

## FREDERICK GOODHALL COX (1874-1942). HIS WORK, HIS FAMILY AND HIS VILLAGE.

Fred (or Freddy) Cox lived in East Farndon for 40 years. He married a Farndon woman and played a significant part in village life. He had two houses built, which are amongst the most interesting in the village. At the same time he was chairman and managing director of R. & W.H. Symington – ‘the Corset Factory’ – one of the leading employers in the Harborough area.

Fred was born on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1874 in Leicester, where his father had a chemist’s shop. Fred was always close to his mother, but she was keen for him to go out to work rather than go on with his education at school. So, at the age of 14, in January 1889, he travelled to Market Harborough to work at Symington’s. The fact that his father’s sister was married to Robert Symington no doubt made this easier to arrange. Fred at first lodged on Coventry Street (now Road) and went home at weekends.

In July 1889 Fred began an apprenticeship, to last six and a half years, as a stay-cutter and sample designer. Corsets were everyday wear for women in those times and were generally known as ‘stays’. The boss at that time was ‘Mr. W.H.’ (W.H. Symington). By this time, Symington’s was the leading employer in the area. In the first half of the century, the main employer was the carpet factory; but the collapse of Goddard’s Bank in 1843 had led to its demise. So Symington’s filled the gap, becoming one of the first corset factories to be mechanised, through its use of Singer sewing machines. The firm opened other factories and had a total of 1,000 employees by 1881. The new Harborough factory was built in 1884. When Fred joined the firm, it had seven factories in various towns.



Symington’s ‘Pretty Housemaid’ corset from 1890

Outside of working hours Fred was very active; he loved cricket, but also played tennis, went walking and took dancing classes. In the winter he sometimes played football and was a supporter of Leicester Fosse. He went fishing at Naseby reservoir and at Marston Trussell Hall with G.W. Wilson. Mr Wilson was the firm’s Manchester agent and saw that Fred was a promising lad. In 1896 he took Fred to London, visiting warehouses and buying materials. That same year brought sadness, too, when Fred’s mother, Bessie, died, aged only 52.

The twentieth century began with vastly increased responsibilities for Fred. In May 1901, he married Florence West at Farndon church. The West family lived at Greywalls and owned land down the main street from the house. So soon Fred started building a new and very fine house in the Arts and Crafts style, ‘The Orchards’ (now Orchard House), just down the road from Greywalls. In December 1903 his meteoric rise through the ranks at Symington’s led to him being appointed a director. That same year George Wilson came to The Orchards as a lodger – and stayed till his death 22 years later, in 1925.



Fred's daughter Freda advertised the Liberty Bodice

Fred wanted the firm to have new ideas and be more enterprising. Perhaps because of pressure from Fred, 'W.H.' resigned as chairman in 1906, when he reached 65, and George Wilson, always a friend and supporter of Fred, became Chairman. A very successful new product came out in 1908 – the Liberty Bodice, designed by Fred. Within a few years Symington's produced 3.5 million Liberty Bodices a year.

In Australia, Jenyns Corset manufacturers had developed a garment which women were able to put on themselves, without help in tying the laces at the back. Symington's acquired a licence to make these corsets in Britain. The firm went from strength to strength with innovations like these. The factory was extended in 1901 and 1916.

Symington's recreation ground was opened after the war, at a time when the firm had to change its products to reflect the new flat shape that became fashionable for women.

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An advertisement from 1921

Fred had by this time become an important figure in Farndon life. As early as 1902 a 'social evening' had enjoyed music from Fred's gramophone. He may have been the only person in the village who had one. It was not till October 1904 that the local paper reported that Mr Cox was proposing to erect a house; this was 'The Orchards' (now 'Orchard House'). Fred and Florence had a daughter,

Freda, in 1903; she was the model for the Liberty Bodice and a bridesmaid at the Stamfords' wedding. The Coxes also had two sons, Edward (born 1910) and Geoffrey (born 1913).



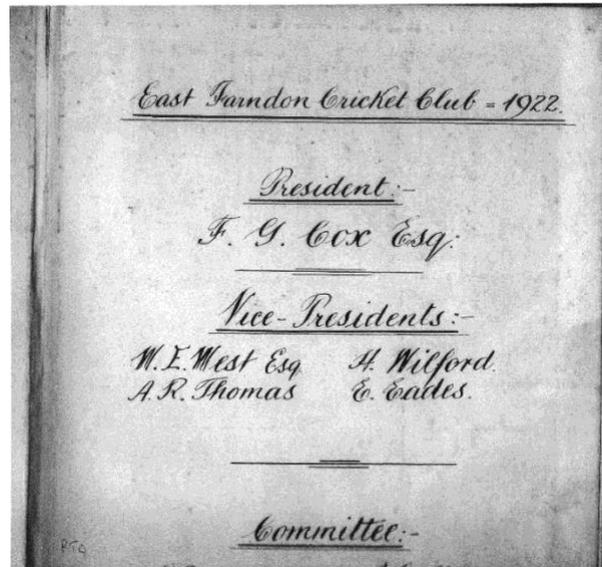
Florence Cox with Freda, Edward and young Geoffrey

In 1911, Oxendon Rural District Council wanted to widen the main road through the village at the upper junction with Back Lane. The road was made narrower by the wall round the Coxes' property, just below Orchard Cottage. The local newspaper reported that the council "recommended that Mr Cox's offer to provide a piece of land to improve the highway be accepted and to pull down the mud wall, the council agreeing to build a nine-inch wall, Mr. Cox to provide curbing and remove the old wall". The photograph below shows that the main road was very narrow at this point . In 1913 Fred was at the Annual Parish Meeting and reported on steps to get a telegraph office for the parish. At a concert in 1915, he is described as 'a genial chairman'.



Coxes' wall makes Main Street narrow in this photo from the early 1900s

A tragic event in 1917 was the death of the Stamfords' daughter Margaret, from appendicitis. She was only 6 years old. Florence was one of the child's aunts who acted as bearers at the funeral. In 1920 the Stamfords bought two houses near the Manor – 'Hillview' on the corner of Marston Road and another cottage behind it, which no longer exists.



The Cricket Club's first Minute Book

East Farndon Cricket Club was founded in 1922. The club's minute book, on the first page, has a list of officers, with 'President: F.G. Cox, Esq.' at the top. Fred was 47 by this stage and there is no evidence that he actually played in the team. However, it was clearly thought appropriate for an eminent person like Fred to be the club's figurehead.

A fire was reported in the local paper in November 1923 at Fred's home, 'The Orchards', which was said to have caused 'considerable damage', though no further details were given. Fred supported village events, as shown by a report from November 1924. A concert was held in the new village hall, only opened in February of that year, and a vote of thanks to the organisers and performers was seconded by Fred – so he must have been present. In January 1925 Fred's 21-year-old daughter Freda organised a dance in the village hall in aid of the Girl Guides, with music played by the 'Rhythmonic Dance Orchestra'. She helped Miss Bluett organise a similar fund-raising concert in June 1927.

When the village hall opened in 1924, there must have been a 'Working Party' set up to carry out decorating and other tasks. The Working Party was 'entertained', presumably at The Orchards, by 'Mr. and Mrs. and Miss Cox', the local paper reports. They then went in a charabanc to Naseby reservoir for a boating trip.

In 1925 Fred's long-term lodger and managing director of R. & W.H. Symington, George Wilson, died. The company now appointed Robert Howett and Fred as joint managing directors. Under their guidance in this period between the wars, Symington's introduced new products as fashions changed. These included the roll-on girdle and Peter Pan swimwear and the company's adaptability was shown by their production of different types of corsets for export to different countries. Fred's brother-in-law William Stamford now joined the Symington's board. He had married Florence's sister Janet in 1907 and they lived at what is now called 'The Manor' on Back Lane. On the death of Robert Howett in 1932, Fred became sole managing director, a post he held till his death. The firm was becoming something of a Cox family business, as Fred's sons Edward and Geoffrey joined the board in 1932 and 1937 respectively.

The Cox children were moving on. In 1928 Freda married vet Kenneth Miles. Edward became a key part of the plays that were produced in the village hall in the early 1930s. He was the producer of two plays, in March and May 1932 and acted in others. He was chairman of the Entertainment

Society, which was very active at the time, spurred on, perhaps, by the availability of a village hall as a suitable venue. After Edward got married in 1934, to Dorothy Wheeler, there is an obvious decline in the number of shows in the hall. A few years later, around 1938, the Cox family built the splendid Art Deco house, Kiln Yard, for Edward and his family.



The wedding of Freda Cox and Kenneth Miles in 1928

The programme for the village's celebrations in 1935, the Silver Jubilee of George V's reign, highlights the importance of the Cox family to village life. The flag was unfurled at the start by Mr F.G. Cox; the children's Jubilee mugs were handed out by Mrs Cox; the adults' prizes were also presented by Mrs Cox; one of the fancy dress judges was Edward's wife; at the end, the toast to Their Majesties was proposed by Mr F.G. Cox. It seems anything seen as symbolically important needed the Cox family to carry it out.

Farndon's involvement with R. & W.H. Symington had for many years included not just the Coxes and Stamfords, but Edward Eades, of Beauchamp House. He died in 1932 after serving as Company Secretary at the firm for 30 years and living in the village for the last 25 of those years. The local paper reported Fred's tribute to him.



Fred Cox at work

Fred's 53 years at Symington's came to an end in 1942, when he died at the age of 67 and was buried in the village churchyard. He had been sole managing director for the previous ten years. On his death, William Stamford continued the family dominance by being appointed managing director in succession to Fred. Five years later, he retired and the family retained its position when Edward became managing director. By 1951 the firm had ten factories world-wide.

After this, in the later 50s and early 60s, trading conditions deteriorated as cheaper imports flooded in and Symington's began to be a little less secure. A major upset for the Coxes occurred in 1962, when a board meeting at the company voted to remove Edward and Geoffrey from the board and for members of the Symington family to take over from them. Edward was incensed, not just at his dismissal but the way it was done. "It was obviously arranged some time previously and I was simply asked to call a board meeting," he said. The other board members asked him to resign, which he refused to do. So a formal meeting passed a motion to remove him from the board. He left the room and a similar resolution was passed to dismiss Geoffrey as Sales Director. "It was a case of three directors voting out two," said Edward, not mincing his words.

At a meeting on in late June, the new chairman, Lindsey Symington, was about to close the meeting, which had featured considerable criticism of the firm's performance, when Edward Cox stood up to put forward his feelings. The removal of the Coxes from the board, he said, "had been a great shock and surprise, particularly as I think during my office as chairman it is the first time a resolution of the board has not been passed with unanimous assent." He thought that some of his initiatives would soon bear fruit. "My long experience and intimate knowledge of the company can no longer be made use of and I naturally release the tiller with some anxiety." He had been chairman and managing director for 14 years and his resentment is understandable.

The company did not prosper without the Cox brothers. It made a loss in 1966 and was taken over by Courtaulds in 1967. Part of the factory was sold to Harborough District Council in 1980 and production ended in 1990.

Fred's wife, Florence, died in 1951. After Edward and his family moved away from the village, of the Cox family only Geoffrey, at Greywalls, was left in Farndon. He died there in 1978. Edward's wife Dorothy died in 1981 and Edward himself in 1990. They are buried in East Farndon even though they had moved away, showing the bond that existed between the family and the village.



The grave of Fred and Florence in Farndon churchyard has suffered with the lapse of time