

Frederick Alexander Preston Pigou (1838 – 1905) : Gunpowder maker and controversial landholder in Dartford.

The Pigou family were of French Huguenot origin and had connections with China and India, first as traders, then as members of the Indian Civil Service. A branch of the family was involved in the manufacture of gunpowder in the Dartford area for several generations¹. Frederick Pigou (1739-1804) and his partner Miles Peter Andrews bought the manor of Bignores, which is south east of Dartford, for the manufacture of gunpowder in 1778. Frederick passed it on to his eldest son Frederick John Pigou (1767-1830), who in turn gave the business and land to his three sons Frederick William (1790-1863), Henry Minchin (1791-1874) and Clarence (1798-1858). Frederick and Clarence took an active role in the operation of the gunpowder works with their partner Robert Wilks. Frederick William and Clarence both died unmarried and without issue. Henry Minchin Pigou was the grandfather of the subject of this article.

Frederick Alexander Preston Pigou was born on the 19th March 1838 in Birmingham. He was the eldest of four children born to Frederick John and Margaret Catherine Pigou. Frederick John played cricket (he was a batsman) for England in 4 matches during 1836². The 1841 census shows Frederick (an agent) and Margaret Pigou living at “House at Railway Station”, Rugby, Warwickshire with their children Frederick (3) and Cecilia (1).

Frederick senior died in 1847 aged only 31. In 1851, his widow Margaret (aged 32, a lady annuitant) was living in Harrow. Also in the household were her children Frederick (13, a scholar at Harrow Public School), Cecilia (11), Florence (9) and Frances (7), her niece Ada Purrier (7) and two servants.

By 1861, Margaret Pigou (a fundholder), her children Frederick (23), Cecilia (21), Florence (19) and Frances (17) had moved to Essex House, High St, Putney. Also living at this address were Margaret’s nieces Isabella Purrier (22), Eliza Purrier (15), Minnie Pigou (14), Ellen Purrier (10) and Constance Pigou (10) plus her nephew Clarence Pigou (11) and three servants.

Frederick’s great uncle Frederick William Pigou died in 1863. His will said, in relation to Edward Walker, an executor, “I would like him to introduce into the business any nephew or great nephew who will testify in writing his agreement so to engage as a partner and take an active part in the business.” So it was that his great nephew Frederick became a gunpowder manufacturer. The London Gazette of 1864 contains notice that he had applied for letters patent, for “improvements in the construction of powder flasks”, although he allowed this to lapse three years later. The partnership between Frederick and Robert Wilks was dissolved by mutual consent in 1866³. The company name continued as Pigou and Wilks, with Frederick as the manager. It became Pigou and Wilks Ltd in 1872 when 1500 shares of £100 each in the company were offered for sale⁴. The company was renamed Pigou, Wilks and Laurence Ltd in 1873. Frederick’s partners were Charles Laurence and Charles Thomas Laurence, gunpowder manufacturers of Battle in Sussex.

Making gunpowder was a hazardous business. There was an explosion at the gunpowder mills in 1872 and another in 1874, but fortunately there were no major injuries on either occasion. An item in the Dartford Chronicle⁵ reads *EXPLOSION AT THE GUNPOWDER MILLS. – At a quarter-past four o'clock last Saturday morning an explosion occurred at the Dartford Gunpowder Mills, Messrs Pigou, Wilks, Laurence & Co's (Limited), by which a mill was blown away. The explosive force was very great, arising from a "charge" in an advance state of manufacture. Workmen were in the destroyed mill shortly before the accident, and thus had a narrow escape of losing their lives. The damage must have been considerable.*



Trademark of Pigou, Wilks and Laurence
(from Dartford Library local history collection)

In 1866, Frederick married his cousin Isabella Margaret Purrier (who was living at the same address as him in 1861) in Brentford. He was aged 28 and she was 27. They were to have six children; Frederick Hugo (b 1866), Mary Isabel (b 1867), Ella Egremont (b 1869), Harold John (b 1874), Meynell Henry (b 1875) and Isabel (b 1877).

The 1871 census shows Frederick aged 33, a gunpowder maker living at Heathside, Wilmington (also known as Wilmington Manor and now part of Wilmington Grammar School for Girls on the south side of Parsons Lane) with his wife Isabella (32) and children Frederick (4), Mary (3) and Ella (1). Also listed at the address were

six servants. Sometime before 1877, Frederick moved into a large house called Bignores, reached via a driveway from Darenth Road. The house was built by James Sharp & Sons, a Dartford firm. The property was later used as the clubhouse for the J&E Halls Sports Club and was recently demolished when the Princes Park Dartford Football Club Stadium was built.



Bignores (photo from Dartford Borough Museum)

In 1876, Frederick enclosed part of his estate on the Brent (an area east of Dartford), which was then open ground. Some people in Dartford claimed a right of recreation on the land and public meetings were held to protest. A banner “The Brent – No surrender!” was hung across the High Street. Frederick offered to leave seventeen acres (nearly half of the land in question) unenclosed but this offer was not accepted. In 1878 the Enclosure Commissioners held an enquiry into the matter. Their report was in Frederick’s favour, saying “the inhabitants of Dartford have not established their claim to a legal right over the Brent.”

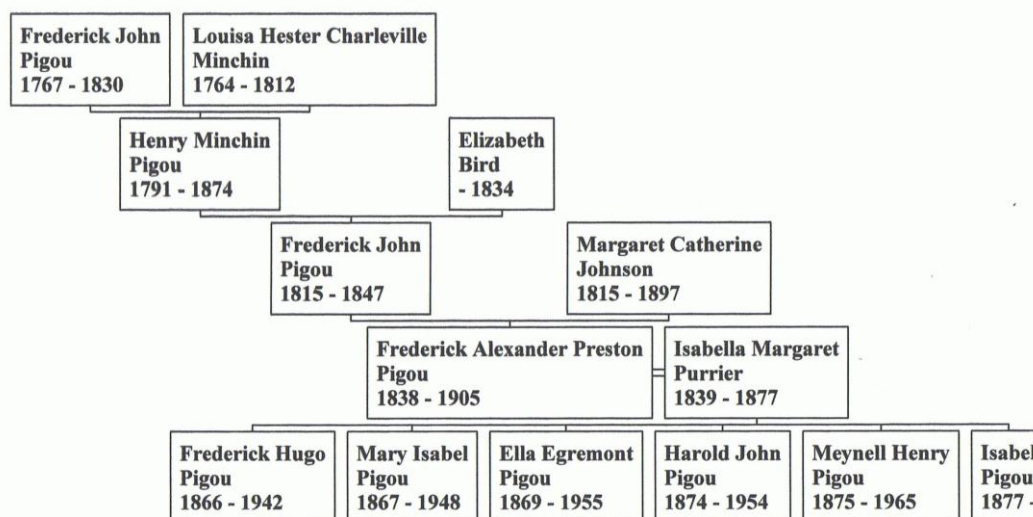
Frederick’s wife Isabella died in 1877, the day after the birth of her daughter Isabel. The following report appeared in the Dartford Chronicle⁶ :

DEATH OF MRS PIGOU. On Saturday last the 7th, the inhabitants of Dartford were informed of a circumstance that once roused their deepest sorrow and sympathy. We refer to the death of Mrs Pigou, which took place at Bignores Dartford, early on the morning of that day, a few hours after the birth of a daughter Isabel. The deceased lady was under the care of Dr Weddell and appeared to have succumbed to supervening syncope. The funeral which took place on Wednesday last was conducted by a friend of Mr Pigou’s. ...A large number of Dartford residents attended at the burial service. Mrs Pigou’s kindly smile and many accomplishments will, we are sure, be sadly missed in Dartford in the approaching winter season.

Syncope is a loss of consciousness arising from a fall in blood pressure. Presumably this was caused by blood loss arising from the birth of her daughter.

The 1881 census shows Frederick, aged 43, a landowner, living at Bignores with his children Frederick (14), Mary (13), Ella (11), Harold (6), Meynell (5) and Isabel (3), his sister Florence (38) and four servants. He did not remarry.

Hourglass Tree of Frederick Alexander Preston Pigou



(a more detailed family tree may be found in the “Pigou42” database on RootsWeb’s WorldConnect Project website)

Frederick had other business interests. Notices in the 1886 London Gazette refer to him as a partner in businesses that performed “Subaqueous Boring and Blasting and Dredging” and acted as “Mechanical Engineers and Contractors for Tunnel Driving”.

By 1891, the household at Bignores consisted of Frederick (52, living on his own means) with his children Frederick (24, 2nd Lieutenant Hampshire Regiment), Mary (23), Ella (21) and Isabel (13). Also listed were his sister Florence (48, living on her own means) and four servants.

In 1897, Pigou, Wilks and Laurence Ltd held an EGM⁷ which approved a proposal that “The Company cannot, by reason of its liabilities, continue its business and that it is advisable to wind up the same and accordingly that the Company be wound up voluntarily.” A liquidator was appointed who sold the Company with its lands and buildings to Messrs Curtis and Harvey, a firm of gunpowder makers, for £70,430⁸. This would have been divided amongst the shareholders.

Frederick died on 13th June 1905 aged 67 at Bignores. A local newspaper⁹ printed an item reporting his death. It included

The deceased gentleman had been in impaired health for a considerable time and last season wintered in Egypt, but with little benefit.....Mr Pigou enjoyed a considerable amount of popularity amongst the community, in whose interests he always manifested a kindly interest, although seldom taking any prominently active part in

local affairs. He was a great traveller, and the possessor of wide and keen intellectual gifts. Salmon fishing in the Norwegian waters was one of his favourite recreations. Dartford loses in him one who largely contributed to its manufacturing prosperity, and who assisted considerably in founding its reputation as a great industrial centre.

Frederick is buried in the family grave, a large plot surrounded by grey marble kerbstones in Wilmington churchyard. They are inscribed as follows

ISABELLA MARGARET, / wife of F.A.P. PIGOU / of Bignores, Dartford / born 17th Jan^y 1839, died 7th July 1877. / Casting all your care upon him, for he / careth for you. FREDERICK ALEXANDER / PRESTON PIGOU / of Bignores, Dartford / born 19th March 1838, died 13th June 1905 / "He forgiveth our sins" / FLORENCE ELIZA CHARLOTTE / sister of F.A.P. PIGOU MARGARET CATHERINE / wife of FREDK J PIGOU / Oct 22 1897 / Until the day breaks FREDERICK HUGO PIGOU Major Indian Army, / dear husband of HILDA EMMA PIGOU, / fell asleep 13th October 1942, aged 75 years / In loving memory

Frederick's estate was valued at £18,763 (equivalent to about £8 million now¹⁰). The executors were his daughter Ella and son-in-law Cyril Ionides (husband of his daughter Mary).

If you have any further information about the life of Frederick A P Pigou, please contact me on PhilT42LQS@Yahoo.co.uk.

Philip Taylor
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Sources

1. The Dartford Library local history collection contains a hand written Pigou family tree prepared in 1994. The researcher (name unknown) has done a thorough job. I have checked the accuracy of much of the information given.
2. Web page <http://www.espncricinfo.com/england/content/player/19199.html> accessed 3.10.11
3. London Gazette 11 January 1867.
4. File BT31/1796/6846 at the National Archives.
5. Dartford Chronicle 4th July 1874.
6. Dartford Chronicle 13th July 1877
7. File BT31/1796/6846 at the National Archives.
8. File J13/1751 at the National Archives.
9. Clipping in Dartford Library local history collection, name of newspaper not recorded (not Dartford Chronicle)
10. Calculated with respect to average earnings using the website "Measuring Worth" www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/