

# Local History

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## Frederick Pledge (1875–1942): Celebrating Crawley in Hampshire's First Historian Roger Ottewill

A particular delight of the Celebrating Hampshire Historians project has been to research and record the lives, and especially the contributions, of those who might otherwise receive little or no attention. One such is Frederick William Pledge who spent 30 years of his life in Crawley and published in 1907, *Crawley: Glimpses into the Past of a Hampshire Village*, which was, at the time, a definitive history of the village, situated approximately 4 miles north-west of Winchester. In so doing he laid foundations on which later historians could build.

It has proved to be quite a challenge to piece together this partial account of his life and certain questions remain unanswered. However, what has been discovered offers some interesting insights into this intriguing personality. As will be seen, having acquired an Oxford degree, a major turning point was securing employment as tutor to the son of a wealthy businessman, Otto Ernest Philippi, who put his money into buying almost an entire village and became, in effect, Pledge's patron, in the arcane manner of aristocrats with painters and musicians. Indeed, it is likely that Pledge had ambitions to be a writer and consequently he would have been amazed to discover that a first edition of his history of Crawley is currently, in 2024, advertised for sale on the AbeBooks website for £324.<sup>1</sup>

### Early Life and Higher Education

Frederick Pledge was born in central London in the parish of St Clements, near Eastcheap, on 17 September 1875. He was baptised on 7 November with the record indicating that his father, also Frederick, was a 'clerk' and the family was living at 118 Canon Street.<sup>2</sup> The 1881 census return gives the same address and the civil parish as St Martin's Orgar. His parents' occupations are shown as that of 'caretaker'. His mother was more than 20 years younger than his father.<sup>3</sup>

By 1891 the family was living in the civil parish of Mitcham, with his father's occupation again being recorded as 'clerk'.<sup>4</sup> Frederick, however, was now a boarder, possibly a scholarship boy, at Christ's Hospital then located in the City of London.<sup>5</sup> From there Frederick went to Oxford University, specifically Trinity College. He matriculated, that is formally entered the University to begin his studies, on 13 October 1894. The entry relating to him in the Undergraduate Progress Register shows that he was exempted from Responsions (the first University examination, taken shortly before or after matriculation) on account of his good results in school examinations. Though he did not sit the examination, he was, like all candidates, required to offer certain 'Stated Subjects' in which he might be examined. Frederick offered works by Sophocles, Virgil and Cicero, and Mathematics, along with the 'Additional Subject' of French. In the Trinity

College Admissions Register, the position of his entry – the first in the new term's list – indicates that he was the Senior Scholar of his year. This meant that he had come top in the scholarship entrance exam held the previous December. A scholarship was a valuable award, entitling the holder to free tuition, accommodation and basic food plus a reasonable stipend, in return for which he had certain duties including saying grace in Hall and reading lessons in the Chapel.

Regarding his studies, Frederick passed the First Public Examination in Holy Scripture in Trinity Term 1895, and in Greek and Latin in Hilary Term 1896, achieving Second Class Honours in the latter. In the Second Public Examination in Modern History in Trinity Term 1898, his final examination, he achieved Second Class Honours. His degree of BA was conferred on 21 October 1905, along with the degree of MA, for which Oxford University required no further study or residence.<sup>6</sup> In those days lengthy delays between final examinations and conferment were not uncommon. At the time of the 1901 census it would seem that he was lodging at Largs in Ayrshire and his occupation was that of 'tutor and journalist'. Intriguingly, on this occasion his first name was spelt Frederic as it had been in some of the University records.

### The Crawley Years

Around the turn of the 20th century and almost certainly while he was in Scotland, Frederick's path crossed with that of Otto Ernest Philippi, who was always known as Ernest, and his future prospects changed in a variety of ways. Ernest had been born in Germany but acquired British Citizenship in 1872 and by 1900 had become the wealthy Managing Director of the cotton business J&P Coats Ltd of Paisley in Scotland. That year he purchased Crawley Court, where he moved with his whole family during 1901 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Crawley Court (courtesy of Matthew Beckett: [www.lostheritage.org.uk](http://www.lostheritage.org.uk))

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Until his death in 1917 Ernest spent a great deal of his wealth and energy on not only renovating Crawley Court, but also buying up and refurbishing many of the dilapidated properties in the neighbourhood to create a 'model village'.<sup>7</sup> Due to his younger son George's 'weak constitution' and his preference for having him 'educated at home', he engaged Frederick as his tutor (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Frederick in the back row wearing a hat with members of the Philippi family (courtesy of <https://www.crawleyvillagehall.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Crawley-Court-History.pdf>)

Contact with the Philippi family also resulted in Frederick meeting his future wife Clara, described as a 'relative of Mrs Philippi' by Ian Henderson in a book about the Philippi family.<sup>8</sup> She had been born in Hamburg. Although no record of their marriage has been found, there is a newspaper report from October 1902 which indicates the couple's involvement in a village 'entertainment and sale of work'. Mrs Pledge was one of the servers on the refreshment stall and Frederick 'organised and presided at a toy stall, and was also very energetic and successful as an amateur auctioneer'.<sup>9</sup> On 19 June of the following year their daughter Ursula was born. She was baptised at St Mary's Crawley on 8 October.<sup>10</sup> Frederick's commitment to the Church was evident in him serving as churchwarden from 1904 to 1907.<sup>11</sup> In 1904 he was also elected to the parish council on which he served for 30 years.<sup>12</sup> There is one substantive reference to Frederick in David Dunbar's account of the first hundred years of the parish council. At a meeting in 1910, the minutes record: 'proposed by Mr Philippi seconded by Mr Pledge that lamps not exceeding six in number be provided for lighting the village street, and that a Parish Meeting be called to adopt the [Lighting and Watching] Act'. At the subsequent parish meeting it was agreed to adopt the Act without opposition.<sup>13</sup> The parish council minutes confirm that Frederick assiduously attended

meetings and played an active part in the proceedings which covered other matters such as the refurbishment of the village pond (Fig. 3); the administration of the 'bread' charity; and the provision and maintenance of allotments. Unsurprisingly, he appears to have been a close ally of Ernest and later George Philippi during their chairmanships of the council. The minutes record that Frederick last attended a meeting on 10 May 1933, however they do not mention his move from the village.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 3 Crawley village pond in 2024

With respect to Frederick's academic activities, in the early years he combined his tutoring of George with researching the village's history in preparation for his publication. After George went up to Oxford in 1908, he started what were described as 'crammers for University Entrance Exams'. By 1911 he and Clara were living at the manor house courtesy of Ernest. It is recorded that here he 'ran a popular [educational] establishment ... for twenty years'. Henderson suggests that Ernest 'must have helped the couple by making substantial additions to the size of the Manor which he let to them probably at a modest rent to accommodate sufficient pupils'.<sup>15</sup> The 1911 census return for the manor house lists two boarders, one described as a 'university student' and the other a 'law student', and four servants as well as Frederick, occupation 'university tutor', Clara and Ursula.<sup>16</sup> Ten years later, the equivalent census return lists four pupils, two of whom were from Greece.<sup>17</sup> Henderson surmises that 'Pledge's success as a crammer was due to a thorough knowledge of all the likely Examination questions and the regularity of their re-appearance'.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1920s two American academics from Harvard University, Norman Scott Brien and Ethel Cuthbert Gras, visited Crawley to undertake research for their history of the village published in 1930. Norman was appointed Professor of Business History in 1927. As he and his wife record: 'There is in the Village of Crawley a tutor, F.W. Pledge esq., M.A., who has lived in Crawley for over twenty years and who prepares young men for Cambridge and Oxford. The young men are in residence with their tutor during the few months necessary. Mr Pledge lives in the old Pern house, now called Manor House. Thus do residents take the place of yeomen farmers.'<sup>19</sup> Later, under the

heading 'Notable Personalities', they describe Pledge as a 'modest scholar who looks out upon the world with calm judgement, getting his abiding satisfactions from the simpler things of life'.<sup>20</sup>

Alongside his tutoring, Frederick also found time to assist at the village school. In his later history of Crawley, David Dunbar records that 'during the First World War ... [Frederick] did a lot there, including "responsibility for school registers"'. Such involvement extended to other administrative tasks, such as the finances of the needlework class, requisitions, and even staffing matters.<sup>21</sup> It is probable that he was a school manager. The school log book also mentions that in June 1932 'Mr Pledge called to say goodbye, after 27 years association with the school'.<sup>22</sup>

### Moving On

The departure of Frederick and Clara from Crawley was probably precipitated by the fact that the Philipps sold Crawley Court in 1931 and over the next couple of years all their other property in the village. Information from electoral registers, and confirmed by the 1939 Register, shows that the couple moved to Eastbourne where they remained until, at least, the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> Only one newspaper report of their time there, relating to a robbery at their home, has been found.<sup>24</sup> It is not known how Frederick occupied himself during this period. Although his occupation in the 1939 Register is recorded as 'University Tutor', this is the only evidence that he continued with his tutoring. Moreover, he does not appear to have pursued his local history research. It seems likely that, to some extent at least, the couple were able to support themselves financially from resources accrued while in Crawley. Indeed, the previously mentioned newspaper report describes Frederick as having 'independent means'.

Sometime between 1939 and 1942 Frederick and Clara moved back to Crawley. When Frederick died on 27 January 1942, the address on his death certificate was given as Upincott, Crawley. He left assets valued at £11,233 3s 8d (worth approximately £435,500 today), with probate being granted to George Harry Milstead, a book publisher.<sup>25</sup> In a notice of his death published in the Hampshire Chronicle, Frederick is described as the 'dear husband of Clara Pledge'. Frederick is buried in Crawley parish cemetery (Fig. 4).

In his will, dated 17 May 1907, Frederick bequeathed most of his assets to Clara. She died 20 years later on 2 July 1962 in Hamburg, Germany. However, it would seem that she had been living in Romsey for a time,<sup>26</sup> with her death being recorded in Winchester and probate granted to the National Westminster Bank and Thomas Parman Lalonde, a medical practitioner. She left £2,992 14s 2d (worth approximately £53,160 today), still a considerable sum, albeit substantially less than her husband.

### Historiographical Legacy

From a historiographical perspective, Frederick's principal legacy was his previously mentioned work, *Crawley: Glimpses into the Past of a Hampshire Village*, which he privately published in 1907, probably with financial support from Ernest Philippi.<sup>27</sup> This charts the history of the village from prehistory to the beginning of the 20th century in considerable detail. It is a scholarly work and there are chapters on Medieval Village Life; the Black Death; the 'Great House' and its owners; the Churchwardens' accounts;

and the Parish Register. Unfortunately, however, he did not include a preface setting out the background to, and motivation for, his research and the approach he adopted. Moreover, given the timing of his publication there does not appear to have been any acknowledged collaboration between him and parallel research being undertaken for the Victoria County History project, with the volume covering Crawley being published in 1908.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, Norman Scott Brien and Ethel Cuthbert Gras describe Frederick's work as an 'excellent general history of the village'. Their choice of Crawley as the subject of what was, as they explain, a 'chiefly documentary' study of the history of an English village was due to it possessing certain characteristics. These included being situated in 'an older and long settled part of England' and 'located near enough to a town (the city of Winchester) to have come very early under urban influence'.<sup>29</sup> Although not specifically mentioned, it is probable that they had many productive and profitable discussions with Frederick. Moreover, in a section of their book devoted to 'documents' they include some text attributed to him, which was written in about 1928. As they put it, 'what he has observed during his stay in Crawley is best told in his own well-chosen words'. In his contribution Frederick makes reference *inter alia* to the improvements at Crawley Court, education, birth control, recreational facilities, and communications including postal deliveries, the radio, and bus services. As he wrote, 'the once peaceful village has become a miniature of the world at large. It has come out of its isolation.'<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 4 The last resting place of Frederick Pledge (courtesy of Bart Huby)

Since the Second World War there have been four further histories of Crawley, all of which can be said to owe something to Frederick's pioneering work. Chronologically, the first of these is a thesis prepared by Sheila Tomlinson in 1971. It covers similar ground to Frederick and relies quite heavily on the book by Norman Scott Brien and Ethel Cuthbert Gras.<sup>31</sup> The second is the publication by Ian Henderson, mentioned earlier, which focuses on the Philipps family and

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highlights Frederick's links with them. The other two are the works by David Dunbar, the first, the detailed history of the parish council, to which reference has already been made, and the second, a lavishly illustrated general history of the village containing 200 photographs, many of which had never previously been published. This dates from 2000 and copies are still available.<sup>32</sup> In referring to Frederick's work Dunbar is a little critical, describing his book as 'by no means easy to read' and 'his story ending rather lamely in 1900'. The latter comment is somewhat unfair given that Frederick's book was published in the first decade of the 20th century. Dunbar, however, does acknowledge that Frederick's work 'is basic source material for any history of the village'.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he quotes Frederick at length from material in the Gras book. To provide a flavour of his style and perceptions, below are two short extracts from this text, which pick up the themes of education and engagement with the outside world:

*A change too has appeared in the attitude of parents to education. A new generation has arisen, the first of free and compulsory primary education. A quarter of a century ago mothers and fathers were only too anxious to withdraw their children from school as soon as they were qualified to leave, often as early as twelve years of age, or to gain temporary release of them on any plausible pretext. Whereas now, when children must remain at school until the end of the term in which they become fourteen, the parents are eager to keep them there and to take advantage of all possible extensions and continuations ... The subject of education inevitably calls to mind the modern problem of Birth Control. Its exercise is obvious even in this comparatively remote village. A generation ago ninety to one hundred children attended the school. Now the village contributes only half that number.*

*Within the writer's recollection, there were women who had not been beyond the limits of the village for 4 or 5 years on end, now men, women and children have at least an annual outing to Bournemouth, Southsea or London. Contact with the outside world is maintained too by the 'wireless' of which there are many installations in the village. Moreover, to judge by the sounds issuing from various cottages, many of the housewives appear to do their daily work to the music of the gramophone. In the winter season Whist Drives and Dances are frequent and well attended.<sup>34</sup>*

It is clear from these snippets that Frederick had his 'finger on the pulse' of village life and it must have been a wrench for him and his wife to leave in 1932 and, perhaps, explains their return towards the end of Frederick's life.

### Conclusion

Although it would be going too far to claim that without Frederick the history of Crawley would never have been written, he can be said to have put the village firmly on the 'local history map' of Hampshire. He also 'set the ball rolling' as far as later research was concerned. His previously mentioned modesty may well have limited his output, but nonetheless he undoubtedly deserves some recognition. It is therefore fitting that Frederick is buried in the cemetery of the

village which, although initially an outsider, he came to love and revere.

### Note

If anyone reading this article can fill in any of the gaps, please contact the author on rogerottewill@btinternet.com.

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### References

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- 2 Baptisms Solemnized in the Parish of St Clements near Eastcheap in the City of London, p.85.
- 3 1881 Census: LNDRG11/97, p.19.
- 4 1891 Census: SRYRG/602, p.131. Their address was Elmstead, Robinson Road.
- 5 1891 Census: LNDRG12/240, p.26. The school moved to Horsham in 1902.
- 6 Information supplied by Oxford University Archives.
- 7 For further information about Otto Ernest Philippi see The Millennium at Crawley Court, <https://www.crawleyvillagehall.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Crawley-Court-History.pdf>
- 8 I. Henderson and P.A. Thomas, Philippi's Crawley (Winchester: C.M. Printing Services, 1977), p.20.
- 9 Hampshire Chronicle, 25 Oct. 1902, p.3.
- 10 Baptisms Solemnized in the Parish of Crawley in the County of Southampton, p.30.
- 11 Winchester Diocesan Kalendar, various years.
- 12 D. Dunbar, A Century of Minutes: Crawley and its Parish Council, 1894-1994 (Crawley: Crawley Parish Council, 1994), Appendix B, p.41. See also Hampshire Chronicle, 9 Mar. 1907, p.8.
- 13 Dunbar, Crawley (1994), pp.34-5.
- 14 Crawley Parish Council Minutes, Hampshire Record Office [HRO] Ref: 188M84/1 and 2.
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- 19 N.S.B. Gras and E.C. Gras, The Economic and Social History of an English Village AD 909-1928 (Crawley, Hampshire) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), p.151.
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- 21 D. Dunbar, '... a finer place to live': A History of the Parish of Crawley in Hampshire (Crawley Local History Group, 2000), p.87.
- 22 Crawley School Log Books, HRO Ref: 86M/LB2 and 3.
- 23 1939 Register, Eastbourne County Borough, 71/1.
- 24 Eastbourne Gazette, 24 June 1936, p.1; Eastbourne Chronicle, 25 June 1936, p.7.
- 25 Probate Record.
- 26 London Gazette, 16 Oct. 1962, p.8152.
- 27 It was printed by Warren and Son at the Wykeham Press in Winchester.
- 28 A History of the County of Hampshire, Vol. 3 (Victoria County History: London, 1908), pp.408-13.
- 29 Gras, Crawley, p.i.
- 30 Gras, Crawley, pp.698-702.
- 31 Unfortunately Sheila does not indicate for which course she prepared her thesis entitled Crawley: The History of a Hampshire Village. A copy, made in 1995, was the property of the Crawley Local History Group and is now lodged in the Crawley Village Library.
- 32 See [https://www.downsbeneice.org/index.php?pg=St\\_Mary%27s\\_Crawley&album=Crawley](https://www.downsbeneice.org/index.php?pg=St_Mary%27s_Crawley&album=Crawley)
- 33 Dunbar, Crawley (2000), p.5.
- 34 Dunbar, Crawley (2000), p.95.