

*Florence Emily Dewson - A Biography*



*(1889 - 1970)*

Researched and written by Brian Drescher, 2003.

## **INTRODUCTION**



**SOUTH CREAKE, NORFOLK**

Robert Dewson, Florence Emily's Great Grandfather, was born in South Creake a small village near Wells-Next-The-Sea in North Norfolk in 1818. His likely father, William Dewson, had been sentenced to 7 years transportation at the local Assize Court in March 1818 for stealing wheat about the time of Robert's birth <sup>1</sup>. At the time of writing it was not known if the sentence had been carried out.

## **BEVERLEY**

By 1839 Robert was a butcher at the Beverley Wednesday market living in Walkergate in the town. Beverley in the East Riding of Yorkshire was an ancient market town dominated by the large Minster founded by John of Beverley, Archbishop of York in 721.

It was flourishing with an important corn trade, and had a major employer in Tigar, Champney and Co, paint and colour manufacturers and an iron works producing agricultural machinery, and domestic and wrought iron. There were cattle markets on alternate Wednesdays and regular fairs. Beverley is nine miles from Hull and joined to the River Hull that flows into the Humber by a short canal<sup>2</sup>. There were over a thousand acres of common pastures now known as Beverley Westwood.

Robert married Mary West from East Gate, Beverley on 19 February 1839 at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in the town<sup>3</sup>. He had a number of professions including brushmaker, painter and at the time of his death in 1893 he was a labourer<sup>3</sup>. Robert became a Methodist local preacher later in life. Methodism which was founded by John Wesley and George Whitefield in the mid eighteenth century had a huge following among poorer people with societies formed across the country which met together to share in prayer, friendship and in helping their neighbours. Many social reformers were Methodists. Lay preachers were not ordained but were trained to give part-time service to the church especially in preaching<sup>4</sup>. Mary and Robert had four sons and three daughters. Robert their second son was born on 25

March 1846<sup>3</sup> and was christened at the Wesleyan Chapel, Beverley in the following month. He married Christiana Dunn who had been born in North Frodingham (between Beverley and Driffield) in 1845<sup>3</sup>. They had six sons and two daughters. Oliver Robert, Florence Emily's father was the first born in Driffield in 1867. Robert like his father had a number of professions including brushmaker, painter and insurance agent. By 1881 Robert and his family had moved to Hull. Oliver Robert was a telegraph messenger<sup>5</sup>. In early 1886 he married Catherine Eliza Leake who had been born in Hull.



**OLIVER ROBERT & KATE DEWSON – FLORENCE'S PARENTS**

## **MOVE TO HULL**

Oliver Robert and Catherine Eliza ('Kate') had three daughters and a son all born in Hull. Their eldest child, Ada, was born on 17 August 1886 when they were living at 10 Wainfleet Terrace, Fountain Road. Florence Emily, their second child, was born on 18 October 1889. The family was then living at 6 Melrose Terrace, Middleton Street <sup>6</sup>. The new electric trams ran along nearby Anlaby Road which was the first service introduced in Hull in 1889. In 1891 the family was living at 2 Alexandra Street and were still living there when Olive Dunn was born in early 1893. Robert, the only son, was born on 16 December 1896 when they were living at 7 Spring Cottages, Middleton Street <sup>6</sup>. All these addresses were in the same part of West Hull.

## **METHODISTS**

Oliver Robert and his family followed the Wesleyan Methodist religion of his parents and grandparents. He and Kate were teetotalers and Florrie was not allowed to have the stout prescribed by the doctor to build her up when she was ill. All the children (with the possible

exception of Olive for whom no record has yet been found) were baptised at the Alexandra Methodist Church in West Hull.

Other family members also worshipped there. Their cousin, Violet Dewson, was baptised there in 1890 and so too was Esther Mary Dewson, their grandfather's eldest daughter in 1902 when she was 21. All three Dewson families were living near each other in 1891. Oliver Robert and Christiana's family was quite small for the time but there is no evidence that there were any children born that did not survive. Florence Emily was probably named after Florence Nightingale who had been named "the Lady with the Lamp" by British soldiers in the Crimean War after organising a nursing service to relieve their sufferings despite considerable official opposition. Florence Nightingale had been named after the Italian Renaissance city.

## **HULL – A THRIVING CITY**

At the time that Florence Emily was born Britain was the world's leading power with its empire stretching across the world covering India, Australia, New Zealand and Canada as well as large parts of Africa. Queen Victoria had celebrated her Golden Jubilee in 1887, and Lord Salisbury, a Tory, was Prime Minister <sup>7</sup>. Hull was also booming. The city's population had grown from less than 16,000 in 1777 to 208,000 in 1892. Its prosperity was based on a massive increase in trade through the port on the back of Britain's position as the world's leading industrial power. Its main imports were food, livestock, wood and raw wool and main exports were coal, textiles, paint and machinery. There were 20, 000 employed in the fishing industry alone. Shipbuilding and the manufacture of oils and colours were also important <sup>8</sup>. It was the only significant centre for trade and industry in East Yorkshire so was a natural attraction for people in the surrounding area seeking work such as the Dewsons who moved the nine miles from Beverley to Hull.

## **SCHOOLDAYS FOR FLORENCE EMILY**

When Florence Emily was born her father was a Civil Service Postman but by 1901 had been promoted to Inspector of Telegraph Messengers. The Dewsons were now living at 258 Alliance Avenue <sup>5</sup> and Florrie, as friends and family knew her was a pupil at the Boulevard Secondary School. She was an intelligent and hard working student.

Even with Oliver Robert's promotion the family were not well off and at the time there were still school fees. Florrie left school to help her mother. Apparently one of her teachers had seen her cleaning the front step and told her mother that she wanted to speak to her. She was told that Florrie was wasted doing menial work and should go back to school, pass her exams and become a teacher. Florrie couldn't afford to go to a college so studied at home and obtained her teaching certificate by external examination while teaching at local schools. Her sister, Olive, was considered "delicate" and stayed at home when she left school. Florrie still often had to help at home in the evenings after a day's work. Ada and later Olive worked at the Hull Telephone Exchange.

## **COURTING**

Florrie had a few boyfriends. She once got into trouble at school because she was seen walking with a boy to school. She said "Its a pity if I can't walk to school with my cousin" – even though it wasn't her cousin. She went out with Brian Rix's (the comedian) father<sup>9</sup>. Florrie married Albert Edward "Ted" Baxter at Anlaby Road Wesleyan Methodist Church on 21 April 1915 after a long courtship although they had stopped seeing each other for a year at one time. They lived less than half a mile from each other, and had both worshipped at Anlaby Road Methodist Church. West Park on Anlaby Road was with its impressive tree-lined walkways a common place for courting couples to stroll. In the late Edwardian era and the period up to the First World War in 1914, Hull enjoyed the best of the music hall with top names such as Harry Lauder, and Vesta Tilley appearing at local theatres<sup>10</sup>. At the time of her marriage Florrie was living with her parents at 603 Spring Bank West. No occupation was shown on the marriage certificate although it is thought that she was teaching. She was twenty-five and he was twenty-seven<sup>11</sup>.



**TED BAXTER**

## **TED BAXTER**

Alice, Ted's mother, died when he was less than two years old. He and his two sisters Lilian "Nin" and Emily Florence "Tots" were brought up by their stepmother, Jane Austin (a friend of his mother's). John Robert, Ted's father, was a very successful butcher who had a large shop in Hessle Road, Hull where there was a large fishing community. He committed suicide in 1904 and was found by Ted who was fourteen years old. No inquest records have survived and there were no newspaper reports so the reason(s) for taking his life is unknown. He left over twenty houses to his wife and children <sup>12</sup>. At the time Ted married he was living at 549 Anlaby Road

with his stepmother. He and Florrie set up home in 541 Anlaby Road which he had been left to him in his father's will and where his father had died. Ted was a coal export clerk with Olsens, a Hull shipping company.



**541 ANLABY ROAD, HULL**

## **THE FAMILY**

Florrie and Ted had three children. Florence Eileen was born on 19 February 1918. She disliked her first name and never used it. Robert "Bob" Austin was born on 16 November 1921 with his second name taken from Ted's stepmother's name at her first marriage (Jane Austin had died in 1917). The youngest Audrey Kathleen was born on 24 July 1923. All the children were brought up as Methodists.

The family were able to enjoy a good standard of living while the children were young. Ted had bought shares in Olsens and had become a Director with responsibility for coal exports. Sometimes he travelled overseas on business. He also had income from stocks and shares. They had a maid when the children were very young but after she stayed out all night she was "given her cards". She was not considered to be a good, moral influence on the children<sup>9</sup>.

## **GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES**

The Carlton cinema which would have been very popular with all the family opened on Anlaby Road in September 1928 no more than a couple of hundred yards from the house. Before it was built there were fields and the Boulevard School sports ground <sup>13</sup>. Hull Fair allegedly the largest fair in England was held for a week in mid-October with children given a day off school to go.

The crash of the Wall Street stock market in the United States in 1929 sparked by speculation led to a world wide economic depression with world trade reducing by two thirds by 1932. Unemployment in Britain rose from 1.2 million people in 1929 to 3 million by Easter 1931 <sup>7</sup>. Ted had significant investments in stocks and shares which then reduced greatly in value. Although the Olsen Lines must have suffered a considerable loss in business from the reduction in trade Ted kept his job. By this time the company founder had died and his son had taken over. Ted decided to sell his shares in Olsens and became the company's coal exporting manager. The family were better placed to ride the depression than most and were still able to maintain a good standard of living. Ted had a phone by 1930 <sup>13</sup> which was not common then. He also had a company car, a Morris Oxford. The car had a dickey seat that the children used to fight for <sup>14</sup>. They hired a house for a month in the summer usually in Bridlington and Ted used to catch the 7.30 train to Hull in the mornings to go to work. The children spent a lot of time on the beach.

Shortly before the war Florrie, Ada and Olive went on a cruise to Norway taking Eileen and a friend with them.



**DEWSON FAMILY**

## **A HARD WORKING WOMAN**

Florrie was very hard working. She had three children and a large house to look after. She made all the children's clothes including Audrey's ballet clothes on a Singer sewing machine and knitted and crocheted. Florrie had a cleaner ("Working Ada" to distinguish her from the Adas in the Dewson family) once a week but did all the spring-cleaning herself. Every week she had a washday and a windows day. The house had sash windows and she would pull the window half way up so that she could sit on the ledge to clean the outside. She did all the painting and decorating including paper hanging even graining the doors with combs. Everything she did quickly and well<sup>9</sup>.

## **CONTRASTING TEMPERAMENTS**

Ted and Florrie had very different temperaments. Ted was very quiet and gentle. Florrie was the driving force and very determined. Disciplining the children was mainly Florrie's responsibility and she was quite strict although soft at heart. Florrie used to say to the children if she was not sure who was at fault "I'm going to smack you both then I know that I've got the right one". Ted was only involved when there were major problems usually with Bob. She would say "Look, Ted, that lad's getting out of control you're going to have to take him in hand". Bob was usually late back home and on one occasion Ted went to the back door with a strap to use on him but

Florrie watched for Bob coming out of the front window and went outside to warn him. Florrie was the organiser. She looked after the money, paid the bills and gave Ted pocket money.

Eileen had been ill and had several mastoid operations in the early 1930s. The operations had been very expensive particularly as she had them at home. She was also very ill after picking up an infection after one of the operations. Florrie had to have all her teeth out and the dentist said that it was all the worry <sup>9</sup>.

## **TEACHING**



**SCHOOLCHILDREN IN VILLA PLACE, HULL**

(Photograph by kind permission of the Local History Unit, Hull College  
[www.historyofhull.co.uk](http://www.historyofhull.co.uk))

Women teachers could only teach for three months after marriage when Florrie wed. She did not teach while the children were young and there was no need to financially although the family income had declined with the fall of value of stocks and shares. However the position changed later and Florrie went back to teaching in the early 1930s to provide money to cover

the costs of Eileen's operations. Initially she was a supply teacher and then was appointed permanently. Throughout her teaching career she taught at primary schools usually the admissions year – the “babies class”. Most Hull school children were evacuated early in the War. Florrie taught at Villa Place on Hessle Road in Hull in early 1941 and went fire watching there sometimes with Audrey. A land mine exploded in nearby Walker Street on 21 March 1941 killing 5 Villa Place school children. Florrie probably taught three of the children who were all aged 5. The school was closed between 9 May and 26 May 1941 after a land mine exploded in the infant's schoolyard. Between 8 July 1941 and 30 June 1942 she was loaned by Hull Education Committee to teach at Ellerker, a small village about 12 miles from Hull travelling by bus there and back each day. She was transferred to Chiltern Street School in Hull on 1 July 1942<sup>15</sup>. Florrie was to teach at Chiltern Street until 1966. She usually taught the Admissions class. On 24 July 1952 she was appointed senior mistress. The school's Head Mistress from 1939 to 1956 was Miss Medd. The following extracts from the HM Inspectors of Schools in 1956 gives an understanding of the School and the way that it was run:

***This school is situated in an old and comparatively congested part of the city.***

***The teaching accommodation consists of 4 classrooms of which all but one are partitioned rooms. There is no hall but the folding back of a partition allows the school to mix for a morning assembly which forms a fitting beginning to the day's programme in this excellent little school, which owes so much to the devoted service of the Headmistress who has had charge of the school since 1939. Her high ideals and marked understanding of young children have combined with her sincerity and wholehearted efforts to establish very good relations with both children and parents. Over the past few years she had sought progressively to relate the work in the basic skills to the children's practical experiences: The assistant mistresses have responded successfully and with real conviction to the challenge presented by the less formal methods suggested by the headmistress.***

Conclusion

***The headmistress and her staff may justly take pride in a happy and successful school where the children are receiving a full and satisfying education.***

The Inspectors were also complimentary about all the teachers and said this about Florrie:

***The Reception Class is taught by a mistress of 67 years of age who has adapted herself loyally and well to the newer methods of teaching and who's skill as a story teller is a real asset.***

On 31 October 1956 Miss Medd retired and was replaced by Mrs Robson who was to be Head Mistress for the remainder of Florrie's time at Chiltern Street School.

Florrie was a very keen teacher. Ted complained that she paid more attention to the school than to him – because she liked teaching so much. After the war Florrie taught at Chiltern Street School until she was well in to her seventies. Every year she did the baking for the Christmas parties at the school and Audrey and Eileen and later her grandchildren often went. At least once she ran a whist drive for her friends to pay for two children whose parents could not afford to send them on the school trip. They went to Lake Ullswater in the Lake District by train. Publication of a school photograph in the Hull Daily Mail in early 1983 prompted a number of former pupils at Chiltern Street to write in about memories of their schooldays. Margaret Wilson (nee Hamilton) wrote “ I began school life in 1957 at Chiltern Street School. My first teacher was Mrs Baxter who was always kind and patient to us all” <sup>16</sup>. The School log book showed that in the twenty-four years that she worked there Florrie was rarely absent from school ill but that when she was bronchitis was often the cause. In 1954 she was absent for three months after a hysterectomy. She was also absent with lumbago for two weeks in 1958.

Florrie had been senior mistress (Deputy Head) at Chiltern St School. Mrs Robson who was head mistress kept persuading her to go back to teaching long after she passed retirement age. She finally stopped teaching when she was 77. Even then she was riding her bike to school. On 21 July 1966 Miss Black, the Schools Inspector presented Florrie with a scroll to mark her retirement. She was also given presents. Her final day was 26 July 1966.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR



Hull was in the “front line” during the war. It was a major port and industrial centre which was not just a primary target for German bombers but a secondary one after raiding inland targets. The River Humber was used for navigation by returning bombers which would then drop any remaining bombs on Hull. There were two major raids on Hull in May 1941 which led to major destruction and loss of life. During the remainder of the year the air raids were more sporadic. There were two attacks in August. The first raid was on Monday 18 August. “ *bombs and casualties – 19 fatal – were scattered. Six people were killed in Holborn Mount, a stone’s throw from Mulgrave Street: three more died in the Garden Village and five in National Avenue.* ”<sup>17</sup> Four of the five dead in National Avenue were Oliver Robert Dewson, his wife Catherine Eliza Dewson, David Birkbeck their son-in-law (husband of their daughter Olive) and their grand daughter, (Ada) Brenda who was sixteen. Olive survived but was quite seriously injured. Florrie heard that the house had been bombed from a phone call from her brother-in-law, Harold Walker (Ada’s husband) and walked to National Avenue with Ted and Audrey where they were told that only Olive had survived.



**BRENDA BIRKBECK**

**DIED AGED 16 AT NATIONAL AVENUE, HULL IN AUGUST 1944**

The loss of her parents, niece and brother-in-law was devastating to Florrie who lost her belief in God as a result. Robbie, her brother, had died of pneumonia in 1932 brought on by being gassed in the trenches in the First World War. Hull suffered badly from bombing during the War and much of the City Centre and housing had to be rebuilt in the late 1940s and 1950s. 1200 people were killed in air raids and 1472 houses were totally destroyed. A further 85,000 houses were damaged leaving less than 7,000 untouched <sup>17</sup>.

## **APPENDIX I – SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Norfolk Quarter Sessions Records – The National Archives.
2. Whites Directory, 1840.
3. General Register Office (GRO) records for births, marriages and deaths.
4. Encyclopaedia Britannica (Children's)
5. Census of Population Records.
6. Alexandra Methodist Church parish records.
7. Pears Encyclopaedia.
8. Bulmer's History of East Yorkshire for 1892.
9. Interviews and conversations with Audrey Taylor nee Baxter, Florrie's daughter.
10. Archive Photographs Series – Kingston Upon Hull
11. Anlaby Road Methodist Church parish records.
12. Last will and testament for John Robert Baxter.
13. Kelly's Directory for Hull, 1930.
14. Interview with Bob Baxter, Florrie's son.
15. School logbook entries for Villa Place and Ellerker Schools.
16. Memorabilia from Chiltern Street School a collection of letters.
17. "The Blitz in Hull" by the Reverend Philip Graystone.
18. Interview with Brenda Darnill, Florrie's granddaughter.

**Note:** The references to sources shown in the text are illustrative. There are numerous other areas where sources have been used but not marked. In particular this applies to conversations with Audrey Taylor, and GRO and Census records.