

## **An Introduction to Object Sixteen**

Once again, we have to thank a guest author for producing the story of our 16<sup>th</sup> object. Although, to a limited degree, we have explored genealogy in previous articles, this story represents our first venture into the detailed world of the subject. It also highlights the highs, lows, and dead ends which are often encountered with this type of 'detective' work.

This story was both unknown and unplanned even a month ago. We had never heard of, never mind spoken to, the writer until a matter of weeks ago. The circumstances leading to the initial discovery and then publication proves that the old adage of 'being in the right place at the right time' certainly applies in this instance.

There was a time not so many years ago when the name of Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd, linoleum manufacturers, was not only known in Kirkcaldy but also famed internationally. The firm, along with Michael Nairn & Co., were both of worldwide repute and without question were largely instrumental in creating Kirkcaldy's reputation as 'The Town that Floored the World'.

It is hard to believe that, as we write in 2021, it is 58 years since Barry's closed their doors for the last time. This decision

led to what is estimated to be 2000 local jobs being lost when the collateral fallout from the closure is taken into account.

Both times and people change and to many Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd Ltd is no more than a name from the past which joins many of the town's other industrial powerhouses which have long since vanished.

This is not a story of the firm or even of linoleum itself. Rather, it concerns a major player who strode the Kirkcaldy stage for over half a century whilst building a business empire of international repute. John Barry, in conjunction with others, was a driving force behind the creation and expansion of the firm which bears his name. He was a figure



and employer of major influence and importance. The sprawling acreages of the firm's factories which covered vast tracts of the 'Lang Toun' bear testimony to his achievements. However, his energy and enterprise were not only devoted to

business but his 'fingers were in many pies' – not least in the political arena.

This story looks at one aspect of John Barry's life and clears up a mystery which has been the cause of much speculation over the years. For this, we are indebted to our guest author, Margaret Watson, who has agreed to contribute this fascinating, interesting and informative article.

While in the Local Studies Room, researching another object, we enjoyed the stroke of luck which has resulted in this article. Susan Birne, of Kirkcaldy Galleries, drew our attention to a newsletter which had arrived that morning. It was from the West Middlesex Family History Society and contained an article penned by Margaret on John Barry and his 'family/families'. Even the most cursory glance at the article revealed that this was a superbly researched, detailed and well constructed article of local interest. Given the Kirkcaldy connection, the obvious conclusion was that it was worthy of wider circulation. Without losing any time contact was made with Margaret and as a result we are able to bring to light the story of not one but two families! Although this year is drawing towards its end – the narrative is being published in the centenary year of Barry's death in January 1921.

We have no wish to dilute or lose Margaret's narrative in this introduction, but it does seem sensible and necessary to put the story in context. It is dangerous to assume that readers

will have a familiarity with the subject and to this end a little background detail follows.

For the sake of brevity, this ancillary information is restricted to John Barry and John Wright both of whom are vital cogs in the unfolding of this tale. Every endeavour will be made to avoid the cardinal sin of providing information which belongs to and will ultimately appear in the main narrative.

We add the proviso that if the reader is familiar with John Barry they may wish to immediately move to the detailed story without reference to the following potted history.

John Barry moved to England when his father was appointed lighthouse keeper to the Craster Lighthouse on the Northumbrian coast. At the age of 14 he started his business



training with *Dunn's of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne*. It led to a lifetime friendship and business connection with a colleague, William Sutton.

In 1865 he moved to London to take up a position as a salesman with *Messrs Tarn & Company*. This firm, in the second half of the 19th century, was extremely popular with the 'well heeled' from the South London suburbs. The firm were in business until 1910 but, in John Barry's time, male staff were required to wear a swallowtail coat along with a white tie. It

was also mandatory that Barry had to shave off his moustache.

He returned to Newcastle after only a few months securing the position of the carpet buyer with *Bainbridge's*. It was here, while quite a young man, that he was 'spotted' by James



Shepherd. Struck by his ability, he engaged Barry as a traveller for *Messrs Beveridge & Shepherd* (floorcloth manufacturers) and it was this action which began his long connection with Kirkcaldy. In his new position he was extremely successful and in 1878 Beveridge and Shepherd commenced the production of linoleum at premises close to Sinclairtown Station. The new venture was *The Kirkcaldy Linoleum Company*.

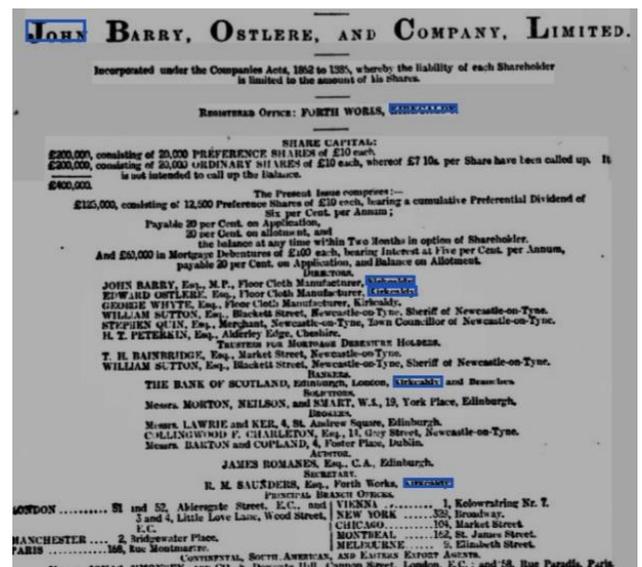
However, in 1880, Barry and Shepherd fell out over political content and comment contained in *the Scotsman*. Despite

**BUILDINGS.**  
Minute was read of a meeting of Dean of Guild Court held on 4th inst., at which plans were passed conditionally for a dwelling-house for Mr William Anderson. Plans and a letter regarding the re-building of the floorcloth work at the Railway Station, were submitted. On the 8th January the Court met at the Forth Works adjoining railway station, and were met by Mr Fraser, builder, and Mr Ostler, on behalf of **John** Barrie & Co., who stated that Mr Fraser's instructions were, where necessary, to take down the wall and re-build from the foundation, and that good iron pillars would be used to strengthen the structure.

Shepherd's best efforts to retain Barry he discovered that Barry, in tandem with the firm's works manager Edward



John Wright was considered by many to be one of the most remarkable men to be connected with Kirkcaldy's floorcloth industry. Wright hailed from Campsie Parish in the west of Scotland and had a natural aptitude for mechanics and mechanical engineering. Unlike many of the owners of the town's floorcloth manufacturers, (Michael Nairn & Co excluded), John Wright understood the manufacturing process and had 'hands on' experience. He came to Kirkcaldy in 1860 as the manager of Michael Nairn & Co's Nether Street works. One of his first innovations revolutionised the drying time required for floor coverings, thereby significantly shortening the manufacturing process. The traditional method had been to dry naturally (originally by hanging out of windows) but his new system involving using drying rooms, which were heated by hot air provided by stoves, dramatically cut the time required.



John Wright struck out on his own account in 1871 founding the *Patent Floorcloth Company*. As previously mentioned, the consequences of a fire led to the firm being taken over by *John Barry and Ostlere* with John Wright being retained as the manager.

**IRISH INDUSTRY AT KIRKCALDY.**  
September 28, 1881.

SIR,—It may interest some of your readers to know that not long since, probably six or nine months ago, a large factory for the manufacture of floorcloth in Kirkcaldy was purchased by a company consisting of prominent Irish Home Rulers and Land Leaguers. The works, which had been partly destroyed by fire, have been rebuilt and greatly enlarged. The Company have adopted the title of Barry, Ostlere, & Co., and, besides Mr Barry, is said to comprise Mr Healy, Dr Cummins, and others of the fraternity. Why these patriots should prefer to invest "their money" in works of this or any other kind in this country, while Ireland stands so much in need of both industries and capital, is not very apparent, unless on the theory that they believe it is better in the meantime to keep such tokens of their prosperity on this side the Channel.—I am, &c. EAST NEUK.

Some months after the formation of the new company a letter appeared in the *Scotsman* of the 30th September 1881. The anonymous letter, from 'East Neuk,' suggested that the capital behind the new

venture was that of "Irish Home Rulers and Land Leaguers" and questioned why Kirkcaldy and not a site in Ireland had been selected. Whether deliberate or in error the spelling of Ostlere's name is incorrect.

John Barry's strong rebuttal appeared on the 4th of October. The letter appears to have been an isolated incident, but for interest, it and the response are included in the text.

**"IRISH INDUSTRY AT KIRKCALDY."**  
Kirkcaldy, October 1, 1881.

SIR,—Your paper of yesterday contains a letter with the above heading, signed "East Neuk." As "East Neuk" takes such a kindly interest in our private affairs, I think it only fair to correct some slight inaccuracies in his letter, and to supply him with a *raison d'être* for the existence of John Barry, Ostlere, & Co. in Kirkcaldy.

The works were purchased, not "by a company consisting of prominent Home Rulers and Land Leaguers," but were purchased by myself and Mr Ostlere. I have been connected with the floorcloth trade for twenty-two years, and for ten years previous to the purchase of Forth Works was associated with one of the leading manufacturing firms in Kirkcaldy. Mr Ostlere has been for many years connected with the linoleum and floorcloth trade, and was, until we purchased Forth Works, manager and director of the Kirkcaldy Linoleum Company (Limited.) From the foregoing facts "East Neuk" need no longer be at a loss to understand why the "patriots" invested their money in this country.

It may interest "East Neuk" to know that, from a national point of view, I am in a minority of one on our board of directors, my colleagues being Scotch and English.

Other letters conceived in a spirit of narrow prejudice and petty hostility about this company have appeared in your columns; this is the first and the last I will notice.—I am, &c. JOHN BARRY.

It is probably here that the genesis of the story lies. It was during his time with the firm that Wright's most famous patent was taken out. He produced the first linoleum printing machine which worked on the rotary principle and significantly reduced the cost of manufacture. A model of the machine was made by engineers of the *Royal Scottish Museum* where it was on display in the Engineering Section. John died in 1916 at the age of 93. His obituary in the *Fife Free Press* of 4<sup>th</sup> November 1916 described him as "A rare big

mindful, big brained man, who left a mark on his day and generation and who did much to further the progress of the industry with which he had such an honourable connection”.

We can now safely move onto the centrepiece of this narrative which, as already mentioned, was penned by Margaret Watson.

Although born in Woodford Green in London, Kirkcaldy, or in particular Dysart, has a claim on Margaret. On her paternal side, her grandmother, Elizabeth Mackie Wright, hails from the ‘Saut Burgh’.

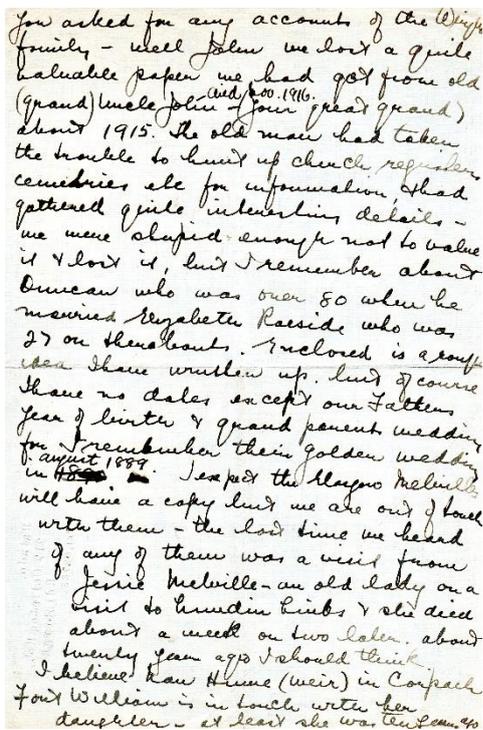


Margaret met her husband while both were studying at the University of Nottingham. Margaret secured a BA in mathematics, but has subsequently added further degrees. In 1964 they moved to the then University of Wales in Swansea. This was not intended to be a permanent move but, bar three sabbatical years in North America, they have been in South Wales ever since.

One of Margaret’s first tasks when taking up employment in 1960 was to write the first matrix inversion subroutine for the IBM 1620 (we have absolutely no idea what this means – so please do not ask!) We are on firmer ground when we add that the machine’s memory was less than a present day

mobile phone and its dimensions were approximately 6 feet in length and 4 feet in height!

Margaret's interest in her family history was sparked following the 1992 death of her father. Amongst his possessions was a rough history of his Scottish mother's family along with a letter from a late aunt detailing her reminiscences of the family. In addition, there was an extensive collection of family photographs with many stretching back to the latter decades of the 19th century.

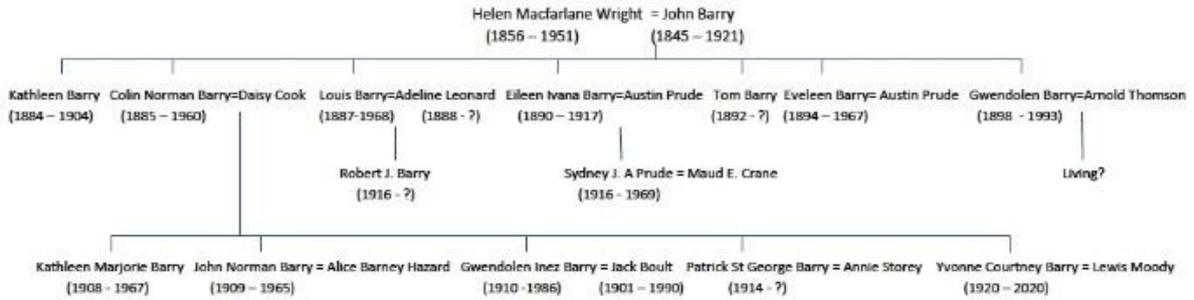


You asked for any account of the Melville family - well John we lost a quite valuable paper we had got from old (grand) uncle John of your great grand about 1915. The old man had taken the trouble to hunt up church registers, cemeteries etc for information & had gathered quite interesting details - we were stupid enough not to value it & lost it, but I remember about Duncan who was over 50 when he married Elizabeth Reaside who was 27 on her death. Enclosed is a rough idea I have written up. And of course I have no dates except our Father's year of birth & grand parent wedding. I remember their golden wedding in August 1889. I expect the Misses Melville will have a copy but we are out of touch with them - the last time we heard of any of them was a visit from Jessie Melville - an old lady on a visit to Auntie Mabel's & she died about a week or two later. About twenty years ago I should think I believe I saw Anne (Weir) in Conrack. Your William is in touch with her daughter - at least she was ten years ago.

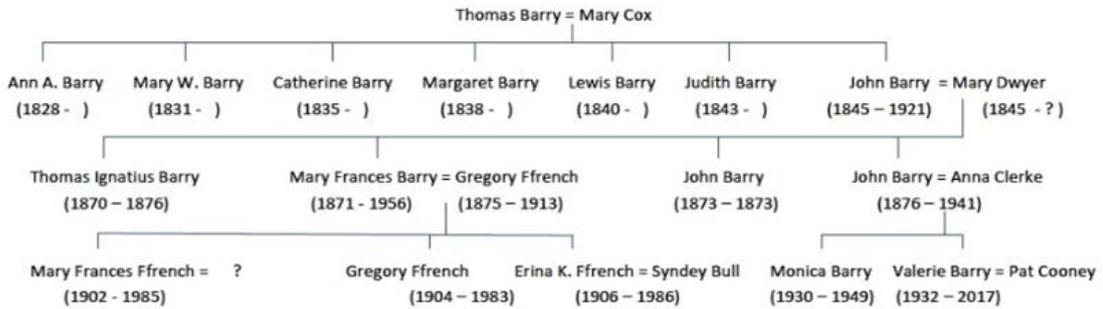
From this sketchy information Margaret and her sister undertook research to such a degree that the results are now housed in 14 volumes!

The following, a fragment of her findings, stems from the time, effort and stamina, Margaret has devoted to unearthing her family's history and John Barry's story.

### Descendants of Helen Macfarlane Wright



### Barry Family Tree





## An Illegitimate Family is traced thanks to the West Middlesex Family History Society



West Middlesex FHS has proved to be a useful provider of family link-ups. I was recently contacted by Finola COONEY who had read my article that was published in the West Middlesex FHS magazine in September 2012 entitled “Don’t believe all that you read in Census Returns!”. In it, I mentioned my great aunt, Helen Macfarlane WRIGHT, who had seven children by a married man, John BARRY. She invented fictitious names for the father of her first two children on their birth certificates in 1884 and 1885 and entered herself as married in the 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses. There was no way that she would have been able to marry John BARRY as he was an Irish catholic and had married Mary DWYER on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1867 in Newcastle upon Tyne.



He was in fact a well-known Member of Parliament. His Wikipedia entry reads as follows: *“**John Barry** (1845 – 27 January 1921). He was born in Wexford and moved with his family to England when he was a small child... [His father, Thomas, was a coastguard/lighthouse keeper.] He was a member of the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican*

*Brotherhood and a founding member of the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain. He was elected as an Irish Nationalist Member of Parliament for South Wexford in 1885, resigning in 1893... On his retirement he pursued his business interests with great success.”* Indeed, he was very well thought of in Kirkcaldy where he owned a linoleum manufacturing company. In his obituary in the Fife Free Times it said: *“...In the past the community has been indebted for its prosperity and extension to the individual energy and industry of its captains of industry. Mr Barry might be classed as one of these men...”*

Helen probably met John BARRY through her father, John WRIGHT, who was works manager at the firm of John Barry Ostlere & Co. In his working life and even into retirement, John took out no fewer than 13 patents for improving the manufacture of floorcloth and linoleum.

It is ironic that Barry sided against Parnell when his leadership was challenged in 1890 due to his being cited as co-respondent in the divorce of Captain O’Shea and his wife. Barry kept Helen hidden safely away in the south of England where she had her children in secrecy and he only lived with her openly after he retired from Parliament. He was affluent enough to be able to provide her with no fewer than four servants; a nursery governess, a nurse, a cook and a house and parlour maid. This was in addition to *Bennochy Park*, his

own large establishment in Kirkcaldy, where several servants were employed.

Finola is a great grand-daughter of Barry and his legitimate wife, Mary DWYER. She and her sister, Gerry COONEY, had always been intrigued by John Barry's will in which he left a large portion of his quite considerable estate to Helen and her five surviving children, Colin, Louis, Tom, Eveleen and Gwendolen.



They had no idea who this Helen was and, interestingly, there were instructions in the will that his wife and her children were not to contest the will or they would lose their share of the inheritance. They were therefore delighted when they discovered my article to find that someone knew all about Helen Macfarlane WRIGHT.

I had earlier been in touch with the daughter, Yvonne, of Helen's eldest son, Colin. She said that her father had always had a chip on his shoulder about being illegitimate. I was able to put Finola and Gerry in touch with her daughter in Canada, although Yvonne herself died last year aged 100. Colin had five children, Kathleen, John, Gwendolen, Patrick and Yvonne. I was also able to trace the children of Gwendolen on findmypast.com and found a son on 192.com. Finola and Gerry were thus hoping to make contact with him too and find out more about the 'hidden' family.

I was also able to help them in finding out more about their own family, descendants of Barry and his 'unwanted wife', as they described her. They only had very scant knowledge, but were hoping to trace some closer relatives. John and Mary had four children, but their first, Thomas Ignatius, died from scarlet fever aged only six and their third, John, only survived a few months. Their daughter, Mary Frances, was born in 1871 and their son, another John, was born in 1876. Finola and Gerry are grandchildren of John, but knew very little about their great aunt apart from the fact she had married and had three children, Molly, or Polly, Gregory and Rina. We discovered that she had married Gregory FFRENCH in 1897 in Kirkcaldy and she and Gregory were living with her brother, John, in Kirkcaldy in the 1901 census. John Barry senior was missing, although it was clearly his home as none of them gave themselves as head of the household.

Given that Molly or Polly and Rina were likely to be nicknames it was difficult to find out much more about them and I failed to find the family in the 1911 census on findmypast.com which might have helped identify them. However, I decided to try looking in the Scottish records and finally found them in the 1911 census, still in Kirkcaldy. From this we were able to discover the true names of the children and their dates of birth. They were, Mary Frances, born 1902, Gregory, born 1904, and Erina Kathleen, born 1906, all in Kirkcaldy. Sadly, Mary Frances's husband died only two years after the census, in 1913, aged only 37.

Erina's unusual name enabled us to discover that she married Sydney Bull in 1942 although she appeared not to have had any children. She died in Ireland in 1986. Gregory became a Father in the Catholic Church and died in 1983. Mary Frances remains Finola and Gerry's last hope of any close relatives. Despite extensive searching she, like her grand-mother, is elusive. Unlike her mother and sister, she does not appear in the 1939 Register. We have found no record of a marriage or her death in any of the British or Irish records. Mary DWYER similarly appears to have vanished off the face of the earth as there is no record of her in any census or elsewhere after the birth of her son John in 1876.

Although we found living family members on the illegitimate side of the Barry family, and solved the puzzle of the will, it was disappointing not to be able to uncover any closer family members.

## **Addendum**

Since writing this article, Finola has received more information on the family from a distant relative in Ireland. It would seem that John BARRY and Mary DYWER were estranged following the death of their son Thomas in 1876. Mary subsequently went back to Ireland taking her baby son, John, with her. She died in Lismore, County Waterford. Their daughter, Mary Frances, was left in the care of her father who took her to a convent in Stroud where his sister was a

nun, even though Mary was only 5. She spent 10 years of misery there. She then transferred to the Ursuline Convent near Edinburgh where she was a lot happier. She went to finishing school in Brussels and afterwards went to live with her father in Kirkcaldy. She met her husband, Gregory FFRENCH, on her visits to Wexford with her father.

The relative also indicated that Mary Frances junior had indeed married but moved to Colombia, South America. She appears to have returned to Britain though, since she died in London in 1985. Helen also moved abroad to Portugal where she died in 1951.

This brings the narrative on our 16th Object to a conclusion. We could not finish without recording our thanks to those who provided information and assistance in the preparation of the story.

We have to thank the West Middlesex Family History Society on two fronts. Firstly, for forwarding their Newsletter to Kirkcaldy Galleries and, secondly, for swiftly connecting us to Margaret. Without these steps, this story would not have seen the light of day.

Susan Birne, of Kirkcaldy Galleries, was instrumental in bringing the item to our attention. Again, this was both vital and fundamental and we record our appreciation.

Finally, we have to thank Margaret Watson for her assistance and enthusiasm in helping us deliver the narrative. Nothing has been a problem to Margaret in that she has supplied much of the information, photographs and charts, which support the base story. Margaret also deserves our thanks for allowing us to use her findings and narrative in the first place.

We hope that readers enjoy this rather different narrative about one of the most important industrialists in Kirkcaldy's history.