great-grandfather, and it was he who embarked on the business of coal-mining in the

West Riding. This again was the result of a marriage, for Henry married Marianne Milnes of Flockton in 1824, and the Milnes family had worked the New Flockton mine on their land since 1774.¹⁰ Henry, his mother-in-law Mrs Milnes, and Marianne's brother-in-law William Stansfeld formed a partnership to run the mine, and from that time the business expanded rapidly. Henry was soon owning and working new seams of coal south of the Calder, until in 1860 the company of Henry Briggs Son and Co Ltd was formed.¹¹

Conditions in the mines of the West Riding at this time were appallingly bad. The coal seams round Flockton were thin, sometimes only ten or twelve inches, and small children were employed because they could get through the low gates when men and horses could not. The Report of 1842 on the employment of children in mines makes horrifying reading.¹² They worked barefoot in water, covered in dirt, and the men were often naked, while girls wore only a shift. Young children might be left alone for long periods in total darkness, waiting to open and shut the gates when the coal was brought through. Others had to push the flat baskets of coal through the gates and up steep inclines, thrusting them forward with their heads, and slow or stupid children were often ill-treated by the men. After describing such conditions in a 'wet' mine at Mirfield, not far from Flockton, the writer of the Report noted: 'This colliery belongs to a gentleman reputed for benevolence, but who knows nothing of his own pits.'¹³

It cannot however be said of Henry Briggs that he was ignorant of what was going on below ground, and when he gave evidence on conditions at Flockton Colliery on 3 May 1841, the Report reveals something of the kind of man he was.¹⁴ He told them that children usually began work at nine years of age, but earlier 'where they are much distressed and there are large families', and described how they worked from six in the morning until about five in the afternoon, with an hour off for dinner. He did not leave them to open and shut gates, because he considered this a risky procedure, but they pushed the coal along the passages and through the gates, some no more than thirty inches high, moving about thirty 'corves' a day. On the whole he insisted that they were 'pretty well used', and resented the idea of Government interference:

As regards regulation of collieries, I object altogether to the right of Government to interfere as a principle. Supposing children were prevented from working in the pits till they were 10 years old, the best Flockton coal must cease to be worked, which is the best coal in Yorkshire. It would cost too much to increase the gates sufficiently.

Henry Briggs was a realist, and a man of his time, but he faced up to existing conditions with honesty and good sense, made it clear how the families depended on the employment of their children to keep them from starvation, and showed genuine concern for his employees. When the writers of the Report deplored the indifference of 'the higher orders of society' towards the workers, they singled out Flockton Colliery as an exception to this, because of the efforts made by the Stansfelds and the Briggs to help those who worked there.¹⁵

There is a detailed account in the Report of the classes held in a large schoolroom built on to the Stansfeld house. Here the children from the mine came on Sunday, and were also taken to services in church or chapel. There was school for the more intelligent on Monday, and various evening activities for old and young during the week: singing, indoor recreation, games and gymnastics outside, cricket for those who signed the temperance pledge, and allotments for the older men. The playground was run with great success by Miles Stansfeld and Henry Briggs, and the writer of the Report was much impressed by his visit there:¹⁶

The attendance was excellent, and the zeal and delight with which the different games and exercises were pursued, generally in spite of a drizzling rain, were most delightful. ... As there are games and exercises adapted to both sexes and to each age, young men, lads, girls and children are mingled together, and nothing is more hopeful than the perfect good temper and decorum which pervades the whole party.... Nor is the kindly and grateful feeling which exists on the part of the work-people of Messrs Stansfeld and Briggs towards their employers by any means confined to the playground — it exists most warmly through the village.

This, he concludes, is due to the fact that 'the family themselves are the teachers and in great measure the companions of their workpeople.' Henry had great faith in education, and declared to the Commission that he believed that high wages were harmful if

the men were uneducated, since they would then work for only three days a week and spend the rest of the time in the ale-house.

The picture of Henry Briggs which emerges from this Report, a man of toughness but also of integrity, and possessed of a strong sense of responsibility for those who worked for him, is characteristic of the Briggs family as a whole. Henry was a strong leader of industry in a ruthless, highly competitive age, and yet neither heartless nor wholly materialistic in his outlook. Many of his letters to Marianne survive, and it is clear that this was no marriage of convenience but a partnership of deep affection and respect on both sides. The letters reveal a man of tireless energy and resource, never sparing himself where business was concerned. He was continually travelling round the countryside on horseback or coach, and was prepared to walk miles through the streets of foreign cities in search of possible customers for his coal. He possessed an interest in science which was typical of the Unitarians, and gave papers to local societies, illustrated by chemical demonstrations.¹⁷ He found time to be interested in music and art, and he remained a loyal Unitarian, conducting Sunday services and instructing his work-people after he moved to Overton with his family, while Marianne gave him able assistance. All that he touched seemed to prosper, and the only failure in which he was ever involved, that of the Stansfeld firm in Leeds, caused him much regret; he expressed the hope in his will that his sons could compensate those who had lost money through this.

As time went on, however, the good relationship noted at Flockton did not continue in the Briggs collieries. There were continual and bitter disputes, and antagonism against the mine-owners, while Henry, now president of an association of masters, became a target for hostility. 'All masters is devils, but our master is prince of devils', one collier was heard to say, and after a long strike, a letter came to Outwood Hall, where Henry and Marianne were then living, in 1863, threatening his life:¹⁸

MR Briggs, I will tell you what i think by you. About this struggle you are getting an ould man and besides that you are a tyrant -ould B-G-R now sirs what do you think to that bit — we have stoped 13 weeks all redy but i have myself sw(orn) to take your Life and your son also. But you shlt not live 13 days ...

The same night a warning note came to Marianne: 'MRS Briggs do tell MR Briggs to mind for he is in danger.' As much as seventy-