

The Douglass family of Chertsey and Egham, Surrey.

Our Douglas ancestors were the forebears of Elizabeth Ellen Douglas who was born in 1864. Her father, James Douglas (born 1837), was the fourth successive “James” in the family. It is often assumed that with the name “Douglas” the family must have come from Scotland and this may be true? However the first recorded James in this family was born about 1740 and was living and working in Chertsey, Surrey as a watch and clockmaker between 1769 and 1791. The surname was, at that time, spelled Douglass. Many of the watches and clocks which came from his workshop were evidently very fine timepieces and some are still in existence and available through antique sales today. He appears to have been declared bankrupt in 1791 and he probably died about 1800.

His wife was Letitia Joyce, who was born about 1744 – the fourth child, of whom there is a record, in the family of Joshua and Elizabeth Joyce of Godalming in Surrey. The marriage of James Douglass and Letitia Joyce took place at Godalming on May 20th 1761. It appears that Letitia’s parents married quite late in life, as all four of their known children were born in the 1740s, whilst Joshua’s birth is recorded as being in or about 1699 (he was christened on October 2nd 1699) and his wife’s in about 1700! Joshua’s christening evidently took place in Godalming, his parents being recorded as William and Mary. He was one of at least six children – four girls and two boys, in the family. The first boy, another Joshua, died in 1691 being aged about 2 years. There was at least one older sister, Elizabeth, who was christened in 1684. Three other sisters followed – Joan, Jean and Margaret – christened respectively in 1694, 1695 and in June 1699. The second son called Joshua was christened later in 1699 and was probably born that year, whilst his elder sister Margaret may have been born in the previous year (or early in 1699?).

Joshua and Elizabeth had at least four children. The first was named William, after Joshua’s father, and his birth date is recorded as July 23rd 1740. He presumably died in infancy as another son, born 13 months later in August 1741, was also named William. A third son named James was born in about 1743, being christened in May that year. Letitia is thought to have been the fourth child, but her christening and birth dates are not documented.

James Douglass and Letitia had four known children who were John (christened in 1763), James (christened in early 1765 – so possibly born in 1764?), William (christened in 1767) and Letitia (christened in 1769). All the christenings took place in Chertsey.



James appears to have become a very fine clock and watchmaker and a number of rather fine watches and clocks produced by him have been on sale.

Evidently the business was taken over by James Douglass junior in around 1800. It is difficult to know how many of the watches and clocks labelled as being made by “James Douglass of Chertsey”

were made by this James. It seems probable that most of the best known pieces were by his father. He is mentioned as executor in the will (written 1808) of his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Varnden, as a watchmaker of Chertsey. Pigot's Directories in 1823 and 1826 give him as Watch and Clockmaker in Chertsey. He married Mary Varnden on 17th May 1804 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London. She seems to have come from a Chertsey family – her parents having been William and Elizabeth Varnden, both of whom died in Chertsey (William in 1797, Elizabeth in 1818). William and Elizabeth are thought to have been born in the 1750s, but the records are sketchy. Mary herself was christened in Chertsey on September 27th 1782.



James and Mary Douglass had at least 8 children between 1805 and 1821 and it was at this time, early in the nineteenth century, that the spelling of the name seems to have changed to Douglas. Two daughters were christened in 1805 and may have been twins. One of these (Mary)



probably died in 1808, whilst her sister, Elizabeth, seems to have been alive at the time of the 1871 census and living in Egham. The next in the family was James, born Feb 9 1806, who followed his father and his grandfather as a clock and watchmaker. Another daughter, Mary, was born in 1810 and subsequently four brothers, William, John, Henry and Albert – born respectively in 1811, 1814, 1817 and 1821.

The eldest son, James Douglas, was christened 5 Mar 1806 at Chertsey, Surrey. He followed the family tradition becoming a watch and clockmaker and set up shop at 14 High Street, Egham. There is a wall clock he made in Egham Museum, housed in the former Literary Institute, in Egham High Street.



James and Martha Douglas

James married Martha Ann Boyce, youngest daughter of George Boyce, a baker of Middle Hill, Egham, on Christmas Day 1833 (James's brother Albert, a baker, who had a shop at 77 High Street, Egham, later married Martha's older sister Sarah Pierce Boyce in 1859).

Brian Loomes, *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the world Vol 2*. gives his working dates as 1839-1878, but the following newspaper report shows that he was established earlier than that.

A contemporary newspaper report tells how he foiled an attempted burglary on 31st March 1837:

Attempted Burglary

On Thursday morning between two and three o'clock Mr. Douglas, a watch-maker and jeweller in this town was awoke by a noise which appeared to proceed from his shop. He got up, and looking out of a window saw a man dressed apparently like a groom, at his shop shutters evidently attempting to break in. He demanded to know what the fellow wanted; the reply was "nothing, Sir;" however Mr. Douglas

called to his wife to bring his gun, which being heard by the robber he made off before the gun could be brought, otherwise as Mr. D always keeps his gun loaded, in all probability the fellow would have paid dearly for his attempt. On going down the stairs and examining the shop window Mr. Douglas discovered that several pieces of one of the shutters had been forced off opposite to a square cut in one of the panes of glass, which cur it had been observed had been made some previous evening, when the shop was closed, - doubtless by the same thief, in anticipation of having the less trouble in inserting his hand into the shop window, as the piece of glass could with more ease, be knocked in, after the difficulty as to the shutter had been overcome. The fellow appeared to have been very clumsy in his dangerous avocation from the manner in which the pieces had been broken from the shutter, which had been done, not by a regular housebreaking implement, such as a centre bit of a "jemmy," but by what is called by carpenters, a spike bit; however from the progress he had made it was clear that a very few more minutes would have sufficed to enable him to grope about inside the window, where however he would have met with no reward for all his labour, as it is invariable practice of Mr. Douglas, to take all his valuable property from thence every night, and put it in a place of security. The robber can be identified by Mr. Douglas, who had a perfect view of him."

James was also Registrar of Births and Deaths from at least 1855-1878.

James and Martha had five children between 1835 and 1850 and eight years later twin girls arrived to bring the family up to seven. Elisabeth Boyce Douglas was the first – born in Egham in 1835. James was born on his parents' wedding anniversary - December 25th, 1837. George Boyce, Archibald and Frederick followed in 1841, 1844 and 1850. Twins Pattie and Martha Pierce Douglas completed the family in 1858. Frederick, a baker and confectioner (also dabbling in the tobacconist business for a while) in Egham, was an ancestor of Robert James (Bob) Douglas (born 1951) who has compiled much of the earlier data about the Douglas(s) family.

James died on the 6th Apr 1879, aged 73, and Martha died on August 26th 1880.

James's youngest brother, Albert Douglas, was a baker, who had a shop at 77 High Street, Egham.



The next James Douglas, born on Christmas day 1837, became a tobacconist. He trained for two years in London before settling in Torquay where his first shop opened in Fleet Street on 1st November, 1863. He was by then married to Emily Ann Harris (born 1838) of Weybridge, Surrey. Their wedding took place in April 1862 in Weybridge. She inherited property along the edge of the Thames, from her father, William Lewis Harris, which included the area known as 'Runnemed'. This was later sold when James Douglas encountered financial difficulties – the result, it is thought, of speculation on the Stock Exchange?

Their first daughter was Elizabeth Ellen Douglas, who was born on August 8th 1864. Four sons and two daughters followed between 1866 and 1875.

By 1881 the tobacconist business was in the Strand, where the business remained until at least 1914, when James would have been 77. A second business opened between 1891 and 1901 in Victoria Parade, Torquay, which in 1911 was also acting as an agent for a Haulage and Carriers. This business was run by James's son George Reginald Douglas, at least until 1911.

James claimed to be the first specialist tobacconist in Torquay, previously tobacco being sold by chemists or other shops. The shop also sold fireworks.



James and Emily

James was a church chorister of some note, having started to sing in the choir in Egham Parish Church at the age of eight. Two years later his beautiful treble voice gained him a place in the choir of St George's Chapel, Windsor. He sang with that choir below Queen Victoria's bedroom window at Windsor Castle on her birthdays and also sang at a number of major events both in Windsor and elsewhere, including the opening of the Crystal Palace in London. He sang in St Paul's Cathedral at the "Festival of the Sons of the Clergy". After his voice broke he continued as a tenor and sang as a soloist with a number of choirs in Manchester. In Torquay he sang in various church choirs over at least five decades and possibly longer.

In 1913 he celebrated his golden jubilee as a shopkeeper in Torquay. He died on August 31st 1920, aged 82.

Elizabeth Ellen (Bessie) Douglas, met Rev. Harry Collard Wilkinson when she was in her late teens. He had returned from Africa to which he had travelled, with a view to joining a monastic mission, in 1883. Evidently the life as a monk was not entirely what he wanted and he abandoned this plan and came home to England in December 1883. His mother and sisters were staying in Torquay, where they had taken a house. He evidently used to shop for tobacco in James Douglas's business in the Strand. At any rate he and Bessie struck up a friendship and became engaged in June 1884. Despite discouragement from some of the Wilkinson family, they were married on July 15th 1884, after only five weeks of engagement and a few weeks before Elizabeth Ellen's twentieth birthday. At the time Harry Collard had no work and very limited private means. After a honeymoon at Clovelly, Ilfracombe, Lynton, & Minehead, where they took rooms, Harry was able to find work as a chaplain in Northumberland, where they went in September. They stayed in lodgings in a farmhouse at Stanington.

After Elizabeth Ellen, James HA Douglas (the fifth successive James in the family) was born in 1866 and died at the age of ten, in 1876. William Boyce was born in 1867 and became a Chemist – working in Egham in 1902. He married Marie Johnson in about 1905 and had four children, of whom the first was Boyce Douglas, born in 1907, who became a dentist. Three sisters followed – Christine, Clare and Heather. George Reginald, born 1869, became a tobacconist. His son Eric (Uncle Eric to us as children) was a keen dog breeder – keeping champion Alsations. Charles H Douglas, born in 1870, became a confectioner baker. Fanny Louise was a Milliner at the time of

the 1891 census. The youngest sister Ethel Mary married William Richard Edwards and had four children – the youngest being named “Buster”. One might well wonder whether, with this very unusual name, he was the same Buster Edwards who was involved in the “Great Train Robbery” – however this turned out not to be the case, the coincidence of this highly unusual name being just that!



“Bessie” with
Rev HC Wilkinson
and KDW 1886

By April 1886, when Kenneth Douglas Wilkinson, was born, Harry Collard was working as chaplain to the Cornwall-Legh family at High Legh in Cheshire. In 1891, at the time of that year’s census the family were living at 122 High Scale, High Legh. By then two younger brothers had been born – Alan Ayscough in August 1887 and Geoffrey Legh in January 1889.

Harry Collard died of peritonitis in October 1891, leaving Bessie, at 27, a widow with very limited income from a church pension – the total family income amounting to 160 pounds a year. A life of extreme care enabled her to get all her sons educated well – with the help of scholarships to Public School (Berkhamstead) and later to University in Birmingham. Kenneth entered Berkhamstead at age 10 on the basis of a scholarship and the family moved there in the 1890s – living at 20 Cowper Rd, Berkhamstead at the time of the 1901 census. The other brothers followed a similar path and in 1903 the family moved home to Birmingham, at the time that Ken entered Medical School, in which he was followed by his two brothers in the years ahead.



Bessie and her sons
about 1902

When they first moved to Birmingham in 1903 the family lived in Stetchford. In later life Mrs Wilkinson lived in Harborne, fairly close to Ken’s family who had moved to Edgbaston in the 1920s (around 1925). She was remembered by her grandchildren as a rather severe and formidable old lady. Evidently she remained ever loyal to the memory of her husband to whom she was devoted. She was a regular Anglican churchgoer and viewed other Christian denominations with suspicion and distaste – though she maintained a warm relationship with Dr Gibbs, the family GP for many years in Stetchford, who was a Catholic. Ronald Gibbs, the son of Dr Gibbs, told of many animated discussions on matters of religious doctrine between his father and Mrs Wilkinson. She was evidently convinced of the essential virtue of the Protestant cause and of the deep weakness of Roman Catholicism, but was not prejudiced or intolerant to the point of being unable to maintain a warm friendship with the Gibbs family who, through Ronald (an officer in the army) and his sister, a prominent Birmingham Barrister, remained close friends with the Wilkinsons long after Dr Gibbs himself had died. Ronald later married Norah Homewood (in about 1938) – younger sister of Ken’s first wife, Phebe.

Boyce Douglas and his wife Peggy were long term friends with his cousin KD Wilkinson and wife Phebe. After Phebe’s death in 1940 the link continued with KD and his second wife Agnes (known as ‘George’) and Boyce was godfather to Ken and Agnes’s son, Jimmy (b 1943). Two of Boyce’s sons, Humphrey (born about 1942)

and Robert (born about 1944) were at Prep School with Jim (Wells House in Malvern). Humphrey Douglas became a cabinet / furniture maker and ran a successful business in the Droitwich area for many years. He is now retired but has been in contact in recent times.

Elizabeth Ellen died in June 1937 at the age of 72.



Elizabeth Ellen (Bessie) Wilkinson