

Catherine B (Katie) Hopcraft of Deddington - daughter of Joseph Hopcraft

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"The daughter of Joseph Hopcraft (Builder) who lived at 20 New Street, Deddington, (Eds note: now Midhill or Winmour Cottage) left Deddington in 1888 and travelled to Russia where she lived with the family of Count Nikolai Tolstoy both in Moscow and at Ysanaya Polyana, the Tolstoy's country estate.

On the 1871 census this daughter is shown as Catherine B. She seems to have enjoyed her stay in Russia but did say that she found Russian a very difficult language to learn (!). She took up a post as English Governess to the youngest three of the Tolstoy children. Governesses were highly thought of in those days and had a considerably higher status than mere servants. She had all her meals with the family and on many occasions said how pleasant "The Count" was. She met a lot of people and seems to have got on with all of them. But what is most amazing is that a young girl should travel, probably alone, by train across Europe to take up such a job. We know that she was quite ill while she was there, but she was well cared for and returned to the UK in 1890.

How do I know this, I hear you ask? Well, Catherine B, as shown in the census, was known to the family as Kate or Katie. Her mother Emma Jane Hopcraft née Wilkins, died when Katie was just 7 years old. Her father re-married shortly afterwards and his second wife was Mary A Walford, born in Hook Norton in 1839/40, so she was older than Joseph, but bore him more children and by the 1891 census 20 New Street housed quite a few Hopcrafts as well as some Walfords.

Mary (Walford) Hopcraft had a younger sister Louisa, who married a William Minchin. The Minchin family were numerous in Hook Norton, and one of them married a "French" who ran the village grocers - though possibly not related to the Frenches of Deddington (as mentioned on your website). Another daughter married Chris Gear who went to China as post-master and just made it home before the Russian revolution - but that's another story. His daughter Philippa (Pip) was the telephonist at Hook Norton telephone exchange - she also made the most amazing cakes.

Louisa (Walford) Minchin had thirteen children of which my father's mother, Elsie, was the 9th and by this time the family had moved to the Reading and Newbury areas. The family were all farmers and one of them managed a farm in Tilehurst which produced the milk for Huntley and Palmers biscuits, but I digress.

One of Louisa's daughters, known as May, was deaf following an attack of scarlet fever as a child, but she could read. Whilst in Russia Kate, or Katie, used to write letters home and many were addressed, "Dear Aunty and May," aunty being her step-mother's younger sister, so not actually a blood aunty, and my father used to say that Katie wrote to them so that May could read the letters and occupy herself. There may have been other letters to other members of the family, but we are not aware of any.

Somehow the letters came into the possession of my father's mother, and eventually my father. They are now in the care of my sister who availed herself of the opportunity to visit Yasnaya Polyana on an excursion last summer, as well as a visit to the Tolstoy House in Moscow. Much of the text is about family members and acquaintances, and as was common in those days, many of the subjects had nicknames, so we're not sure who they all are.

But I thought you might like to know that a young woman travelled from Deddington to Russia and back in the late 1880s. The job should have been taken by Louisa's eldest daughter, but she backed

out and Katie went instead. My father died in 1988, but that was pre-internet and he never managed to find out who exactly Katie was, but with the benefit of census returns and the wonderful free BMD we have been able to trace her parents. But we heard so much about the letters that we feel that Katie is a relative, even though we know she wasn't.

Katie went on, with her younger sister Emma, to be housekeepers to a doctor in Bath, and eventually to an address in West London where they ran an art gallery.