

Alice and May's Story

There was a family story about Auntie Alice; she allegedly died in a fire, when at home alone, in Whitstable, Kent. 'Auntie Alice' was actually my grandmother's aunt and our lives didn't overlap, although it was close. She was born in Broomfield, then a rural Essex parish and was the third of the six children of my great great grandparents, Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer. She was to become the middle sister of five girls; her one brother was three years her junior.

When the 1861 census was taken, Alice's birth was just three weeks away, on the 24th of April.¹ Her father, Thomas, was working as a gardener, almost certainly for Broomfield Place, as the family was living at Broomfield Place Lodge.² A lodge still survives however there is thought to have been two, so this may not have been the one lived in by the Dawsons.³



Broomfield Place Lodge

It wasn't until the 27th of October 1861 that Alice was baptised at Broomfield, when her father, Thomas, was described as a groom and gardener.⁴

Our next snapshot of Alice's life is in 1871, when Alice, like her brother

¹ 1939 register for 5 Bexley Street, Whitstable, Kent RG101/1799I/008/17.

² 1861 census for Broomfield, Essex RG9 1080 folio 122.

³ Information from Jane Braund, then of Broomfield.

⁴ Baptism register for St. Mary the Virgin Broomfield, Essex 1852-1883 D/P 248/1/6 image 20 online images of original register taken from <http://seax.essexcc.gov.uk>.

and sisters, was living at home and was listed as a scholar.⁵ A Bible, presented by Broomfield Sunday School to Alice's older sister Clara, survives, so it is likely that Alice also attended.⁶ In 1872, Alice and Clara, were each awarded a prize of 1s 6d for needlework, at the Broomfield Cottagers' Show.⁷ Several members of the family went on to become talented dressmakers.

At some point between 1874, when the family was completed with the birth of Alice's sister, Annie and 1881, the family moved to the more urban environment of Penge, then in Surrey, now part of Greater London. Alice cannot be located in the 1881 census but was almost certainly in service, like her older and younger sisters. There is an Alice Dawson of the right age, working as a housemaid for the Hedges family at 12 Windsor Road, West Ham, Essex. The birthplace is given as Colchester, some twenty-five miles from Broomfield⁸ but no Alice Dawson born in Colchester can be found in 1871.⁹ Could this be Alice? Alice was a witness to her sister Clara's marriage in 1886.¹⁰

There were photos of Alice and her daughter 'cousin May' in the family photograph album. They had captions and they came with accounts of family relationships. The oral evidence suggested that Alice's first husband was a Mr Fludder and that this was May's birth surname.¹¹

What then of May, who was born on the 8th of June 1889 at 19 Walmer Road, Kensington, Surrey, when Alice was recorded as being a domestic

⁵ 1871 census for Broomfield, Essex RG10 1663 folio 128.

⁶ Bible in family possession.

⁷ *Chelmsford Chronicle* 19 July 1872 p7 col d.

⁸ 1881 census for 12 Windsor Road, West Ham, Essex RG11 1721 folio 25.

⁹ Indexes to the 1871 census on FindmyPast www.findmypast.co.uk.

¹⁰ Marriage certificate of Clara Dawson & Philip James Woolgar 1886 - original in family possession.

¹¹ Oral information from Mrs Ella Bird née Woolgar (granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer) and Mrs Gwendoline Braund née Smith (great granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer).

servant?¹² Was a Mr Fludder her father? There certainly were people with the surname Fludder within a five mile radius of Penge in the 1880s and 1890s but there is no evidence to suggest that Alice was married to any of them, or was living with a Mr Fludder as if she was his wife. So the Fludder connection seems to be a complete fiction.

May was registered as Dawson, with no father's name listed but was given the unusual middle name, Bula. The hunt then began for a Mr Bula as a potential father for May. There was only one recorded male named Bula in the country in 1891 and this was a Swiss clerk, John F Bula who was living and working in Wood Street, London. He was eight years younger than Alice, only twenty when May was born,¹³ could he have been the father? The occupants of 19 Walmer Road in 1881 and 1891 offer no clues; it appears to have been a house occupied by several working class families. The building no longer survives.

Alice and May went to live with Alice's parents, Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson at 6 St. John's Cottages, Penge and by 1891, Alice was working as a cook;¹⁴ unfortunately, we don't know who her employer was.



**Alice Dawson
possibly a wedding photo
with thanks to descendants
of the Hart family**

On the 27th of August 1898, at Beckenham in Kent, Alice married

¹² Birth certificate of May Bula Dawson 1889 – pdf from the General Registrar; 1911 census for RG14 for 67 Perry Vale, Forest Hill, Kent RG14 2831 sn 8.

¹³ 1891 census for 119 Wood Street, London RG12 239 folio 80. Coincidentally, John Bula was working with a member of the Hart family but has not been possible to connect this colleague with Alice's future husband Thomas Hart.

¹⁴ 1891 census for 6 St John's Cottages, Maple Road, Penge, Surrey RG12 599 folio 102.

Thomas Sanders Hart. He was a fifty year old widower, whose wife had died just three months earlier, leaving Thomas with four children in their twenties. This apparently came as a great shock to Thomas' family.¹⁵

Thomas worked in the print trade before becoming an antiques dealer and bookseller. He had been born in Ceylon¹⁶ but had spent much of his life in Ireland. In 1891, Thomas, his first wife and two of their children were living in Clerkenwell, not far from Alice's family.¹⁷

Although May took the surname Hart and named Thomas as her father on her marriage certificate, I had dismissed him as a potential father. He did



after all appear to be in a settled family unit both before and after May's birth, which took place nine years before Thomas and Alice married. Careful work by a researcher with an interest in the Hart and Sanders families has suggested that I was wrong to dismiss Thomas. Thomas' grandmother's christian name was Bula; it had not occurred to me to consider it as anything other than a surname. It seems almost certain that May was named after her father's grandmother and that her birth was the result of an extra-marital affair between Alice and the man she was to marry nine years later. It is a shame that there are no clues as to how Thomas and Alice may have met. His family do not appear to have been of sufficient social-standing to have employed servants and it seems unlikely that they may have encountered each other as a result of Thomas' occupation.

**May Bula
Dawson a.k.a.
Hart**

Thomas, Alice and May were living at 21 Stavordale

¹⁵ Information from a Hart descendant.

¹⁶ Now Sri Lanka.

¹⁷ 1891 census for 7 Exmouth Street, Clerkenwell, Surrey RG12 225, folio 11.

Road, Islington, Middlesex in 1901 and May was using the surname Hart.¹⁸ In the photograph of May as a girl, she appears to be about fifteen, making the date around 1904. She is wearing what seems to be a shockingly short skirt for the time. Could it have been some kind of theatrical or sporting costume? By 1911, the family had moved to 67 Perry Vale, Forest Hill and May had started work as a book keeper.¹⁹ Thomas died in 1913 and the 1921 census finds the widowed Alice living in the seaside town of Whitstable, Kent, working as a housekeeper at the imposing Bear and Key Hotel, a premier establishment in the town.²⁰



The Bear and Key, Whitstable

Alice made rather an unusual will in 1934, making her unmarried sister, Annie, her executor and instructing that her daughter was to be paid an income for her lifetime, then Alice's estate was to revert to Annie. This raises questions as to why Alice did not make her daughter or son-in-law her executor.

May was given an income, so there clearly wasn't a break down in their



Seated Alice Hart née Dawson 1861-1949 probably May Bula Dear née Dawson a.k.a. Hart 1889-1937 standing

¹⁸ 1901 census for 21 Stavordale Road, Islington Middlesex RG13 200 folio 114.

¹⁹ 1911 census for 67 Perry Vale, Forest Hill, Kent RG14 2831 sn 8.

²⁰ 1921 census for the Bear and Key, Harbour Road, Whitstable, Kent RG15 04361 sn 51.

relationship. Was May perhaps already unwell? It is also odd that Alice did not make a new will after May died in 1937.

According to those family stories and the labels in the photo album, May was thought to have married a William Phleoney or Fleoney²¹ but this does not seem to be a surname. Instead, records show that she married, using the surname Hart, on the 18th of March 1918 to William George Thomas Dear in Beckenham, Kent.²²

In 1921, the Dears were living at 24 Mackenzie Rd, Beckenham and William was working as a warehouseman.²³ They had a son, Colin J, born in 1922 in Bromley district but he died as an infant, thus confirming the oral evidence that they were childless.²⁴ May died on the 19th of April 1937 at 49 Prince's Avenue, Petts Wood, Kent²⁵ and William remarried on the 27th of December in the same year to twenty eight year old Marjorie Elizabeth Ellenden in Woolwich registration district.²⁶



William and May Dear

²¹ Oral information from Mrs Ella Bird née Woolgar (granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer) and Mrs Gwendoline Braund née Smith (great granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer).

²² General Registrar's birth and marriage indexes; the marriage certificate of William George Thomas Dear and May Bula Hart 1918, from the General Register Office; 1911 census for 354 Blandford Road, Beckenham RG14 3672 sn 168.

²³ 1921 census for 24 Mackenzie Rd, Beckenham, Kent RG15 03823 sn 176.

²⁴ Oral information from Mrs Ella Bird née Woolgar (granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer) and Mrs Gwendoline Braund née Smith (great granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer).

²⁵ General Registrar's death indexes. The indexes of the Principal Probate Registry.

²⁶ General Registrar's marriage indexes.

In 1939, Alice was living at 5 Bexley Street, Whitstable, a small, terraced house near the sea. She was no longer working but was sharing her home with a younger woman, Elizabeth Horrell.²⁷

Despite the birth of May, it doesn't seem that Alice was ostracised by her family. Unlike other 'embarrassing' relatives, she was spoken about, albeit with inaccurate elements to the account and included in the family album.

What then of the story of Alice burning to death whilst alone in a house in Whitstable, Kent?²⁸ Surely something from Alice's story must have been accurately reported. Her death certificate shows that she died on the 10th of September 1949 of pneumonia, coma and thrombosis. The address was 5 Bexley Street, Whitstable and her niece Kathleen Dawson registered the death.²⁹

Like many family stories, there is just a tiny grain of truth in the account of a fire. In the early hours of Tuesday 27th of December 1949, firemen attended a blaze in Bexley Street, Whitstable. A Miss Madge Horrell was found dead in her bed.³⁰ The death was registered as Elizabeth M Horrell.³¹ Although the newspapers described her a Miss and the 1939 register stated that she was married,³² this was surely Alice's companion. Further details come to light in a report of the inquest in *The Kent Messenger and Gravesend Telegraph*. Although the victim was known locally as Miss Madge Horrell, she was actually Mrs Elizabeth Madeline Horrell née Iddenden.³³ Madge is elusive in the records but she was born in 1887, she married

²⁷ 1939 register for 5 Bexley Street, Whitstable, Kent RG101/1799I/008/17.

²⁸ Oral information from Mrs Ella Bird née Woolgar (granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer) and Mrs Gwendoline Braund née Smith (great granddaughter of Thomas and Mary Archer Dawson née Bowyer).

²⁹ Death certificate of Alice Hart née Dawson 1949 - from the General Register Office - facsimile copy.

³⁰ *Lincolnshire Echo* 27 December 1949 p. 1 col. c.

³¹ General Registrar's death indexes.

³² 1939 register for 5 Bexley Street, Whitstable, Kent RG101/1799I/008/17.

³³ *The Kent Messenger and Gravesend Telegraph* p. 7 col f.

Henry Freeman in Canterbury in 1916 and then remarried to Walter Horrell in the Wycombe district of Buckinghamshire in 1925.³⁴ In the 1939 register, Walter was living in Addlestone, Surrey and is listed with the marital status 'separated';³⁵ he died in 1945.³⁶

The newspaper account of the inquest stated that the *"deceased's health had been bad and she had had many falls, the last on the afternoon of Boxing Day, when witness [a neighbour, Mrs Mary Darby] found her lying in the kitchen, after which she was very shaky and incoherent. Apparently she slept in the kitchen. Dr C E Etheridge, who had been attending deceased for 16 years, said that on Christmas Eve she was very shaky and feeble and considerably worse than nine days previously. He attributed her condition to worry because the house had been sold and she had been told she must leave and could not find anywhere to go. She had for many years helped the former owner, Mrs Hart and when the latter died had no status in the house."*

It seems then that, on Alice's death, the family sold 5 Bexley Street and neither they, nor Alice, had made any provision for Mrs Horrell. As we have seen, Alice's will had been made in 1934, almost certainly before Mrs Horrell became her lodger.

Having unearthed the origins of that part of the story, one can't help wondering about the Fludder and Phleoney labels in the photograph album.

³⁴ General Registrar's birth and marriage indexes.

³⁵ 1939 register for 7 Green Lane, Addlestone, Surrey RG101/1878D/007/27.

³⁶ General Registrar's death indexes.