

The Plumbe Family



The Plumbe Family, circa 1897. Standing (l/r) Winifred (or Agnes), Agnes (or Winifred), William Alvey, Jane Elizabeth Moon (nee Conway)?, William Collingwood. Seated (l/r), Charles Conway, Gertrude, Kate holding Gwyneth, Hilda, Olive (with cat).

Mrs Kate Plumbe moved to Totley Rise from Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, around 1913 following the death of her husband, William Alvey Plumbe, two years earlier.

Kate had been closely connected with the Mansfield Congregational Church, where for a number of years she was the leader of the Young Women's Class. She was also an ardent temperance worker. The first indications we have of her moving to our area are on 17 October 1913 when a report appeared in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph in which she spoke at a meeting in the city to deplore the indifference towards the subject of temperance by members of the public in general and by members of the Christian churches in particular. On the same day a request was received by the Mansfield Church for her transfer to the Union Church, Totley.

We are not sure why Kate decided to move here but it may have been to be closer to younger members of her family. Her son Charles Conway Plumbe had already moved to the area to take up a position as the local H.M. Inspector of Factories and her late husband had been guardian to two orphaned nieces, Constance Mary and Faith Marjorie Johnson, who were living in Sheffield.

In later life, Kate Plumbe was described as being of striking appearance whilst as a young woman she was said to be something of a beauty. If her views on religion and alcohol were somewhat narrow, she had a much lighter side to her character, being passionately fond of music - having a fine singing voice in her youth - and also of dancing and gardening, being particularly fond of roses. She was a woman of character,



Kate Plumbe (nee Stidston)

ability and charm, although some people were in awe of her as they felt they couldn't match her very high standards.

Kate was born Kate Stidston in Plymouth, Devon in 1854, the daughter of Samuel Stidston, a draper, and his wife Catherine Munford Conway. Kate's father's family came from Kingston, Devon where both her uncle and her grandfather, James Stidston, were farmers. Kate loved life on the farms and she was a keen horsewoman. Her grandfather on her mother's side, William Conway, was a Plymouth mason and later a builder.

It was whilst on a family holiday to the Scilly Isles that she met her future husband, William Alvey Plumbe, who was on a walking tour of the coasts of Devon and Cornwall. She was only 15 and he was ten years her senior, the son of Charles Plumbe and his wife Elizabeth Alvey. It appears to have been love at first sight on his part and she was undoubtedly very fond of him. The couple hardly saw anything of each other but corresponded for several years during

which Kate refused four offers of marriage from William. It was said that when her mother died in 1873 and her father hastily remarried to a woman who was unacceptable to Kate, she decided to marry William "chiefly to get out of the house." The couple were married at Sherwell Congregational Church in Plymouth on 9 September 1875 and at the age of 21, Kate left Devon to join her husband who worked in his father's printing business in Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire. It was a happy and successful marriage.

During the next twenty years, William and Kate had ten children, two of whom died in infancy. The eight other children were: Agnes Catherine (1876-1954), Winifred (1877-1966), Hilda Margaret (1878-1956), Gertrude Elizabeth (1879-1970), Charles Conway (1881-1962), Olive Stidston (1884-1963), William Collingwood (1887-1918), and Gwyneth Evelyn Boyd (1894-1983). Agnes and Winifred were born in Sutton-in-Ashfield but by the time of the 1881 Census, the family had moved to 4 Argyle Street, Mansfield.

William Alvey Plumbe had multiple business interests which were initially run in partnership with his father under the style of Charles Plumbe & Son, printers, booksellers and stationers of Sutton-in-Ashfield and Charles Plumbe & Sons, chemical manufacturers at Mansfield. William also ran a coal merchants business at the Railway Coal Wharf, Mansfield. He took over his father's printing business in 1874, moved it to Dame Flogan Street, Mansfield in 1884 and converted it from a partnership to a limited liability company in 1888. All whilst he continued to run the coal merchants, coal tar manufacturing and chemicals businesses. By the 1891 Census, the family had moved house again to Linden House, Chesterfield Road, Mansfield, which was already a substantial property before William enlarged it by building a billiard room.

It was William's great regret that he did not have much formal education but he was a great reader and he assembled an extensive library. Fond of both walking and botany, he would take the children on long 'botany

walks' that began Agnes's interest in botany - she later took a degree in the subject at Girton College, Cambridge. The Plumbees were a musical family and William took full part having a pleasant but untrained tenor voice and playing the cello. William also liked cricket and he took Kate and other members of the family to watch Nottinghamshire County Cricket team play.

He was also a keen traveller and the family never went to the same place twice running for a holiday as there were so many more places to see. He and Kate would go overseas every year, sometimes taking their youngest daughter Gwyneth with them. The family still have the original passport that William applied for in 1875. It is a large sheet of paper embellished in the Victorian style and signed by the Earl of Derby. "For Mr. Wm. A. Plumbe and his wife to travel to the continent". William Alvey Plumbe died on 9 February 1911 at the age of 65.

By this time most of the children had left home and only Gwyneth remained. Conway had married 'Queenie' Lynham in 1908 and in the same year Olive married Thomas Mack. The following year Gertrude married Charles Don. Agnes, Hilda and Winifred were living overseas.

William Collingwood Plumbe had remained in Mansfield where, following the death of his father, he became managing director of the family printing business, Plumbe and Richardson Ltd., and manager of the Sherwood Chemical Works. He was called up in March 1917 and he served with the 9th Yorkshire Regiment and the 1/5th Gloucestershire Regiment. The greater part of his time was spent in Italy but in the autumn of 1918, following leave home in Mansfield, he was sent to France. He was wounded at Le Cateau on 23 October, invalided home and admitted to Edinburgh War Hospital, Bangour, near Broxburn. At first his wounds were not considered to be severe but after a fortnight he took a turn for the worse and died on 13 November 1918, just two days after the Armistice was signed. He was aged 32 and left a wife, Marion, and three children below the age of six. Before joining up William had been a member of the Territorials and a special

constable. He was of a bright sunny disposition which endeared him to many people. He had been choir leader and Sunday School Superintendent at the Mansfield Congregational Church.

Gwyneth Plumbe attended the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School for Girls, Mansfield and the Dartford Physical Training College in Kent before becoming a teacher of Physical Education and English. Between 1915 and 1927 she worked in the United States, being recorded in the 1920 US Census as a teacher in Baltimore, Maryland. She came back home to Totley Rise most summers typically arriving in late June and returning to America in early September. At the beginning of World War 2 she worked for the ARP Casualty Transport Service at Llanfyllin in Montgomeryshire. In later life Gwyneth lived very happily in a Tudor cottage in Cranbrook, Kent where she enjoyed her music and her books. It was said that she would have liked to have become a professional violinist. She was of a good enough standard but in those days good orchestras did not employ women. Gwyneth Plumbe never married and died on 6 April 1983 at the age of 88.



Gwyneth Plumbe

The Plumbe's house in Totley Rise was at 1 Devonshire Road. Kate named it "Widdecombe", in memory of the happy days of her youth in Devon. The family also owned a house on Ashfield Avenue, Mansfield, that Kate named "Kingston" for similar reasons. Widdecombe had a lovely garden and a large drawing room with a grand piano and space for dancing - Jim Martin remembers going to parties there. The house was always well run by efficient domestic servants. Kate was happy there.

Between September 1915 and February 1917, Kate worked part time for the British Army Red Cross Volunteers and was involved with "knitting, needlework, war hospital supplies", probably in support of the VAD Hospital at St. John's Church Rooms. She then briefly managed the family businesses in the absence and then the death of her son William Collingwood, before they were handed over to local management but still under Plumbe family control.

Kate became a prominent member of the Totley Union Church and a Sunday School Superintendent but she also took an interest in other local churches, opening bazaars, charring luncheons, presiding over concerts and fund raising events and, of course, giving speeches on matters close to her heart. She warned of the many distractions that now faced the church on Sundays, like motoring, gardening, golf and tennis. She accepted that to encourage people to attend, the church must appeal to people's musical tastes, literary tastes, educational tastes etc. but it must not forget to provide for their spiritual needs. She never wavered in her support for total temperance. In one speech to the Nether Congregational Church, Norfolk Street, in 1926 she related how whilst driving through the Sussex lanes, she came upon three signs bearing the words "Red Lion", "Black Swan" and "Blue Boar" respectively "and we weren't running into a zoological garden. The signs indicated some of the things which lead from the church."

After an illness lasting about a year, Kate Plumbe passed away on 8 May 1931 at the age of 77. The funeral took place at Mansfield Cemetery preceded by a short

service at Totley Union Church. But that wasn't the end of the Plumbe Family's association with our area. Two of Kate's daughters, Winifred and Hilda, continued to have connections with our part of Sheffield for many years to come.



Hilda Plumbe

Hilda Plumbe attended the Bedford Teacher Training College between 1898 and 1899. At the time of the 1901 Census she was working as a teacher at the Wesleyan Girls College, Penzance. She was a missionary in Calcutta for about two years on a temporary basis covering for her sister Winifred who was ill, returning home in June 1908. Then between 1910 and 1911, Hilda taught in a school in Vancouver, Canada.

From October 1914 to April 1915, she worked six hours a day with the British Army Red Cross Society Volunteers as a cook in the VAD Hospital at St. John's Church Rooms. She joined the Sheffield Transport Department where she was placed in charge of women bus conductresses. When they were disbanded

at the end of the war, Hilda was made superintendent in charge of the Ticket Department, remaining in post until her retirement at the start of the World War 2.

Hilda was also the secretary of the Totley Union Church Dramatic Society from its inception in 1913 until 1954. The Society had begun as a Literary Society but by the mid 1920s "Dramatic Evenings" were the most popular items on the programme and a Dramatic Section was formed. In 1928 the old Literary Society was dropped and the new Dramatic Society took on ever more ambitious productions, encouraged by the building of a new church hall on Totley Brook Road to replace the old "Tin Tab". Hilda performed in these events which even featured the Society's own orchestra.



Winifred Plumbe

On 12 July 1899, at the annual speech day of the Queen's Grammar School for Girls, Mansfield, it was announced that the name of their former pupil, Winifred Plumbe, had appeared in the Tripos lists at the University of Cambridge where she had gained a second class in the Mathematical Tripos. It

would be more than twenty years, however, before her BA degree was conferred, as women were not full members of the University in those days. In the 1901 Census Winifred was shown as a teacher at the Girls County School in Abergavenny, Monmouthshire having spent the intervening twelve months at the Maria Grey Teacher Training College in London.

Missionaries were expected to do "deputation" work during their furloughs, visiting churches and organisations to tell them about their work. It was at one such event that Winifred was recruited. She applied to the Free Church of Scotland Board of Foreign Missions in July 1901 - despite being a Congregationalist - and on 31 December the same year she set sail aboard the Mombassa bound for Calcutta via the Suez Canal. She studied and passed examinations in Bengali. Most of her 37 years in India were at the Calcutta High School but between 1934 and 1938 she was the head of the Bachelor of Teaching Department of the Scottish Church College, Calcutta.

After her retirement in 1938, Winifred returned to England to live with her sister Hilda at 60 Furniss Avenue, Totley Rise, a property they named "Linden House" in memory of their parents' home in Mansfield. The two sisters shared housework with Winifred doing the cooking and Hilda doing the cleaning. They still travelled both at home and abroad enjoying separate holidays so that they could see as many places as possible and share their experiences with one another. Hilda Plumbe died on 4 November 1956 aged 78 and her sister Winifred died on 30 April 1966 at the age of 88.

We would like to thank the Plumbe Family for the use of family photographs and for their considerable help in researching this article. Any mistakes are entirely our own.

More information about the well-educated and well-travelled Plumbe family may be found in Freda Higgins' book A Family Record: The Browns, Cargills and Plumbees.