

James Sharp (1808-83) and his Children, a Prominent Family in Victorian Dartford

St Edmund's Pleasance in East Dartford contains the Sharp family tomb, just inside the entrance from Great Queen Street. Seeing this prompted me to find out more about the Sharps, who were one of the leading families in Dartford during Victorian times.

James Sharp was born in Dartford on 29 December 1808, a son of Charles (1779-1811) and Ann (1786-1832) Sharp. The father of Charles was James Sharp (1758-1829), a bricklayer who founded a building company in 1800. After Charles Sharp died in 1811 aged 31, his son James lived with his grandfather. In 1829 James senior died. His will bequeathed the building company to his grandson James. It also said "I desire to be buried in the North East corner of the burial ground of Dartford in a vault to be made sufficiently capacious for myself and family."

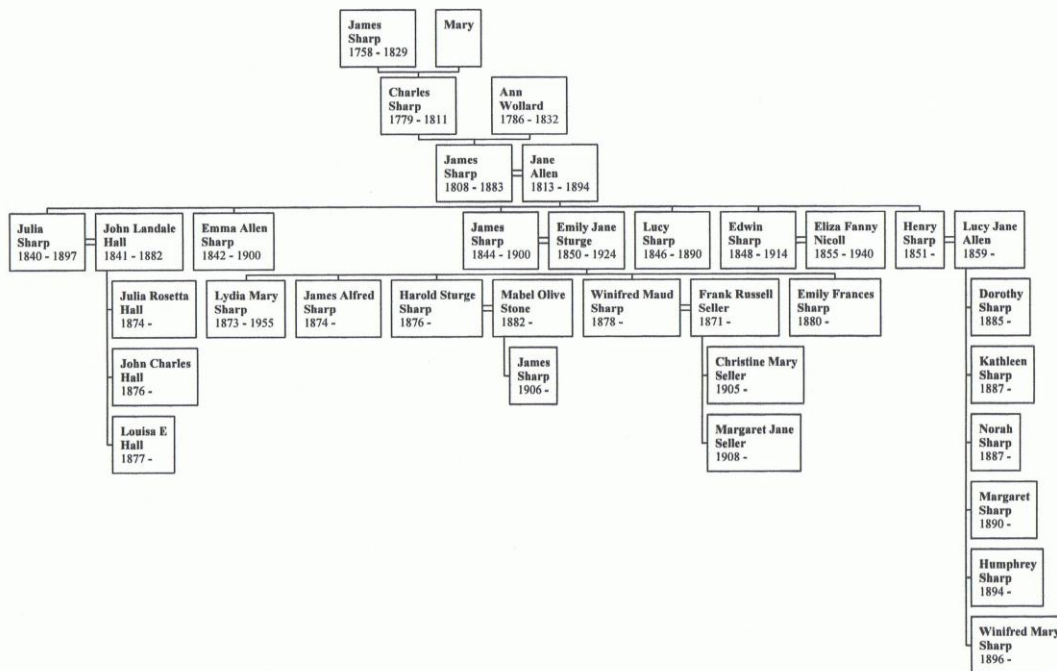


The Sharp family tomb

James married Susannah who died in 1834 aged 25. In 1839 he married Jane Allen in Dartford. He was 31 and she was 26, born in Southfleet. They went on to have six children, three boys and three girls, all born in Dartford. They were Julia (1840-97), Emma Allen (1842-1900), James (1844-1900), Lucy (1846-90), Edwin (1848-1914) and Henry (b1850).

The 1851 census shows James, aged 43, a builder master employing 8 men living in Dartford High Street. Also in the household were his wife Jane (38), their children Julia (10), Emma (8), James (7), Lucy (5), Edwin (2) and Henry (2 weeks) plus two general servants.

Hourglass Tree of James Sharp



The 1851 Kent Directory lists “James Sharp, builder and agent to the Kent fire and life office and cashier to the Savings Bank, Water Lane.” The company did a lot of building work in Dartford including Hall Place Girl’s School in Dartford (1858), the Baptist Chapel in Highfield Road (1867-68) and alterations to the Methodist Church in Spital Street (1869).

James was still living at High St Dartford in 1861 and is listed as aged 52, a builder employing 11 men. Living with James were Jane, his wife (48) and their children Julia (20), Emma (18), James (17, an architect), Lucy (15), Edwin (12) and Henry (10). Also at the address was Isabella M Allen (6, Jane’s niece) and a servant.

The address for the Sharp family in 1871 is given as 2 High St, Dartford. James (63, a builder), Jane (58), Julia (30), Emma (28), James (27, a builder), Lucy (25), Edwin (22, a builder), Henry (20) and a servant are listed. 2 High Street is now the address of Clifton and Co, Estate Agents, at the junction between High Street and Hythe Street. The frontage above the shop looks like it dates back to Victorian times and so is probably the same building that James and his family lived in.

Julia Sharp got married in 1872 to John Landale Hall, an engineer aged 32. John was a grandson of Edward Hall (1775-1850), a brother of John Hall (1764- 1836), who founded Dartford Ironworks that later became J & E Halls. Julia and John had three children namely Julia Rosetta (b1874), John Charles (b1876) and Louisa E Hall (b1877). John Landale Hall died in 1882 aged only 41. Probate records show that his personal estate was valued at £337. James (the younger), Edwin and Henry Sharp were the executors of his will.

James Sharp junior also got married in 1872. His bride was Emily Jane Sturge, a daughter of Alfred Sturge, the minister of the Baptist Church that James Sharp and Sons had built. At the time of the wedding he was 28 and she was 22. They had five children namely Lydia Mary (b1873), James

Alfred (b1874), Harold Sturge (b1876), Winifred Mary (b1878) and Emily Frances (b1880), all born in Dartford.

The 1874 edition of Kelly's directory lists "James Sharp and Son, builders and timber merchants, Hythe Street." The firm owned the nearby Baltic Saw Mills (which were located where the Orchard Theatre now is). Sometime between 1871 and 1881, James Sharp senior moved to Miskin Road in Dartford and retired, leaving his eldest son James in charge of the business. Miskin Road was one of the most affluent streets in Dartford, containing large Victorian houses, several of which were demolished only recently. The 1881 census shows James (72, a retired builder) and Jane Sharp (68) living at 2 Miskin Road with their four unmarried children Emma (38), Lucy (35), Edwin (32, a builder) and Henry (30, a builder) plus a general servant.

Next door at 4 Miskin Road in 1881 was James Sharp junior aged 37, a builder and timber merchant employing 42 men and 6 boys. Also living at the address was James's wife Emily (30), their children Lydia (8), James (6), Harold (4), Winifred (3) and Emily (8 months) together with a nursemaid and a housemaid.

James Sharp senior died in August 1883 aged 74. The Dartford Chronicle contained an item reporting his death and funeral. It said "Another of the oldest and best esteemed of the natives of Dartford has been called to his rest. Those who remember Mr James Sharp in the prime of life will bear in remembrance how active and competent a trader he was in all his business relations. Esteemed by relatives and acquaintances alike, he was sought out to undertake responsible trust and private business until at that period much of his time was devoted to such philanthropic work, whilst his practical piety displayed itself in charitable and Christian local undertaking. Of late years he has, since his retirement from business, been rarely seen in the busy haunts of men, but his genial smile and warm interest in the good of all never left him until the hand of death removed him on Saturday, August 11th, to a higher sphere. In the removal of such estimable characters there is naturally deep sorrow and grief with those who remain behind; but the best of us may well desire no better life, no happier end. From a comparatively small country business Mr Sharp, in his lifetime, lived to see the expansion of his into one of the most important in the town and district, and his sons firmly established in it. He desired to terminate his days in the peaceful retirement of the residence in Miskin Road that he had selected, and his wish has been fulfilled. Mr Sharp served in his time most of the public parochial offices which fall to those in his condition of life."

James was buried in the family vault in St Edmund's Pleasance. His three sons were the executors of his will. His estate was £1,493 (equivalent to about £800,000 now, by comparison with average earnings).

1883 saw the marriage of Henry Sharp (aged 32) to Lucy Jane Allen (23) in Dartford. They had five girls – Dorothy (b1885), Kathleen and Norah (twins b1887), Margaret (b1890), Winifred (b1896) and one boy – Humphrey (b1894).

In 1886 Edwin Sharp married Eliza Fanny Nicoll in Eastbourne. He was aged 38, she was 31. They had no children.

The London Gazette contains an announcement dated 13 January 1888 saying that the partnership between James, Edwin and Henry Sharp, who had been operating as James Sharp and Sons, Timber Merchants and Builders at Hythe Street, Dartford was dissolved by mutual consent. The business continued under Edwin and Henry. James set up his own company in competition – the 1899 edition of Kelly's directory lists him as James Sharp, timber merchant and saw mills, Gas Lane, Dartford. Gas Lane was in North Dartford and is now called Victoria Road. James's business was on Victoria Wharf, which is now occupied by an industrial estate. Two different timber merchants

called James Sharp in Dartford must have been confusing and reduced the amount of business available to both !

Sometime between 1888 and 1890 James Sharp and Sons ceased to operate as a builder and became timber merchants only. An advert in the Dartford Chronicle dated May 30, 1890 read as follows :

Sawing, Planing and Moulding Mills,
JAMES SHARP AND SONS, DARTFORD
English and Foreign Timber Merchants
Slates, Cement Pipes, Staffordshire Goods
Agents – Kent, Fire and Life Insurance Company

In 1889, the firm submitted plans for new offices in Hythe Street on the site of what is now Dartford Post Office. A photo taken in 1902 shows the office, which was quite a large, imposing building. It was built next to their existing office, which was in the premises now occupied by the Nationwide Building Society.

Lucy Sharp died in 1890 aged 44. She was buried in East Hill Cemetery. The 1891 census shows 3 houses in Miskin Road occupied by the Sharp family.

- at number 6 was Jane Sharp (aged 78, a widow), her unmarried daughter Emma (48) and a servant
- at number 7 we have James Sharp (47, a timber merchant) his wife Emily (40) and children Lydia (18), James (17, a timber merchant's clerk), Winifred (13), Emily (10) as well as two servants.
- at number 4 there is Henry Sharp (40, a timber merchant) with his wife Lucy (31), Dorothy (5), Kathleen (4), Norah (4), Margaret (1) a domestic servant and a nurse.

The site of these houses is now occupied by modern housing. Julia Hall née Sharp (aged 50, a widow living on her own means) was living nearby at 13 Tower Road with her children Julia (16), John (15), Louisa (13) and a servant. Edwin Sharp (42, a timber merchant) was a boarder in Bournemouth.



The offices of James Sharp & Sons in 1902 (from the Dartford Library local studies Collection)

Jane Sharp (the widow of James) died in 1894 aged 80. She was buried in the Sharp family tomb in St Edmund's Pleasance.

An election for the newly created Dartford Urban District Council was held in December 1894. 31 candidates contested the 15 seats. In sixth place in the poll (with 454 votes) was Mr J Sharp, timber merchant. *Dartford Historical Notes* by S K Keyes contains a photo (opposite page 497) of the new council, including James Sharp.

Julia Hall née Sharp and her sister Emma moved to St Leonards on Sea, Hastings. Julia died there in 1897 aged 57 and was buried in East Hill Cemetery, Dartford in the same grave as her husband. Probate on her estate (£355) was granted to her brother Edwin. Emma died in 1900, also aged 57. Probate was issued to Julia Rosetta Hall, (Emma's niece), spinster. The estate was £540.

James Sharp junior died aged 56 on 27 March 1900 of liver cancer. The Dartford Chronicle reported as follows

“We regret to record the death on Tuesday of Mr James Sharp of the Victoria Saw Mills, Dartford. A native of the town, the deceased had taken an active part in public affairs, and for several years was member of the old Local Board and of the Urban Council. He was one of the retiring members by rotation this year, but owing to ill health he had decided not to seek re-election. On the Council he was an outspoken member, and on occasions when the majority were of adverse opinion it did not deter him from assiduously pressing his views. The town has lost a valuable public worker and the news of his death on Tuesday was met with general regret.”

The description of James as “outspoken” and his business split with his brothers suggests to me that James was not an easy man to get on with ! He was buried in East Hill Cemetery. Probate was granted to his eldest two children Lydia Mary Sharp, spinster, and James Alfred Sharp, timber merchant. The estate was £11,653 (equivalent to about £5.2 M now, by comparison with average earnings). Lydia Mary Sharp (1873-1955) later became a successful artist under the name Dorothea Sharp and exhibited her paintings regularly at the Royal Academy.

In 1900 the business of James Sharp and Sons was sold by public auction. It was purchased by Edwin Sharp. By the time of the 1901 census, only two (Edwin and Henry) of the six children born to James and Jane Sharp were still alive. I can't find a census record for Edwin. Henry (aged 50, a retired timber merchant) was living in Hastings with his wife Lucy (41), children Dorothy (15), Norah (14), Kathleen (14), Margaret (11), Humphrey (7), Winifred (5) a cook and a housemaid.

Keyes reports that Edwin purchased a Speedwell car from John Beadle in 1906. This would have been one of few cars in Dartford at that time.

In 1911, Edwin, aged 62, a timber merchant was living in Miskin Road with his wife Eliza (56) and two domestic servants. Henry Sharp (60, a retired timber merchant) was living at Mayfield, Church Road, Bexleyheath. Also at the address were Henry's wife Lucy (51), his daughters Dorothy (25) and Winifred (15) as well as his sister in law Florence Ann Allen (51) and a domestic servant.

Edwin Sharp died in 1914 aged 65. A report in The Dartford Chronicle describes his funeral. It starts

“Amid many manifestations of regret and heartfelt sorrow, the funeral of the late Mr Edwin Sharp of Miskin Road and the Dartford Sawmills, took place on Monday afternoon last. All the principal business houses in the town had signs of mourning, and the blinds of private houses were drawn on the line of the route, while flags flew at half-mast at the Parish Church and at the London Provincial Bank.”

There was a large congregation at the funeral service in Holy Trinity Church and many floral tributes including one from Sir James Whitehead (“A warm tribute to a genuinely good man”). Edwin seems to have been held in high regard by the people of Dartford. He was buried in East Hill Cemetery in the same grave as his sister Lucy. His wife Eliza was later buried there in 1940.

The probate record says that Edwin Sharp died 14 October 1914. Probate on his estate (£14,303) was granted to Eliza Fanny Sharp, widow and Thomas Godfrey Baines, solicitor.

James Sharp and Sons Ltd continued to trade after Edwin’s death. In 1933 the firm was controlled by Mr Edward Ernest Harle (b1874, Managing Director), Mr Walter Ernest Harle (b1879, Director and Secretary) and Mrs Eliza Fanny Sharp (Edwin’s widow, Director). It finally closed in 1966.

A Sharp family tree may be found in the “sharp42” database on RootsWeb’s WorldConnect Project website.

Philip Taylor © 2011
Email PhilT42LQS@Yahoo.co.uk

Resources used

- The local studies collection at Dartford Library for parish records, The Dartford Chronicle newspaper, local directories, *Dartford Historical Notes* (1933) and *Further Historical Notes* (1938) by S K Keyes.
- Probate records, held at the Principal Probate Registry, 42-49 High Holborn, London
- Burial Registers for East Hill Cemetery on DVD from NWKFHS
- The website <http://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/>