

Bertram Cohen, MVO, MB BS (Lon). *The last Resident of Asherton, Sidmouth*



Introduction: In the late 1940's, our grandfather, Dr. Bertram Cohen moved to Asherton on Cotamaton Road from Hillsdon House on the High Street in Sidmouth, Devon. He lived there on the ground floor with our Aunt Ruth, his youngest daughter, supported by a housekeeper (Meier) and gardener (Luxton). By this time our grandmother had become estranged from our grandfather, and being a rather a restless soul moved around a lot. She spent some time living with us in Hampshire as well as living with her two sisters in residential hotels in Southsea and the New Forest. She returned to a residential home in Tipton St. John for

her final years. As grandchildren, we were so fortunate to stay at Asherton two to three times a year while growing up. The gardens provided a wonderful place to play, damming the stream, fishing for newts in the lily pond, and playing croquet and golf putting on the far lawn, where we used to put on annual summer shows. We went to Jacob's ladder beach, played tennis at Coburg Terrace in the mornings, and took country walks all around Sidmouth in the afternoons, with an occasional picnic trips to Exmoor and Dartmoor. Whenever it rained, we walked in Harpford Woods, pretending to be "The Railway Children" as we waved to the steam trains as they tumbled down the valley. We are currently very excited about the renovation work being conducted by the "Friends of Glen Goyle," and thought we could contribute some information about our grandfather and his family as background to the final years in the history of Asherton from the 1940's until its demolition in 1967.

Early Life and Military Service: Dr. Bertram Cohen, was born on the 14th November 1884 as Bertie Isaac Cohen in London, UK. He changed his name by Deed Poll, effective 13th May 1913, prior to being married to Gladys Marguerite Hogg on the 2nd June of that year. In 1896, his father Mark Cohen, a school principal in Brixton, London, emigrated to Cape Town, South Africa, with his wife Deborah Nathan and their four children, Bertie aged 12, and three daughters, Beatrice, Emmie, and Mabel, together with his sister-in-law, Annie. A second son, Joseph Ernest was born in South Africa. Mark Cohen joined "The Hope Mill Hebrew Public School" as its headmaster. This school was considered to be: "the first Jewish public-school worthy of the name in Cape Town and was destined to have a very successful career" [1]. Sadly, Deborah died in 1901 with Mark remarrying in 1903. Soon after, our grandfather's sister Beatrice left to attend school in Switzerland and he left for medical school in London, UK, attending Kings College (preclinical) and then St. George's Hospital at Hyde Park Corner (relocated to Tooting in 1976).



*Dr. Bertie Cohen
Naval Surgeon*

It must have been soon after he completed his medical training that he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve as a Naval Surgeon. Sometime prior to 1913, our grandfather was assigned as house surgeon to the King Edward VII Hospital for Officers, which was around the corner from St. George's Hospital, first on Grosvenor Crescent (now the Belgium Embassy) and then Grosvenor Gardens in London. The King Edward VII Hospital was relocated to Marylebone in 1948, and continues to be frequented by members of the Royal Family. This hospital at the suggestion of the Prince of Wales, was established in 1899 in the home of Agnes and Fanny Keyser to attend to the wounded of the Boer War [2]. The Prince of Wales also suggested that Agnes, who had no formal training, be appointed as the matron, later becoming known as Sister Agnes [2]. Although she had a reputation for stern discipline for keeping young doctors in line, according to our mother, Barbara (Bunty) Cohen, her father indicated that Sister Agnes often shared palace gossip over afternoon tea.

After his marriage in 1913 to Gladys Hogg, a music teacher, the couple moved to Sidmouth to live initially at Barton Cottage on Coburg Road before moving to Hillsdon House on the High Street. At that time he partnered with Dr. Ralf Michelmore [3], and was appointed as: "Honorary Medical Officer to the Victoria Cottage Hospital, Sidmouth" [4].



*Dr. Bertram Cohen
Surgeon Lieutenant*

However, the following year, as a Surgeon in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR), he would more than likely have been meeting his annual commitment to the Navy when World War 1 (WWI) broke out [3]. As a surgeon lieutenant, he was initially based at the Naval Hospital in Plymouth and later with the Grand Fleet in Scapa Flow as the ship's surgeon on HMS Malaya, possibly having risen to the rank of Commander Surgeon by then [3]. He more than likely joined the ship after the Battle of Jutland by the time Admiral Beatty had taken over command of the Grand Fleet from Lord Jellicoe. He spoke very highly of Admiral Beatty. It is interesting to note that in 1917, Prince Albert (George VI) as a lieutenant had a very short stay on HMS Malaya accompanied by his friend Louis Grieg, who was appointed as assistant surgeon and the Prince's equerry [5]. It would have been interesting to know whether they all messed together on the ship during this latter part of the war.

Life in Sidmouth after WW1: Our grandfather returned to Sidmouth and his medical practice based at the family home of Hillsdon House with his consulting room next to the pharmacy in the space that is now an estate agent's office. Dr. Tom Fison joined him after WW2. [3]. When our grandfather moved to Asherton in the late 1940's, he established a consulting room and a dispensary within the house. He and Dr. Fison may well have practiced at a clinic in or around the Old Grand Cinema, since we recall a phone call that was received from the Fire Brigade at the time of the Cinema's destructive fire in 1956. It was probably sometime later that Dr. Fison moved with his family from Milford Road to Spring Gardens on Station Road, where he established a surgery. Over the years of practicing general medicine in Sidmouth, our grandfather was chairman of the Sidmouth Victoria Cottage Hospital for several years and at some stage was appointed by the Honiton Board of Guardians as Poor Law Medical Officer [6]. He became highly regarded by many prominent members of the Sidmouth community.



*At the Palace with
Margaret (Betty) Cohen*

By the 1930's, Arthur, Duke of Connaught (3rd son of Queen Victoria) was coming to Sidmouth on a regular basis. On his first visit, it might be assumed that as a well-established local physician, our grandfather was asked to present his medical credentials to the Duke so as to be available during the Duke's visit if required. Subsequently, a long-standing relationship was developed as a friend and physician to the Duke. Our mother Barbara (Bunty) Cohen, recalled visiting Bagshot Park (current home of Prince Edward and family) with her father on several occasions. His service to the Duke and his family was recognized in 1939 by our grandfather's appointment as a Member of the Victorian Order (MVO).



MVO 4th Class

Our Aunt Betty (above), his eldest daughter and a nurse, recalled that early in 1945, she and her father were called out in the middle of the night to attend to Sir Ambrose Fleming, who had suffered a

hæmorrhage and had fallen into a coma. Sir Ambrose was known for his development of the “Thermionic Radio Valve” and of the “Left Hand and Right Hand Rules,” used by young physicists in determining motion, current and field for motors and generators, respectively. Apparently, Sir Ambrose came out of his coma and took one look at Lady Fleming and requested plum pudding and then laid back and passed away.



Our grandfather was a member of the Golf Club and a regular bridge player at the Club located at the end of Fortfield Terrace. He was also a keen fly-fisherman, which took him to North Devon and Scotland. By the 1960’s (prior to his death in 1966), he mainly maintained a private medical practice without regular surgery hours. However, he was engaged every morning in being driven to visit current and former patients all over the Sid Vale. As young children we had to be on our best behaviour when invited to visit some of these friends and patients that included Mrs. Townsend on Boughmore Road to play board games, and Lady Twyford on Mutersmoor Road to meet with her Myna birds. These birds use to disturb golfers on the other



*Marguerite Smythe
circa 1940*

side of the hedge with: “wolf whistles” and outbursts of: “hello my old cock-sparrow,” and “where’s Betsie” the dog. Marguerite Smythe, who before the war lived with her husband at Glenside before relinquishing their house in 1943 to accommodate the Dental Hygiene School, was a dear friend of the family and a very frequent visitor at Asherton. At the onset of the war, it was at one of her parties that our parents first met. Two of our father’s friends from the military, also met the two Smythe daughters whom they subsequently married after the war.

Dr. Cohen’s Children: Our grandparents had three children. Margaret Deborah Cohen (b. 1914), our Aunt Betty, became a senior nurse at St. George’s Hospital, and at the beginning of WW2, a matron of a Nursing Home in Budleigh-Salterton, before joining our grandfather’s practice near the end of the war. She married Arthur Thomas Gainsford in Columbo Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They spent several years in the Indian Sub-Continent, eventually returning to Sidmouth for their final years. Our mother Barbara Joyce Cohen (b. 1919), known as Bunty, after a short period in the Land Army, received a Diploma in Horticulture from Reading University in 1943 and then spent time in Monmouthshire helping make allotments productive. In 1945, she married our father Captain Derrick Vincent Bassett after his return from being a prisoner of war in Germany.

The third daughter, Murial Ruth Cohen (b. 1921), our Aunt Ruth, attended the Harcombe House Domestic Science School in Uplyme run by Francis and James Francillon. She then went on to obtain a Diploma in Domestic Science from Reading University. She joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) that subsequently became the Women’s Royal Army Corps (WRAC), and stayed on for a few years after the war, rising to the rank of sergeant. She then lived with our grandfather at Asherton. She was very



Ruth Brown 2011

active with the local Red Cross and following a period of making homemade cakes for the hotels in Sidmouth, joined forces with Margaret Brazier, who lived in a Glenside flat, established “Ruth’s” cake shop on Old Fore Street. It was very successful, but closed in 1967. At this time, she married John Brown (d. 1982). Throughout her life she made major contributions to the Sidmouth community. She was the Ladies Captain of the Sidmouth Golf Club in 1978, cooked for “Meals on Wheels” and subsequently volunteered her time in their delivery after they moved to frozen foods. She volunteered at the Museum and was a founding member of the Sidmouth’s Macmillan fundraising committee [5]. In 2001 she was voted “Sidmouth Citizen of the Year.”

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Sources:

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3. John Murray (publ.) 1998: J. Royal Society of Medicine 92: 196, 1999.
4. T. Gosling and S. Luxton. In: “The Book of Sidmouth: Celebrating an Ancient Coastal Town.” Halsgrove (Publ), 2004.
5. Recent Appointments. British Medical Journal Supplement November 22:463, 1913.
6. Sarah Bradford. In: “The Reluctant King: The Life and Reign of George VI, 1895-1952.” St. Martins Press, New York. Pp 70-71, 1989.
7. Newspaper cutting of unknown origin.

Additional Material from the Family Archives:



This photograph, obtained from the Sidmouth Museum (Strip No 58/220 Neg), shows our mother Bunty, and her mother Gladys examining the storm damage to Sidmouth’s New Esplanade in 1925.



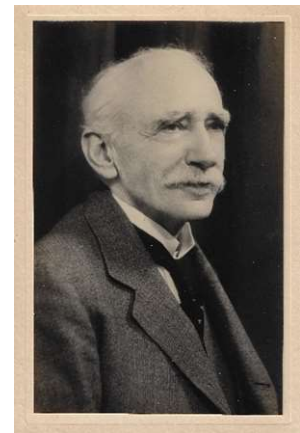
*Dr. Bertram Cohen
Hillsdon circa 1945*



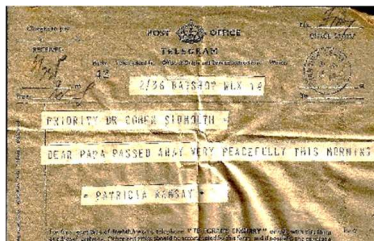
*Duke of Connaught 1933
No.3 46/920*



Duke of Connaught 1934



*Sir Ambrose Fleming
9267/4344 B*



Telegram from the daughter of the Duke of Connaught (Lady Patricia Ramsey) to Dr. Bertram Cohen 1942: “PRIORITY DR COHEN SIDMOUTH • DEAR PAPA PASSED AWAY PEACEFULLY THIS MORNING • PATRICIA RAMSEY”

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