

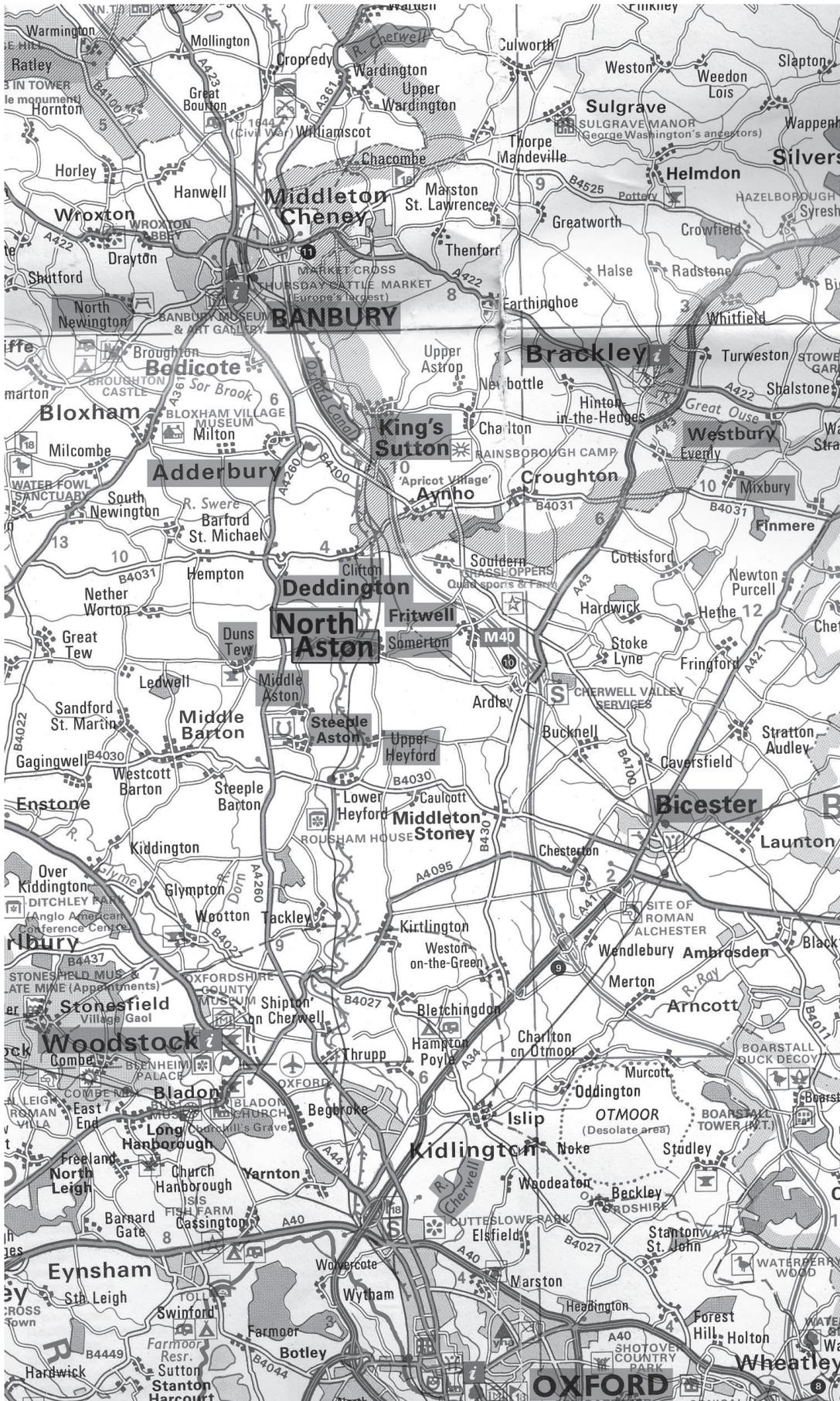
**The Sykes family**  
**of**  
**North Aston**

2016

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction .....</b>                            | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>The Sykes name – some history .....</b>           | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>The village of North Aston .....</b>              | <b>11</b> |
| <b>The Sykes family of North Aston .....</b>         | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Les Sykes’ reminiscences of North Aston .....</b> | <b>35</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgments .....</b>                         | <b>47</b> |

# North Aston and surroundings



## INTRODUCTION

My name is John Sykes.

That was not my name at birth.

My mother was 18 years old at the time and unmarried. My father disappeared before I was born. So I took my mother's surname, which was Schiller. My birth certificate shows that I was born John Schiller on 6 August 1934 in Reading, Berkshire.

My mother had no means to raise me, so when I was two weeks old I was handed over to the social welfare service in Reading. They placed me in the homes of foster-parents. Initial arrangements were unsatisfactory. But when I was about 6 months old I was placed under the responsibility of a Mrs. Bessie May Sykes, and I remained with Mrs. Sykes until I flew from the nest at the age of 18. Mrs. Sykes had separated several years earlier from her husband Bernard Sykes so I had no foster-father. She had lived with him for some 20 years in the village of North Aston, Oxfordshire. From such inauspicious beginnings Mrs. Sykes nurtured and supported me very well, for I received a good education and became a man of the world. I left England in 1959 at the age of 25, and have lived in various countries over the years. I am in my early eighties as I write this monograph. In retirement I live in France.

In schools, hospitals or wherever my name was required, Mrs. Sykes had always registered me as John Sykes rather than John Schiller. In the immediate post-war years it was not convenient to have a German-sounding surname in Britain, for anti-German feelings were still very strong. But to use a false surname was strictly speaking illegal, so as adulthood approached Mrs. Sykes proposed to take me to a solicitor to change my surname from Schiller to Sykes. I accepted this proposal. As of the age of 17 I became officially John Sykes.

Not that I was personally anti-German. Indeed I learned the German language, soaked myself in its culture, lived in Germany for some time after going to university, and married a German lady when I was 28 years old.

From that union were born two children: Julian Sykes (b. 1969), currently living in Switzerland, and Vanessa Sykes-Tremblay (b. 1972), currently living in Canada. Since both carry the surname Sykes, I decided to enquire into the origins of the name Sykes, and to give a portrait of some of the personalities in the Sykes family into which my foster-mother had married. They had all lived in North Aston.

This monograph therefore covers three topics:

- The Sykes name
- The village of North Aston where my foster-mother lived during her married life
- The Sykes family of North Aston

## THE SYKES NAME – SOME HISTORY

It seems that “Sykes” was a fairly common name in certain parts of England, in particular Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria, during the period between the Norman conquest in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. It derived from the mediaeval English word “syke”, which denoted a boundary stream, a ditch, or damp gully. It was therefore a topographic name for a place situated in a marsh, a damp lowland, or a slight depression in the landscape. It could also designate a person who lived by a stream or in a locality with the aforementioned characteristics.

There are records of persons and localities with this name or a variant thereof going back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Variants include Sik, Syk, Sikes. The grandfather of Bernard Sykes, husband of Mrs. Sykes, spelt his name Scyks.<sup>1</sup> A certain Richard Sykes of Sykes Dyke near Carlisle in Cumbria was “an eminent and opulent clothier” in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. His wife was recorded as dying of scarlet fever in 1504. Their son William then moved across the Pennine hills to Yorkshire near Leeds, where he became a successful cloth trader. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a branch of the family, based in Hull on the east coast, expanded their business into shipping and finance. They traded with the Hanseatic city-states of the Baltic and accumulated considerable wealth. From the 1730s their home was the extensive Sledmere Estate in the Yorkshire Wolds. Members of the Sykes clan evidently multiplied, for by the time of the 1841 and 1851 censuses there were no less than 3,160 listings under the name Sykes in the Huddersfield and District area of Yorkshire alone. The Sledmere Sykes became very much part of the local landed gentry. Probably the most famous Sykes in British history is Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919), a descendant of the Sledmere Sykes. He was a travel writer knowledgeable about the Ottoman world, a Conservative Party politician, and a diplomatic adviser to the British Government during World War I. He owed his place in history primarily to the fact that he was the co-author of the famous (or infamous, depending how one sees it) secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, drawn up in 1916 with his French counterpart Francois Georges-Picot. The Agreement, which

---

<sup>1</sup> Wedding banns of 1848

came into effect at the end of the war, divided up the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire (which had been an ally of Germany) into British and French spheres of interest. Sir Mark Sykes advocated the cause of Arab nationalism, still dormant but stirring under the Ottomans. Almost contradictorily he also promoted the adoption of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised the Jewish people the establishment of a home in Palestine. The least one can say is that his actions had a decisive but not necessarily happy impact on the Middle East as we know it today (2016). He participated in the Peace Treaty negotiations in Versailles, but succumbed to the Spanish flu pandemic in 1919, aged only 39. He had six children, one of whom, Christopher Sykes, became a well-known author in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As for the Sledmere Sykes, the estate is currently owned by Sir Tatton Sykes, 8<sup>th</sup> Baronet<sup>2</sup>, and Sledmere House has become one of the stately homes of England.

Anecdotally it can be mentioned that there exist three settlements called respectively Low Sikes, Sykes Grange, and High Sikes, all near the Nidd River in the district of Lofthouse, Nidderdale, Yorkshire. They serve to confirm that the name Sykes comes from a type of moorland stream used to mark land boundaries. Other places in Yorkshire with names derived from the Middle English “syke” include Sykehouse (east of Wakefield) and Harle Syke (east of Burnley).

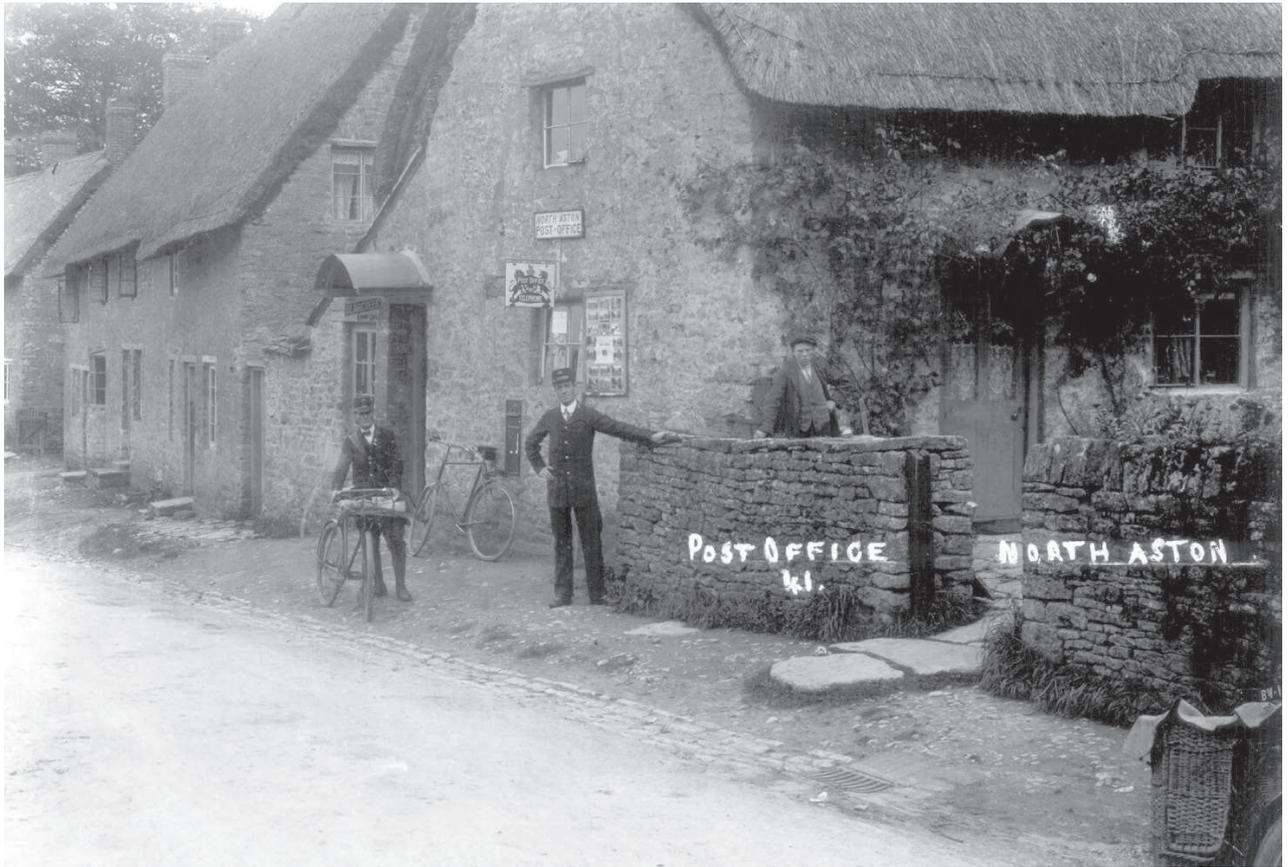
A research project by Professor Bryan Sykes, a geneticist at Oxford University, on the DNA of males in England with the surname Sykes, concluded that practically everyone with the name Sykes was related to other Sykeses. The findings were published in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*<sup>3</sup> and were the subject of articles in the *UK Daily Mail* of 4 April 2000 and the *New York Times* of 9 April 2000. Professor Sykes and his team identified a “Sykes gene” which suggested that all Sykeses could trace their paternal ancestry back to a single founder male who lived around 1300. The research focused on 60 men with this name selected at random from across Britain. It revealed that only one DNA signature was common among the Sykeses, which means therefore that there was one common ancestor.

It is estimated that there are currently some 18,000 persons named Sykes in the United Kingdom. The name or variants thereof is also quite common in the USA, and in other countries – Canada and Australia in particular - which were populated from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards *inter alia* by migrants from Britain.<sup>4</sup>

2 A baronet is an hereditary title awarded to commoners by the British Crown.

3 Bryan Sykes and Catherine Irven, “Surnames and the Y Chromosome”, *American Journal of Human Genetics* 66.1417-1419, 2000

4 Source: [www.selectsurnames.com](http://www.selectsurnames.com)



North Aston Post office, with postmaster and telegraph boy



The Village Green, ca. 1905

## THE VILLAGE OF NORTH ASTON

Mrs. Sykes was born in 1888 in Grantham, Lincolnshire. Her maiden name was Bessie May Mundy. In 1901 she moved with her parents and two sisters to Abingdon, to the south of Oxford, where she trained and worked as a nurse. In July 1909 she married a certain Bernard Henry Sykes and thus became Bessie May Sykes. At that time Bernard was working in Deddington, but his family came from the nearby village of North Aston, Oxfordshire, some 15 miles (25 km) to the north of Oxford. So she moved initially to Deddington and then to North Aston, where she lived for the next 20 years. Mrs. Sykes gave birth to three sons and a daughter during that period.

The marriage of Bessie May and Bernard Sykes broke down by about 1929, and they lived separate lives thereafter. But they never divorced, and Bessie May retained the surname Sykes until her death in 1976. That is why I adopted the name Sykes when I changed my surname in 1951.

I never met Bernard Sykes and indeed Mrs. Sykes never spoke to me about him. It was as if he did not exist. There must have been hard feelings about the breakdown. Nor did I ever live in North Aston, for I was born in 1934, some five years after the marriage collapsed and Bessie May had left North Aston.

In my retirement, and well after Mrs. Sykes had died, I became interested in North Aston. I occasionally visited one of Mrs. Sykes' sons, Ronald and his wife Renee, who lived with their daughter Tina in the nearby village of King's Sutton, so I became familiar with the area. Ronald worked for several years on the U.S. Air Force base at Upper Heyford, very near North Aston. Unfortunately he died of leukemia soon after retirement, but I remained in touch with his widow Renee and daughter Tina. I occasionally visited North Aston while staying at King's Sutton.

North Aston is a small village situated in the heart of rural England, on a slope overlooking the lush Cherwell Valley. The Cherwell is a small river which has its source in the English Midlands and flows into the Thames at Oxford. Most of the villages along that stretch of the river are on high ground so as to avoid flooding.

Thanks to the Internet I became aware of the publication just after the turn of this century of a book entitled *North Aston: A Millennium*. The book was published by the people of North Aston to mark the beginning of a new millennium and 1000 years of Oxfordshire history.

Various aspects of the history of North Aston are covered in the book, so I will not re-hash that history here.

I will however highlight one or two salient aspects of that history. From the book I learned that the village was already well established by the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 – the last time that England was successfully invaded – and was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. This historical document, in Latin, is a comprehensive survey of much of England and parts of Wales, completed in 1086 by order of King William the Conqueror. From *North Aston: A Millennium* I learned that North Aston in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is not much bigger than it was in mediaeval times – in the year 2000 it comprised only 77 houses with approximately 200 inhabitants. The village lies well away from the main Oxford-Banbury road and has been spared the creeping urbanization characteristic of so many erstwhile rural communities.

Of particular interest to me was the realization that a significant number of local inhabitants went by the name Sykes, or had married into the Sykes clan. There is a chapter in the book on “The Sykes Family of Dane Hill and North Aston” (pp. 130-133). The chapter is prefaced by a photograph of the Sykes family dating from 1900, comprising the couple Henry and Martha Jane Sykes and their six sons and two daughters. Another daughter was born in 1903 and therefore is not shown on the photograph. Among the six sons is Bernard Henry Sykes – future husband of my foster-mother - when he was about 12 years old.

# North Aston

## *A Millennium*

A Thousand Years  
of Rural Life

Edited by  
Marcus Potts  
& John Harvey-Lee



Photo of book cover

1900 photograph of the Sykes family



1. Henry Sykes

2. Martha Jane Sykes

3. Percy Sykes

4. Marion Sykes

5. Bernard Sykes

6. Jesse Sykes

7. Elsie Sykes

8. Denis Sykes

9. Norman Sykes

10. Cyril Sykes

## THE SYKES FAMILY OF NORTH ASTON

In seeking to find out all I could about the personality and life histories of Bernard Sykes and other members of the Sykes family of North Aston I took as my starting-point the 1900 photograph reproduced above. I was greatly assisted in my inquiries by Roger Moore, one of the few living persons with an extensive knowledge of the Sykes family of North Aston. Roger is the son of the ninth child of Henry and Martha Jane Sykes, Marjory May Sykes, known as Madge, born in 1903 and therefore not shown in the 1900 photograph. In 1930 Madge had married a certain Frank Moore, a butcher by trade who lived in the nearby village of Somerton, on the other side of the river. Roger was born in 1942 and indeed lived for some 50 years in North Aston. Today he lives in the nearby market-town of Brackley. He is one of a group of contemporaries who made contributions to *North Aston: A Millennium*, as mentioned in the preface of the book. It was in fact Roger who made available to the editors the family photograph of 1900.

After Roger had agreed to assist me in my research there followed an intensive exchange of emails in the course of which Roger furnished me with fascinating information on the personalities who figure in the above-mentioned photograph, and others who in one way or another were related to or knew those figuring in the photograph. In the summer of 2015 I visited North Aston and surroundings in order to gather more information for this project. Roger Moore was my guide for this purpose.

What follows is a summary of the information thus obtained. The silhouettes in the 1900 photograph are numbered from 1 to 10 to facilitate identification.

Wherever possible, with his permission and using the initials RM, I shall quote directly from emails containing Roger's vivid description of those concerned – his prose brings the characters to life far better than I could. The emails have been edited to eliminate unrelated material, to provide continuity in the narrative, or to make the meaning clearer to the uninitiated. In one or two cases the information

initially provided needed to be revised in the light of additional information which became available after Roger had given me his version of events.

RM (29.03.2015): “Hello John. First of all I would like to introduce myself. My name is Roger Moore... Bernard Sykes was my mother’s brother, i.e. my uncle, but when you look at the photo of the Sykes family in the book on North Aston you won’t see my mother because she was born in 1903, well after that photo was taken... I would like to help you as much as possible... I lived in North Aston for 50 years and now live in Brackley, I was too young to have direct knowledge of the period which interests you, only what my mother told me. I do remember my mother telling me how proud Bessie was of you. By the way, do you remember my sister Marie ? She was more your age and was a school teacher. She travelled the world teaching, at one time she worked for the UN in New York, teaching the Embassy children. Marie passed away at the age of 41 in 1973 whilst teaching in Beirut, she had breast cancer and this August she would have been 84.” (I did not know Marie). Roger confirmed that he had provided certain inputs for the book on North Aston, in particular old photographs, and had been rewarded by being presented with a complimentary copy of the publication when it came out.



Roger Moore receiving a complimentary copy of the book from John Harvey-Lee

## 1. Henry Sykes (born 1859, died 1949)

Henry Sykes was born in Deddington, Oxfordshire, in 1859. He was the last of 9 children (5 sons and 4 daughters) born over a period of 18 years to Benjamin Sykes (1820-1895) and Martha Dale, also from Deddington. Henry's grandfather Thomas Sykes (1792-1864) descended from John Sykes (1754-1814), who originated from Evenley (Northamptonshire), not far from the Deddington/North Aston area. Henry moved from Deddington to North Aston in 1900.

RM (11.04.2015): "My mother Madge told me such a lot about Henry's life, it's a job to know where to start, in any case she said that at one time her parents Henry and Martha were very poor and she could remember having to wear her brothers' boots to school because her parents couldn't afford new shoes for her. But the family was very loving and close and had many happy times together and of course in those days they had to make their own entertainment. I was told how her Dad used to play the squeeze box<sup>5</sup> every Sunday and they would all gather round and have a good old singsong. I know that he had very strict Victorian standards. If food was in short supply he and his wife would always make sure the children were fed first, they would themselves go without if necessary. But when her Dad did have money he would spend it on booze. He used to visit many pubs in Banbury and in Deddington. Once he was bundled out of a Deddington pub into a cart and the horse brought him home. On another occasion it was discovered that he had been to the lavatory at the top of the garden and had been wiping his backside with five-pound notes, in those days they were on big white pieces of paper. Although he could not read or write, Henry was apparently a very shrewd business-man and had many businesses in his time. I believe his trade was a stonemason and in his younger days he frequently travelled to Bath for important building jobs. He used to work on chimneys as a steeplejack, and my mother told me that once he made her climb up to deliver sandwiches to him. Other businesses included as a coal merchant. At one stage he possessed limekilns and built houses with the help of his sons Bernard, Denis and Cyril. I remember my mother telling me that her father could remember public hanging, this could be true because public hangings were only abolished in 1868 at which time he would have been eight years old. So I do believe that he witnessed public hangings because not too far away (between Duns Tew and Great Tew) there is a place called Hangman's Hill and in those days you could be hung for stealing a loaf... I'm not too sure where Henry came from; I do know that his wife came from North Newington to the west of Banbury and maybe he lived in a village nearby. I think his ancestors originated from the Yorkshire area<sup>6</sup>. I do know they lived on Dane

<sup>5</sup> A smaller instrument than the accordeon, like a concertina

<sup>6</sup> It has not been possible to trace Henry's origins further back than to 1754, when his ancestors lived at Evenley, Northamptonshire

Hill at North Aston for many years because I can remember Mrs. Proffitt (wife of the village baker) having a document that related to when the whole village was auctioned off and that's when the Longfords acquired it.<sup>7</sup> The document stated that Henry Sykes was paying a token rent of thirty-six shillings a year for a cottage on Dane Hill.<sup>8</sup> It was the Longfords who gave Bernard the land on which he built the Post Office and house, in exchange for work he carried out on North Aston Hall.”

This is what Kendrick Gilkes, nephew of Cyril Sykes – the youngest of Henry's six sons – had to say about Henry: “He was the “Patriarch” of the family. With little education, he became a real self-made businessman, owning two fields at Dane Hill, both of which had been bought from Sir Henry Dashwood by Henry Sykes. Henry had made his money by starting a builder's merchant and general haulage business, helped by my Uncle Cyril, including supply of builders' sand from the quarry in our field and slaked lime from Field 47 (on the estate map of 1907). At one point he owned three cottages in Deddington, and the ‘White House’ at Dane Hill, as well as the businesses“.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. Martha Jane Sykes nee Williams (born 1857, died 1940)**

Henry Sykes married Martha Jane Williams at Woodstock, Oxfordshire, in 1879. They had 9 children, 6 boys and 3 girls, born between 1880 and 1903.

RM (12.04.2015): “I don't know very much about Martha Jane as she died about two years before I was born, that would be about 1940... She came from North Newington to the west of Banbury. I remember being told how very deaf she was. One thing which does stick in my mind is that she used to wrap up my mother and the other children from cold in the winter months by covering their chests and backs with goose fat, then covering them in brown paper. Bath time for the children was by the range (fire-place) in a tin bath filled with hot water from the copper which of course was in the wash-house out the back of the house. Everyone would use the bath with the same water in it, and it would be topped up now and then with hot water from a kettle heated on top of the range. I know that my grandmother was quite well educated for the time and did the reading and writing for her husband Henry who was illiterate, but when it came to anything to do with arithmetic no-one could beat him and he was meticulous at book-keeping.”

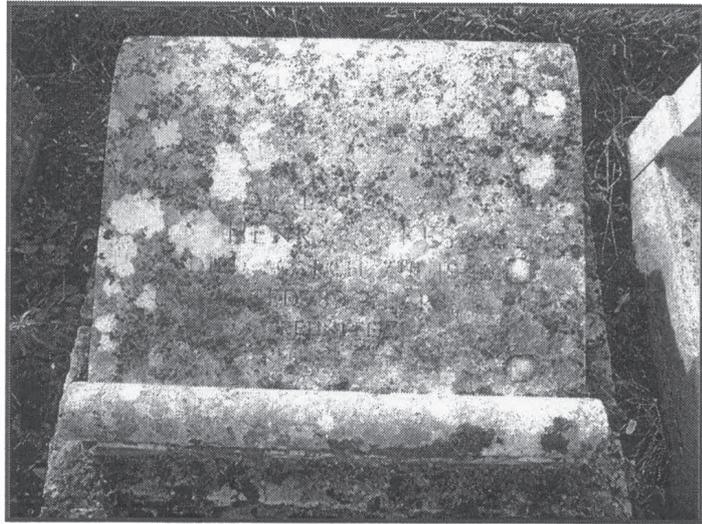
<sup>7</sup> The Longfords, members of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, in fact acquired the Hall in 1911, together with outbuildings and an estate of 200 acres. It was Capt. John Taylor who had acquired the whole village in 1907

<sup>8</sup> Equivalent to about 200 pounds sterling in 2015

<sup>9</sup> *North Aston News* no. 303, January 2016

Martha Jane was buried in the cemetery of Deddington Church in 1940. Her husband Henry was buried next to her in 1949. The tombstone is still there, but illegible because of undergrowth which has not been cleared for years.

**In loving memory of  
Martha Jane SYKES  
died February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1940  
aged 82 years  
At rest  
Also of  
Henry SYKES.  
died March 7<sup>th</sup> 1949  
aged 89 years  
Reunited**



Tombstone of Martha Jane and Henry Sykes, Deddington churchyard

### **3. Percival John Sykes (born 1880, died 1957)**

Percy as he was known had a peg-leg. It was not possible to establish with certainty how it happened that his leg had been amputated. In one version, when he was a boy he was running through long grass when he stepped on a rusty barrel hoop that shot up and hit him in the shin. Poison set in and the leg had to be amputated. In another version, the accident happened when he was working in a brewery, and a red-hot barrel hoop hit him on his leg. It was also not clear what he did for a living. In one version he ran a cobbler's business in Abingdon, in another version he ran a barber's shop in Woodstock. Perhaps he ran one after the other. He had the reputation of being quite a character. He had a good friend who also had only one leg, he had lost the other while serving in the Great War. They had lost different legs, so they bought one pair of boots for the two of them. Percy had to stuff paper into his boot to avoid developing blisters, for his friend had a larger foot ! Percy married Sarah Silman in 1904 and they had two children, Henrietta born in 1905 and Henry Vernon born in 1910. He died in the alms-houses of Abingdon in 1957.

#### **4. Marion Sykes (born 1882, died 1979)**

RM (10.04.2015): “Marion was a nurse in the 1914-18 war, it was said in the trenches but I would say very close to the front lines, probably at one stage close to the Vimy Ridge. I know that a lot of Canadians served there, and she married a Canadian Army Captain. After the war they went to live in Canada (Kelowna, British Columbia) and I heard that she did very well in her nursing career and got to be a Matron in a large hospital. She used to write a lot to my mother, and sent her dog-tag<sup>10</sup> and medals to my mother, I still have these to this day. Marion’s dog-tag is dated 8 August 1914, so she volunteered immediately after war broke out, aged about 30. She never had children and lived to the age of 97.”

It was in fact her brother Bernard who brought back her medals of the 1914-1918 war – see below. He visited her in Kelowna B. C. in 1963. Marion had been involved as a nurse in the famous retreat from Mons and was one of the few women decorated with the 1914 Mons Star.<sup>11</sup>

#### **5. Bernard Henry Sykes (born 1887, died 1971)**

Bernard was born on 27 August 1887 at Deddington. He married Bessie May Mundy who thereby became Bessie May Sykes. Many years later she became my foster-mother, so that is how in a roundabout way I came to have the surname Sykes.

It has not been possible to find out much about Bernard’s early years. He presumably went to the village school in Deddington. When he was 13 his parents moved with eight children to North Aston. He must have met Bessie May Mundy around 1907, when he was twenty. They married at Woodstock, Oxfordshire, in July 1909. While Mrs. Sykes never told me how and when she met Bernard, it seems likely that they got to know each other when Bessie May was working as a nurse at Abingdon hospital, near Oxford. Roger’s mother told him that Bernard used to cycle from Deddington to Abingdon, some 20 miles (30 km), when he was courting Bessie May. It was said that they fell deeply in love. In the course of the twenty years that they lived together they had four children: Leslie Bernard (1910), Ruby (1915), Ronald Norman (1920), and Geoffrey Joseph (1926).

It transpired that Bernard was the father at a much later date of another child, born out of wedlock, although the truth emerged only accidentally. In 1942

<sup>10</sup> Informal term for the identification tag worn by military personnel in World War I

<sup>11</sup> A retreat presented as a victory. The British Expeditionary Force, heavily outnumbered by the attacking German army immediately after the beginning of the war in August 1914, conducted a tactical retreat from Mons (Belgium) in order to align itself with the main French army near Arras in northern France.

he apparently had a brief relationship with a woman who was working in domestic service for a family in the village of Mixbury near Brackley. The son born in 1943 of that relationship never got to know his father. His mother told him that his father had disappeared in World War II, which was not however the case: Bernard lived until 1971.

It has not been possible to ascertain whether or not Bernard served in the armed forces in the Great War of 1914-18, but it seems probable that he did not. I made a written enquiry with the National Army Museum but they had no information on Bernard Sykes apart from UK census records which showed that he was working as a bricklayer in Deddington in the years leading up to the outbreak of war. The second child of Bernard and Bessie May, Ruby, was born in North Aston 1915, so he was clearly still living in the village in the early part of the war. By then the couple were running the bakery, the village shop, and the village post office, so Bernard was probably exonerated from military service, which became compulsory in the UK in 1916.



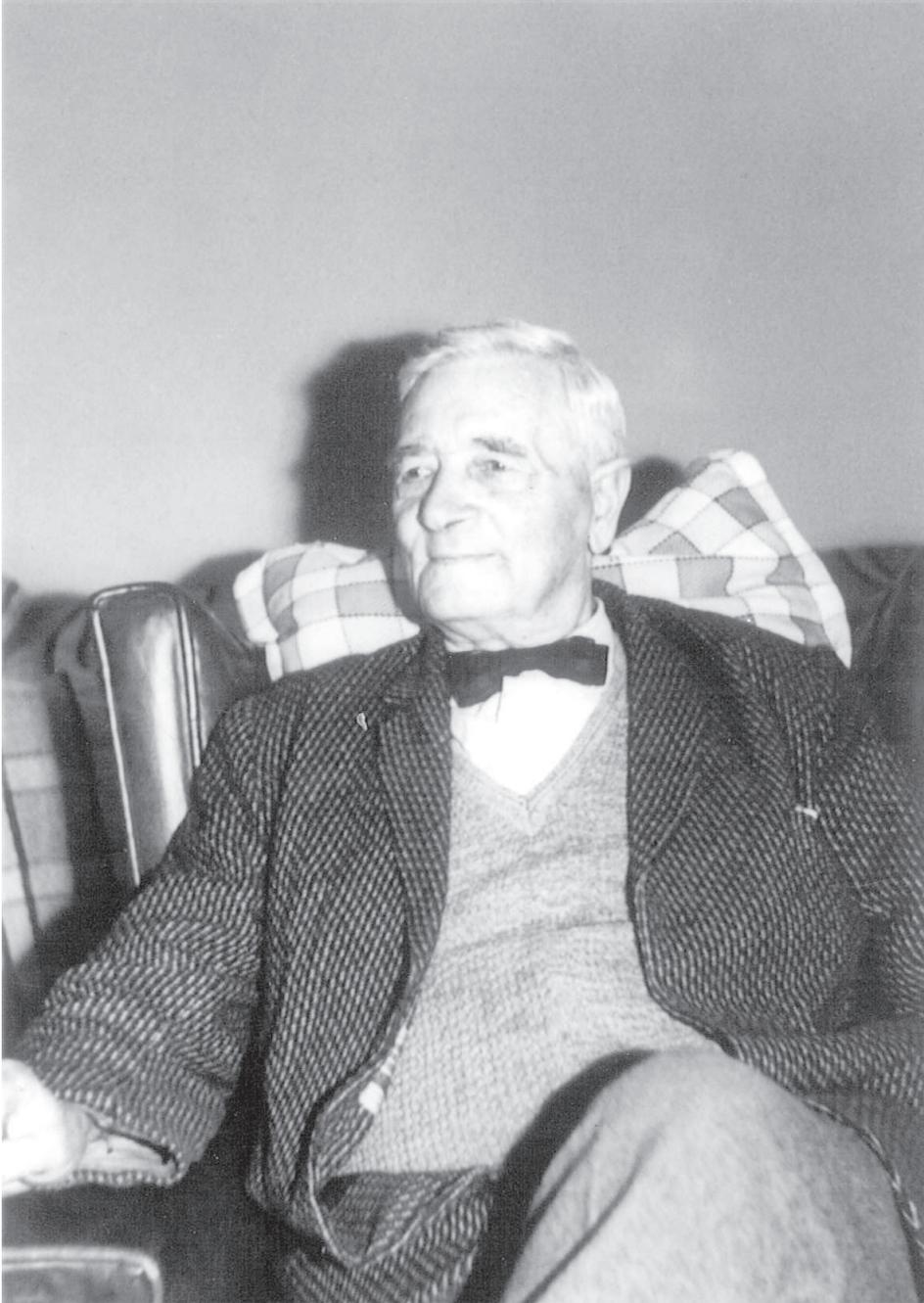
The four children of Mrs. Sykes

Bernard travelled a little in his later years, and a local Brackley newspaper carried an article summarising a talk which he gave to residents of Westbury near Brackley, where he was living at the time, describing a trip which he made in 1963 to visit two of his sisters who were living in Canada, Elsie and Marion. Consequent upon serving as nurses on the Western Front during the Great War, they had both married and emigrated to Canada after the war. Long-distance travel was far from common for ordinary mortals in those days, so the article makes interesting reading for blasé modern travellers: “Mr. Sykes left Southampton on the s.s. Homeric and travelled seven days by sea to Quebec and then some 3000 miles (5000 km) across Canada by train to Kelowna B.C. to stay with his sister (Marion)... He told of a 70-ton whale he saw and mentioned that the amount of water used daily on the Homeric equalled that of the town of Brackley. He gave a detailed description of the railway-station at Montreal, mentioned the ride through the Rockies with special reference to the Edith Cavell mountain<sup>12</sup> and above all stressed the friendliness of the people and said that there was no class distinction. Members present at his talk were able to see and handle many souvenirs which he had brought back with him. Especially admired was a coat with caribou skin which the Indians had made for him. There were also many coloured views, a piece of gold quartz from the Klondyke and some bear’s teeth and claws... A competition guessing the number of stations between Quebec and Kelowna was won by Mrs. Gilkes, who received a bookmark souvenir from Kelowna which Mr. Sykes had brought back”. Roger Moore recalls that Bernard was amazed at the vast size of Canada, pointing out that the distance from England to the first sister was barely more than the distance from the first to the second sister. In those days it was common to cross the Atlantic by boat and Canada by train, so travelling took a long time by present-day standards...

RM (30.03.2015): “Years ago I met a man in a pub who said that he knew Bernard when he first came to live in the Brackley area and apparently he lived in a small hamlet called Mixbury and did some renovation work on a farm. I believe that like his father Henry Sykes he was a very accomplished builder. From Mixbury he then moved to Brackley, then out to Westbury and in 1964 back to Brackley. There he lived in an old-people’s complex called Charterhouse. I used to take my mother over to see him when I acquired my first car. It was a real surprise when a couple of years later he moved to Worthing on the south coast. I remember I went to see Bernard in September 1970 whilst on holiday in the area, and that was the last time I saw him. I think he died the following year.” Bernard must have been rather lonely in Worthing, for I later learned from Ronald’s widow Renee that she had been in touch with him during his last years and had arranged for him to move from Worthing to

<sup>12</sup> The highest mountain situated entirely in Alberta (3363m), named after a nurse executed by the Germans in 1915 for aiding Allied wounded soldiers to escape from internment in Belgium to neutral Holland

a care-home in Adderbury, a village very near King's Sutton where Renee was then living. He died the day before he was due to move, aged 83.



Bernard Sykes in his later years, 1964

## **6. Jesse Sykes (born 1889, died 1918)**

RM (02.05.2015): “I promised I would tell you what I know about Jesse Sykes. Well I don’t know much about him really, only that he emigrated to New Zealand just before the Great War and then was conscripted into it. My mother told me that he died of pneumonia, but I don’t know when that was.” In fact Jesse died like so many of the so-called Spanish flu (estimates vary from 20 to 40 million) a few days after the armistice ending the war was signed, and was buried in Featherstone, New Zealand, on 17 November 1918. Earlier that same year Jesse had married a certain Jane Rebecca Bowman. She was already widowed once in 1911, having been married for less than a year during which time she gave birth to a daughter. She had no luck with her two husbands !

## **7. Elsie Sykes (born 1892, died 1960)**

RM (10.04.2015): “Elsie was also a nurse, but I am not sure if she served in the war. What I do know is that she married a local farmer, Frank Mayo, and they were given some land to farm in Donnelly, north-western Alberta, Canada. Elsie had two children, a boy and a girl. She died of cancer at the relatively early age of 68 and just after her death, in the early 1960s, Frank came over to visit us and I remember him saying how much my mother reminded him of Elsie.”

## **8. Denis Sykes (born 1894, died 1966)**

I had asked Roger by email if there were still any persons with the name Sykes living in the North Aston area. RM (21.05.2015): “Regarding your query, yes, there are still a few Sykes in the area , they are all descendants of Denis, the little boy in the front row of the photo of the Sykes family. Denis and his wife Daisy had two boys, Raymond and Norman. Ray (as we all knew him) died of cancer about five years ago, and he and his wife Gladys (who died about four years ago) had three children, two boys and a girl. The eldest boy Alan and his wife Sylvia live in Banbury and have no children. Carol the next eldest lives in America and suffers from MS (multiple sclerosis), and the youngest child Royston was killed in a road accident just before his twenty-first birthday. Norman, the other son of Denis and Daisy, had two children, a boy and a girl. I haven’t seen Norman for at least fifty years although he only lives locally at Middle Barton, the only thing I do know is that his daughter also suffers from MS... I see Alan quite a lot and I hope to take you over to meet him and

his wife.” I did indeed meet Alan Sykes and his wife; Roger and I spent a pleasant afternoon at their house in Banbury in July 2015. I was hoping that Alan would be able to shed some light on the reason why Bessie May and Bernard Sykes parted ways in 1929, but that was too far back for him to be able to comment.

Denis served in the Royal Navy from July 1916 (shortly after conscription was introduced) until April 1919.



Denis Sykes in Royal Navy uniform

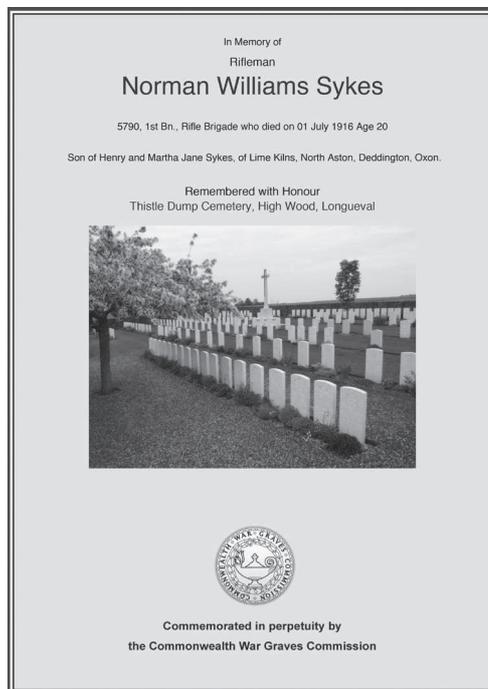
## **9. Norman William Sykes (born 1897, died 1916)**

Norman volunteered for the Army in 1915, just after reaching the eligible age of 18. He was assigned to the Rifle Brigade. He was killed on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. RM (11.04.2015): “I remember my mother Madge telling me that when she was thirteen her brother Norman was killed on the first day of the battle of the Somme along with many hundreds of other poor souls, and when they received the news of his death by telegram his mother (Martha) would never believe that he died and carried that belief for the rest of her life.<sup>13</sup>...In 1996 I went on a tour of the war graves with Ian Adamson an ex-teacher from Combe who ran talks on WW I at the Marlborough School where I was working at the time. I will never forget the experience. Ian kindly did a detour to visit the Thistle Dump cemetery where Norman Sykes was laid to rest. This is some twenty miles from the Serre Road area where he

<sup>13</sup> The first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, was the worst day in the history of the British Army, which on that day alone suffered 60,000 casualties, of which 20,000 dead. It was butchery.

lost his life. Ian couldn't understand why his body was taken to Thistle Dump as there is a war-graves cemetery near to where he was killed". I later learned that the Thistle Dump cemetery was used as a front-line cemetery from August 1916. The Serre Road cemetery, some 10 km from Thistle Dump, was not completed until 1934.

The following extract is from a detailed report obtained by Roger from the War Graves Commission on the action in the course of which Norman Sykes was killed. It makes instructive reading: "Norman Sykes was in the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, a Regular Army Division, which attacked the Quadrilateral Redoubt (Heiden Kopf) at the end of Serre Road, the site of Serre Road No. 2 Cemetery. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division was under the command of Lieutenant – General Hunter-Weston's VIII Army Corps... This Corps suffered 662 officers and 13,636 other ranks casualties on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916. They did not achieve their objectives and Commander-in-Chief Douglas Haig was moved to write in his diary that "few of VIII Corps left their trenches", an appalling slur on the gallantry of all these men<sup>14</sup>... The Rifle Brigade and the Somerset Light Infantry were held up at the German wire until a Rifle Brigade officer shouted "Come on lads, let them have it!" The R.B. and S.L.I. then got into the second line of German trenches. A heroic Seaforth Highlander corporal of the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade, hurling grenades and swearing in broad Scots, was shot dead by several bullets as he got into the German trench. By the afternoon the British survivors were isolated and surrounded. G.T. Rudge, a 17 year-old in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Essex, killed a German and thought: "He looked old enough to have a family and I felt very sorry". He was the first man he had killed. By evening the survivors were scrounging in the German dug-outs for food, avoiding the cold stew and black bread for fear it was poisoned, but eating some British bully-beef they had found, and smoking German cigars. The Quadrilateral Redoubt was evacuated in the small hours of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the survivors bringing back prisoners and souvenirs. Parcels from home for casualties were distributed amongst the survivors". Rifleman Norman Williams Sykes was among those killed in this action, and was awarded posthumously the British War Medal "in memory of his services with the British Forces during the Great War".



The official notification of the grave of Rifleman Norman Sykes issued by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

14 Note the callous attitude of the British Commander-in-Chief Douglas Haig, responsible for the outmoded tactics adopted at the battle of the Somme and repeated later at Passchendaele, at enormous cost in terms of lives lost and survivors maimed for life. He later retracted his derogatory remarks, which were based on misinformation, and apologised.

The war took its toll of North Aston, as it did of virtually every town, village and hamlet throughout the land. The 1914-18 Roll of Honour in North Aston church shows that this small village lost 9 men in the war, including the two Sykes brothers Norman and Jesse. Poor Norman, like so many others, ended his short life as cannon-fodder for enemy machine-gunners and artillery units, while Jesse succumbed to an even more lethal enemy, the Spanish flu pandemic.

### 10. Cyril Joseph Benjamin Sykes (born 1900, died 1994)

Cyril is the new-born babe in the arms of Martha in the photograph of 1900. RM (31.03.2015): “In fact it was Cyril who loaned me that photo to have a negative made, and then I had several prints made from it...”

Cyril married Cora Hirons in 1935. Cora was one of twelve children from the Hirons family in nearby Duns Tew. The *North Aston News* of March 1991 reported that “she was a lady of many parts, a great reader and a lover of history. For a number of years she taught at North Aston School. She was also a musician of some distinction and played the piano in the cinema at Middle Barton. She then had a position as companion to a lady at Over Norton, a Miss Adamson. This lady valued her services so highly that she was reluctant to release her to marry Cyril in 1935. However, Cyril prevailed and they were duly married and in 1936 moved into the house which Cyril had built.” Cyril and his wife had no children, but one of Cora’s sisters, Sybil Madeline Maude, had married in 1939 and had a son, Kendrick Bernard Gilkes, who was born in 1940. His father was mobilized for military service and spent virtually the whole of World War II away from home, so Kendrick’s mother and Kendrick himself lived with her sister Cora and Cyril during that period. Henry Sykes the Patriarch also lived with Cyril and Cora until his death just after the war. Kendrick: “He (Henry) had become a ‘surrogate’ grandfather to me during the war years, just as Cyril became a ‘surrogate’ father, and with my mother Sybil and her sister Cora ever-present, I had two mothers!”<sup>15</sup> RM (date): One more thing to mention about Cyril: he almost died in about 1955 when he contracted tetanus from a cut in his right hand. He fell while climbing down from the cab of a lorry and cut his hand on a rusty nail.”

\* \* \*

The ninth child of Henry and Martha Jane, **Marjorie May** known as Madge, the mother of Roger, is not shown in the 1900 family photo as she was born in 1903, i.e. three years after it was taken. When Bernard and Bessie May Sykes separated and both left North Aston in 1929, Madge took over the Post Office. Les would have liked

<sup>15</sup> cited from *North Aston News* no. 303, January 2016.

to have done so, but he was only 19 and in those days one had to be 21 years old to assume such responsibilities. Madge was 26 at the time.

In the following year, 1930, she married Frank Moore, a butcher from the village of Somerton, about 3 km from North Aston. RM (12.04.2015): “They were both 27 and had been courting from the age of 14. They met in 1917 when he fell from his horse on his way back from Banbury and injured himself right outside the cottage where the Sykes family lived. They took him in to clean him up, and I suppose it was love at first sight...”.



Frank Moore and Madge Moore, nee Sykes

RM (30.05.2015): “The photo of my parents was taken in the village of Farthinghoe near Brackley. I would say it was taken on a Sunday morning because Dad was an organist and used to travel around some of the local villages to play in the churches, and he usually took Mum with him on the pillion of his motor-bike.”

Madge ran the Post Office for ten years, while her husband carried on working, together with a brother, for his father who had a butcher’s shop in Somerton. Frank and Madge moved into Bernard’s house when the latter left North Aston; it was next door to the Post Office. Both houses had been built by Bernard, with the help of his father Henry and some of his brothers. Frank and Madge bought the two houses for 600 pounds in instalments from Bernard (equivalent to some 34,000 pounds sterling today).

Madge was born in 1903 and Leslie, first child of Bernard and Bessie May, was born in 1910. Madge was Les' aunt, but the age difference between them was so little that they grew up almost like brother and sister, and remained close to each other throughout their lives. They both had childhood memories of North Aston just before and during the Great War.

Madge was 11 years old when hostilities began, and she told Roger that at night she could remember lying in bed and hearing troops marching by her bedroom window on their way down to the Southampton docks. The cottage was and still is right by the Banbury to Oxford road, which was a major route for moving troops and equipment down to the south coast. This echoed my own experience as a boy in Reading during the latter part of World War II, when planes, troops and equipment were constantly on the move down south, preparing for the Allied invasion of Normandy (D-day).

Madge's husband Frank was exonerated from military service in World War II because as a butcher he ran a vital business; he also ran a taxi service. He was the victim of a serious accident in June 1960 when, still in his early fifties, his taxi collided at a crossroads near Bicester with a vehicle occupied by two airmen from the USAF base at Upper Heyford. The American driver, who it turned out was inebriated at the time, survived with injuries; Frank Moore was killed. He was a teetotaler. Ironically it was drink that killed him...

Madge lived until 1979.

\* \* \*

The chapter on the Sykes family in *North Aston: A Millennium* contains extracts of a longish article by Mrs. Sykes' eldest son Leslie (Les) which refers several times to his father Bernard but makes no mention of his mother, nor of his three siblings. Les' letter is concerned with events in his early life before and during World War I and the beginning of the 1920s, until he left for an apprenticeship in Manchester in 1925. Nor was Les' mother mentioned elsewhere in the book, although there is a passing reference to the fact that "people by the name of Sykes kept the (village) shop" (p.147). This was somewhat surprising, for **Mrs. Sykes** must have been a well-known figure in North Aston during the twenty years that she lived there. For several years she and Bernard had a virtual monopoly over the economy of the village: they ran not only the village shop but also the bakery and the Post Office. In addition Mrs. Sykes was a trained nurse, and Les was for some of that time, after the war, the village telegrapher.

In 1929, after the marriage collapsed, Mrs. Sykes left North Aston without her husband – who had moved to the nearby town of Brackley - but with her four children. They went initially to Southampton, where she ran a grocery business, and then to Reading. Les later became the self-styled “Reading Correspondent” of the *North Aston News*.

I was also puzzled at the fact that there was no mention in the book of a certain **John Taylor**. He was butler for many years to the aristocratic Longford family. In 1907 the whole village of North Aston, including North Aston Hall (a 17<sup>th</sup> century Jacobean residence), North Aston Manor, an estate of 900 acres and a further 1280 acres of manorial rights, had been purchased by a Capt. John Taylor from Southgate near London – not to be confused with the butler John Taylor ! In 1911 Thomas Pakenham, the fifth Earl of Longford, purchased the Hall from Capt. Taylor, together with an estate of 200 acres. The Earl of Longford moved into the Hall with wife and children. John Taylor had served as their butler in their previous residence at Penn House, Amersham, so he and his wife Edith moved into an out-house adjacent to the Hall.<sup>16</sup>

The Earl of Longford was one of the countless victims of the Great War: he died at Gallipoli in August 1915. So for the rest of the war, and through the 1920s, the Countess of Longford lived at North Aston Hall as a widow, with her six children, served by the butler John Taylor and his wife Edith. Like Mrs. Sykes, John Taylor must have been a well-known figure in the North Aston of those days, despite the fact that he was perhaps overshadowed by the presence of his namesake at the Manor, Capt. John Taylor. He became a widower when his wife died of cancer in July 1928. Mrs. Sykes had tended her during her long illness. The tombstone of Edith Taylor is still visible in the North Aston churchyard. The church dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The Countess of Longford sold the Hall in 1929 to a certain W.L. Hitchens, chairman of Cammell Laird & Co., shipbuilders, and moved with her children to Rutland Gate, London. John Taylor accompanied the family and continued to serve as butler until her death in 1933. For a short time he was without employment, and then became the unmarried partner of Mrs. Sykes, who by then had settled in Reading. He remained her companion until he passed away in 1959. He had been very touched by the manner in which Mrs. Sykes had tended his wife during the illness which led to her death in 1928.

I wondered if the absence of any mention of Mrs. Sykes, wife of Bernard Sykes, or of John Taylor, butler to the Longfords, could be explained by an atmos-

<sup>16</sup> There are two stately homes in the village, North Aston Manor and North Aston Hall, about which abundant information is available on: <http://www.geni.com/projects/North-Aston-Hall-Manor-Oxfordshire-England/25491>



North Aston Hall 1910



North Aston church and cemetery

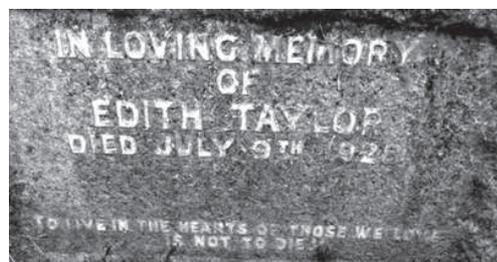
phere of scandal surrounding the break-up of the marriage. Was it possible that Bernard, Bessie May and John Taylor were involved in some kind of “ménage à trois” which led to the collapse of the marriage ? Unlikely, as John Taylor’s wife was living with him for most of the period in question. Was Bernard a philanderer, an alcoholic ? Roger had mentioned in his correspondence with me that the Sykes boys of North Aston had the reputation of being “ones for the ladies” and that Bernard apparently had a penchant for the occasional pint or two. But Mrs. Sykes never explained to me why she had separated from her husband, why they did not divorce, or how she subsequently came to be living with a man with whom she was not married. Given the attitudes to social and in particular sexual affairs which prevailed in those still-Victorian days, I began to think that perhaps it had been decided not to mention such scandalous matters in a book celebrating a thousand years of North Aston’s history. This feeling was reinforced by the fact that I had discovered that Bernard had been father to a child other than the four children born to Bessie May Sykes. He maintained secrecy over that affair and never acknowledged paternity of the child in question. But it happened long after the marriage had collapsed, so could not have been the cause of it. As it turned out, the explanation for the absence of any mention of Mrs. Sykes or John Taylor in the book was prosaic indeed : the publication depended on contributions from eye-witnesses or those with memories going back to events of the early 1900s, and there were simply no witnesses to or records of these particular persons or events when the book was under preparation at the turn of this century.



Mrs. Sykes



John Taylor



Edith Taylor's tombstone

## LES SYKES' REMINISCENCES OF NORTH ASTON

When Mrs. Sykes left North Aston in 1929, Geoffrey was three and Ronald was nine years old, so they were too young to have put down on paper or to pass on verbally any reminiscences of their days in North Aston. The same goes for Bes-sie May's daughter Ruby. The only trace I found of their time in North Aston is a photograph in the *North Aston News* (n. 32, September 1992) showing the children attending the village school in July 1928 together with their Schoolmistress, Miss Chapman. Ronald is in the second row, third child from the left seen from the camera. He was 8 years old at the time.



Ronald Sykes at North Aston school, 1928

This was not at all the case however with Leslie (Les). Even after leaving the village at the age of 19, he kept in touch with his father, his uncles and aunts, and with friends he had left behind. There exist quite a number of written reminiscences by or about him, and the purpose of this section is to recall some of them insofar as they relate to the period up to 1929 and convey something of the atmosphere of those days in a small English village.

Les occasionally sent what he called “snippets” to the *North Aston News*. The edition no. 29 of July 1992 carried an account by him of an incident which occurred when he was about 3 years old. The incident was cited later in *North Aston: A Millennium*.

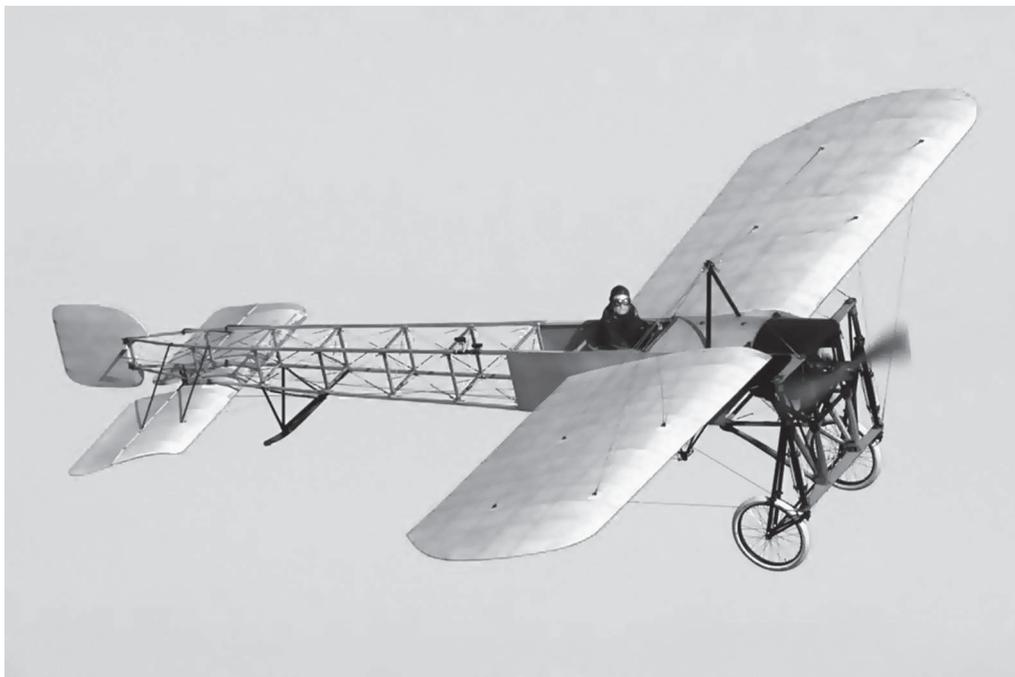


Leslie Sykes as a small boy

“As memory is a fickle thing I find myself going back to 1913 and the episode of the “Aeroplane”. My dad rushed into the house one afternoon and grabbing me up in his arms, and then onto his shoulders, we took off at what seemed to me a full gallop. Across the fields and down to the water meadows and there in front of me was the biggest kite I had ever seen.

Apparently the intrepid aviator had run out of “essence”, but all was not lost. Two men were despatched by train to Banbury, the nearest petrol supply, for several cans of fuel. By the time they returned half the population of North Aston and Somerton had gathered to view this remarkable machine. Boys from the village helped the plane to take off by holding the wings while it gathered speed to lift off the ground. I found out later that it was a Bleriot aircraft and it was rumoured that the pilot was none other than the famous Gustav Hamel, a German. Needless to say that when war broke out a year later, it was noised abroad that he had been spying. Could it have been an invasion via the Oxford Canal ? Time will, in this instance, never tell.”

Well, time did in fact tell, for it turned out that despite his German-sounding name, Gustav Hamel was in reality a famous British aviation pioneer. He was born in London and educated at Westminster School. He set various records in those early days of flying, and disappeared over the English Channel in May 1914, just before war broke out. He was flying a French-made Bleriot prototype machine. So he was by no means a German spy.



Bleriot aircraft

Les continued the snippet thus :

“Back now to around 1919. Life had again settled into a routine, but not as before the War, for people had been around and seen things. Girls who previously had resigned themselves to a humdrum life of service, marriage and children now found that there were other things to do,<sup>17</sup>and soon there was a dearth of young ladies in the village. The young men, looking for other outlets for their energies, became famous in the surrounding area for their prowess as footballers and cricketers, winning over the next few years a prodigious number of Team Caps and awards”. Les’ father Bernard coached the village football team, as witnessed in a photograph of the 1919-1920 team which was reproduced in the September 1991 edition of the *North Aston News* :

Bernard is standing in the back row to the right as seen from the camera.

Here is another reminiscence written by Les some years later of life in North Aston just after the Great War :

<sup>17</sup> Because of the absence of so many men at the front, women were mobilized for productive activities in industry, agriculture and the service sector. In addition a political movement led by the Suffragettes campaigned for the emancipation and political empowerment of women.



North Aston football team, 1919-20

“As I look across the village green toward Deddington, my thoughts and memories come flooding back over the years, and again I see the little village school alive with children and the Master ringing the bell to tell us that playtime is over and to come into the classroom for what seems to us a lifetime (it was for two hours).



North Aston school, circa 1919

That was 1919 and the following year I had to leave the village school and I had to walk the three miles (5 km) to the Central School at Steeple Aston.

North Aston was a quiet place then, the War was over, and the men who went to the Front as it was called had returned to tell of strange things and strange people. Some did not return and we can see their names on the Roll of Honour in the Church.

So it was back to the old routine for many of them, working on the two estates, the Manor and the Hall. The Earl of Longford was among those who had not returned – he had been killed at Gallipoli in 1915 – but Captain Taylor was once more to be seen, impeccably dressed in morning coat and silk hat, complete with gold-topped cane, walking with military precision down to church on Sunday mornings. His seat in the choir stalls was immediately above mine, and should the hymn drag a little from the tempo he liked, he would close his hymn book, fix his monocle firmly in his eye and stare motionless at the altar. This would demoralize the young choristers to such a degree that often the singing was left to the men of the choir and the lady soprano who sat by the organist. But of the good things done for the village by him and his wife Mrs. Taylor, these would fill a book and possibly cause embarrassment to the present members of the family still in North Aston.

There was no pub in the village, so home-made wine was the standard tippie. As the fountain was the only source of supply of clean water in the village the men, complete with yokes and large buckets, would gather round the Fountain on Sunday mornings, after church, to fill their tubs and coppers for the Monday wash.”<sup>18</sup>

And here is Les recounting with his usual self-deprecating humour his experience as telegrapher for North Aston and surroundings in the early 1920s (he was twelve years old when he began to take on this responsibility):

“Telephones in the village were rare beasts in the 1920s, in fact only one was in captivity in 1921 and that resided in the Post Office in North Aston.

The keeper would, on request, relay a telegram message to the Main Post Office at Banbury and the reply, if any, would be relayed to the door of the recipient by the Telegraph Boy. The bicycle was his means of transport.

The North Aston instrument served not only North Aston but also the adjacent villages of Duns Tew and Somerton. On the rare occasion of two telegrams arriving at the same time, one for the Lower Farm at Duns Tew and the other for Hill House at Somerton, a distance of 5 miles (8 km) separating them, the decision regarding priority rested with the Post Master, i.e. my father. In any case, the second message was further delayed owing to the fatigue of the Telegraph Boy, i.e. me.

A separate equation regarding time and effort crept in on Thursdays which was “early-closing day” in Deddington.

The Telegraph Boy’s district included Deddington, Clifton and Hampton: which brings me to the real point of this “snippet”, the marriage of the Earl of Denbigh.

I am not sure where the marriage took place but the reception was held at the delightful if not unusual house at Clifton. The day chosen – without of course con-

<sup>18</sup> *North Aston News* no. 9, November 1990

sulting the Telegraph Boy – was a Thursday. Telegrams of congratulation flooded into the Post Office at North Aston, causing the legs of the Telegraph Boy to disappear in a maze from the waist downward.

At the end of a long hot day the last of the messages arrived, the Telegraph Boy was duly thanked, and a sixpenny piece changed hands.

The saddle of a bicycle remained imprinted on his backside for a long time...”

Another snippet, with the title “A bad cough”, recounts an incident which occurred in 1923 when his father gave Les a Meccano set:

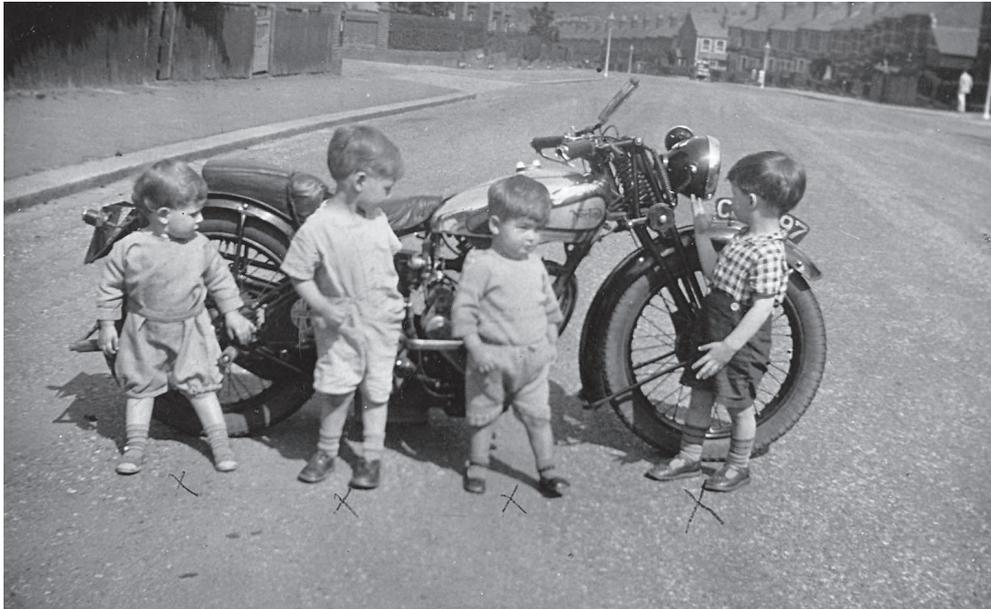
“It (the Meccano set) was only a small one and few models could be made. So it was with great excitement that I learned that David Knight, one of my school-mates, had a similar set given to him. Soon we were making larger items with the amalgamation of the two sets, first at my home in the village and then at David’s place over at the Cottages at Hendon Farm. Eventually, as with young boys, we decided to go our separate ways, and this is where I come to the real point of this story.

It was about 6.30 p.m. on a dark cold February evening that I went off to David’s house to collect my Meccano which was in two boxes. Carrying them in my arms, I proceeded homeward along a dark tree-lined lane. Suddenly from over the wall bordering the lane came the sound of a dreadful hacking cough. My pace quickened and in no time I was relieved to find myself, complete with boxes still in my arms, outside my home door at what is now the Old Post Office.

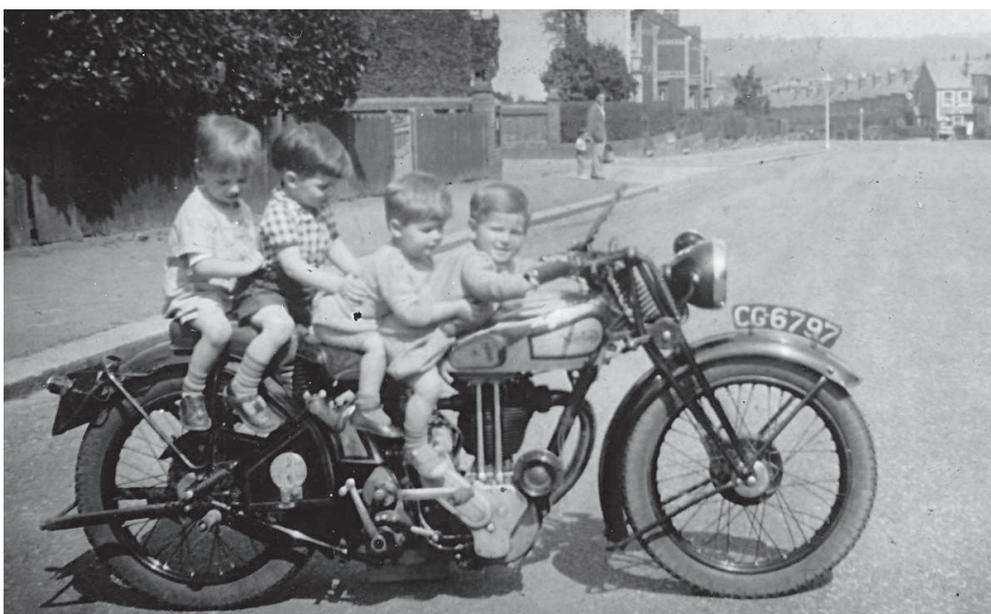
I slept badly that night, and in the morning approached the journey to school with some trepidation. Passing the “Place” I summoned up the courage and looked over the wall. There lying helplessly on its back was an old and very dead SHEEP !”

RM (23.04.2015): “I would like to recall some memories of Les, Bernard’s eldest son, my cousin, some thirty-two years older than me. What a man he was ! My first memory was when he and his wife Barbara used to come over from Reading to visit my mother. Les always called her his favourite aunt. He and Barbara used to come on Les’ 1936 Norton motor-cycle. I always remember their leather pilot’s helmets, Barbara used to wear a white one and Les a brown one. The first time they came, there was a side-car attached to the motor-bike. I was probably about eight years old at the time. Les plonked me in the side-car and we shot off up the road and turned off along the Middle Aston lane. This was a very narrow twisty road and I remember being terrified as we sped around the bends, thinking we would tip over. Anyway we got back in one piece, I must have been white as a sheet. I never forgot the experience and vowed one day to get my own back... Les was a very interesting man, he would take me on long walks across the fields, showing me lots of things which I never knew were there, things like fossils in old walls and where to find different

types of birds' nests. He of course knew all these things, having discovered them as a boy in North Aston. Over the years we saw less and less of Les and Barbara. I used to take my mother to visit them at their very nice bungalow in Loddon Bridge Road near Reading, and later on I would visit them with my wife and two girls. As the years passed we were too busy with our lives and somehow we just lost touch”.



Les' Norton motorcycle, 1936 model



I am the boy in the checkered shirt, one of four young admirers of the 1936 machine. Les was a great fan of motorcycles, a competent mechanical engineer, and attended motorcycle rallies until late in his life. During WW II he had to dismantle and lay up his beloved Norton, the use of private motor vehicles being forbidden for economy reasons. But he reassembled it shortly after the end of the war, and when I was a schoolboy he often took me on the pillion-seat for rides into the countryside around Reading. He later acquired a post-war model.



Les on a post-war Norton motorcycle

In my correspondence with Roger I had said that I knew that Les had great affection for Madge. But I had never met Madge, and did not know that she was Les' aunt. Mrs. Sykes never explained these things to me. I continued: "I think I am telling you no secret when I say that Les and Barbara had at times a stormy relationship, and I can recall a couple of occasions when they had stand-up fights, like boxers, in Mrs. Sykes' kitchen. As a small boy I could hardly believe that adults could behave like that. Anyhow, I said to myself: what a pity that Les did not marry Madge rather than Barbara!"

Roger replied (29.04.2015): "Yes, I did know that Les used to think the world of Madge, and yes, she was only seven years older than him but it was I would say just a platonic friendship. What I didn't know was about Les and Barbara's stormy relationship... Barbara died of cancer in 1988, Les died in March 2002, he would have been 92 in August of that year. I have never been to a funeral like it, with lots of people there, it was a joyous affair with lots of songs. It certainly inspired me to

have a funeral like that, everyone came away happy, just what Les would have liked, a really good send-off !”



Les and Barbara on their wedding day, September 1940

The following is an extract from a letter written by Les which is reproduced in the July 1992 issue (No. 29) of the *North Aston News*: “All memories, like everything else, must have an ending, and this is what was about to happen. In May 1925 I was despatched to Manchester to learn the secrets of engineering, which occupied my time for the next four years. On returning to the village I found, to my sorrow, that family affairs had taken a turn for the worse and, by reason of that, I left North Aston, with great regret, to start a new life in Reading, where I now live.” Les was 19 at the time, free to make his own decisions. He would have liked to take over the village Post Office, but was not old enough to do so. Despite his evident love of life in North Aston village and the countryside around, and the good relationship which he seems to have had with his father up to his departure for Manchester, he chose to live not with his father but to move with his mother and siblings.

This letter is the only reference I have found to the breakdown in the relations between Bessie May and Bernard Sykes, and it is a discreet reference indeed: there is no apportioning of blame, and no hint whatsoever as to what caused this breakdown. It remains to this day a mystery.

As Roger wrote when telling me about the consequences of Bernard's illicit affair with a lady in Mixbury, "things were not talked about in those days so I would say there's lots of skeletons in the cupboard". The above portrayals of the various members of the Sykes family of North Aston and related persons may have brought some of the skeletons out of the cupboard, but some remain locked away, no doubt for ever...

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In writing up this monograph I obtained valuable advice and information from a number of people, but I would like to make special mention of:

- **Roger Moore**, nephew of Bernard Sykes and longtime resident of North Aston
- **Tina Strachan**, daughter of Mrs. Sykes' second son Ronald Joseph Sykes and longtime resident of King's Sutton near North Aston
- **Fiona Rolian**, a former professional colleague of mine who is a member of Ancestry.com, specializing in genealogical research and family trees

I was able to get information from various issues of the *North Aston News*, from the book *North Aston: A Millennium*, and from the Internet. Much of the information is however based on hearsay rather than historical sources. I assume responsibility for errors of fact which may have crept into this monograph.

John Sykes

July 2016