
IAN SMITH

Edward Whymper's London

Edward Whymper was a South Londoner. He was born on 27 April 1840, the second son of Josiah Wood Whymper and his second wife, Elizabeth.¹ The Whymper family had a long history in East Anglia; in the 18th century Whymper's great-great-grandfather, Thomas Thurston Whymper, had been the owner of Glevering Hall near Wickham Market in Suffolk. Whymper's grandfather Nathaniel was a brewer in Ipswich, but his father Josiah Wood, chose to train as a sculptor. A serious accident in the stonemason's yard put an end to this, and in 1829, when 16, he came to London to make his way as an artist.

The earliest known address for him, in the 1830s, is Paradise Street. Now called Old Paradise Street, with all vestiges of the 19th century removed, it runs from Lambeth High Street to Newport Street, a few yards from the river and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth Palace. Josiah Wood's older brother Ebenezer was a neighbour in the 1850s, so he may have headed for this unfashionable area of dense cheap housing and growing businesses and workshops, as he had family already there. Ebenezer assisted Josiah Wood in the wood engraving business, though according to Edward's teenage diary, he was not particularly helpful.²

In 1837 Josiah Wood married Elizabeth Claridge of Peckham at St Giles Church, Camberwell. The church was burnt down soon afterwards but rebuilt in 1841. By now he was living in the more salubrious Lambeth Road, that runs from the Archbishop's Palace at the river, past the Bethlehem Hospital (now the Imperial War Museum) to St George's Circus. He was renting number 20, Canterbury Terrace. Sadly the terrace was hit by bombs in 1940 and pulled down, but a photograph, possibly taken by Frank Smythe in 1938 or 1939, shows a four-storied brick house with a probable basement and a garden.³ Canterbury Terrace was on the south side of the road, opposite Hercules Road (where William Blake had lived). The north side of Lambeth Road is still largely unchanged and presents a pleasing row of brick terraces from the end of the 18th century. Captain Bligh's house is on this side of the road, and he was buried in 1817 in St Mary's Church, next to the Archbishop's Palace.

When Whymper's father settled in this area of Lambeth Marsh it was a densely crowded mixture of narrow terraced streets and more grandiose edifices. Doulton's pottery was near the river end of Lambeth Road. The Bethlehem Hospital, or Bedlam, as it was known, had been greatly enlarged in the 1830s. While becoming a bustling area of working-class urban poverty during the 18th century, this part of London, just across the river from the Houses of Parliament, was close to the more genteel spaces of Kennington,

and in the 19th century benefited from the philanthropic tendencies of the well-meaning Victorian great and the good. From 1835 to 1838 the School for the Indigent Blind on St George's Circus was considerably enlarged to take 200 pupils. This was largely funded by individual subscriptions, one guinea a year getting you a vote for an aspirant pupil. Whympers mother Elizabeth was a tireless performer of good works in the area. When he was 15, Whympers records in his diary several weeks' arduous and time-consuming canvassing for a blind boy whose cause had been adopted by his mother, and to secure whose election to the school, Whympers pounded the streets after work.⁴

In 1851 Henry Beaufoy, whose family had made their money by brewing vinegar, spent £10,000 on a new Ragged School for the Lambeth poor. An imposing building with a classical portico and two wings (only the south wing still stands) was erected in Newport Street near Black Prince Road. Whympers parents were on the committees and donated money to its costs; Whympers mother was frequently involved in events at the school.⁵

Josiah Wood learnt water colour painting from Collingwood Smith but was persuaded to take up the rapidly expanding business of wood engraving.⁶ Growing literacy, expanding education, the falling price of publications and the development of organised religious societies created a rapidly growing market for popular illustrated literature. Before the coming of photographic techniques later in the 19th century, an engraved block was the standard way of reproducing a picture in large numbers. At the end of the 18th century, the Newcastle artist Thomas Bewick had developed the wood engraving as a means of reproducing drawings and sketches.

While pursuing his career as a watercolour artist, Josiah Wood used his early sculpting background to train himself as a wood engraver, and was illustrating books by the late 1830s. Canterbury Place became his workshop and by 1851, as well as his wife, six children and two young servant girls, the house was the place of work of 20 employees, either apprentices or general handymen. Josiah Wood was certainly living at 20 Canterbury Place by 1837. The family was listed there in the 1851 census and throughout the 1850s in the Post Office directories, but entries in Whympers diary for the period suggest that the family lived and worked in separate places. For 24 March 1855 he says, 'We have now been 3 years in this house,' and the entry for 21 December 1857 refers to 'our business house'. With everyone in the family except Edward moving to Haslemere, on 21 June 1859 he says, '... got into the very dirty operations of clearing out rooms which have not been used for several years'. He spent several days sorting out a bedroom for himself at Canterbury Place, implying that he was moving in there. Among Whympers school reports at the Scott Polar Archives is an envelope addressed to 'Mr E Whimper, 4, Charlotte Place, Upper Kennington Lane, nr Vauxhall Gardens.' Charlotte Place was on the north side of Kennington Lane, running west from Vauxhall Road. Through the 1850s various people are listed as living there, but not the Whymyers.⁷

Edward Whymper went to a small private school a few minutes' walk round the corner in Kennington Road. Run by Mr Conrad Pinches, this school occupied one of the large terraced houses on the west side of the road running south from Walnut Tree Walk. A fellow schoolmate was Thomas Roffey, who became Whymper's solicitor and remained a friend all his life.⁸ Whymper prospered at the school, doing well in the more practical and scientific subjects,⁹ and learning French, which stood him in good stead in his alpine career. He left school at 14 to become apprenticed to his father and learn the trade of wood engraving. Perhaps because he was the oldest or had a more obvious artistic bent, Frederick, two years older than Edward, was taken by their father into the life of a water-colour painter.

The Whympers were a religious family and every Sunday, usually both morning and evening, found them at the Maze Pond Baptist Chapel, near London Bridge. Josiah Wood and Elizabeth had become members of the church in 1845 and the Whymper family attended regularly, Josiah Wood acting as a deacon. The chapel had been built in the 17th century and was improved and rebuilt over the years. Maze Pond was a marshy area fed by a stream until the later 18th century, but the name remained to describe this place just south of London Bridge, now covered by Guy's Hospital. In 1877 the chapel was sold to Guy's Hospital and a new one was built on the Old Kent Road, by Albany Road. This building no longer stands either.

In 1859 Josiah Wood moved his family to Haslemere for the sake of Edward's mother's health. Twenty-two years of married life had produced one girl and nine boys, and their doctor advised moving from the fetid air of Lambeth Marsh. In the spring of 1859 Whymper's father had been sketching around Selborne as part of a commission to produce illustrations for a new edition of Gilbert White's *The natural history of Selborne*.¹⁰ He returned from one such trip to the Surrey countryside to announce that he had taken a lease on Town House in Haslemere High Street. The railway from London to Haslemere and Portsmouth had just opened in January 1859, and in July the Whymper family transported themselves and their property on the train, leaving Edward alone in Canterbury Place to run the wood engraving business. In October, Whymper's diary, kept more or less continuously for nearly six years, reached the end of another exercise book, and almost certainly he was just too busy to start another volume. Frederick, when not on his sketching tours, mostly stayed at Canterbury Place, but in the summer of 1862 he took himself off to Vancouver Island.¹¹

Town House is an imposing Georgian house, originally built early in the 17th century but much changed in the 18th century. In the entrance hall is an impressive three-flighted wooden staircase with wood-carved wall panelling attributed to Inigo Jones. The house, well aware of its own history, is now a comfortable bed and breakfast. A few months after settling there Elizabeth Whymper gave birth to Edward's youngest sibling Annette, but a few weeks later Elizabeth died, and was buried in Haslemere Parish Church. The Whympers stayed in Town House until Josiah Wood's death in 1903,

when the two sisters, Elizabeth and Annette, both unmarried, moved to a relatively new house in Beech Road, Haslemere, which they named Glevering, after the ancestral home. The house is still there, not far from the church.

In 1866 Josiah Wood married for the third time, taking as his wife, in Holy Trinity church, Clapham Common, Emily Hepburn, then 32. Her father, Thomas Hepburn, was a fellow member of Maze Pond chapel, and a well-off tanner in the leather business. He had a large house in Clapham,¹² and during the 1850s the Whympers frequently socialised with the Hepburns. Josiah Wood often went sketching with Emily and her sister Sophia; Emily became a competent water-colour painter, exhibiting at the Royal Academy.

For Whymper, life continued in Lambeth. In 1860 he went on a walking and sketching tour in Somerset with J W North, a fellow wood engraving apprentice,¹³ and then, in the summer, started his meteoric Alpine career. The first Lambeth Bridge was constructed in 1862 on the site of the old horse ferry across the Thames (disused since the 18th century). During 1867 and 1868 the crowded narrow streets along the river were pulled down and the Albert Embankment took shape. On his return from his first trip to Greenland in November 1867, Whymper moved back to Canterbury Place, which was now getting more crowded, with various brothers passing through or staying. Fred returned from San Francisco, Alfred was in Edinburgh learning the printing trade, Henry had just left for India and a life of brewing, Charles settled down at Canterbury Palace as an artist and book illustrator. Josiah, Frank and Sam followed Henry to India one after the other, and William Nathaniel entered the insurance business, settling in the genteel suburb of Thames Ditton.

Whymper decided there was little narrative and no excitement in a book about his Greenland escapade, so he turned instead to a book on the Alps, working on this during 1869 and 1870. Years later his youngest sister Annette remembered him staying in Haslemere to write *Scrambles amongst the Alps*, and escape the ceaseless bustle of work, visitors, and organisation in Lambeth. In 1869 the next-door property became vacant and Whymper moved himself into 19 Canterbury Place, leaving number 20 to Charles and the workshop. In 1871 *Scrambles* came out to wide acclaim and financial success, and Whymper addressed himself to a long-planned return trip to Greenland. His first trip in 1867 had been a bitter failure as he was thwarted in his attempt to make an exploratory journey over the inland ice, and was blighted by the unfortunate decision to take Robert Brown as a naturalist and collector.¹⁴ In 1872 he travelled on his own (sharing his steamer from Tower Bridge to Copenhagen with the Holborn Circus, which he watched perform in Tivoli Gardens) and had a much happier time, revisiting many Danish friends. Always a keen rower in his youth, for this trip he had his own Eskimo kayak made, with a propeller operated by foot pedals designed so that he could keep up with the much more competent Greenlanders.

The canoe was delivered to Canterbury Place a few weeks before his boat to Copenhagen, but he managed to take it out for practice on the Serpentine half a dozen times (no doubt an amusing sight to the crowds in Hyde Park).

The Post Office tidied up their street names in 1876 and all the various terraces along Lambeth Road were simplified into just *Lambeth Road*. 19/20 Canterbury Place became 43/45 Lambeth Road. Whymper stayed here until 1887 when the lease expired, and after nearly 50 years he moved away from Lambeth. His father had retired, leaving the business to Whymper in exchange for an annuity; but the demand for wood engraved illustrations was being undermined by photographic processes. Whymper had spent two years from 1885 working as general manager of the publisher Cassell's at their large London headquarters, Belle Sauvage, in Ludgate Hill.¹⁵ He now took rooms in a newly-built block of offices across the road at 29 Ludgate Hill (the building still stands opposite Wren's church, St Martin Ludgate). For a short while he also had a room in Surrey House on the Victoria Embankment, now the site of the Temple tube station.

In 1891 Whymper found a retreat from London in the sea air of Southend, renting the top floor of a lodging house at 4 Cliff Town Parade, overlooking the cliffs, with extensive views across to Kent. In the conservation area of early 19th century Southend, the building is now (like Town House, Haslemere) a bed and breakfast. It boasts the only Whymper blue plaque, to the 'conqueror of the Matterhorn'. Whymper's landlady, Louisa Wright and her family lived in the basement, Whymper occupied the top floor and the intervening floors were kept vacant at his insistence. He maintained a somewhat Spartan existence here, with the barest of furniture (his bed was a mattress kept rolled up on the floor until his unusual hours of sleep). Keeping his office at Ludgate Hill, he regularly travelled on the train to and from town, becoming a known curiosity to his fellow commuters but rarely, if ever, engaging them in conversation.¹⁶

In Southend, Whymper got to know his landlady's young niece, who came out from London to help in the house, and took it upon himself to retire from travelling and settle into what he presumed would be domestic life.¹⁷ He married Edith Lewin two days before his 66th birthday, at Emmanuel Church, Forest Gate where she lived and where Whymper stayed for a month before the wedding. As soon as the ceremony was over, they took a cab to Waterloo and train to Bournemouth, where a month's honeymoon was spent sightseeing. July and August were devoted to Whymper's Alps; he took his wife to Chamonix, Zermatt and Saas Fee, taught her how to use an ice-axe and how to walk uphill at a regular brisk pace. He made some efforts to find a suitable family home in Exeter, but settled on the relatively recently built detached house, Holmwood, at 84 Waldegrave Road, near Teddington Station. This was the only property Whymper ever owned, and on his death it passed to his brother William who sold it for £750.¹⁸ It became a girl's school, and is now a doctor's surgery.

Whymper, characteristically, spent much time sorting out his extensive collections of books, maps, instruments, specimens, birds, rocks, animals and paraphernalia brought back from his travels, and gave up his office at Ludgate Hill. His daughter, Ethel was born at Waldegrave Road, and Whymper was clearly proud of her. He was utterly distraught when his wife left him in the summer of 1910 and he passed his last year alone in Teddington. The following year he made a final trip to the Alps and died on 16 September at an old haunt, Couttet's Hotel in Chamonix. His funeral was attended by most of the village, his brothers William and Charles, and William's daughter Amy. Whymper would be content with his grave being in such an Alpine centre, the home of Michel Croz, whose death on the Matterhorn, and whose lost friendship haunted him all his life. Whymper's parents and his step-mother, Emily Hepburn, share a grave by Haslemere Church, not far from the grave of his Matterhorn adversary, John Tyndall.

Whymper's travels in the Alps, Greenland, Ecuador and Canada would make more than another article, but perhaps as interesting would be following the lives of his four brothers in India. Frank worked his way up the career ladder in the post office from central India to Mandalay, Rangoon, Assam and Bombay. Henry, Josiah and Sam all went into brewing in the Himalayan foothills. Henry's residence at Murree near Rawalpindi ended up in Pakistan as the Prime Minister's residence, Josiah started a brewery at Mussoorie, and Sam's house, 'Glencoe' is still to be seen at Naini Tal in India. But that is another story.

REFERENCES

1. The marriage certificate of August 1837 describes Josiah Wood as a 'widower'. See also Seymour J Price, 'Maze Pond and the Matterhorn', *Baptist Quarterly* 10, no 4, 202-208, Oct 1940.
2. George Somes Layard, *The life and letters of Charles Samuel Keene*. Sampson, Low, Marston and Co, London, 11, 1892. Ebenezer was a witness at Josiah Wood's wedding to Elizabeth Claridge in 1837.
3. British Library, Add MS 63112.
4. Whymper's diary from January 1855 to October 1859 is in six exercise books kept at the Scott Polar Research Institute archives in Cambridge, MS 822/39. See entries for March-April 1855. The Whympers' adopted candidate got 1321 votes and came third but Whymper does not record if this was sufficient to win him a place.
5. Beaufoy papers at Minet Library, Lambeth Local History Library. On 13 February 1855, for example, Elizabeth was giving out pea soup to 100 boys and girls at the school. (Whymper's diary)
6. Rodney Engen, *Dictionary of Victorian wood engravers*. Chadwick-Healey, Cambridge, 285-286, 1985.

7. Post war council housing now occupies the site.
8. In 1906 Roffey sent Whymper a wedding present.
9. At 12 he came top in geography, lectures, natural philosophy, arithmetic and divinity. He also received a certificate for 'good conduct'. His school reports are in the SPRI archives.
10. Whymper's diary, 11 May 1859. Edward's engravings feature in the edition. (SPCK, London, 1860)
11. Frederick Whymper, *Travel and adventure in the territory of Alaska, formerly Russian America – now ceded to the United States – and in various other parts of the North Pacific*. John Murray, London, 1868.
12. Whymper went to a party there on 16 January 1857 and said, 'He has now a splendid house (I might say mansion) for which he pays a rent of £350 a year ... it is furnished in a very splendid manner.'
13. Herbert Alexander, 'John William North, ARA, RWS, c1842-1924', *The Old Water-Colour Society's Annual Volume* 5. 35-52, 1927-8.
14. Brown had travelled with Whymper's brother Frederick in Vancouver Island. Relations between Brown and Edward Whymper were strained, and arguments about their trip to Greenland in 1867 rumbled on for years.
15. Simon Nowell-Smith, *The house of Cassell*. Cassell, London, 1958.
16. See Coulson Kernahan, *In good company: some personal recollections of Swinburne, Lord Roberts, Watts-Dunton, Oscar Wilde, Edward Whymper, S J Stone, Steven Phillips*. 2nd ed. Bodley Head, London, 149-188, 1917.
17. Annette Whymper's notes for Frank Smythe, British Library, Add MS 63112.
18. Edward Whymper's Will, and his probate records at the Public Record Office, Kew.