

A Forgotten Life: Felix B White

It was a Tuesday morning when two men and their dogs passed through the quaint cemetery in the Church of Annunciation on Chislehurst High Street. There, they encountered the unusual sight of a young woman exploring the stone remnants of graves, gradually sinking into a grassy bed.

That young woman was me, tracing my finger over the faded letters of long forgotten names, carved in cold stone. I was searching for the headstone belonging to a man by the name of 'Felix'. It was the first name that had entered my mind when beginning this assignment. It is the strangest things that we remember at times, and I decided to follow my instinct.

As a child, I grew up in Chislehurst, and often cut through the graveyard to get from one part of the village to the other. A little girl named Alison Phelps was buried there, and her grave always made itself known to me. She had been a student at my primary school, and every year we would plant Daffodils in memory of her. After passing her grave, I would always notice the large marble stone for Felix, because it reminded me of 'Felix the Cat.'

I knew that Felix lay not far from Alison but when I arrived that morning, I could not see his name on any of the stones. It has been a few years since I have been through the Graveyard, and some of the names had now faded, and stones were disintegrating. He had to be here somewhere, and so I swept aside the spiky blades of grass from square tablets facing upwards towards the sky, wondering if Felix had been dead so long that his grave had been swallowed by the earth, or crumbled into dust.

After close inspection of the graves, I caught a glimpse of a brown honed headstone, draped in vines, of weed and thorns. I drew closer to it, and moved aside the vines.

Written in charcoal letters, the headstone read *'In loving memory of my dear husband, Felix White, laid to rest May 11th 1961, aged 71 years.'* Underneath the inscription, another had been added at a later date: *'Also his wife, Edith White, died March 21st 1976, aged 91 years.'* My project had begun.



Fig.1 The headstone of Felix & Edith White hiding behind the leaves, The Church of Annunciation, Chislehurst, Kent

I worked out Felix's year of birth from the dates on the grave, and typed '1890' into the search engine, along with his name and town, on ancestry.co.uk. There was a 1901 Census record for a Felix B White. He was eleven years old at the time, the youngest son, and one of five children. I wondered what the 'B' stood for. The White family lived at 15 Chislehurst High Street, and their father, Douglas, was a Shopkeeper. I needed to find out their trade, and if Felix had followed in his father's footsteps. I decided to look at some local history online at visitchislehurst.co.uk, an association who works closely with the Chislehurst Society on Chislehurst Heritage. I was unaware at this time, how vital a part the Chislehurst Society would play in my research.

I browsed through a few articles, and came across *'Memories of the High Street'*, a series of memoirs written by a gentleman, named Ralph Hedderwick, who lived in the area between 1921- 36. He wrote about the shops he visited along the high street, with his mother, and named the families that worked there. My eyes ran through each line desperate to see the name 'White', and yes, I was in luck!

Towards the end of his memoir, Hedderwick recalled,

‘...then finally came White and Bushell Ironmonger’s. Mr White endeared himself to my mother who took something in to be repaired, “Will you wait while we do it? Or will you leave and we will let you have it in a week or two?”’.¹

Of course I had no proof that this was the same White Family who Felix belonged to, but it seemed likely. To find out about Felix, I needed more information on the White family so I decided to visit the Local History Archives at the Library in Bromley, Kent.

Lucy, the archivist was extremely helpful. She set me up on the Library edition of Ancestry.co.uk where I gained more in depth access. I had previously been unable to locate a record for Felix on the 1911 Census. With Lucy’s help, I soon discovered that the ‘B’ in Felix’s name stood for ‘Bertie’ and he was recorded as living in Tatsfield, Surrey, with his parents and sister, Frances.

I then located the marriage record between Felix and Edith Belton. They had married between October and December in 1918 which was the close of WW1. Had Felix fought in either of the World Wars or was he protected by trade? Assuming he had become an ironmonger, of course. I still had no confirmation. I searched for Edith Belton on the census records and although there were a few results, all were servants and living in Sevenoaks. I felt I couldn’t go any further at the moment and would come back to Edith later, if necessary.

I decided to check out the Street Directory, which held records of all the residents dating back to 1900. As Felix had married near Woolwich, I assumed that he had not remained in Tatsfield, so I wanted to see if he had resided back in Chislehurst. Before I conducted my search amongst the blue bound books, Lucy suggested looking for an Obituary

¹ Ralph Hedderwick, *Memories of the High Street from 1921 -36*, Memories of Chislehurst <<http://www.visitchislehurst.org.uk/news/memories-high-street>> [accessed 19 May 2016].

in the archive collection of the Chislehurst and Kentish Times, which were held on Microfilm. Although I thought it was a long shot, I needed something more to go on and there was a chance that an Obituary had been printed for him. Fortunately, it didn't take me too long before I had my breakthrough. I began with the edition issued on Friday 19 May, 1961, a week after Felix's death, and scrolled through until I came to the Obituary section. I couldn't believe my luck.

'A former partner in the family business of White and Bushell [...] Ironmongers, Chislehurst. Mr Felix Bertie White died at his home, Edenbel, Willow Grove, Chislehurst [...] on his father's death, Mr White took over the family business with two of his brothers and a sister [...] until they retired in 1957. [...] During World War One, he served with the Royal Army Signal Corps and during World War Two with the Home Guard [...] Mr White is survived by his wife and two elder sisters...'²



Fig.2 Felix White's obituary, Chislehurst & Kentish Times, 19 May 1961 (Microfilm) [Accessed 19 May 2016]

I was ecstatic at finding this piece of information, but slightly disheartened at the realisation that Felix had no children.

² Chislehurst and Kentish Times, Edition 19 May 1961 (Microfilm), Bromley Local Archives, Bromley Library, Bromley, Kent [accessed 19 May 2016]

Edenbel, where Felix lived appeared to no longer exist. My curious mind took me to Willow Grove, which is not a long road to travel down. I happened to meet the Postman there who had never heard of Edenbel, so I assumed the property had either been demolished or turned into flats.

I told my mum about the project, and she suggested speaking to our neighbours, Renie and Brian, who have lived in Chislehurst all their life. They both remembered the Ironmongers, but not the White family, who were before their time. They gave me two books, *'Memories of Chislehurst'* by Arthur Battle, and Pat Bushell's *'Chislehurst in Camera'*, which was a collection of black and white photographs and captions.

Battle wrote a fabulous description of the shop where Felix worked:

Almost anything could be found here, eventually! Huge balls of rope or twine, chains, buckets, baths, brushes, mops, tools of all kinds, scissors, shears, lawn mowers and dustbins, penknives, gas mantles, Aladdin lamps and hearthstone could be seen, filling every space, shelf or box, even hanging from the ceiling. Rows and rows of wooden drawers contained nuts, bolts, screws and tacks, which were sold by the pound. The indefinable conglomerate of tarred rope, paint, paraffin, turpentine and a hundred and one other items resulted in a most satisfying Ironmonger's aroma. Stock was piled high in chaotic disarray but the family who served the shop knew where to find everything and time was of no importance. They decorated and plumbed, were grainers and gilders, hung paper and fitted ranges. Their versatility was endless.³

³ Arthur Battle, *Memories of Chislehurst*, (Meresborough Books, 17 Station Road, Rainham, Kent, ME8 7RS, 1988) p. 125

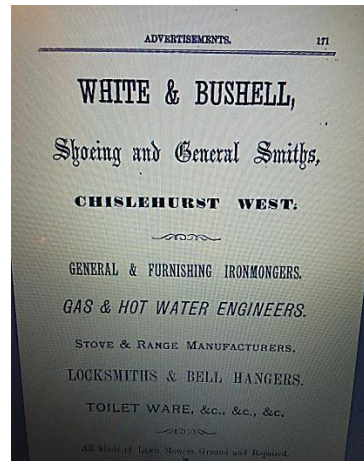


Fig.3 White & Bushell's advertisement, Strong's Bromley Directory 1887, <www.bromley.gov.uk/downloads/file/2476/1887_bromley_strongs_directory> [accessed 20 May 2016]

Bushell's book contained a photograph of the large Ironmongers premises, and the caption read that it stood for over 100 years. I typed the store name into Google, but there was little information except for a short clip, once more taking me to the Visit Chislehurst website, in the series, '*Friel on Friday's*.' The two minute clip was filmed in January 2016, and showed Joanna Friel, the Heritage Representative, standing outside the premises that were once White and Bushell's. Friel described it as,

A quintessential store, like the Four Candles sketch from the Two Ronnie's [...] you were served by a gentleman in a brown overall, and you could buy one nail or a hundred nails. You could get your shoe mended, and you could get your horses shoe mended because there was a forge at the back.⁴

⁴ Joanna Friel, 'Friel on Fridays', <www.visitchislehurst.org.uk/about/white-bushell-ironmongers> [accessed May 20 2016]

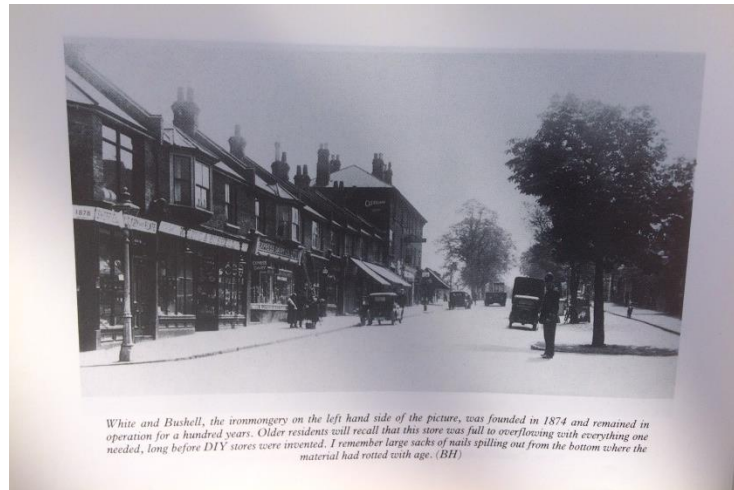


Fig.4 White and Bushell's Ironmongers as featured in Pat Bushell, *Chislehurst on Camera*, (Quotes Limited, Buckingham, England, Second Edition, 1988) p. 25

From the information that I had gathered so far, it sounded like The White family were an integral part of Chislehurst, providing a fundamental and memorable service to the community. I headed to the local history section in Chislehurst Library. Although very explanatory of the village's history, all the books only briefly referred to the Ironmongers. I had hoped to find a photograph between the pages somewhere of the White family, perhaps outside their store, but I was to leave empty handed. I trawled over pictures from 1900 leading up to the 1950's. There were so many photos of so many faces, all unknown to me.

With lack of knowledge as to any surviving White family members, I decided to contact the Chislehurst Society and was fortunate enough to receive a response the same evening from Joanna Friel.

'If only you'd chosen the Bushell Family, there is plenty of information about that side of the partnership...'

I know, typically I had managed to pick one of the more discreet families in Chislehurst. Joanna advised me that she would enquire with Pat Bushell, the remaining member of the Bushell family to see if she could offer any information about the White's.

I took this opportunity to ask Joanna about contacting someone else who may be able to help me. During my search through various books, I had read about the Cooling family, the local photographers who lived in Chislehurst during the same era as the White's. George Cooling had also run the Newsagents and Stationers on the High Street. His son, Arthur joined the Post Office where he worked for many years whilst developing his part time business growing market crops. Michael, Arthur's son remained in the area, and I wondered if he may be able to help me.

Coincidentally, the next response I received from Joanna was very exciting.

'It's your lucky day. Mike Cooling lived next door to Felix White on Willow Grove and remembers him well...'

Michael Cooling was happy to meet with me, and a date was swiftly arranged. I visited him at his home, where I instantly felt comfortable in his presence, as soon as I stepped through the door. In the living room were an assortment of photo albums, and books, waiting for me, and Michael shared his memories.

During the 1920's, Douglas White built the four houses for his Children in Willow Grove, including Eden bel where Felix and Edith lived. Around the same time, Arthur Cooling built his house on the smallholding at the rear of 39 High Street which was called 'Littlefarm'. The land adjoined with the gardens of the White's homes and this was where Michael was born in 1934. He remembers the family as being members of the local Poultry Society, of which Arthur was the Secretary, before the War.

Felix was regarded as very polite and always had time for his customers, unlike his two brothers. He wore a full length brown overcoat, whilst Tom always wore a flat cap, and you would find Henry in a Homburg hat.

Michael recalls asking for seven pound of sulphate asphalt. Henry put his finger in the bag, licks it and says ‘yep, that’s the sulphate asphalt.’

Their sister Frances was in charge of the book keeping and customers could normally expect to receive their bill three months later made out in elaborate handwriting.

Back in those days, it was common for a lot of ‘palm-greasing’ to occur between the tradesmen. Bribery was how business worked, and Michael remembers ‘Old man White’ (Felix’s father) being in the Queen’s Head every lunchtime, buying pints for all the head gardeners to keep them happy, so that they would continue to buy their fertiliser from him.

Tom and Henry died a few years before Felix, in the late 1950’s. In the early 1960’s, Arthur Cooling bought parts of the gardens adjoining the Whites and Coolings' land. In 1964, Michael bought 2, Park Villas from Mrs Henry White, where he lived with his wife, who would take their son next door to visit Edith, known as ‘Auntie White’, until her death in 1971.

I asked Michael why none of the White Family had any children. Felix and Edith did not have any, and Frances never married. Henry and his wife Bessie had a son, but they suffered a tragedy which would have affected the whole family. Their son was a student at Eltham College, and part of the Rugby team. There was an incident where members of the rugby team threw him into an ice cold swimming pool, where he caught pneumonia. Sadly, he did not recover from the illness.

Tom White was the only one to have a son, Douglas, but perhaps with the way the world was developing, he may not have wished to carry on the family business.

Michael was extremely informative in the history of Chislehurst. Not just about the White’s, but of his own family legacy, whose success is apparent today, through the famous

Coolings Nurseries, first set up in Chislehurst, by Arthur, in 1913. They are undoubtedly a huge part of Chislehurst's history and it was a great pleasure to meet Michael.

Before this assignment, I had never really taken a huge interest in the history of Chislehurst, the village where I grew up. In my pursuit for the forgotten life of Felix White, I may not have uncovered an awful lot but the journey has been an interesting one.



Fig.5 the premises of White & Bushell's Ironmongers, as it stands today on Chislehurst High Street, Chislehurst, Kent.

Word Count: 2551

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