



Figure 8. Gilbert family and friends outside a marquee pitched on the North Shore at Skegness in summer 1910. Back row left to right: Eleanor Gilbert, Jessie (Gilbert) Sharp, Albert Sharp. Front row left to right: unknown friend, Mary (Gilbert) Castledine, Charles McSwiggan, unknown friend, Janetta (Gilbert) McSwiggan, William Fred Castledine. *A Rodgers/Gilbert collection.*

summer, thanks largely to Polly and Emily's organisational skills, a well furnished marquee and assorted tents were set up on the North Shore at Skegness provoking a passer-by to describe the Gilberts as 'the gypsies who come here every year' (Figure 8). Following her father's retirement in 1903, Emily was constrained by the needs of the business. Consequently, she came and went to Skegness as she could, bringing supplies of fresh food. Lots of healthy exercise, plenty of reading, watercolour painting and needlecraft were enjoyed but mainly there was the chance to talk, to challenge conventional wisdom and to explore new political ideas. Here, no doubt, plans were made for Emily and Eleanor's trips to the continent in pursuit of art galleries, museums and architecture. Thus Emily's horizons were widened and her cultural and political education were enriched.

Although four of the Gilbert sisters married before 1914, Eleanor and Emily were not among them. According to their youngest sister they did not lack offers but consciously chose career over marriage. Family was, however, of great importance to them and both became the adored aunts of their sisters' children.

The First World War

As for many women of her generation, the First World War offered Emily unexpected opportunities. Her youngest brother, George, who had joined the business following apprenticeship at the Wolsley motor company and a spell managing Wolsley's London office, went off to play his part as a pioneer aviator in the Royal Naval Air Service. Charles, too old to fight, took on war work and, in response to the desperate shortage of agricultural labour, applied his engineering talents to the development of tractor ploughing. This left Emily in day to day charge of a business which included shell case manufacture and the machining of parts for the Foster tanks made in Lincoln.

By 1916 Emily had become a shareholder and attended annual meetings of the company. In 1919, she and George were made directors and on the 21 November 1919 Emily was voted a bonus of £100 for her work during the war. At this time she was, effectively, in sole management of the business as Charles Gilbert was in charge of the Food Production Department. Better still they appointed her Company Secretary.

The inter-war period

Between 1919 and 1939 cars ceased to be rich men's toys and, with volume production and increased reliability, became more common. Gilbert and Son adapted to meet new needs. Its growing agricultural business was focussed on new premises in Bourne and cars and commercial vehicles became central to the Lincoln undertaking. Manufacture and sales of cycles continued as did the silver plating business. A wholesale company was developed and, at Emily's instigation, a hire purchase company was set up.

Despite the difficulties of the period, the business was usually profitable. Charles's salary reflected his additional management responsibilities but, as directors in 1920, Emily and George were well and, more to the point, equally paid.

In 1920 the registered office of the company was moved to premises purchased on Pelham Street and, about this time, a large flat was created for Emily over the cycle shop in Oxford Street. Emily owned a car and took holidays abroad but her lifestyle hardly reflected her income.

It was in her nature to invest wisely and, even before the First World War, she had personally acquired property in locations which might later be useful to the company.

The extended family

Living in the town centre Emily's only unmet desire was to have a garden. By 1921, clearly wishing to revive the family holidays among the dunes at Skegness, she had purchased a rather primitive seaside bungalow at Landseer Avenue, Chapel St Leonards. Travelling by train and cycle, it was to make her garden at Chapel that she escaped when she could. Each summer her sisters' families gathered there for holidays which featured bracing walks, cold sea bathing and ginger cake (Figure 9).

Family continued to be enormously important and Emily travelled to Dublin each Christmas to be with her sister Janetta and her children. By them, she is remembered as a fairy godmother, always arriving with lots of little gifts and treats. In 1932, on one of Jan's children's visits to Lincolnshire, they were delighted to be accommodated in a real gypsy caravan and a tent set up amongst the dunes at Chapel. Emily never lost either her touch with children or her love of the Lincolnshire coast. The high spot of our family's

Figure 9. Family and friends in the garden of Emily Gilbert's bungalow at Chapel St Leonards, August 1921. Back row left to right: Sam Freshney, Charles Gilbert, unknown female holding Martin Castledine, Freshney son. On Chairs left to right: Emily Gilbert, Maud Hindle, Mrs Freshney, Mary Castledine, Polly Gilbert. Kneeling left to right: Peg Goss, Elizabeth Castledine, Gilbert Sharp. Cross-legged left to right: Christopher Castledine, Freshney daughter, Louis Goss. *A Rodgers/Gilbert collection.*



holiday at Sudbrooke, in 1952, was when Aunt Em entrusted my father to drive us, in her new Morris Oxford, for a day trip and picnic at Chapel. Emily also remembered the family when debts were paid. Amongst her customers, in the early 1930s, was an excellent tailor who was persuaded to settle, in kind, a long overdue bill. Honour was satisfied, the company reimbursed and my father and his cousin were sent to be fitted for dress suits.

The Sudbrooke years

Following her sister Eleanor's retirement, in 1925, Emily looked for a new home which they could share. In about 1928 she purchased Sudbrooke Park where the pair eventually set up home at Garden House. This, with its conservatory and large grounds, offered enormous scope for Emily's horticultural talents. She also ran a market garden at Sudbrooke.

By now Emily was well known in Lincoln through her work in the business and because of involvement with local activities. Although Charles became a Conservative member of the Council, Emily remained socialist in outlook. She took particular interest in staff welfare, in the training of company apprentices and she encouraged employees to take their bonuses as company shares. Gilberts could never be a workers' co-operative but, under Emily's influence, the staff was both loyal and long-serving.

First woman sheriff of Lincoln

In 1936, at the age of 64, Emily was invited by the Labour Mayor elect, Councillor J E Fordham, to serve as City Sheriff (Figure 10). In his speech on Monday 9 November proposing her appointment Councillor J K Fox made much of the novelty that Emily Gilbert, the 936th Sheriff, was to be the first woman ever to hold office. The councillors who proposed her made no bones about the risk they were taking but drew attention to the part Miss Gilbert had played in obtaining the franchise for women. 'In these days of science and industry there is scarcely anything we can say is only a man's job.'

Emily responded with characteristic vigour and with delicious irony quoted, the supreme misogynist, Paul of Tarsus.



Figure 10. Official portrait of Emily Gilbert, Sheriff of Lincoln, 1936-37.

A Rodgers/Gilbert Collection

Throughout the years, women have been regarded as anything from chattels to angels but this honour, paid to a woman, is a recognition of the admission of women to full citizenship. With St Paul I can say that 'I am a citizen of no mean city'.

Emily made a gracious and good sheriff and enjoyed her public duties which she carried out mostly unsupported by a Sheriff's Lady. Her appointment had come as the Abdication Crisis reached its height and a month later Emily was in the Minster Yard for the proclamation of the new King, George VI. She was still in office at the time of his Coronation on 13 May 1937 and features in Lincoln's official publication to mark the event.

In September 1937, along with the nineteen other Sheriffs of the Counties Corporate in England and Wales, Emily attended celebrations in Exeter to mark the four hundredth anniversary of that city's shrievalty. To the sheriffs of Lincoln and of Berwick upon Tweed fell the honour of replying to the toast to the guests.

Emily's correspondence with the town clerk of Exeter shows her desire not to allow the robing room to remain a male preserve. The Town Clerk advised that the lady sheriff of Worcester would be processing to and from the cathedral in court dress without a robe, involving her in two substantial changes of clothing. There was, he said, no room in the Guildhall for the women to robe separately. Emily replied

... in my case I wear the official robe, chain and hat so there is no difficulty about robing in a separate room since these are, of course put on over my other wearing apparel.

Exeter Corporation had chartered an eight-seater DH Dragon plane to take three of the sheriffs, including Emily, to the event. Special permission was obtained to fly from RAF Waddington via Rochester and Southampton but fog grounded the aircraft. A car was hastily arranged to take Emily and her sister Mary Castledine, her escort for the occasion, to a rendezvous near London with under sheriff Sir Charles and Lady McRae. Shortly afterwards, the vehicle broke down. Somehow the party got to Paddington and, fortified by a slap-up meal at the *Great Western Hotel*, proceeded by rail. In a letter to Emily, Sir Charles later described it as 'a bit of an adventure' and their journey became the talk of the civic dinner they missed at Exeter Guildhall. Despite the smoothness of the return flight, the story still hit the newspapers. Exeter Corporation insisted on reimbursing all expenses including the meal!

According to her sisters, as sheriff, the only duty which Emily dreaded was the need to witness executions at Lincoln Prison. Fortunately none took place during her term. In November 1937, in yet another first for the Gilberts, Emily was succeeded by her brother Charles. He and Polly revived the Sheriff's Garden Party which was held at Sudbrooke with Emily, now High Constable, in the receiving line. It is some indication of the extent to which Emily was ahead of her time that 50 years were to pass before there was a second woman Sheriff. Only Norah Baldock (1986) and Irene Goldson (1994) have yet followed in her footsteps.

The Second World War.

Charles Gilbert died in 1939 and, shortly after, George went off to a distinguished service career in REME. Once more Emily was alone at the helm as the works was adapted for military training purposes. She was ably supported by Ernest Radford, works manager, a longstanding and close family friend who had been made a director. The worst moment of Emily's war came, in July 1941, when two RAF planes collided above the Oxford Street premises killing Ernest (Figure 11). Emily, nearing her 70s, strove on with the support of Hilda Menzies, a long-serving employee who became company secretary in February 1942.

Figure 11. Press report of the air crash over Oxford Street, July 1941. Gilbert and Son collection.



The post-war period and Pelham Bridge

After the war, George returned as managing director but died in 1947. Thus, at the age of 75, Emily became managing director. In 1949 Gilberts altered its rules to permit directors to serve beyond the age of 70 and Emily continued in office. Wartime restrictions and shortages of materials made the post-war period one of particular difficulty for the motor trade. In the early 1950s new models began to appear and people accepted a long wait for cars. It was with glee that Aunt Em telephoned in 1953 to say she had found a 1952 model Morris Minor for my father.

The mid-1950s was the time of greatest challenge. The construction of Pelham Bridge was in prospect and that would mean the demolition of the company premises. Emily, now in her 80s, was not superhuman. She was troubled by cataracts and relied to an increasing degree on others. Hilda Menzies was depended upon at the works, the loyal and devoted Sam Snell drove her on anything other than local journeys and her niece, Fan Goss, kept house. Her nephews Martin Castledine and, later, Niall McSwiggan joined the company. At first Niall and his wife lived in Sudbrooke Park where they observed Emily, determined to the last, cycling with a hoe over her shoulder, to tend distant parts of her garden (Figure 12).

Emily continued active in local life. She was a Soroptomist, a founder member of the Lincoln branch of the National Council of Women and a member of the United Nations Association, Lincoln Automobile Association and Lincoln Civic Trust. Sudbrooke Park was used for camps by Lincoln and District Boy Scouts of which she was, a Vice President, and shortly before her death she gave six acres there for a permanent scout campsite.

Emily lived to see the demolition of Gilbert's works, the move to temporary premises in Norman Street and the opening of Pelham Bridge in June 1958. During the last year of her life she was ill and burdened by



Figure 12. Emily Gilbert, octogenarian gardener, in her conservatory at Sudbrooke, c1958. *Gilbert and Son collection.*

negotiations over the siting and building of new premises for Gilberts. On 25 May 1959 she attended her last director's meeting, held at Sudbrooke, which made provision for a new director, from outside the family, to take over her work. A fortnight later, aged 86, Emily died of cancer.

It was an enormous funeral at St Andrew's Church attended by her large family, staff and former staff, civic dignitaries, representatives of industry and commerce in Lincoln, of the motor industry nationally and of the organisations she had supported. All were proud to be numbered among the friends of Emily Gilbert, a woman of dignity and integrity and an outstanding citizen of Lincoln.

Notes and References

This article is based upon an inherited collection of material about the Gilbert family which came to me on the death of my father, Christopher Castledine. This includes the family Bible started by William and Fanny Jane Gilbert, Emily Gilbert's file of memorabilia relating to her term as Sheriff, letters, press cuttings, certificates, wills, estate accounts and family photographs as well as my father's meticulously referenced notes on the history of Gilbert and Son Ltd. In celebration of the company's centenary in 1976, my father's cousins, Niall and Philip McSwiggan prepared a tape/slide talk and an album of copies of old photographs. These materials, together with minute books and newspaper cuttings in the Gilbert and Son deposit in Lincolnshire Archives, have cast additional light on Emily Gilbert's life.

Acknowledgements

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