

George Coggins (1846-1920)

Biography by Brian Carter

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The name of George Coggins is now unfamiliar in Deddington, yet one hundred years ago there was hardly a person in Deddington who would have been better known or more highly esteemed.

He was born in Deddington in 1846, the son of John and Caroline Coggins: his father was a carpenter and was probably not able to offer him any material advantages in life, but clearly he was an intelligent and hardworking boy. He attended the Academy in Banbury, went on to train as a solicitor, and in due course set up practice in Deddington.

At that time Deddington was well supplied with solicitors so no doubt competition kept them all on their toes. Coggins was active in all affairs in Deddington and was particularly involved in the wider sphere in Oxfordshire on account of his interest in politics. He had been a zealous sub-agent for Albert Brassey MP when he held the North Oxfordshire seat.

George Coggins married Mary Helen Holiday of Hampton Poyle and they lived at The Laurels in Deddington: she died in 1899 and later in the year he moved to The Hermitage in the Market Place. Curiously, there do not seem to be any obituaries in the local papers when he died in 1920, although it is possible he may have moved away from Deddington when he retired, but it would be useful to know of any obituaries.

Perhaps George Coggins's greatest legacy to Deddington was a posthumous one. It lives in three scrapbooks of printed ephemera that are deposited in the Bodleian Library [G.A. Oxon. 4• 785-6-7]. The scrapbooks are rather battered but they contain a unique source of printed material relating to Deddington mainly in the second half of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th. Deddington is fortunate in having two separate but extensive sources for studying the second half of the 19th century. The 44 volumes of manuscript diaries of the Reverend Cotton Risley provide a personal view of the period from someone closely involved with local affairs. Readers of the Deddington News will be familiar with these diaries thanks to the painstaking work of Buffy Heywood.

The scrapbooks of George Coggins are the other source which disclose the hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of pieces he so assiduously assembled and preserved, and constitute his great legacy to Deddington.

Ruth Johnson has found a brief obituary notice in the Deddington Deanery Magazine for December 1920:

George Coggins died aged 73 on November 1st 1920 and was buried in the same grave as his wife on the 5th, his wife having predeceased him by twenty one years. Among his professional duties as a solicitor in private practice, and his active interest in political affairs, he was Coroner for North Oxfordshire, Clerk to the Justices at the Magistrates' Court, and was also a Church warden and school manager.

The first volume of his scrapbooks has more than 300 pages with many newspaper cuttings relating to Deddington, including bankruptcy notices. There are also small and large notices and posters: for example, one announcing that Professor A. Wood (under Royal Patronage) of Oxford would conduct dancing classes in the boys' schoolroom; and notice of a Rural Fête and Picnic at the Castle Grounds in July 1900 at which there would be a Ladies' and Gentlemen's Cricket Match.

There are accounts of the Football Club, details of the enrolment in 1886 of George Coggins into the Diploma of Knighthood in the Primrose League; a good deal of information on the bankruptcy of local solicitor Henry Churchill in 1870, and a list of benefactors towards the restoration of the Church tower and bells in 1893, George Coggins giving ten guineas, a substantial sum in those days. There is also a copy of the Rules and Regulations of the Deddington Parish Fire Brigade for 1896.

The second scrapbook contains more than 400 pages. It includes a small notice of 1847 giving details of Viggers' Omnibus service from Banbury to London, calling at Deddington at 9.00am reaching Oxford in mid-morning, where passengers transferred to the Royal Blue Omnibus arriving in Holborn at the Bell & Crown at 6.00pm. There are details relating to Oxfordshire Rifles, Deddington Subdivision, and several items relating to a dispute in 1854 over whether or not the pool in the Market Place should be filled.

The third scrapbook has an equally diverse collection of material including the Rules for the Deddington District Conservative Association for 1881, the accounts for the Deddington Cricket Club for 1901, and various pieces relating to the duties and responsibilities of the management by the Feoffees of the Deddington Estates in the early 1850s.

These three scrapbooks constitute a gold mine for anyone interested in the history of the period. It would seem that George Coggins was a vigilant and persevering collector of any printed material that related to Deddington, irrespective of its importance and therein lies its real value. Anyone wishing to consult these volumes is advised to set aside a substantial amount of time and make several visits to the Bodleian. The material has not been pasted in on a thematic basis, nor in chronological order, so no matter what the reader's interest all the volumes will have to be consulted, with a good deal of rechecking. It would be of great benefit if the material were to be made available on a CD rom, supposing the Bodleian gave permission, although an expensive, difficult and time-consuming operation.

When consulting these scrapbooks it is tantalising to find that George Coggins did not use standard blank scrapbooks but appears to have utilised old legal copy books or similar; in one or two of the volumes one can see a partly concealed manuscript text under the pasted in item, relating to local affairs.