

An Honourable Opponent



A Short Biography of Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ratcliffe-Ellis

by

his great-grandson

Miles Ellis

AN HONOURABLE OPPONENT

MILES ELLIS

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Chapter 1 The Early Years (1842 – 1867)

Thomas Ratcliffe Ellis was born in Wigan on New Year's Eve 1842, the son of a Welsh builder and a Lancashire farmer's daughter. When he died more than 80 years later flags on the Town Hall and other public buildings were flown at half-mast in honour of Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ratcliffe-Ellis and *The Times* described him in its obituary as "the most trusted as well as honoured and, indeed, beloved personality in the coalmining industry". This is the story of that truly remarkable man.

The story really begins in the quiet of the Tanat Valley in North Wales where his grandfather, Thomas Ellis, was the latest in a line of stone masons going back to the early 18th century. Thomas Ellis' eldest son, another Thomas Ellis, was born in the little town of Llansilin in 1812 [1] but at some time in his early 20s he decided to leave the land of his fathers and travel to seek his fortune in Lancashire, where the burgeoning industrial revolution was changing the world for ever. Exactly why he decided to settle in Wigan will never be known, but it must have been an enormous change for the young man from Llansilin when he reached the *Ancient and Loyal* town [2].

Wigan dates back more than two thousand years and by 1246 it had become such a prosperous and important market town that Henry III saw fit to grant it its first charter [3], making it one of the four ancient boroughs of Lancashire – the others being Preston, Lancaster and Liverpool– although a Heraldic Visitation in 1613 authenticated an earlier charter apparently issued by Henry I in 1100 [4]! Although primarily a rural market town for many centuries, by 1650 there were at least 12 commercial collieries within five miles of Wigan, and in 1771 it was claimed that "the coal dug up in the centre of the town is perhaps the best in the universe" [5]. One reason for this praise was probably that some of the coal seams around Wigan contained a unique form of coal known as cannel which is extremely hard and burns with a hot, clear, and almost smokeless flame. Wigan was also becoming a major weaving centre, and in 1784 a Cloth Hall was opened to cater for the large quantities of linens, calicoes, fustians and checks that were being produced by the local textile workers, with Wigan checks, in particular, held "in much estimation". By 1819 there were eight cotton mills operating in the town employing 616 people [6].

When Thomas Ellis arrived in Wigan in the mid-1830s, therefore, he must have been amazed at the scale and breadth of manufacturing after having spent his early life in the quiet little rural communities of the Tanat Valley around Llansilin and Llanrhaiadr. Between 1801 and 1851 the population of Wigan increased tenfold from 4000 to 40,000 to meet the growing demand for workers in its mills and supporting infrastructure, and this enormous increase led to major housing problems [7].

Although Thomas Ellis was still only a young man he was clearly possessed of considerable drive and initiative, for he appears to have established himself very quickly in this new and very different environment. He was an experienced stone mason when he arrived in Wigan, but seems to have been willing to turn his hand to whatever was necessary and soon set up in business as a timber merchant in addition to his work as a builder. By 1841 he had his own yard in Church Street, close to St George's Church, and only a short walk from where he was living in New Square, just off Standishgate, in the heart of the town [8].

Exactly how he came to meet Elizabeth Ratcliffe, the younger daughter of Thomas and Anne Ratcliffe of Red Rock Farm, near Haigh, about 3 miles north of Wigan, is not known, but on 26th March 1840 they were married at All Saints' Parish Church in Wigan at a ceremony attended, despite the distance, by several of his family – two of them, his brother John and his sister Margaret, signing the marriage register as witnesses [9].

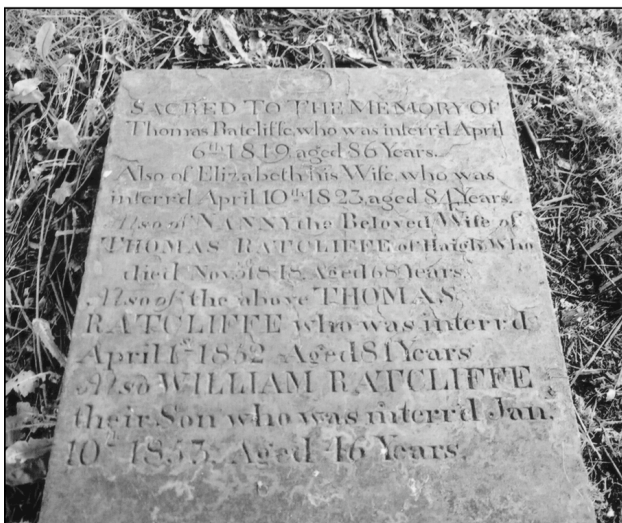
Just over nine months later, on 8th January 1841, Thomas and Elizabeth's first child Thomas was born but, sadly, he only lived for one day. However, two years later, on New Year's Eve 1842, their second son was born and, in keeping with family and Welsh tradition, he was baptised with the same name as his late elder brother Thomas although, in addition, he had his mother's maiden name, Ratcliffe, as a second christian name [10] – as would all his brothers and sisters: William Ratcliffe, born in 1844, Henry Ratcliffe (1846), Anne Ratcliffe (1850) and Elizabeth Ratcliffe (1853).

It was still quite unusual at that time for children to be given more than one christian name, and the fact that Thomas gave all five of his children the additional name of Ratcliffe clearly indicates that he was proud of his wife's family. One reason for this may have been that the Ratcliffes believed that they were descended from Charles II via his mistress Mary (Moll) Davis. According to family legend Moll had a son by the king who was given to a Lady Anne Ratcliffe at court to adopt, and she, at some stage, sent him to live in Standish [11]. It has proved impossible to verify this story, although Moll certainly had a daughter by the king in 1673 who was known as Lady Mary Tudor [12, 13], and whose son, the 3rd Earl of Derwentwater, was executed as one of the leaders of the 1715 Jacobite rebellion. However, various reports indicate that this daughter was born around 1669, at the time that she was bought a house in Suffolk Place by the King and shortly before she was replaced in his affections by Nell Gwyn [e.g. 14, 15], although there is no doubt that Lady Mary Tudor was born four years later. It seems possible that there was an earlier, unacknowledged child of Moll Davis and Charles II, therefore, especially as Moilll appears to have remained a friend of the King for many years after she had, apparently, been dismissed in 1668/9. If the legend is true this child could have been the son adopted by Lady Anne Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe/Radclyffe families played an important role in the government of the kingdom for centuries and the coat of arms of one of them, with its proud motto of *Caen, Crécy, Calais* which was awarded to Sir John Radclyffe by King Edward III in recognition of his valour during the French campaign of 1346-7 [16], hangs in the parish church of St Wilfrid in Standish. Elizabeth's grandfather, Thomas Ratcliffe, who was probably born around 1733 and died in 1819, is buried in an impressive tomb at St Wilfrid's together with his wife Betty, Elizabeth's own

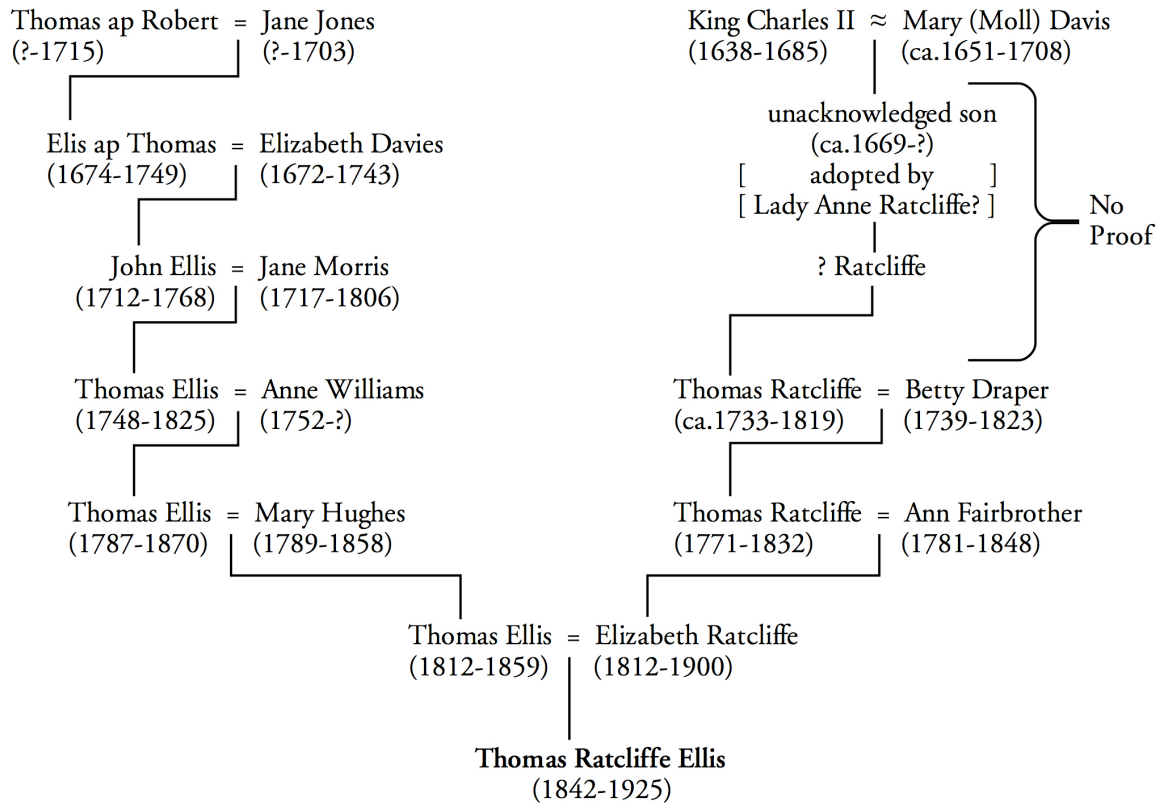
parents and her brother William, but whether he was really the great-grandson of Charles II will probably never be known.

Thomas Ratcliffe Ellis, or Tommy as he was known within his family, was the first of his family to receive a proper education, for his father's success meant that he was able to send both Tommy and his younger brother William to Wigan Grammar School, an ancient school founded in 1597. Sadly, however, Thomas Ellis never saw the fruits of that education for on 8th January 1859, only a week after Tommy's sixteenth birthday, he died at the relatively young age of 46.

He was buried four days later at St Wilfrid's Church in Standish, where his



The Ratcliffe grave at Standish Parish Church



Ellis and Ratcliffe Ancestors of Thomas Ratcliffe Ellis

two infant sons, Thomas and Henry Ratcliffe, had been buried some years before. His early death left his wife alone to continue the task of bringing up his four surviving children – a task which she carried out with great skill before passing away just as the 20th century began on 2nd January 1900, when she was finally laid to rest at St Wilfrid’s beside her husband.

Thomas had, of course, left a thriving business and initially his widow decided to keep control of it herself [17]. Within a year, however, she had decided to sell it as a going concern to John Preston, another builder, and to use the resulting capital and income to bring up her children in the manner to which they were becoming accustomed [18]. Nevertheless, it was now time for her eldest son, Tommy, to commence his own career.

Apparently Elizabeth had plans for him to become a doctor, but after his first day as a medical apprentice he is reputed to have returned home and refused to go back! Instead, he went to evening classes to learn about the law and soon afterwards took articles with John Stewart Marshall, a local solicitor.

Tommy obviously took his work as an embryo solicitor very seriously, and a diary that he kept for the first few months of 1861 [19] shows that he spent a great deal of his time reading law books – although he was also getting into trouble with his mother for staying up so late! An extract from his diary for Tuesday February 12th shows why his mother might have been getting worried, as it describes a party to which he had been invited the previous day:

..... at about half past seven went to Mr Lea’s. [John Lea was a senior colleague at ‘the office’.] I found Mr R Waddington, Mr Wall, Miss Walls and all Miss Leas & others there; felt altogether done at having so many eyes upon me. I danced with Miss Maryhen, a most charming creature. Never enjoyed myself more anywhere. I should have enjoyed myself still more, but not knowing them so well felt “very shy”. Got home at about one.

The next day he continues:

Got up about half past seven. I really believe if I go to bed late I can get up much earlier Went to office – read all day – saw John Lea – told him how I enjoyed myself, but I didn't tell him what a bashful cove I am & how I felt.

That evening he went out with his brother William to another friend's for more dancing and pancakes, leaving for home at ten, after which he commented:

..... What a difference exist between Miss Leas and Miss Rigbys. Miss Leas seem superior in every respect. But its certainly ungentlemanly and unfair for me to criticise in this way.

Indeed, Tommy certainly had an eye for the girls and his diary is full of references to the attractions of the various young ladies with whom he had contact, as can be seen from the following entry on Sunday January 13th:

Went to School & Church. Mr Smith preached a passible sermon, but I was much more occupied in looking at Miss — & Miss — who were I flatter myself looking at me. Great shame to confess this, but can't be helped.

It should not be thought that his life was all jollity, though, as his description of what happened on Friday 22nd February demonstrates:

Got up a little after seven – am quite conquering my bad pernicious habit of lying in bed, nothing like determination, nothing like having a will & knowing how to use it. Read about an hour, had breakfast & went down to office. Was with Mr Marshall nearly all morning – I like my professor more & more every day – something always new, always something exciting, & always something to call into action & to stretch to utmost limits the powers of the mind. Read during the afternoon. Left at seven, went home, found Robt. Procter, did a little algebra – read a little English, History, & a little arithmetic. Went to bed about halfpast eleven.

The early 1860s were a time of great upheaval in Wigan as a result of the 'Cotton Famine' caused by the Civil War in America. At the end of the 1850s almost 70% of all manufactured cotton goods in the world were produced in Lancashire, and most of the raw cotton which was spun and woven in Lancashire's mills came from the southern states of America. The outbreak of war between the southern Confederacy and the rest of the Union in 1861 led to a blockade of the southern cotton states by the ships of the Union Navy, and by early 1862 most of the Lancashire mills were closed and the remainder reduced to very limited working hours.

Wigan was one of the first Lancashire towns to be affected because the cotton used in its mills was almost entirely 'ordinary to middling American', which quickly became the scarcest and dearest of all, while the closure of the mills also resulted in a drop in the demand for coal – the other main industry in the town [20]. It was, reputedly, the first Lancashire town in which a Relief Committee was organised [21] and great efforts were made to provide not only food for the starving families but also education, training, and alternative work for as many as possible. Sewing classes were organised for the girls [22], who were paid enough to purchase a good meal for attending, and many of the men were employed in the improvement of the Wigan streets, while the extensive plantations at Haigh Hall, the seat of the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, were laid out by a similar use of unemployed Wigan miners [23].

The war ended in April 1865 and almost immediately the cotton trade resumed and the Lancashire mills began to return to work. This improvement in Wigan's fortunes coincided with the end of Tommy's time as an articled clerk, and later that year he was admitted as a solicitor [24]. Two years later Richard Leigh, a Wigan solicitor who was also clerk to the county justices, invited him to become a partner in his firm, which was henceforth to be known as Leigh and Ellis [25]. A career which would lead Tommy to the pinnacle of his profession had begun.

Chapter 2 The Developing Years (1867 – 1895)

With his partnership in Leigh and Ellis settled, Tommy was now in a position to settle down to build a family, and the following year he married Mary Dean Barton, the eldest daughter of Councillor Matthew Barton of Standish. The Bartons were a well-established farming family from Parbold – three or four miles north-west of Wigan, but as the youngest of seven sons there would have been no role for Matthew in the running of the farm and he had, therefore, established a successful ironmongery business in Wigan, where he was sufficiently important in the affairs of the town to have been elected as a member of the Wigan Corporation [26]. The wedding took place at St Wilfrid's Church in Standish on 25th February 1868 and, unusually for the period but possibly because of the importance of the bride's father in the local community, the *Wigan Observer* of 28th February carried a lengthy report of the wedding, part of which read as follows:

The bridal party, which was a numerous one, reached the church at about 11 o'clock and, as the day was particularly favourable, the little village of Standish was quite alive with the unusual stir and bustle which were caused by the event. The bride, who wore a dress of white silk covered with tulle, trimmed with white satin, and the customary wreath of orange blossoms and veil, was conducted to the church by her father, and she had in attendance a train of seven bridesmaids, who were attired in white silk covered with tarleton, trimmed with cerise, white bonnets and veils to match. – The ceremony was performed in the presence of a large number of spectators, and the bells of the old Church rang a merry peal as the party returned to Effingham House to breakfast. – The happy couple left Standish station about half-past three for London, and in the evening a large party of friends were made happy by the enjoyment of Mr and Mrs Barton's generous hospitality. [27]

On return from their honeymoon Tommy and Mary moved into a new home in Dicconson Street – *Gothic House* – that had previously been the abode of Mr Thomas Graham, the organist at the Parish Church for 23 years and the composer of a number of well-known hymn tunes, including *Rock of Ages* [28]. Thomas Graham had died only two months earlier, and his house was just what an ambitious young solicitor needed to start his married life.

Slightly over a year later, on 15th April 1869, the young couple's first child, Thomas, was born in *Gothic House*. Large families were quite normal at that time, and over the next sixteen years he would be joined by Mary in 1871, Arthur in 1872, Elizabeth in 1874, Madge in 1877, Ruth in 1879, Dorothy in 1881 and Henry Ratcliffe in 1885. This growing family soon became too large for *Gothic House* and shortly after Mary's birth Tommy moved his family into a larger house in Bellingham Terrace on Wigan Lane, slightly less than a mile north of the town centre in the newly evolving residential suburbs [29].

As well as building a family, however, Tommy was also building a career. In 1874 his partner Richard Leigh retired, and he became the sole partner of Leigh and Ellis. The following year he merged with Edward Scott, who had been the sole partner of Scott and Son since his father's death in 1866, to create the new firm of Scott and Ellis [30], and was also appointed to his first public position as clerk to the Wigan Bench of Magistrates – a post which he would hold for over a quarter of a century until August 1900, when his growing national responsibilities forced him to resign [31].

Despite his position as Magistrate's Clerk, Tommy sometimes appeared before them on behalf of his clients, and a report in the *Wigan Observer* of 23rd September 1882 shows that his understanding of the subtleties of the law was of considerable benefit to his clients:

ALLEGED PERMITTING DRUNKENNESS. – John Simm, landlord of the Bird-i'th-Hand, Hindley, was summoned for permitting drunkenness on his premises on the 5th inst. – Police-sergeant Hargreaves said he visited the house on the day in question. He saw a man in the tap-room drunk and asleep. There was a glass of beer before him. He called the defendant's daughter, and she admitted that the man was drunk. He saw another man drunk. The man he saw in the tap-room was Samuel Lord. – Mr Ellis urged for the defence that to be guilty of permitting drunkenness the prosecution must prove that the defendant served the beer. – The case was dismissed. [32]

It should not be thought, however, that Tommy's growing standing in the legal world was to the exclusion of the lighter side of his character. From an early age he had been interested in amateur dramatics and as an adult he was frequently seen on the stage in and around Wigan. In May 1881, for example, he could be found playing Bob Acres in a performance of Sheridan's comedy *The Rivals* at the Theatre Royal in front of "the Earl and Countess of Crawford and Balcarres, and many of the leading residents of the town and district" to raise money for the erection of a drill shed for the Wigan Volunteers. In its review of the performance the *Wigan Observer* stated that "Mr Ellis deserves great praise for his representation of the character; it will stamp him as an amateur actor of no mean order" [33]. The following year he appeared on successive nights as Tony Lumpkin in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Gustave de Grignon in Charles Reade's *The Ladies' Battle*, and was again highly praised, with the report of the latter event saying that "Mr T. R. Ellis was in his element as Gustave de Grignon, and was the life and soul of the comedy" [34].

Another of his lifelong interests away from the workplace was the church – although as he grew older he no longer treated it as a good place to exchange glances with pretty young girls! In the mid-1870s it was decided to build a new church dedicated to St Michael and All Angels in Swinley Road, just off Wigan Lane and only a few hundred yards from where the growing Ellis family now lived. As the then Vicar, Canon Lloyd, was to say some years later, "fifty years ago this church was in building and the services were held in the schoolroom, where an altar stood at the south end of the main room: and throughout that time he [Thomas Ellis] was working with your Vicar, ... and when the church was consecrated for public worship on St Mark's day, April 25th 1878, he accepted the appointment of [Vicar's] Churchwarden" [35]. He would retain the post for the rest of his long life.

The first of many important family events to be held at St Michael's occurred just over three years later, on 13th September 1881, when Tommy and Mary's seventh child, and fifth daughter, Dorothy was baptised there.

Tommy's success as a lawyer meant that he had been able to move home once more, and shortly before Dorothy's birth the family had moved to an imposing house known as *The Hollies*, just off Wigan Lane and adjacent to the Plantations that formed a large part of the estate belonging to Haigh Hall, the home of the Earls of Crawford and Balcarres since the 18th century. He and his



The Hollies, Wigan

descendants would continue to live here for over 65 years. At the same time his mother, now nearly 70, moved from her home just outside the town centre to the house in Bellingham Terrace vacated by Tommy, which had the advantage of being barely a quarter of a mile away.

Tommy could also now afford the best of education for his children and in 1880 his eldest son, Tom, had gone away to a small boarding preparatory school – Yarlett Hall, a few miles north of Stafford – which had about 70 boys, mostly aged between 10 and 13. It seems probable that the school was recommended to him by one of his professional colleagues, for both Henry Ackerley, solicitor and Superintendent Registrar of the Wigan Union, and Thomas Heald, another solicitor and Chief Magistrate of Wigan, already had sons at the school when Tom Ellis arrived there [36]. Three years later, in May 1883, Tom moved on to Rugby School, where he would spend the next four years and be followed in due course by his brothers Bobby and Cliffe.

In the same year that his eldest son started his secondary education at one of England's most famous schools Tommy's legal career was about to take a step which would have far-reaching consequences. The partnership with Edward Scott had been very successful, and Scott and Ellis had become one of the most extensive and important legal practices in the county. However, on 10th February 1883 Edward Scott died most unexpectedly, aged only 44. Just over three months later a circular was issued by the partners of Peace, Ackerley and Co. stating that they were dissolving their partnership and that Maskell Peace was contemplating a partnership with T.R.Ellis of Scott and Ellis, "which arrangement is thought desirable owing to the lamented death of the late Mr Scott" [37]. Two weeks later the partnership came into existence, with the establishment of Peace and Ellis [38] – a firm that would become the most notable law firm in Wigan for well over half a century.

Maskell Peace was already an important figure in the legal side of the mining industry, being Law Clerk and Secretary of both the Lancashire and Cheshire Coal Association and the Mining Association of Great Britain, Secretary of the Wigan Coal and Iron Company – the largest mining company in the world, and having been Secretary of the Wigan Mining and Mechanical School since its opening in 1857 [39]. With a dynamic new younger partner it was almost inevitable that Peace and Ellis rapidly became the most important legal firm in all aspects of mining law.

Tragically, however, for the second time in less than ten years death was to take Tommy's senior partner, although on this occasion Maskell Peace had been ill for some time before his death in November 1892. In the circumstances it must have seemed natural for both the Mining Association of Great Britain and the Lancashire and Cheshire Coal Association to invite Thomas Ellis to take over the legal positions that had been held by his late partner. Here, however, he had a baptism of fire when, in July of the following year, the recently established Miners' Federation embarked on a strike against the coal owners over a proposal to reduce wages. The strike, which involved over 300,000 miners, lasted until November, when it was brought to an end after negotiations under the chairmanship of Lord Roseberry with the establishment of a Board of Conciliation that had equal representation from both the miners and the employers. The Board had the responsibility, amongst other things, for fixing wages for the following twelve months. As C.M.Percy wrote in an article in *The Science and Art of Mining* in July 1894, "The position which Thomas Ellis holds of adviser to the employers would be an important and responsible one under any circumstances, but no one could possibly have foreseen how important and how responsible it would be. The signs of the times are that the importance and responsibility will not diminish" [40]. The truth of this comment can be found in his obituary in *The Times* which stated that from this point on he was to become "a man of increasing influence in every succeeding labour crisis in the industry" [41].

Thomas Ellis' role was not appreciated by all, however, and a letter in *The Comet* – a Wigan-based 'Fortnightly Journal of Fact, Fiction, and Free Opinion' – on 23rd September 1893, some eight weeks into the strike, read as follows:

DEAR TATLER, – Mr T. R. Ellis is, I understand, paid a salary of £800 a year as Magistrate's Clerk, and a clerk he employs, and probably pays about £2 a week, seems to do most of the work. I have been in court several times lately and this clerk has officiated on each occasion, and not only performs the duty appertaining to the magistrate's clerk, but also arrogates to himself the function of magistrate, witness and jury. Mr Ellis has several appointments, and as he cannot find time to attend the court and discharge duties for which he is handsomely paid he should relinquish the post. There are plenty of capable men willing to accept it at half the salary. In this district half-a-dozen families monopolise every lucrative public position. I should like to ask how many times Mr Ellis has been absent from court since the coal-war commenced? – Yours respectfully, ONE MAN ONE JOB [42]

In 1887 Tommy's eldest son, Tom, had left Rugby School and joined Peace and Ellis as an articled clerk – initially at the firm's London office in the Strand which had been set up to deal with the increasing amount of business arising from the firm's work for the Mining Association of Great Britain. In 1893, only a few months after Maskell Peace's death, he qualified as a solicitor and shortly afterwards became a partner in Peace and Ellis.

Tommy's second son Bobby had arrived at Rugby in September 1886, at the start of his elder brother's last year at the school, and had excelled there, gaining his Cricket XI colours in both of his last two years at the school, and obtaining a place at Trinity College, Oxford to read law – the first of his family to attend University. Four years later, in 1895, he was awarded Third Class honours in Jurisprudence.

Arguably, however, a far more important breakthrough was registered by his sister, Beth, when she went up to Oxford in 1892, for women were still only accepted there under considerable sufferance at that time. Beth was fortunate that her father was a strong believer in a good education for both boys and girls – a quite advanced belief for the time – and had sent his daughters to complete their education at a private school called Halliwick Manor in New Southgate, just to the north of Muswell Hill in London. She must have shown considerable academic talent there, for she went straight on to Oxford, arriving at Lady Margaret Hall only a few days after her eighteenth birthday to become one of the early female academic pioneers. Nothing is known about her time at Oxford, but in 1895, the same year that her brother Bobby graduated in Jurisprudence, she was awarded First Class honours in her final papers in English Literature – although, as a woman, she did not receive a degree to recognise her achievement!



Beth Ellis, while she was at Oxford

Chapter 3 The Glory Years (1895 – 1925)

Shortly after Bobby and Beth had left Oxford, on 28th July 1896, Tommy and Mary's eldest daughter May married Geoffrey Dawson at St Michael's Church. The importance of the Ellis family in Wigan by this time can be gauged from the fact that, even though the ceremony was at St Michael's, the *Wigan Observer* reported that the bride and her father were met at the door of the church by the Rector of Wigan – whose own church, All Saints', was situated about a mile away in the centre of the town. The Rector then conducted the service assisted by the Vicar of St Michael's, and after the service the happy couple left the church "and entered their carriage to the sound of the merry ringing of the Parish Church bells" [43]. A year later, in the city of Rangoon in far-off Burma, where Geoffrey Dawson was a member of the Indian Civil Service, Tommy and Mary's first grandchild, Anita Mary, was born.

May Dawson was the eldest of five sisters, and the year after the birth of her first child she was visited in the hill station where Geoffrey Dawson was then stationed, some 30-40 miles from Mandalay, by the second of these five girls, Beth. For Beth this was to be a turning point in her life, because while she was there she was asked by a gentleman at a dinner party, possibly knowing that she had read English Literature at Oxford, whether she was planning to write a book. When she replied in the negative her companion expressed his disappointment and asked what then did she intend to do with her life, leading Beth to decide that she clearly had no choice other than to take up his suggestion! The result was that the following year a book entitled *An English Girl's First Impressions of Burmah* was published by Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. of London. Almost a century later, in 1997, this book was republished by White Orchard Press with an introduction including such phrases as "A spontaneous and irrepressibly humorous view of life in Burma a century ago" and even "One of the funniest travel accounts ever written" [44]. Beth would go on to write seven successful novels, one of which was turned into a play at Wyndham's Theatre in London, starring Gerald Du Maurier, while another became a Hollywood film featuring the silent screen star Constance Talmadge.

On the second day of the new century Elizabeth Ellis, Tommy's mother, died at the age of 88, more than 40 years after the death of her husband. She was buried with him in the churchyard at St Wilfrid's, Standish, where she would be joined almost exactly forty years later by her youngest daughter, Lizzie, who never married.

Tommy's career on the national stage was now starting to expand quite dramatically, and it was with mixed feelings that he submitted his resignation as Clerk to the Wigan Borough Justices in this first year of the new century after over 25 years in the post. Mr J. T. Gee, J.P., who was Mayor of Wigan at that time, was later to say that "we received that resignation with very great regret because most of us who have been associated with Mr Ellis knew his great capabilities, but that sorrow was mitigated to a very large extent by the fact that he had a very able son who could follow him" [45]. That son was Tom who, as we have already seen, had become his father's partner some seven years earlier; he would continue as Clerk to the Justices for over 36 years until his death in December 1936 at the age of 67. Tom's brother Bobby, who had worked alongside him since graduating from Oxford in 1895 also became a partner at around this time, as would the 'baby' of the family, Cliffe, in 1909 after completing his articles under the tutelage of his elder brother Tom.

The three boys' father was now increasingly involved with mining affairs on a national level and, following his work with the Roseberry Conference in 1893 and the subsequent Board of Conciliation, he was appointed to numerous posts on official bodies connected with the coal industry, not the least of which were the 1906 Royal Commission on Mines and the 1907 Royal Commission on a Railways Conciliation Scheme.

In 1904, on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the Mining Association of Great Britain, he was presented with several pieces of silver and a cheque in recognition of his work for the Association by its President, Sir James Joicey, M.P., whose words show very clearly the regard in which he was held: "His experience of every branch of trade which has been entrusted to him is unique as far as Parliamentary work is concerned [he] is one of the most able men we have ever had in connection with the coal trade He has such a charming manner and such a gracious presence that he disarms any opposition he is likely to encounter I think he is invaluable and I hope he may be spared to long occupy his position" [46]. This ability to gain the respect of all those involved with the mining industry, in whatever capacity, would be picked up by *The Times* some years later when it said that "a great part of his success in industrial negotiations between coal owners and miners was due to his knowledge of and sympathy with the day-to-day life of the miner and the miner's family. Born and bred in Wigan, and living there all his long life, this was natural to a man of such kindly and genial disposition, and it is not too much to say that in the Lancashire coalfield many an incipient dispute between colliery manager and miners or miners' union officials has been peacefully settled through his tactful intervention. He maintained friendly relations with most of the miners' leaders, and a different story might have had to be written if all owners and owners' advisers had been like him, and all miners' leaders like his Wigan friend, Mr Stephen Walsh" [47].

His influence on the national stage was eloquently described in November 1910 by Mr Charles Masterman, Under Secretary of State for the Home Department, who, when presenting the prizes at the Wigan and District Technical College, explained that "he was there because Mr Ratcliffe Ellis commanded him to be there, because when Mr Ratcliffe Ellis commanded, Members of Parliament habitually obeyed" [48].

The following year his work for the coal industry was recognised by King George V in his Coronation Honours with the award of a knighthood [49].

Sir Thomas decided that this would be an opportune moment to remember his beloved mother, and her yeoman forbears, and so, with the approval of His Majesty, he changed his surname from Ellis to Ratcliffe-Ellis, thus becoming Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ratcliffe-Ellis. His mother's family was also remembered in a more permanent manner through the coat of arms that he had created for him by the College of Arms. His mother's only brother William had died in 1853 without any children and so her family was now extinct in the male line. In these circumstances it is permissible to quarter the arms of one's maternal grandfather with those of one's own father. Neither Thomas Ratcliffe nor his son-in-law Thomas Ellis had borne arms and so



*Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ratcliffe-Ellis
on the occasion of his investiture in 1911*



The Ratcliffe-Ellis Arms



The Ellis Arms

it was first necessary to retrospectively create arms for both of them in order that they could be quartered to create Sir Thomas' own arms! The result is the impressive coat of arms which may be borne by his male descendants in perpetuity. At the same time the simple Ellis arms may also be borne by the male descendants of his father, thus ensuring that his brother William's descendants also had a properly accredited coat of arms.

Amongst the many tributes to the new Knight was one from Mr Gerrard, H.M. Inspector of Mines, who said that "he had known Mr Ellis all his life, and had known no one more upright, more fair-minded, more anxious to do that which was right to both owners and men. Although representing the owners, Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ellis, he knew from his own personal knowledge, had always before him the interests of the working men. There was no one more deserving of the honour than Mr Ellis" [50].

The range and scale of the work which led to this honour can be seen from the lengthy list of his "public offices" which the *Wigan Observer* listed in its report of the honour accorded to one of Wigan's leading citizens:

Member of the Royal Commission on Mines, Member of the Employers' Panel of the Court of Arbitration, Member of the Board of Trade Railway Committee, Law Clerk and Secretary to the Mining Association of Great Britain, Secretary to the Lancashire and Cheshire Coal Association, Secretary to the Lancashire and Cheshire Coal Owners' Defence Association, Secretary to the Gas Coal Federation, Secretary to the Lancashire Gas Coal Association, Secretary to the Federated Coal Owners, Joint Secretary (with Mr Thomas Ashton) to the Conciliation Board for the Coal Trade of the Federated Districts, Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries, Member of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, Member of the Lancashire Parish Registry Society, Member of the Cheetham Society, Member of the Manchester Geological and Mining Society. [51]

By now all of Sir Thomas' daughters were married and he had five grandchildren, although he was possibly becoming slightly concerned that none of his sons had yet found a wife. However, the next year, 1913, would turn out to be another important year in the life of the Ratcliffe- Ellis family.

The year was not long started when the news came that both Dolly and Beth were expecting babies, and then Cliffe announced that he was to marry Grace Wall, the granddaughter of Thomas Wall, the founder of the local *Wigan Observer* newspaper. In July Dolly's

second son, Peter, was born, but the joy of his birth was overshadowed less than two weeks later, on 2nd August 1913, when Beth died during childbirth. Quite apart from the devastating loss of a daughter at the age of only 38, her death came when she was at the peak of her career as a novelist and cut short what might have become an important career in the literary world.

Beth's death also overshadowed Cliffe and Grace's forthcoming nuptials and, although it was decided not to postpone the wedding, the scale of the event was substantially reduced, with only the



Cliffe Ellis and Grace Wall on their wedding day with Sir Thomas and Lady Mary Ratcliffe-Ellis

immediate family of the bride and groom present. The wedding took place on 30th October at Holy Trinity Church in Southport but, out of deference to Sir Thomas' long association with St Michael's Church, the service was conducted by the Vicar of St Michael's with the Vicar of Holy Trinity assisting him [52]. Cliffe and Grace's first child Joan was born just over a year later, two days before Christmas, but by then a shadow had fallen over the world with the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914.

Cliffe, who was 29 at the outbreak of the war, and his brother Bobby, who was 41, both volunteered to join the 5th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, the direct descendant of the old Wigan Volunteers with which their father had been associated in his younger days. The 5th Battalion was a Territorial Battalion based in Wigan and Leigh, so they served alongside many of their friends and relatives, including their cousins William, Stephen and Roland, the sons of their Uncle William Ellis. The "Collier Battalion" first travelled to Egypt where, it was reported, they achieved a reputation for the most efficient trench digging in the entire army – perhaps not too surprising, given the number of miners in their ranks – and then on to Turkey in the spring of 1915 to take part in the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign. Fortunately, despite the carnage, all the Ellis men survived their visit to the Middle East unscathed. The battalion's reward for its heroism and sacrifices in Gallipoli was to be transferred to the trenches of Flanders, where it would spend the rest of the war.

Two years later, in March 1917, Tommy and Mary's second son, Major Arthur Ratcliffe-Ellis, was amongst five Wigan officers whose names appeared in a list published by the War Office of "officers whose names had been brought to the notice of the Secretary of State for War for valuable services rendered in connection with the war". A little under two years later the war was over and Bobby and Cliffe, as well as their cousins William, Stephen and Roland, all returned home to continue their lives as civilians. Although at the end of the war they were all gazetted with honorary ranks, only Bobby would continue to use his military rank, and was regularly referred to as Major Ratcliffe-Ellis for the rest of his life.

Despite the constraints imposed by the war, and although he was almost 72 years of age when the war started, Sir Thomas was now at the height of his powers. Widely respected as the ultimate authority on all legal matters related to mining, *The Times* subsequently recorded that "posts, offices and honours descended on him in a thickening shower, and it is one of the

most striking testimonies to his extraordinary vitality that he sought to justify every distinction by some personal act or contribution” [53].

On 12th July 1917, however, tragedy intervened when Mary Dean, his wife of almost 50 years, passed away at the age of 69 after an illness of more than six months. Following a service at St Michael’s Church she was laid to rest at St David’s Church in Haigh, not far from where his mother’s family had been farmers, in a new vault at the edge of the graveyard “overlooking the fields and woods of the Haigh Hall estate.” The report of her death in the *Wigan Observer* makes special mention of Lady Mary’s charity work and, in particular, of her work in establishing the Wigan and District Division of the British Red Cross Society, of which she was Vice-Chairman from its inception before the war until her death, and the Comfort Funds and Red Cross Workrooms during the war [54]. A report from the local Red Cross in the same issue includes an appropriate memorial:

To all connected with the local Red Cross, the memory of Lady Ratcliffe-Ellis will be treasured as one who did much for it, actively and yet unobtrusively, and with the characteristic kindness which so endeared her to all.

Possibly the pain of losing his wife after so many years was, at least partially, alleviated just ten days later by the birth of what would prove to be his last grandchild, Barbara, and only the third to bear the Ellis name following her sister Joan and brother Thomas (Tim) who had been born in 1914 and 1915. Barbara was, in fact, Sir Thomas’ eleventh grandchild and as they grew up all these grandchildren would affectionately refer to their eminent grandfather as “dear old Tommy”!

By this time Peace and Ellis had grown to the extent that, as well as its head office in Wigan and the London office, where Sir Thomas could deal with matters on the national scene, there was a third office in Wrexham, where many of the Welsh mine-owners were clients of the firm. All three of Sir Thomas’ sons were already partners and with the end of the war the firm went from strength to strength.

Honours continued to rain down on Sir Thomas – one of particular note being his appointment to the Presidency of the Geological and Mining Society when, *The Times* recorded, “he appeared on the day of his election, though nearly 80 years of age, with an elaborate paper of profound interest to mining engineers, in which numerous details of their everyday experience and difficulties in mine work were discussed” [55].



*Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ratcliffe-Ellis
(by Sir Arthur Cope, R.A.)*

Another noteworthy honour was the commissioning of a portrait in oils by the Mining Association of Great Britain in celebration of his twenty-fifth year as its Secretary and Law Clerk. The portrait, by Sir Arthur Cope, R.A., was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1918, and was ranked as one of the most notable portraits in that year’s exhibition. The Association formally presented it to Sir Thomas, together with two silver tea-caddies from the reign of George II, in a ceremony held at the Savoy Hotel in London on March 21st 1918 which was attended by most of the leading people in the mining industry. In formally presenting these gifts to Sir Thomas, Mr Adam Nimmo, President of

the Association, paid many handsome tributes to Sir Thomas, including a generous assessment of the character of Sir Thomas as a man, as the *Colliery Guardian* reported the following day:

Sir Thomas's knowledge and acumen as a lawyer have been of immense advantage to the association, and we recognise that in all legal matters connected with the mining industry Sir Thomas is an outstanding expert who can always be safely relied upon. (Hear, hear.) But I venture to say, gentlemen, that his qualities as a lawyer taken by themselves would not have enabled him to succeed as he has done had he not combined with these qualities of deep and widespread knowledge of commercial and industrial affairs. His experience of business matters has been broad and profound; and he has brought all the wealth of that experience to the multifarious duties that he has been called upon to perform. And we, as an association, have had the incalculable benefit of that storehouse of knowledge and experience that he is. But I go a little further, and I say this. I suggest that it is his rich human qualities that have had as much to do with this success as anything else. It is his human viewpoint, and the ease with which he establishes a friendly and sincere contact with his fellows, that has made him not only win his way with us, but command the esteem and regard of everyone he has come into contact with. (Applause.) That human viewpoint has enabled him always to see the other man's case as well as his own, and I think that that is one of the features of Sir Thomas's outlook in his negotiations on our behalf that has made him moderate and reasonable and just: and so far from us seeing any bias or unreasonable prejudice in him, we have always found him an honest and straightforward man, bent upon doing his duty, and still more bent upon finding the right in it. I do not wish to enlarge upon Sir Thomas's qualities as a man, although I might well do so, and there are many here who could do so to a greater extent still. But I want to say this – that he has that charm of nature which disarms hostility – that gracious personality which surrounds him always with an atmosphere of sweet reasonableness – that spirit of helpfulness and subordination of himself which are among the crowning virtues of human life. I think I might almost say this of him, in summing up this aspect of his work and character – that we can truly say that he has always been, in the deepest sense of the word, the servant of the association – (hear, hear) – but that when he has been most our servant he has been most the master of the assembly. (Applause.) [56]

In his reply, Sir Thomas made a number of interesting comments, including a recognition that there would be many more changes in the mining industry in the future and that they should be faced with confidence, not fear. "From time to time," he said, "we have heard gloomy forecasts that if such and such a measure became law, disaster would be sure to follow. Well, gentlemen, the measure became law, and happily disaster did not follow. And I hope this may be so in the future. At any rate, it will never do, I am satisfied, to sit down and think or say, 'Because it was done in my father's or grandfather's time it is good enough, and it will do now.' We must recognise that changes have to come, and we must meet them and make the best of them." Sir Thomas concluded by saying "Let me say once more how I thank you all for these beautiful pieces of silver that you have given to me, and for this portrait, and to assure you that although I value these, and value them very greatly, the inscription that you have put on the foot of that portrait, that I have secured your esteem, I value above all." (Loud applause.)

The inscription that Sir Thomas obviously valued so highly was attached to the frame of the portrait and said simply

SIR THOMAS RATCLIFFE RATCLIFFE-ELLIS, K^T

Presented by the
MINING ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN
in grateful recognition of his VALUABLE SERVICES
as SECRETARY AND LAW CLERK during 25 years,
and as a mark of high esteem.

One of Sir Thomas' most important contributions to mining legislation came at this time when, after having been heavily involved in the preparation of the 1917 Mines Act, he was invited to be a member of Sir Leslie Scott's 1919 Committee which was to lay the ground for the Mines (Working Facilities and Support) Act of 1923. This ground-breaking legislation would remodel the whole code of regulations regarding the rights of landowners with regard to the extraction of underground minerals, and establish that the national interest lay above the rights of the owners of the land under which coal, and other minerals, lay. By this time, as *The Times* would subsequently claim, he was "the most trusted as well as honoured and, indeed, beloved personality in the coalmining industry" and one whose authority on the law relating to coalmining was almost final [57].

Another important, although less public, role performed by Sir Thomas was in connection with negotiations with the newly established Irish Free State over mineral rights. Sir Thomas confided that he did not like the Free State's leader, Raymond De Valera – a dislike that seems to have been shared by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, who once said to Sir Thomas [58] that negotiations with De Valera were slowed down by De Valera's insistence on talking about Irish history at such length that after six hours of 'negotiations' they had only got as far as the victory over the Vikings in 1014 at the Battle of Clontarf!

Chapter 4 Requiescat In Pace

On Monday 2nd March, 1925, at the age of 82, Sir Thomas spent a full day in his office in Wigan. The following day he had a slight chill and stayed at home, although he continued working and issued a string of instructions, and even dictated letters, over the telephone. Later in the week he travelled to London to conduct several items of business for the Mining Association of Great Britain, of which he was still Law Clerk after over 30 years in office, although he had resigned as its Secretary in 1921. He returned by train on Friday night, and was observed to be apparently in his usual good health when he retired for the night. The following morning he was found to have died peacefully in his sleep [59].

Amongst the many tributes that were made to Sir Thomas in the following days, possibly the one which best sums up the enormous respect in which he was held came from the Rt. Hon. Stephen Walsh – a former miners' leader and, from January 1906, Labour M.P. for the nearby constituency of Ince, and subsequently a Vice-Chairman of the Labour Party. A Wiganer like Sir Thomas, Mr Walsh said that "Sir Thomas Ratcliffe-Ellis was one who for more than half a century had taken a leading light in the guidance of the coal mining industry. During the greater part of that time Sir Thomas and I had come into close contact, though generally from opposite sides, but while he always did his best for the Mining Association of Great Britain, of which he was Secretary, no more honourable opponent could be found than Sir Thomas Ratcliffe-Ellis, nor one with a keener sense of equality and fairness. Never was he known to descend to an unworthy argument, or to disparage those to whom he was opposed. No man for 50 years has exercised so great an influence on the mining legislation of the country, and to the last he preserved his great faculties unimpaired" [60].

This view of Sir Thomas from the workers' perspective was echoed by the General Secretary of the Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales Enginemen's and Boilermen's Federation, Mr W. Forshaw, when he said that "his word could be absolutely relied on, and if we had more employers with the same high conception of straight dealing as Sir Thomas had, many grievances and disputes would never occur at all, and all would be more easily dealt with" [61].

The *Colliery Guardian*, in an editorial tribute, echoed this feeling when it said that "it is not too much to say that the wonderful record of freedom from industrial conflict [for almost 30 years] was earned largely through the wisdom and judgement with which this really great man carried out his duties." It went on to say:

Throughout those 30 years his invariable aim was to banish intrigue from the councils of the association, to preserve the full dignity of the industry inviolate, and to play a straight and honest game with the workmen. Some measure of his achievement is to be found in the universal respect in which he was held by several generations of miners' leaders. In the most embittered passages at arms across the Board table, in the Press, or at the pithead, no attempt was ever made to blacken the character of a man who always stood for practical common-sense and a square deal. Sir Thomas was, in a word, the Mining Association so long as he held the office of Secretary, and no inquiry into the affairs of the mines was complete without him. [62]

Interestingly, in view of Sir Thomas' words on the occasion of the presentation of his portrait some eight years earlier, the *Colliery Guardian* concluded its tribute with the following words:

Even if high renown in other spheres had been his portion, we are convinced that Sir Thomas could not have done a greater work than that which he actually performed. It is one that future generations would do well to ponder on, and his life was one that may form an exemplar for any young man who, on the threshold of his career, may regard the esteem of his fellow men as superior to rank and fortune.

The funeral service was naturally held at St Michael's and was attended by representatives from the many local and national bodies with which he was associated, as well as the Mayor of Wigan and the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, in addition to a large number of friends and relatives. His obituary in the *Wigan Observer* the following week covers two pages, and includes two columns listing those attending the funeral at which "in addition to the crowds both inside and outside the church, motor vehicles lined the adjacent streets, where blinds were all drawn, and a body of the Wigan Borough Police, in charge of Supt. Gordon, kept a clear space outside the church." Six members of the Wigan Borough Police acted as pall bearers.

"At the conclusion of the service at St Michael's," the *Wigan Observer's* report continues, "the cortege proceeded via Wigan Lane and the Plantations to St David's Church, Haigh, where the internment took place in the family grave. A posse of the Wigan Borough Police, who had been in charge of Supt. Gordon, walked in front of the hearse as far as the borough boundary. There were two open conveyances filled with floral tributes" [63]

And so, after a full and honourable life, Sir Thomas Ratcliffe Ratcliffe-Ellis, the son of a Welsh builder who rose to be one of the most influential men of his generation in a quiet and unassuming manner, a man respected both by his colleagues and by those for whom he was always an honourable opponent, was finally laid to rest alongside his wife in the quiet of a country churchyard.



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