

Draft of downloadable resource for Watercress Beds website -

One Walthamstow family

The Story of the Alexanders: Background for teachers

Until only a few years ago, there were people living in the Queen's Road area of Walthamstow whose memories went back to the time when our streets were mostly fields. The transformation happened very quickly - dozens of streets and thousands of houses appeared in just a few years.

The people who came to live in the houses were from many different places. When the census was taken in 1901, nearly nine tenths of the adult residents were listed as having been born outside the area. Each of those people and families had their own story; each story is unique to the people concerned. But those stories often form part of a pattern that is echoed by the experiences of other people. Here is just one of them.

The first glimpse we have of Francis Alexander is as a 22-year-old under gardener at Prospect House, Tilehurst in 1851. Tilehurst was then, as it remains today, a suburb of Reading on the edge of countryside. In Francis' time there were many large private houses in and around the town, and he had found work at the biggest of these. As an under gardener he was a junior servant in a large household of nearly twenty staff; he was, however, lucky enough to have his own cottage on the estate. His employers were John Englebert Liebenrood and his wife Lucy. The house is still standing in 2015 - it is now used as a restaurant, and a mental hospital occupies most of what were the kitchen and flower gardens where Francis worked. There is further information about Victorian servants in the Jobs and Occupations section of the website.

Francis' future wife, Harriet Smith, was living nearby with her widowed father. We do not know how they met, but William Smith was a market gardener, and may well have supplied the household at Prospect House with extra produce. And Tilehurst was not a big town - Francis would have been likely to have got to know most of the local girls, at least by sight.

By the time the next census was taken in 1861, Francis and Harriet were married and living in Francis' home town of Mill Hill, still a semi-rural area. They were living and working at Bittersea Farm, which is listed on the census return of having been of 100 acres. Theirs was quite a large household, including their six-year old son William Robert, their one-year-old daughter Agnes, Francis' mother Elizabeth and sister Anne, and 72-year-old James Green, whose occupation is given as "farm servant". There was also a farm cottage, where lived Joseph Hardiman, an agricultural labourer, his wife and five children. It is likely that this had been Francis' childhood home, that his father had now died and he had taken over the running of the farm.

However this had come about, ten years later in 1871 the family had left their farming days far behind, and were living in Moray Road in what is now London

N4. The road runs between Stroud Green Road and Hornsey Road, and it must have been a very different life for them all. Francis must have been away from home on census night, as his name does not appear, but Harriet is there, listed as being the wife of the head of the household, so we know he was still alive and usually at that address. By now Francis and Harriet had five children - Henry, Rose and Frederick were all under ten, and their elder brother William, now sixteen, was working as an auctioneer's clerk. Elizabeth Alexander is not listed in the return; her daughter Anne is, but recorded as being a visitor rather than a resident, so it may well be that mother and daughter were living elsewhere. However, Harriet's father William Smith is there and was evidently part of the household, as he is not listed as a visitor. The household no longer includes any living in servants - this may suggest they had fallen on harder times.

By 1881 the family had moved house yet again, this time to Peshurst Road in South Hackney. Then as now this was a leafy area near Well Street Common and Victoria Park, so it may be that the family's fortunes had improved. Francis, by now 52 years old, was working as a ship's clerk. This was a responsible job involving making sure that goods for import and export were received in good order, packed and unpacked properly and sent on to their destination. He was relatively unusual for his time in having made a successful change of career in his middle years - from gardener to farmer was perhaps not much of a leap, but from farmer to ship's clerk, was much more of an alteration. He must either have had a useful contact, probably at the London docks, or have impressed someone enough to take him on. Francis and Harriet's eldest daughter Rose was now 17 and working as a harness sticker; Frederick, aged fifteen, was still at school. As he was now two years over the minimum school leaving age, this is a sign the family were doing relatively well. There was also a new youngest child, Albert, aged six. The two older boys, William and Henry are not mentioned and are likely to have left home.

And it looks as if the Alexanders continued to prosper in the following ten years. 1891 found them in another new home, but this time the move had been of only a few hundred yards, to leafy Church Crescent. Francis and Harriet lived at number 27 - the household consisted of them and a lodger, George Orlebar, a milkman. By now Frederick was married, and he, his wife Adelaide and two-year-old son, another Frederick, were living next door but one at number 30. Frederick was working as a coal agent.

However, the next decade brought yet more changes. By 1901 both Francis and Harriet had died, and Frederick had changed jobs, becoming a vegetable salesman, and he, Adelaide and their increased family of five children had moved to Walthamstow, living at 57 Courtenay Road, and moving to 240 Boundary Road by 1911. By that time their seventh and youngest child, Constance, had been born. Her granddaughter, Jane Harris, is now head teacher of Queen's Road Primary School. Jane's mother, Jean Harris, remembers both Constance and her elder sisters. The Alexanders were just one of the thousands of families to move to Walthamstow at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of whose grand children, great grand children and great, great grand children are still here. In 1901 perhaps nine tenths of the adult residents of the Queen's Road area were, like the Alexanders, newcomers.

Explanation of Resource

We have retold the story of the Alexanders for your group to read, and this appears alongside the census returns from which we have taken the information.

This resource can be used either as part of a sequence beginning with the “Who Lived in our houses when they were new?” resource, or on its own. This resource assumes the participants already know what a census return is. There is a session about this included in the aforementioned resource.

The first activity sheet invites the participants to answer some questions about what was happening to the family at different times, using the information in the story backed up by the census returns.

The second activity sheet invites the participants to use the template to make a family tree for the Alexander family using the information provided.

The third activity sheet - occupations. This looks at the jobs different members of the family were doing at various dates and invites participants to write a job description and advertisement for a gardener, a ship's clerk and an embroiderer.

The fourth activity sheet: asks participants to write a diary for Frederick Alexander the younger on the day he and his family moved to Walthamstow.

Story (children's version)

This is the story of a Walthamstow family. One of them was the great-grandmother of Jane Harris, who today is the head teacher of Edinburgh Primary School, Walthamstow.

Chapter one: Francis Alexander's early life

Like most Walthamstow families, the Alexanders moved here from another area. And some of their story has been lost. Here is what we know about them. It's some, but not all, of what happened to them,

Francis Alexander was born in Mill Hill in Hendon in 1829. When Francis was a boy, Mill Hill was in the countryside outside London, and the area was mostly farms. We think Francis' father rented a small farm of 100 acres. It was called Bittersea Farm.

At this time not all children went to school – only those whose families could pay. Francis probably had some education – later in life he had jobs that needed him to be able to write and to add up well.

But the first thing we definitely know about Francis is that in 1851 he was working in Tilehurst, near Reading, as a gardener at a grand mansion called Prospect House. He was just one of nearly twenty servants employed by a rich couple, John Englebert Liebenrood and his wife Lucy, to look after their great house and garden. This was a good job, and Francis would have been well trained by the head gardener.

During the time he was working at Prospect House Francis met and married a girl called Harriet Smith, who lived nearby with her father who was a market gardener.

Ten years later, Francis and Harriet were living back in Francis' home town of Mill Hill. By now Francis was in charge of the 100 acre Bittersea Farm. He and Harriet now had two children, a son, William and a daughter, Agnes, and the household also included his mother, Elizabeth and sister, Anne. 72-year-old John Green also lived with them and helped to run the farm.

There was also a cottage next to the farm house – Joseph Hardiman and his wife and five children lived there; Joseph was an agricultural labourer, and probably worked for Francis.

Chapter Two: Going to London

We have no way of knowing exactly why Francis and his family left their farm and their life in Mill Hill. In the 1860s it was still usually possible to make a living from working even quite a small farm, but perhaps the Alexanders were unlucky.

What we do know for sure is that by 1871 the family was living in Moray Road, quite near Finsbury Park. By now they had five children – Henry, Rose and Frederick were all under ten. Ann Alexander, Francis' sister, was visiting when the census was taken, but Francis himself was away from home.

And ten years later still, in 1881, the family had moved to South Hackney. Francis now worked as a ship's clerk – a very different job from that of being a farmer. He was now in charge of making sure all the goods that were expected as part of the cargo of a big ship, were actually there, were not damaged, and were sent on to the right place. And when the ship left again with a new cargo of goods, Francis would make sure that everything was in order. This was responsible work, and is likely to have been quite well paid. A good thing, as Francis and Harriet now had yet another child, Albert, who was nine years younger than his next brother.

In 1891, Francis and Harriet were living round the corner from their old house, in leafy Church Crescent. Their son Frederick, now married with a little son of his own, lived next door but one.

Chapter Three: Going to Walthamstow

The next few years brought a great many changes. Both Francis and Harriet died, and Frederick, his wife Adelaide and their children moved to Walthamstow.

Their first Walthamstow home was 57 Courtenay Road, where they were living in 1901 with their five children, then aged between 12 years and six months.

Frederick was working as a vegetable salesman. His great grand daughter Jean knows he was a wholesaler. This means he bought supplies for local shops; Jean has been told he commuted to Covent Garden market very early in the morning to do this.

By the time of the 1911 census the family had moved to 240 Boundary Road and their youngest child Constance had been born. It was Constance who was the grandmother of Jean Harris. Jean's daughter Jane still lives in the district, and is head teacher of Edinburgh Primary School.

First Activity Sheet

In which year was Francis Alexander born?

And where was he born?

What was Francis' job in 1851?

What was his job in 1861?

What is similar about the two jobs?

What was the name of Francis' wife?

How do you think they might have met?

What do you think it was like for Harriet to be a farmer's wife when she had not been brought up on a farm?

Where in London did the family move to first?

Can you think of three ways in which life in Islington was likely to have been different for the Alexander family from life on a farm? Do you think life was easier on the farm or in London?

Write a list of the fruit and vegetables Frederick Alexander is likely to have bought from the big wholesalers and sold to shopkeepers and market traders

Looking at the maps and houses pages on the website, write a short description of the house in Boundary Road where the Alexanders were living in 1911.

Second Activity Sheet

Family trees - need to make a template for these.

Third Activity Sheet

Write an advertisement for an under gardener – the kind of advertisement that Francis Alexander may have replied to.

Write an application to be a ship's clerk. Francis Alexander is writing the letter, and you need to explain why you should have the job.

Write an advertisement for a young girl to learn to be an embroiderer. What does she need to be like, and able to do?

Fourth Activity sheet

Diary entries for:

Harriet Smith on the day she met Francis Alexander - and Francis' diary for the same day

Rose Alexander on the day she moved from Bittersea Farm to Islington

Frederick Alexander junior (Francis' grandson) for the first day at his new school in Walthamstow

NB

Resource needs to include

Census pages for the family for 1851-1911 inclusive

Link to "What is a census?" section from first resource

Link to maps and houses sections on the website

Victorian "situations vacant" ads