

The Josephus Woods Story

Josephus (possibly also known as Seph) was the son of Richard 1 Woods, born in Bolton on the 15th October 1856. Richard Woods, born 1823, had worked his way up through the mill until on the 1881 census he appears as Mill Manager. Josephus' mother was Margaret Vickers. She was also a mill worker until her marriage and was apparently illiterate, signing with an X on her marriage lines.

In April of 1871 at the age of 15, Josephus is a piecer in a cotton mill. In 1876 he married Sarah Gaskell also from Bolton, another cotton mill worker. A year later they had their first daughter Hannah and in March of 1881 another whom they christened Florence Maud Mary, known as Florrie. At this time he is still working in the mill but, as one might expect, with more responsibility as a 'self-acting (loom?) minder'. Their first son Robert Gaskell Woods (my Grandfather) was born in 1883.

Josephus' mother, Margaret, died in the middle of 1878 at the age of 51. One year later his father married his second wife, Mary Sandiford, almost 20 years younger than him. Mary was born in Breightmet in 1842 but was at the time living in the same area as Richard: Halliwell. Richard, died of pneumonia on the 21st February 1890 at the age of 66. On his death certificate he is described as a 'provision dealer'.

Between 1883 and 1894 Josephus and Sarah seem to have had other things on their minds rather than child rearing because their next child, Norman Josephus Ketchaw Woods, isn't born until 1894 followed by Walter Sydney Sharples Woods in 1899. Perhaps Sarah had been ill – working in a mill was not conducive to good health. Certainly there was a mood for change. In April 1891 Josephus had left the mill and is reported on the census as an Insurance Agent.

But by the time of the 1901 census Josephus was a self-employed baker/confectioner, still in Bolton living next door to the shop. According to the census, Sarah was evidently working in the shop as well but on the 20th December 1903 she died. During that same year Florrie left home to marry leaving Robert, Norman and Walter with their father.

There was then an even more profound change in the family situation. By the census of April 1911 Josephus was in Portsmouth as a 'Comercial Traveler Dry Soap'. Robert was then a soldier (a corporal) and, although he had married Sabina in March 1911, he was lodging in Bolton with his Uncle Richard Woods, Josephus' brother, whereas Sabina was still in service in Watford. Norman and Walter were living with a family in Southampton called Basford along with a two year old child called Hannah Woods described as a granddaughter of the head of the household, Hannah Basford.

So, why were Josephus and his sons not together? Who was this Hannah Woods? The 1911 census had Josephus living in Portsmouth, apparently alone, but on census day had a visitor called Eunice Woods who is 17 years his junior who seems to be represented as his wife of 8 years and moreover they have a child two years old who is not recorded on the census. A little more research shows that Eunice was, in fact, a Basford and Hannah Woods was their child.

It does not seem possible that Josephus and Eunice could have been married for eight years. Sarah died in December 1903. We don't know when Josephus' Hampshire connection started but, even allowing for census inaccuracies, he would have had to have been pretty quick of the mark to get established in the Southampton-Portsmouth area, meet Eunice, marry her

and beget a child. It has to be admitted that there is no evidence to scotch the theory that they met in Bolton, had an affair and tied the knot as soon as Sarah died. But there is no evidence for it. I can find no record of a marriage between a Eunice Basford and Josephus anywhere in the UK within the relevant time period.

It seems to me that the information put on the 1922 census returns was to provide some sort of respectability to the situation. Perhaps Josephus started work in Portsmouth as a travelling salesman, met Eunice somehow and after a short time, in 1908, they found that Eunice was pregnant and they decided, with the collusion of the Basford family, to pretend that they were married. The daughter Hannah Woods was born in March 1909. To explain the fact that Eunice and Hannah were not living with Josephus it is tempting to suggest that, under the circumstances, Josephus was not too popular in the Basford household. However, were that so, it is unlikely that on census night Josephus' sons Norman and Walter were apparently living with the Basfords and are represented as grandsons of Eunice's mother, the widowed Hannah.

It seems as the Basfords were treating the couple as married whether or not that were true. I would not have expected them to do that. In the 1881 census, the father, Henry Thomas Basford, is listed as a Unitarian Christian Minister, which suggests an upright and god-fearing family. Not a family you would expect to be content with illegitimacy within it. Henry died before 1911, but surely the family would not have condoned an unmarried relationship between Eunice and Josephus to such an extent that they welcomed Josephus' sons into the household.

One might suggest that Josephus and Eunice went through some sort of Unitarian marriage service but that, for whatever reason, it was not recorded by the Registrar? However, in a discussion with a representative of the Unitarian Churches, he did confirm that Henry was indeed a Unitarian Minister in Blackley *'for a short period 1876-1882, latterly in Blackley'* he also stated that *'As far as I am aware all marriages had to be registered by the state after July 1837. I do not think it possible that a marriage could have taken place in a Unitarian chapel without it being so registered.'*

The fact that I cannot find an official marriage record would not trouble me too much except for the fact that Josephus and Eunice do get married – but not until December 1921! Josephus died in September of 1922. Was Josephus, at 65, not well? Was he contemplating his end? Had they decided to legitimize the situation and make the union official?

Eunice, at 51, survived Josephus by many years, dying in 1962 at the age of 93. It is curious to realize that the widow of my great grandfather was alive until I was 20 years old. I wonder what tales she would have had to tell.

Gordon Gilmore Feb 2012