



## WOOLF BARNATO 1895 – 1948

### **Family Origins**

On 27<sup>th</sup> September 1895 Woolf Barnato was born at Spencer house in St James Place, London. This great Palladian house was built in 1752 for Lord Spencer. How did a baby whose family were from East London arrive at such a prestigious address in just two generations?

Woolf's grandfather, Isaac Isaacs, was a second hand clothes dealer (a clobberer) in Petticoat Lane. His two sons, Harry and Barnett helped in the business as well as earning extra money by street trading, mostly apples, and juggling. The local community was organising an entertainment and Barnett decided to play Othello, a strange choice for a slim, blonde boy who wore pince-nez spectacles. The audience thought he was "playing for laughs" and began to jeer in hilarious delight so Barnett left the stage in tears. At the end, when the performers took their bows, Barnett refused to come on until the audience began chanting 'Barnett too'. From then on the two boys were known as the 'Barnett Too Brothers' which eventually became Barnato, the surname they adopted.

### **Diamonds**

In 1867 diamonds were discovered on the Orange River in South Africa. Harry went there in 1871 followed two years later by Barney with capital of £50 and 40 boxes of cheap cigars given to him by his uncle. Arriving at the port of entry he then had a journey of 300 miles to make to the diamond fields. He paid a cattle drover £3 walking all the way and helping with the cows, sleeping under a wagon at night. Reaching Kimberley he found that Harry was sleeping rough in a tent, his letters home about making a fortune had been all lies.

Barney set about trading, finally acquiring the postman's pony which knew its own way around the various mining claims. The practice was to sieve the soil for diamonds but when the "blue earth" was reached the claim was abandoned. Barney started to buy these abandoned claims and, with the few diamonds he found, buying more. When he had sufficient, he brought in machinery to mine the "blue earth" his first mine being named The Primrose Diamond Mine.

In the next twenty years he made a vast fortune from diamonds, gold mining and becoming an international financier. His company Barnato Bros (45%) was amalgamated with Anglo American (45%) and Johannesburg Consolidated

Investments (10%) to form De Beers. He became a Life Governor of De Beers, a Member of the Cape Assembly for Kimberley and a Lieutenant of the City of London.

He took his three nephews Jack, Woolf and Solly Joel into the business and this may have led to his death.

### **Suicide or Murder**

In 1897 Barney, his wife and three children, including Woolf aged 1 year, were returning to England for a holiday and rest on the SS Scot. Solly Joel was also on board. Approximately one day south of Madeira, Barney fell (or was pushed?) overboard and drowned. He was on deck with nephew Solly at the time and there was talk of a struggle. Did Solly push him or was he trying to stop him? Did Solly have a motive to commit murder?

Barney's will, after provision for his wife and children, stated that the company should pass to his surviving nephews. Jack Joel was accused of illicit diamond buying, a very serious charge in South Africa, and fled to England to escape trial.

Woolf Joel was shot and killed by a blackmailer having set up an ambush with the police. With Barney already dead, Solly was in control of the company.

### **Litigation**

After the 1914-1918 war, Woolf Barnato's father-in-law from his first marriage, with the consent of various relatives, agreed to investigate the affairs of the company in return for 20% of any money recovered. Herbert Falk (originally Von Falk) was a stockbroker with J S Balche in New York but he resigned from the firm to carry out his investigation.

Solly Joel tried to be as obstructive as possible and Herbert Falk frequently found that important documents were missing. After many years Solly was instructed by the court to hand over the books. It was found that he had been stealing from Barney and the company over a long period. The court case against Solly began but, on the afternoon of the first day, a settlement of £960,000 was agreed. Friends of Woolf Barnato pointed out that the recipients of the settlement had been losing interest on the money stolen. Solly agreed to pay interest calculated over a period of 30 years.

### **Growing up**

After Barney's death, Woolf was brought up by his mother being educated at Charterhouse School and Cambridge University. When war broke out he joined the Royal Field Artillery serving in France and the Middle East rising from the ranks to finish the war as Captain. In 1915 he was given leave to marry Dorothy Maitland Falk, the daughter of Herbert Von Falk a New York stockbroker. There were two daughters by this marriage, Virginia and Diana, but it ended in divorce.

### **Motor Racing and Speed Records**

Woolf Barnato was a talented 'all round' sportsman playing cricket for Surrey, becoming a scratch golfer, a useful tennis player and he excelled at motor racing. He is best known for being one of the 'Bentley Boys' but his first competitive drive with Bentley was not until 1925. He drove several other makes before then, many of which no longer exist.

1921	8 Litre Locomobile, Calthorpe, Austro-Daimler.
1922	Talbot (Malcolm Campbell's car) Ansaldo, 1.5 litre Enfield Alldays
1923	Wolseley "Moth", Bertelli
1924	8 Litre Hispano Suiza
1925	Hispano-Suiza, Bugatti

Cesare Bertelli was the chief engineer for Enfield Alldays. The Bertelli cars were built in Lingfield but we do not know if this was at Ardenrun Place or elsewhere. Enfield Alldays became part of Aston Martin.

In 1925 Bentley Motors were in danger of bankruptcy. Following a meeting with W O Bentley, Woolf Barnato agreed to provide finance and eventually became chairman of the company. However this did not give him preference over other drivers as W O Bentley described him as 'the best driver we ever had and, I consider the best British driver of his day'.

From 1925 to 1928 with various co-drivers he set 28 speed records for distances ranging from 50 kilometres or 30 miles to 3000 kilometres or 2000 miles. Some of the records were timed from 1 hour to 24 hours. Most of these record attempts took place at Autodrome de Montlhery, south of Paris. However, his greatest achievement was winning the Le Mans 24 hour race in three consecutive years 1928, 1929 and 1930. His co-drivers were Bernard Rubin (1928), H R S Birkin(1929) and Glen Kidston.

### **The Great Train Race**

Between the two wars, the fashionable way to travel to the Mediterranean was on the Blue Train which ran from Calais to Cannes. Whilst on a sailing holiday, Woolf Barnato made a wager that, driving his Bentley and crossing the channel by car ferry he could be in London before the train reached Calais. Both car and train left Cannes at 17.45 in the evening and, by careful planning and skilful but safe driving, Woolf and his co-driver Dale Bourne arrived at the Conservative Club in St James Street, London 8 minutes before the train reached Calais. Passengers on the train arrived in London four hours later.

### **No More Racing**

He gave up racing in 1930 after winning Le Mans for the third time. With the worldwide financial slump Bentley Motors were in serious financial trouble and in 1931 they were taken over by Rolls Royce.

### **Ardenrun Place**

Ardenrun Place was designed by Ernest Newton and built for the industrialist H H Konig. It was described 'a pleasant specimen of a country house. It makes no pretence of being older than it is. It looks well already and, given proper upkeep, should look better as the years go on.'

Woolf Barnato purchased the house in 1921 with 1,000 acres of surrounding land. There was a private golf course, a home farm, a stable block and garaging for many cars. It was all maintained under the supervision of the head chauffeur Cyril de Heaume. In the basement was a 'mock tudor' public house known as the Ardenrun Arms. On the lower lawns were cricket practice nets.

The property was reached down a long drive from Tandridge Lane, the straight to Moat Farm being approximately half a mile long. This is where the 'Bentley Boys' used to race their cars. On one occasion Bugatti, who was a great friend of Woolf Barnato, brought several of his cars to Ardenrun Place and the guests raced against the clock from the house to Tandridge Lane and back.

In 1930 the Surrey Cricket team came on a visit, including Jack Hobbs and Percy Fender. It is said that they played on the cricket pitch at Blindley Heath but the writer has been unable to prove this. Apparently Woolf Barnato's gardener used to look after the pitch.

The Australian touring team including Don Bradman also came and Diana Barnato Walker, Woolf's daughter, has an autograph book with the signatures of both teams.

On 21<sup>st</sup> January 1933 tragedy occurred. Fire broke out on the upstairs landing by the nursery and, by the time the fire brigade arrived, the house was ablaze. By the morning it was a roofless ruin. The house was never rebuilt and Woolf Barnato moved to his flat in Grosvenor Square purchasing the adjoining flat to give extra space.

He decided to build a new house at Englefield Green, West Surrey on the edge of Windsor Great Park. The chosen architect was Robert Lutyens who designed a long, low, white ranch style property with 25 bedrooms, most en suite, a swimming pool, a squash court and 20 acres of garden. The house took seven years to complete and was named 'Ridgemead House'.

### **The War Years and after**

When war came he joined the RAF but at 44 was too old to fly. He was commissioned with the rank of Wing Commander and was responsible for the defence of airfields in Southern England. He was also involved in the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

Ridgemead House was considered, being painted white, a tempting and conspicuous target for enemy aircraft. The whole house was repainted in camouflage colours.

In July 1948 Woolf Barnato went into hospital for a minor abdominal operation that he had been postponing for many years. The operation was successful but four days later he died from a thrombosis. The funeral was at Englefield Green and, laden with a mass of flowers, a magnificent Bentley Le Mans Speed Six was driven to the graveside. A fitting tribute!

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Sources:

*First President* by John Binns

*Spreading My Wings* by Diana Barnato-Walker – ISBN 85260 473 5

W O Bentley Memorial Foundation

Bentley Drivers Club Limited

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