

Charles Towsey of Henley upon Thames in the County of Wexford Gentleman

Mary Harriet Sparks
A. B. Moorhouse
Just Henley
Henley upon Thames
Edwards Towsey

TOWSEY TALES

NAME: Mary Harriet Towsey (née Sparks)

BIRTH DETAILS: 16 February 1823 Tottenham

DEATH DETAILS: 1 June 1900, Tendring, Essex

CHART REF: Towsey Charts C1 & D1

MARRIAGE DETAILS: 20 May 1845, Henley

SPOUSE: Charles Augustus Towsey

Mary Harriet Towsey was the daughter of John William Thomas Sparks, whose father was Robert Harry Sparks, about whom you can read in his own Towsey Tale.

JWT Sparks was married in June 1818, to Mary Cooper, the daughter of Philip Cooper, a silk mercer, about whom you can read elsewhere on this website.

JWT and Mary had four children, the last being Mary Harriet Sparks, born at the Sparks villa in Tottenham, north of London, in February, 1823.

By that time John W T Sparks had gone into the family's very lucrative commercial distilling chemist's business, started by his grandfather, Thomas Sparks and then carried on by JWT's father, Robert Harry Sparks.

It was probably the vast sum of £500, that JWT had inherited from his grandfather, Thomas Sparks, that he invested in what must have been high risk stocks, which subsequently went bust.

It would seem that in October of 1823, Mary and the children, including Mary Harriet, who was just eight months old at the time, were staying at the Sparks villa in Tottenham, during renovations to their usual residence in St. John Street, above the distilling business, when JWT Sparks went upstairs and blew his brains out.

The newspaper reports of his suicide, show that newspapers in 1823 were just as sensationalist as they are today.

It is quite likely that the verdict on JWT's death was listed as 'temporary insanity', so that he could be buried in the churchyard. Those who committed the sin of suicide would not otherwise be buried in hallowed ground.

The reference to Spanish Bonds, shows that JWT was investing in Spanish Government Bonds, which yielded a high return but were also prone to defaulting. In this case the default meant that investors lost their entire stake.

The Morning Post (London, England),
October 31, 1823

SHOCKING SUICIDE.—Mr. **SPARKS**, a respectable chemist and druggist, who resided in St. John-street, put an end to his own life on Tuesday last, by blowing his brains out with a pistol: he was missing from two o'clock in the afternoon till five, when he was discovered by a bricklayer, who was at work in the house, in the garret, with his head blown to pieces. An inquest has been held on the body. Verdict—"Temporary derangement."

Morning Chronicle - Friday 31 October 1823

SUICIDE.—On Tuesday John Sparks, Jun. Esq., of the firm of Sparks and Co., distillers in St. John-street, Smithfield, in a fit of despondency, occasioned, as it is reported, by losses in his speculations in the Funds, particularly in Spanish Bonds, put an end to his existence by shooting himself through the head with a pistol, by which the greater part of his countenance was dreadfully lacerated. He fell on his face, and the report of the pistol not being heard by the family, the body was not discovered till two hours afterwards, when a surgeon was called in, who stated that the unfortunate young gentleman must have died instantly.—A Jury has since sat on the body, at the Windmill, St. John-street, and returned a verdict of Insanity.—The deceased has left a wife and four children. The melancholy intelligence was conveyed to her at the country residence near Edmonton.

By 1830, Mary Sparks had moved, with her children, or at least those who were not at school in London and therefore probably boarding with her family, to 67 Bell Street, Henley, no doubt because it was a nice place to live but probably also to be close to her wealthy half-brother, Philip Barrett Cooper, who was just a ten minute walk away, on the other side of the bridge.

We know from the accounts of Sparks and Co, that Mary Sparks was receiving a twice-yearly dividend from her shares in the business.

It is quite likely that the house at 67 Bell Street was owned by Philip Barrett Cooper. The record of Henley parish church pew allocations from 1834, compiled by Charles Augustus Towsey, for his brother Frederick Towsey, who was then the Church Warden, shows that the pew allocated to the residents of Mary Sparks' house, also accommodated P. B. Cooper's servants.

Mary Sparks was not at home for the 1841 census and has not shown up anywhere else in the country at that time. She might well have been off travelling in Europe, maybe with her daughter, Mary Harriet. Her three sons were all grown by then and off following their careers.

Mary Sparks was back at 67 Bell Street in Henley by the 1851 census, by which time all of her children had moved on, leaving their mother to share the house with her elder sister, Susannah Terry and their uncle, James Cooper, who died in Bell Street in 1858, at 98 years of age.

Mary Cooper died in that house in 1854.

Charles Augustus Towsey had been a keen oarsman in his youth, presumably participating in locally arranged events and through that interest he, together with a group of his fellow Henley gentlemen, decided in 1839 to stage a properly organized rowing regatta in Henley, at which Charles was one of the two honorary stewards.

Having moved to Henley at about seven years of age, Mary Harriet would have known Charles, who lived just down the street, throughout her childhood, though there would most likely have been a considerable gap when she went away to school.

Perhaps even as a child, Mary Harriett had watched admiringly as the handsome young man from down the road, rowed up and down the river and she would no doubt have been impressed, as a 16 year old, when Charles was involved in starting and running the Henley Rowing Regatta.

After Charles Augustus Towsey and Mary Harriet Sparks married in 1845, when she was 22 years old and he was already 33, she moved into the Towsey home at 57 Bell Street, which was above Charles's wine and beer merchant business and I can only assume that the house was bigger than it looks, when we consider that it had to accommodate the ever expanding new Towsey family.

By the time of the 1851 census, Charles and Mary have their first four children: William Charles, born in 1846, Arthur John, born in 1847, Edward, born in 1848 and Augusta Mary, born in 1850. They also had three servants.

All of these bodies left no space for Charles' poor old mother, who was living up the road at number forty. Elizabeth Ann Towsey, at 78 years of age, was probably happy to move away from all those young children. She was boarding with a 61 year old confectioner and his 58 year old deaf, dress-making spinster sister. Elizabeth Ann died there four years later from constipation.

You can read about the lives of Mary Harriet's children in their own Towsey Tales and in that of their father, Charles Augustus Towsey.

One event that certainly impacted on the lives of Mary Harriet and the family at that time, was Charles Augustus Towsey being declared bankrupt towards the end of 1856, and you can read about that sorry business in Charles' Towsey Tale.

All of the evidence of the life of Charles Augustus and his family in England for the rest of the 19th century, indicates that there was no long term damage to their modest but comfortable middle class lifestyle, although they did lose the property in Bell Street. It is likely that the majority of the collective wealth of the family, was in the name of Mary Harriet Towsey who had inherited considerable sums from various ancestors.

It would have been these funds that paid for the education of the children which, particularly in the case of Mary Euphrasie (May) Towsey, their youngest child, who spent four years at a music college in Berlin, would have been very expensive.

The second class certificate of bankruptcy that Charles was awarded, seems to have allowed him to continue as a wine merchant, but because the premises at 57 Bell Street had been surrendered, we see that by the 1861 census, he is trading as a wine merchant and living at 10 Hart Street, just up the road from the church.

By that time he and Mary Harriet had nine children, of whom the six youngest were living at home.

You can read more about the children at this time, on the Towsey Tale of their father, Charles Augustus Towsey.

Mary Harriet Towsey
1862



Gerti Towsey circa 1865

Philip Barrett Cooper, Mary Harriet's uncle, died over the Henley bridge at his house, Bird Place, in March 1862. Philip left an estate of nearly £5,000, of which £2,000 went to his wife. The rest was divided between his four siblings or, in the case of his deceased sister, Mary Sparks, that quarter was divided between her four children. This means that Mary Harriet Towsey would have received about £180.

Charles and Mary's tenth and last child, Mary Euphrasie Towsey was born in 1864. Two years later, their seventh child Gertrude ("Gerti"), died at nine years of age.

At the time of the census in April 1871, the family were still living at 10 Hart Street, but on that particular night, only Charles



HART STREET HENLEY

Sale of useful and modern Household Furniture and effects, the property of C. Towsey Esq. who is removing.

Mr. W. H. Cooper has been favoured with instructions to sell by auction on the premises on Wednesday July 5th, 1871 at 11 o'clock precisely.

THE FURNITURE AND EFFECTS comprising mahogany and painted wardrobes, toilet tables, washstands, iron bedsteads, capital bedding, blankets, linen &c. Brussels and tapestry carpets, chairs and easy chairs covered in chintz, mahogany bookcase, walnut loo tables, capital pianoforte in handsome walnut case, china, glass and various useful articles.

May be viewed the day previous to and morning of sale and Catalogues had at Mr. W. H. Cooper, Auctioneers &c. Bell Street, Henley-on-Thames and Oxford St. Reading.

KINCH'S HENLEY ADVERTISER

24th June, 1871

and three of his children were at home.

Mary Harriet was holidaying at Brighton, where she and two of her daughters were lodging in a guest house, enjoying the first warmth of spring at the seaside.

Charles Towsey retired in July 1871 and the few family members still at home moved to Deal, near Ramsgate on the Kent coast.

The family would no doubt have taken their most important pieces of furniture with them to Kent, but the list of



Mary Harriet Towsey Circa 1865



Mary Harriet Towsey, August 1868

items being sold is of some interest, nevertheless.

A Brussels carpet is one of good quality, made of wool on a linen background. A loo table is a round card table with a single, central pedestal, where the top can fold down for ease of storage. Selling more than one loo table possibly indicates that the Towseys enjoyed card parties. As to the piano: being the middle of the Victorian era, when furniture became bulky and overly decorated, means that the 'handsome walnut case' of the piano, must have been at least elaborately carved, but just as likely ponderously kitsch.

Possibly as early as 1880, Charles and Mary Harriet had moved from Deal up to Lowestoft, which is about the most easterly spot on the English coast, in Suffolk,

Susanna Terry, Mary Harriet's aunt, died a month later, in May 1881, two weeks after her eighty sixth birthday.

Susanna also left several thousand pounds to be divided between most of her surviving nieces, nephews and the offsprings therefrom, but left most of her wealth in a trust, from which Mary Harriet Towsey would receive the interest. Upon her death, the capital was to be divided between her children.

Susanna specified that this trust money should only be invested in British or Indian companies paying fixed interest.

One provision in the wills of both Susanna Terry and her sister, Mary Sparks, was that Mary Harriet Towsey should inherit their clothing. Was this a comment on Mary Harriet's dress sense? It is certainly difficult to imagine her enthusiastically dressing up in her 86 year-old aunt's old threads.

Yet another pile of money left in trust for Mary Harriet, (so that no husband could get his hands on it), and then to be divided between her children, or as she chose in her own will, was £500 from Margaret Dean, who had lived with Mary's mother's family: the Coopers, silk mercers of Pall Mall, since her childhood. There is no record of exactly what the

connection was between Margaret Dean and the Coopers. She was obviously independently wealthy and seems to have perhaps been adopted by the family. Anyway, she never married and spent the last decades of her life living around the corner from Mary Harriet Towsey, in Henley, dying there in 1860 at 78 years of age, and leaving the income from the £500 to "her friend".

At the time of the April 1881 census, Charles Augustus was at the lodging house of Annie Bates, in Hart Street, Henley. He may well have been in Henley working on plans for that year's Regatta, or to deal with some other small business interest.

Mary Harriet, at 53 years of-age, was finally free from all parental responsibilities and staying at a beach-side hotel in St. Leonards-on-Sea, near Hastings.

Charles Augustus Towsey died from cancer at 71 years of age, on 25th January, 1883, at the small village of Mutford, just outside Lowestoft, where he was probably staying at a private hospital.

He had already disposed of whatever estate he might have accumulated since his bankruptcy, because the balance which he left to his wife in his will was valued at just £25-15-0.

It appears that at some time during the 1880s, Mary Harriet and her daughter, Gus, moved in with Edith, who was the only one of her daughters in England to marry.

Her husband was the Reverend John Banks Beers

John and Edith had no children and at the time of the census of 1891, they were living in the rectory at Sturmer in Essex, with Mary Harriet and Gus, who was then 38 years old and working as governess at the local church school.



Beaumont Hall Hotel, Clacton-on-Sea

Gus had not moved in permanently and we see that she was employed elsewhere, as a companion, ten years later.

Mary Harriet Towsey was staying at Beaumont Hall Private Hotel in Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, when she died on June 1st, 1900 at 77 years of-age.

In her will, her estate is valued at £1378-5-3. Of that, she left £300 each to Arthur and Connie, £100 to Gus, £200 to Edith and £200 to May. The balance went to Connie, who was most likely, also living at Beaumont Hall by then, looking after her mother.