

## *Hills & Saunders - The Story of the Harrow Collection*

On the wall of our living room are to be found two large picture frames; each contains a collection of photos of the family members we affectionately refer to as 'The Oldies'. Great grandparents, grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, they are all there, with many of the photographs dating back one hundred years or more.

We were fortunate to acquire a number of glass negatives of the photos of my paternal grandfather and his family which were taken at the studios of Hills & Saunders on Harrow Hill, just a few yards from where my grandfather served as a butler in the Head Master's House of the renowned Harrow School. This is the story of how we came by the negatives.

Hills & Saunders was a leading Victorian photographic firm founded in the 1860s. They were photographers to the royal family and also social photographers with studios in London; Harrow, Eton and Rugby public schools; Oxford & Cambridge universities and Aldershot & Sandhurst military establishments.



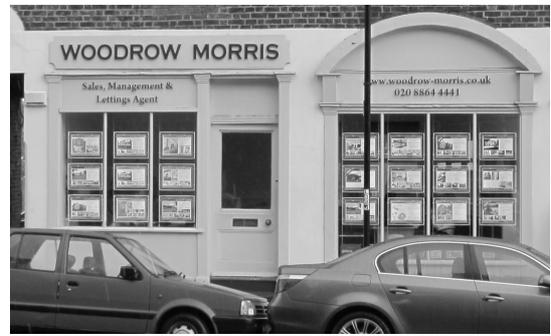
**My Grandfather - Edmund Charles Sansom  
(I scanned this 1927 photo directly from the  
glass negative)**

A number of the studios failed and only their two main school branches (Harrow & Eton) continued well into the 20th Century. Today, only a studio at Eton remains to carry on the name.

It is believed that with one exception all the records and negatives held by the branches were destroyed as each studio was closed. Those of the Harrow branch consisted of around 80,000 negatives, the majority in the form of glass plates, and towards the end of the 1980s, with the help of Old Harrovian Patrick Lichfield, these were taken into the care of Harrow School.

Over the years attempts were made to sort out the hundreds of boxes, tins and crates in which the negatives were stored but it was a major task and lack of funding meant that the job was never completed. An index, covering a large part of the collection, was however available and it was this index which I discovered about five years ago on the web-site of Roger Vaughan, a passionate collector of Victorian, Edwardian and antique photographs. By searching for names and using the supplied descriptions I was able to identify with reasonable certainty the negatives of two photographs of my grandfather and his family of which we had copies.

Frustratingly, there was nothing further I could do to follow up this discovery until in 2009 the entire collection was acquired by Alasdair Kirk, a photographer, with a view to finally sorting, scanning and fully cataloguing the 80,000 negatives.



**Hills & Saunders Harrow Studio in the early 1900s - and the same shop front in 2012**

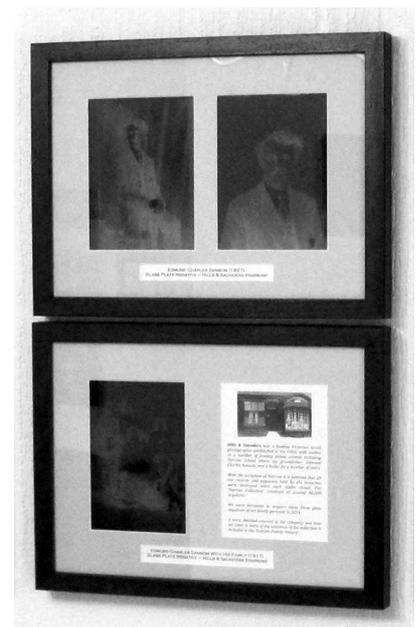
There was however one major issue to resolve, what to do with the collection when sorting was complete. It was too large for one museum or gallery to handle and the investment required would be considerable. In addition many of the subjects were either not identifiable or were not 'famous names'.

Having taken professional advice it was decided that the only way to ensure the preservation of at least the majority of the collection would be to offer each negative for sale; scans or prints would also be offered. Those that were of well known people, Winston Churchill (a Harrow 'old boy') being an obvious example, could of course be offered to collectors at relatively high prices, thus ensuring a cash flow to fund the ongoing project.

I had followed the story of the collection during this time and contacted Alasdair through his company, *Harrow Photos*, to advise him of my interest in the two negatives I had identified some years earlier. To be honest I had little hope that the negatives would be found quickly, perhaps not for some years as the task of sorting and scanning was very much a long term project.

Luck was on our side however and in September 2011 Alasdair emailed to let me know that he had found a set of negatives of my Grandfather taken in 1927 (I had previously sent him copies of the photographs so he was able to confirm that they were indeed the correct ones). I debated whether I should make the not inconsiderable investment to acquire these for our family and decided that they were an important part of our history and well worth buying.

Then, in early January 2012, I received a further email from Harrow Photos advising me that the second negative (a family group) had been located. I was extremely surprised as in my last conversation with Alasdair he had told me that at the current rate of scanning and re-indexing the whole project could take him another nineteen years! I quickly arranged to purchase this plate, thus completing the 'set'.



**The Framed Glass Plates**

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Having received the glass plates I was determined to preserve them in the best possible way. Following discussions with a local picture framer, Kevin Jones, he enthusiastically offered some ideas which would allow them to be both preserved and displayed.

Whilst talking to Alasdair I discovered that his family have a longstanding and close connection with both Harrow School and Christ Church Roxeth, just down the hill. His family were involved in the founding of the church and he worshipped there as a boy. My Grandfather, Grandmother and my uncle Reginald are buried in the Roxeth church graveyard and in 1930 my Uncle Cyril was married at the same church.

It is, as they say, a small world and these connections almost always come to light through a seemingly serendipitous process which is, I suppose, what makes life and in particular family history research so interesting.

Footnote: I wrote this story in 2012, since that time the story of the Hills and Saunders Harrow Collection has taken an almost surreal turn. Firstly, the collection was taken into the care of *Save Photo* 'on behalf of a private owner'. *Save Photo*, a leading UK based scanning and digital asset development company had been, in their own words, contracted to clean, catalogue, store and digitise the images for future digital consumers to enjoy.

Then, early in 2015, *Save Photo* went into liquidation and at around the same time the collection was acquired by Tim Boswell, a British private collector residing in Dubai. His business, *Ocean View Antiques, Artefacts and Artworks*, offered 'noteworthy collectables from a cross section of history'.

In February 2016 Tim Boswell decided to put the entire collection held by the company up for sale in order to finance other business interests.

Who could have imagined a few years ago that the thousands of negatives (the majority of which are fragile glass plates) which make up 'The Harrow Collection' and which was created in a London suburb would eventually find its way to the Arabian Peninsular ?

Where the collection is now (August 2016) I have no idea. I do however fear for its future if it is far from home and away from those who know the details of its one hundred and fifty year truly remarkable history.

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