

Edward Charles Davey FGS 1833-1923

A Wantage Geologist and Historian

By Trevor Hancock

Looking at 'Wantage Past and Present', one of the standard history books on Wantage published in 1901, one will notice that the authors are Agnes Gibbons and E.C. Davey FGS. Agnes Gibbons was the daughter of Philip E. Gibbons, one of the owners of the firm that was later to become Wantage Engineering Ltd. Edward Charles Davey, to give him his full name, was the author responsible for the first two chapters and the last one on the geology of Wantage. Who was he and how did he come to collaborate with Agnes Gibbons on the writing of 'Wantage Past and Present'?

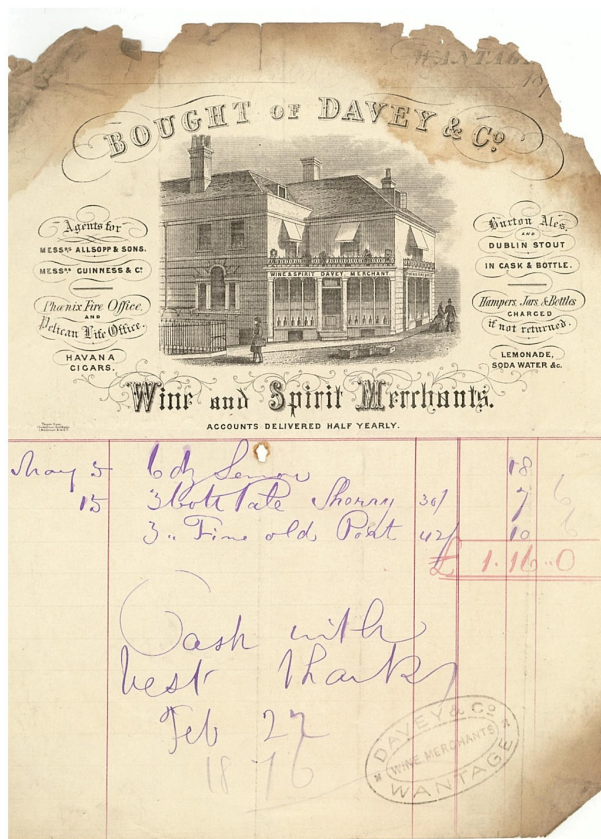
Edward Davey, born in 1833, was the youngest son of George and Elizabeth Davey (nee'Taylor) of Overy, Dorchester, Oxfordshire. The Daveys were a well-known Roman Catholic family who could trace their family back to a William Davey who bought the first copyhold in Overy in 1633. Edward's father, George Davey was a well-respected farmer and cattle-breeder who won several prizes at Smithfield Cattle Market.

Early life and Family

Edward was one of eight children (6 boys and two girls). He, like three of his brothers, was educated at St Edmunds College. Located at Ware, Hertfordshire, St. Edmund's College is the oldest Roman Catholic school in England; it was originally located in Douai, France and started as a seminary to train priests. However, it became a Roman Catholic school for boys and is generally known simply as Douai. Edward Davey was at Douai from 1847 until 1851, when he left to study for his London Matriculation 1st Class at Stoneyhurst College, Lancashire which he passed after a year whilst also carrying off several prizes for his French. A great linguist, Edward Davey eventually became fluent in seven or eight foreign languages, including Russian and Norwegian.

After further study back at Douai, Edward returned to Berkshire and settled in Wantage where he can be found living with his family in Newbury Street in 1861. He married Sarah Ward, daughter of John Ward of Sugnall Manor, Staffordshire on the 25th August 1859. They were to have three daughters Catherine (b1860), Teresa Mary (b1861), and Mary Ellen (b1864). Teresa was to marry in New York USA in 1888, John Venable Gibbons, the son of Henry P. Gibbons (Uncle of Agnes Gibbons). Sadly, Edward's wife, Sarah Davey died aged only 34 on 9th May 1869.

On the 26th October, 1870, Edward Davey married his second wife, Teresa Mary Turner of Enslow, Oxford. She was the daughter of Job Turner a wharfinger and Coal Dealer at Bletchingdon, Oxford. The couple had seven children, of these the two sons William and Francis emigrated to Canada. Edward and Teresa's daughters were Elizabeth (b1872), Agnes (b1874), Alice (b 1875) and Margaret (b1878). The seventh child died and its name is not known. Elizabeth and Agnes both became Head Teachers in Cumbria and Lancashire respectively.



Business Life in Wantage and beyond

The first mention of Edward Davey's business life comes from a local trade directory dated 1863, when Edward is listed as a Wine and Spirit Merchant and Insurance Agent for Phoenix Fire and Pelican Life, based in Alfred Street, Wantage. The wine business apparently prospered, for in 1863 he held an auction sale of surplus stock of 200 dozen wines (including Port, Sherry, Champagne and Burgundy). Following this, his wine shop moved to the Post Office Vaults, where the opticians is today (2012). He sold Havana cigars, lemon soda water and was an agent for the brewers, Allsops and Guinness.

Davey was also one of the first Directors of the Wantage Tramway when it was formed in 1873. In 1879 Edward Davey started a coal merchants in Mill Street where he dealt in home and steam coals arriving in the town via the Tramway. Coal came into Wantage over the tramway from Cannock Chase, Somerset, Kilmersdon, the Forest of Dean and Leicestershire and was sold by Davey at 18s to 22s a ton. The wine merchants business continued. The 1870s trade directories show that Davey went into partnership with James Frogley from Denchworth. Invoices from 1880 show that the company then changed to Davey & Co.

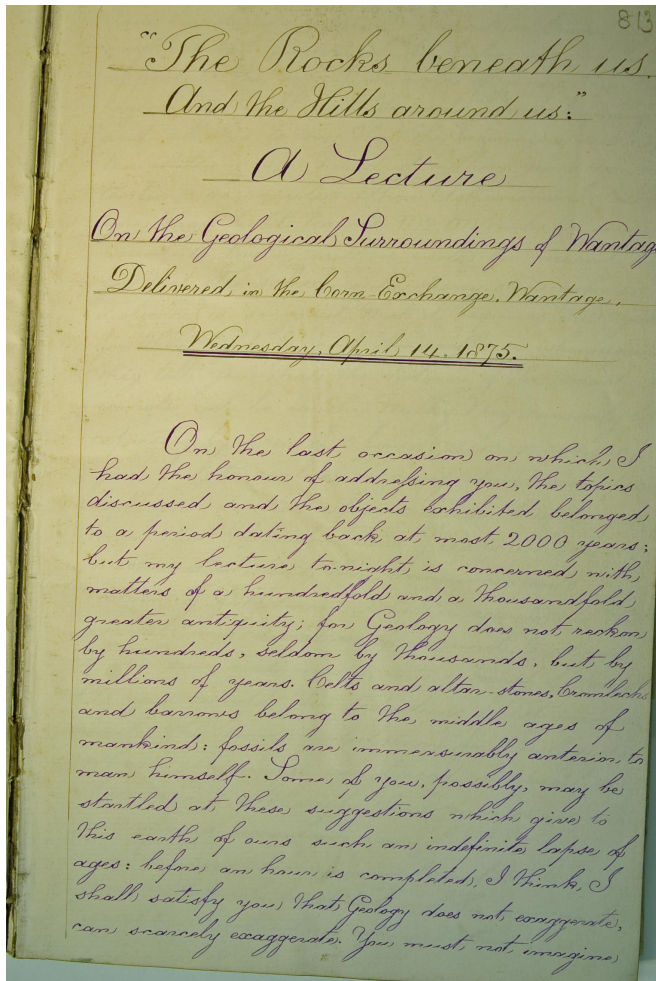
All connection with these businesses ceased when Edward Davey left Wantage in 1884, the coal merchants in Wantage was taken over by Thomas Clark and C R Clement in April 1884. On moving to Bath, Edward Davey became manager of the Bladud Coal Company and Midland Coal Wharf at Lower Bristol Road, Bath.

Date	Description	Amount
Feb 3	1/2 doz. Sherry	16
Apr 4	2 Dts 1879	9
Dec 29	1/2 doz. Best Sherry	19
Total		2.4

Geological and Historical Work

By far the most important contribution to the world Edward Davey made during his lifetime, was his work on geology and history. A look at a bibliography of his work reveals an interest in geology from at least 1861. He was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society in 1871, a member of the Newbury Field Club, the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and was an original member of the British Numismatic Society. He had a collection of fossils, coins (early British, Anglo-Saxon and mediaeval) and Roman Villa remains from the villa discovered at West Challow in 1876.

Looking at Edward's geological notebook in the Vale and Downland Museum gives some idea of the way in which he worked.



A page from Davey's Journal 1875.

Edward Davey would visit places of interest such as the prehistoric castle at Letcombe, the Roman remains at West Challow and Frilford and go for walks along the Ridgeway to see what he could find. He would then write up his findings in his notebooks. People would also bring their findings to him for identification. If there were local excavations (such as in 1875 to procure ballast for the Wantage Tramway) Davey would make a visit to talk to the workmen to see if there were any interesting finds. He recounts this story in his lecture given at the Corn Exchange at the time: "I walked part way up Chain Hill in quest of fossils and received three fish teeth from one of the men employed in digging ballast. At the bottom of the hill another labouring man thus accosted me – Any more sharks' teeth this morning sir? I answered in the affirmative. Do you think they be shark's teeth was his next question "I don't think anything about it I know they are! His rejoinder was "then where be their heads?"

In fact, Davey had a small fish jaw containing 50 teeth and had been partly instrumental in procuring for the British Museum the remains of a "new monstrous saurian" (i.e.

dinosaur bones) that had been found in the Kimmeridge clay at Swindon, for which he had received the thanks of Sir Richard Owen, the Victorian palaeontologist who coined the word "Dinosauria".

Thus Edward Davey gained experience and a reputation for being the local expert in the fields of geology and history. He was often in demand as a speaker at the Corn Exchange, Wantage with lectures such as "The Rocks beneath us and the hills around us" which he delivered in 1875 and which was later published in the Reading Mercury in April of that year. He was asked to comment on an earthquake felt in England on 30th October, 1868 and said it had been felt at about 10:35pm. Edward was a determined character wanting to educate the public about geology and to dispel superstitions that fossils were the result of a 'great deluge' or that 'the world was created in seven days'.

Several of his lectures were published in the local press either in full or as extracts, another example being "British and Roman Coins of Berkshire" which he gave in 1876. Subsequently these lectures formed the basis of many of his publications. Edward also corresponded with his fellow geologists and historians such as M. Fromental of Grauy, France who he made a trip to see in France in 1875 to discuss fossil sponges. One of the most interesting lectures he gave was in 1882 on "Wantage Past and Present" after 25 years living in the town. It is a very good summary of the history of the town and its development in the early Victorian period.

Move to Bath and last years

In 1884, Edward Davey and his family left Wantage for Somerset, selling the contents of their house in Mill Street by auction including, a walnut wood drawing room suite, a pair of cabinets, a full compass cottage pianoforte, 800 volumes of books, pictures, a 4 wheel pony carriage and a tricycle.

In the 1891 census the family can be found living at Lyncombe, later moving to Prior Park Villas in Bath. Davey found employment as the manager of the Bladud Coal Company and Midland Coal Wharf. He also became the Honorary Secretary of the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution and was for a year (1905) the curator of the Holbourne Museum. The Daveys attended St John's Church in Bath, where for some years Edward played the organ. At the Royal Bath Literary and Scientific Institution he accomplished a great deal of work, for many years keeping the meteorological data. He published books and pamphlets on various subjects notably one on his own family history, 'Memoirs of an old Catholic Family'. It was at this time he collaborated with Agnes Gibbons on the writing of 'Wantage Past and Present'. Bath began to interest him and he was in constant demand to identify Roman coins found in the early excavations.

Edward Davey passed away aged 91 on 1st February, 1923 in Bath.

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