

AN AMERICAN IN TORBAY - ISAAC SINGER AND HIS LEGACY

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Dedicated to Roger Jobson 1939 -2024, who proposed and researched a presentation on the subject of the Singers and their influence on Torbay, but sadly died before he was able to give his talk.

Global significance, pioneering industrial methods, eye-watering wealth, exuberance and extravagance are not terms that immediately jump to mind when considering Paignton. But one man brought all of these to the town in the C19. His name was Isaac Merritt Singer best known for his iconic domestic sewing machine.

Isaac Singer's father, Adam, came from a Jewish family called Reisinger who lived in Frankfurt. He had been brought up a Protestant which encouraged him to emigrate to America in 1769 at the age of 16. Adam married his wife Ruth in 1788 and their youngest child, Isaac, was born on 26 October 1811 in the village of Schaghticoke in New York State shortly before the family moved east to Oswego on Lake Ontario where he spent his childhood.

The Singer household was not, however, a happy one and in 1821 Isaac Singer's parents divorced and Ruth left home. The following year, at the age of 12 ...*without money, without friends, without education, and possessed of nothing but a strong constitution and a prolific brain...* he left home and made his way to Rochester, a much larger and more successful town. It is possible he lived with a brother and managed to support himself sufficiently with labouring jobs to attend school and learn to read, particularly books on mechanical engineering.

Singer then did a four-month apprenticeship in a machine repair shop but was restless and over the next 20 years moved from job to job and relationship to relationship, proving himself to be an increasingly able and innovative engineer, but...*conspicuously unable to form satisfactory and durable relationships in bed, business or friendship with members of either sex...* He could never resist novelty and, like many Americans then, he moved on when there was potential for work or economic advancement.

Singer claimed to be Episcopalian as he believed that would give him more respectability, though he never really gave much thought to respectability or religion. He didn't really want to be an engineer but rather an actor – definitely not respectable. In 1830 he joined a theatre company and played Richard III, Shakespeare being very popular in America at that time. Being tall, blond, good-looking and charismatic, he achieved some success but could not resist playing his loud and bombastic self rather than the character.

In the same year Singer married Catherine Maria Haley. In the light the pattern of his subsequent relationships, it seems that he married solely to get Catherine into bed. Despite having two children, he gained no other pleasure from the relationship, spending as he did most of his time touring with the theatre company. In 1836 he met and courted Mary Ann Sponsler to whom, despite his being married, he became betrothed. He separated from Catherine and Mary Ann moved to join him in New York. Singer admitted to Mary Ann that he could not marry her but persuaded her to live with him and pretend to be married. In 1837 they had a child, Augustus, after which Singer went off again with the theatre company and Mary Ann went to her parents.

Always in need of money Singer worked for a time on a canal building project and saw a way of cutting labour costs by inventing a rock drilling machine for which he sold the patent for \$2000. With his new wealth he took off to Chicago and founded his own theatre company, the Merritt Players, in which he was joined by Mary Ann. Some hard financial times and three more children followed so that by 1844 Singer finally gave up trying to be a success in the theatre and took a job carving wooden print type. Not content with a routine job as a mechanic he invented a machine to carve the type and in 1846 set up in business in Pittsburg as a type maker, subsequently taking out a patent on his machine.

In 1850 Singer partnered with George B Zieber and rented a space in a steam-powered machine shop in Boston owned by Orson C Phelps. They built a new type-cutting machine, despite the reality that the use of wooden type was declining. The business failed and Singer was destitute. At 38 in America he would have been viewed as too old to embark on yet another business adventure. But he was a man of exceptional vigour and optimism and in a country obsessed with new mechanical ideas he was determined to come up with one and make his fortune.

In the main part of the machine shop Phelps was constructing a model sewing machine developed by Lerow and Blodgett which was very unreliable in design. Phelps began persuading Singer to abandon his type cutting machine and concentrate on improving the sewing machines. At first unenthusiastic, he declared: *What a devilish machine! You want to do away with the only thing that keeps women quiet, their sewing!* Nonetheless Singer, Zeiber and Phelps made an agreement and Singer started his modifications which after 11 days and, despite the shortage of finance, were successful. His sewing machine with its cantilevered arm, vertical straight needle and straight action shuttle, worked satisfactorily.

The development of the business was still a struggle and Singer felt constrained by his partners, so he first pressurised Phelps to accept a buy-out offer. He then, despite Zeiber's strong resistance, insisted on taking into the partnership a top and ruthless lawyer, Edward Cabot Clark. In 1851 Clark secured the new machine's patent in the names of Clark and Singer with the excluded Zieber being promised a third of the profits. From this point the company was known as I M Singer & Co and in a short time, by decidedly underhand means, Zieber was removed. Zieber was unwell and Singer told him that: *The doctor thinks you won't get over this. Don't you want to give up your interest in the business altogether?* Zieber immediately decided to put his affairs in order and a buy-out figure was agreed. But Singer had never met the doctor, the whole episode was a deceit practised with the connivance of Clark. Manufacture and marketing could now begin in earnest.

But another problem was on the horizon. Singer did not invent the sewing machine, he improved it and made it a viable product for the professional and domestic markets. The pressure to develop a such a sewing machine followed the invention of water- and steam-powered spinning and weaving machines. The first practicable sewing machine was invented by the German Charles Frederick Weisenthal in 1755. There followed many improved models by other European inventors until Americans picked up the baton including Walter Hunt (1834), Elias Howe (1845) and of course Isaac Singer (1851).

The increasing complexity of the sewing machine, as each inventor added new ideas and created their own machines, gave rise to legal conflicts over who had been the originator of particular design aspects. This was complicated by the many patents lodged by different manufacturers over the years leading to others claiming that they held patents relevant to the machines of rivals. Between 1851-56 as Singer & Co struggled to capture a larger

market, the law suits multiplied. In particular, in 1853, Elias Howe began to wage war on Singer & Co suing it for breach of patent and the placing of libellous advertisements in newspapers aimed to discredit Howe. Singer and Clark refused to settle early, a great mistake as Howe continued to litigate until he won his case in 1854, thus costing Singer & Co dearly as they were now obliged to pay Howe \$25 for every machine sold. Notwithstanding this outcome manufacturers continued suing each other in what came to be known as *The Sewing Machine War*. The absurdity of this finally dawned on the leading manufacturers who realised that markets were not being exploited and money was draining away. In 1856 I M Singer & Co, Elias Howe, Wheeler & Wilson and Grover & Baker agreed to a proposal by Orlando Potter, President of Grover & Baker a lawyer, and future Congressman, to form a patent pool known as the Sewing Machine Combination. The idea of the patent pool later spread to many other manufactured products such as automobiles and radios. This in turn led to Anti-Trust laws to counter the ill-effects of monopolies.

The sewing machine became the most in-demand domestic appliance in America. Sales boomed driven by innovations such as plush showrooms, hire-purchase, introduced by Clark in 1855, part-exchange, loss-leading by gifting or selling machines cheaply to parts of a target market, advertising aimed at women, selling territorial rights and the employment of hard-sell sales agents. But the biggest boost was given by the construction of larger factories in America and then in France and Germany. The mammoth factories had production lines using interchangeable parts manufactured by single application machine tools and assembled by specialist labour. This reduced the cost of machines by half and led to the exponential growth of American sales from 3,594 in 1858 to 116,330 in 1860. Domestic sales were 25% of the total in 1860 but were soon in the majority. In 1867 Singer opened a factory at Clydebank in 1867 by which time Singer machines outsold all other makes especially in Europe where more machines came to be sold than in America. I M Singer & Co had become one of the first American multi-national corporations.

The influence of the financial success of Singer & Co was eclipsed only by the effect that had on Singer's personal life. After years of mixed fortune including periods of abject poverty, the 1850s heralded for Singer the prosperity for which he had long craved. Singer wasted no time exhibiting this prosperity by moving in 1859 to 14 Fifth Avenue, New York, thereby laying down his first challenge to society, entertaining in style and performing as flamboyantly as he had when an actor. But society did not respond. Even Mrs Clark told a friend that she wished her husband would leave the partnership *and the nasty brute he was associated with*. The old families, such as the Astors and the Vanderbilts, were unwilling to welcome the even newer rich and disapproved of excessive ostentation. America, and especially New York, had developed a firmly layered society.

Singer was not deterred and ever the showman he was determined to flaunt his success. He designed for his family the biggest carriage in New York a ten-seater painted canary yellow and pulled by nine horses. This was regarded by society as the height of bad taste. Singer was not concerned and continued to display his wealth until 1860 when his personal life took an ominous turn. In this year, after 30 years of marriage, he divorced Catherine Haley on the grounds of her adultery. Her lawyer urged her to admit the adultery in return for a settlement of \$10,000 as he understood that Singer was in *falling circumstances*. It is strange that Singer wanted to upset an arrangement that suited him very well, but it is likely that Clark, a pious man, was increasingly concerned that as the business grew, the situation might reflect badly on the company and his own social position. When Mary Ann became aware of the divorce, she assumed that Singer would fulfil his long-standing promise and marry her, but he told her that was not inclined to do so. She had no redress and they continued with their life together as before until one day, the 7 August 1860 she was driving

along 5th Avenue in her carriage and met Singer driving in the other direction accompanied by Mary McGonigal who had been rumoured to be having relations with him and which were now confirmed. Mary Ann screamed loud and long attracting the attention of half the people in 5th Avenue before returning home where Singer physically assaulted her. Mary Ann filed a complaint and the story appeared in a newspaper. Singer was arrested and released on bond, and on 19 September he fled to Europe aboard the first west-east Atlantic crossing of Brunel's *Great Eastern*, accompanied by Mary McGonigal's sister Kate.

What emerged next was truly astonishing. It transpired that Singer had known Mary McGonigal for nine years and had fathered seven children by her and had even named one after a child by Mary Ann who had died in infancy. Singer had set up another home with Mary and when with her was known as *Mr Matthews*. It then emerged that under the name of *Mr Merritt* he was also supporting Mary Eastwood Walters and their daughter Alice who was born in 1851. Thus, in the early 1850s, when Singer was immersed in perfecting his sewing machine, he was supporting four families and spending time with three of them in New York. No wonder he was often broke! It can be imagined that his simultaneous lives as Messrs Singer, Matthews and Merritt appealed to his love of drama and novelty, and he clearly had abundant energy.

Singer spent the next three years travelling between America and Europe fighting various cases in the courts most notably Mary Ann's decision to sue him for divorce on the grounds that she had lived with him as Mrs Singer for so long that she was his common law wife and that he had committed bigamy. She also cited his adultery with the McGonigal sisters, Mary Walters and at least four others. A divorce was granted but never executed and a settlement arranged. It was fortunate for Singer that during this time the Civil War raged in America from 1861-65 and newspapers were too busy with that to be concerned with his scandalous personal life.

Mary Ann, on being assured that she was free to marry, did so secretly in 1862. Singer, on learning this the following year, declared that there had been no divorce and accused her of bigamy. Her lawyer, paid handsomely by Singer, persuaded her to sign a document accepting his contention which effectively removed the grounds for her claims. We are left with an image of Singer as brutal, unscrupulous and immoral but also, generous, energetic, inventive and amusing. A paradox, but perhaps the perceptions of the people in his life reflected their experiences and the truth lay somewhere between.

Meanwhile Singer acquired his next romantic interest, a young woman called Isabella Eugénie Boyer Summerville, 30 years younger than he was. Stories differed as to where they met, either in France where her mother lived, to whom he had also expressed his affection, or in America where Isabella lived with her husband. Singer and Isabella toured Europe and returned to America. Isabella, by then pregnant with their first son Adam Mortimer, divorced her husband and married Singer. Surprisingly Mary Ann did not sue Singer for bigamy again.

Clark became increasingly concerned that Singer's preoccupation with his personal life was hampering the business along with his poor business judgement and conspicuous extravagance. Singer was contributing little to the business and Clark proposed the creation of a joint stock company which came into being as the Singer Manufacturing Company in 1863, capitalised at \$500,000 with 40% of the shares going to Singer and 40% to Clark. Neither would permit the other to be President of the company so they appointed a senior office clerk called Inslee Hopper.

In 1864 Singer and Isabella moved to Yonkers on the Hudson River where in due course he built a large house called *The Castle*. Singer organised a grand house-warming party but of the hundreds invited, few turned up. It was a disaster. Being snubbed by society again was intolerable and after two years and the birth of a daughter, Winaretta Eugénie, the Singers left for Europe on 14 April 1866, never to return to America. During their voyage aboard the SS *City of Washington*, their second son, Washington Merritt Grant, was born.

They settled in Paris in 1867 where three more children, Paris Eugene, Isabelle-Blanche and Franklin Merritt Morse were born. But in 1870 the Franco-Prussian War broke out and with Paris under threat, the family departed to England. After a short stay at Brown's Hotel in London, a doctor recommended that the sea air at Torquay would be better for the couple's health. The family moved again and stayed the *Victoria and Albert Hotel* in Torquay (now the *Victoria Hotel*) whilst Singer sought a suitable site to build a house. He favoured Brunel's estate at Watcombe but it was not for sale and the high land above Torquay was not available.

Eventually he bought the Fernham estate in Paignton which included Oldway Villa. Paignton in the mid-C19 was a small inland farming town with some fishing and a few new villas along the nearby beach. Singer commissioned George Bridgman, a successful local architect, to create for him a grand house, which he liked to call *The Wigwam*, in the style of a French chateau. The only exterior parts of Isaac's House now visible are the west face and the chimneys. The agreed design included a theatre and ballroom as well as family apartments and reception rooms, and magnificent formal gardens. Whilst the building works were in progress, Singer and his family lived in *Oldway Villa* which he named *Little Oldway*. To enhance the estate, he bought further land and demolished 20 cottages to provide a pleasing panoramic view of the sea from the house. Next to the house which was now referred to formally as *Oldway House*, Singer built a huge conical rotunda called *The Arena* to be used for exercising his horses as well as stables and buildings for his new grand carriages. Between the Arena and the house, a large conservatory was constructed.

Oldway became the scene of magnificent parties presided over by Singer dressed in brightly coloured velvet and satin coats, still an imposing, though older, figure. The parties were for tradesfolk and a better class of local residents and their children for in Devon, as in America, he was snubbed by the local gentry. Singer's generosity was legendary and he sent regularly provisions to the poor, sweets to children and jewellery to local beauties, though seemingly that is as far as his reduced libido would take him.

In late 1873 Alice Merritt, Singer's daughter by Mary Walters, came to live at Oldway and changed her name to Alice Singer. She was, like her father, tall, fair and good-looking. She was enthused by the theatre at Oldway as she loved acting and eventually became a professional actress. She also had an amorous nature and by 1875 was betrothed to an American hanger-on at Oldway called William La Grove. The wedding was a lavish affair though the marriage lasted just over a week when La Grove ran off to America. Her second marriage in 1883 to the picturesquely named actor Frank Bangs, known to his friends as *Lillie*, lasted a month.

The excitement of the La Grove wedding had clearly taken a toll on Singer, already in poor health, and on 23 July he died at Little Oldway. His funeral was inevitably a grand affair. The funeral cart was pulled by 12 horses followed by mourners on foot and over 70 other carriages. The cortège was $\frac{3}{4}$ mile long and wound its way to Torquay along roads lined with local people who remembered his generosity – especially the tradesmen. He was

buried in Torbay Cemetery at Hele in a magnificent marble mausoleum, which over time received many of his descendants.

Singer's total estate was about \$14,000,000 (about \$400,000,000 today), in Singer company shares and other holdings including property. His wills of 1870 and 1873 divided the estate into sixty parts which were distributed as Singer felt fit. His sons by Isabella received six parts (\$1,400,000 / \$40,000,000) and the daughters five parts. Other children received one or two parts, except Vouletti who received nothing as Singer considered that her husband, William Proctor was wealthy enough. Isabella received four parts and Singer's property and chattels in trust for her lifetime and then to his children by Isabella. Mary Ann Sponsler received nothing and the other mothers very little. The two children of Catherine Haley, William and Lillian, received very small bequests as they had opposed Singer during his divorce from their mother. But these were increased to \$45,000 each contributed by agreement from the legacies of the other beneficiaries. The children's legacies were to be held in trust until individuals attained 21 years of age.

Soon after the will was published, Mary Ann Sponsler filed a suit claiming his estate, but given that she had never been married to him and had married again, she lost.

The Singer Trust lost little time in carrying forward some of Singer's wishes to finish Oldway develop the coastal area of Preston and a sea wall was completed in 1876. Land purchase and improvements continued, especially under Paris Singer who in 1902 built the new road from north of Preston Sands to the Redcliffe now called Marine Drive.

By 1879 Isabella decided that her children, particularly her daughters Winnaretta and Isabelle-Blanche, would not marry well in Devon and returned to Paris. There she married Victor Reubsaet, a Dutchman of lowly origins who had acquired titles, and became the Vicomtesse d'Estenburgh and in 1881 Duchess of Camposelice. But Mortimer, her eldest son, contrived to remain in Paignton and later bought *Redworth House* in Totnes (now the Sixth Form Centre at King Edward VI College, Totnes, before moving to *Middlepark Villa* in Paignton (*The Travelodge*, Paignton) in 1887. He was subsequently joined by Washington, who bought *Stearfield House* in Paignton (*Palace Hotel*, Paignton). In 1893 Paris, bought *Redcliffe Tower*, Paignton (*Redcliffe Hotel*), a bizarre Anglo-Indian style house completed in 1864 by retired East India Company Army engineer and architect, Colonel Robert Smith. Like his brother Mortimer, Paris was a keen pilot and nearby he built hangars on Preston Beach to house his Avro seaplanes. The introverted youngest child Franklin eventually returned to Paris to collect antiques and breed Arab Stallions. Whilst in England, under the protection of the family lawyer David Hawley, they were safe from the designs Isabella's new husband had on their wealth.

Isabella's two daughters remained in Paris and her hopes of prestigious marriages became reality when Winnaretta married Prince Louis de Scey-Montbéliard in 1887. After the marriage was annulled in 1892 for being unconsummated, she married the impoverished musician and composer Prince Edmond de Polignac. Edmond was gay but that was not an issue as Winnaretta was a lesbian. Despite the 31-year age gap they developed a successful affectionate relationship through their mutual love of music and the arts in general. Winnaretta was an accomplished pianist and together they ran a music salon and organised concerts until his death in 1901. He was buried in Torquay in the Singer Mausoleum. Winnaretta continued her patronage of the arts commissioning works by Stravinsky, Satie and Poulenc, financially supporting Le Corbusier, Rubinstein, Horowitz and ballet, opera and classical music in Paris, as well as running an arts salon frequented by Debussy, Monet and Diaghilev. Winnaretta was also a successful painter and a generous

supporter of social housing and homeless shelters in Paris. She died in 1943. Her sister Isabelle-Blanche married Jean, Duc Decazes et de Glücksbiery in 1888, but died eight years later at the age of 27.

Washington and Paris bought the Oldway estate in 1893 and subsequently Paris bought Washington's share, moving into the house in 1897. He immediately began to plan the rebuilding of Oldway, employing the French designers Achille and Henry Duchêne to transform the house into a small Versailles. Achille designed a new classical south front in the style of *Le Pavillon Français* of the *Petit Trianon*, Versailles as well as the gardens with a parterre, sphinxes, urns and statues. The east front was remodelled with a great classical colonnade in the style of the Place de la Concorde in Paris, and completing the reconstruction in 1910 the north front was remodelled with a classical portico and an adjoining replica of the Porte Saint Antoine at Versailles.

Inside, Singer's theatre was removed and replaced by a grand staircase set off by Jaques-Louis David's enormous painting popularly known as *The Coronation of Empress Josephine*, which Paris had bought in 1898. The staircase, a faithful copy of one at Versailles demolished by Louis XIV, is made of fine marble cut at the same French quarry as the original as are the floors at Oldway. The ceiling is a fine copy of that by Charles le Brun at Versailles.

In 1887 Paris married Cecilia (known as Lillie) Graham and during a largely happy marriage of 20 years they had five children. After the completion of the rebuilding of Oldway they decided to alter the Arena by demolishing the conservatories in 1904 and constructing a large indoor swimming pool and changing rooms after which it was referred to as The Rotunda. The marriage eventually faltered and Cecilia and Paris separated in 1907, though they did not divorce until 1918. It is possible that prior to the separation Paris was seeing his *femme fatale*, Isadora Duncan, the celebrated exponent of modern dance, but certainly by 1909 they were engaged in a passionate affair and the next year she bore him a son, Patrick. Paris brought her to Oldway where she danced on the lawns and in the ballroom. He showered her with gifts including a yacht and even built her a villa at Paignton, the *Villa Marina*, but she never lived there. Tired of Paignton she left to tour Europe. In 1913 tragedy struck when her children Diedre, her daughter by set designer Gordon Craig, Patrick and their governess were drowned when their car ran away into the Seine at Neuilly in Paris. Isadora and Paris were distraught and neither really recovered.

Isadora toured America and Europe but she was in decline, financially struggling and with an increasingly reliant on alcohol. She made a disastrous and short-lived marriage and spent her latter years trying to live off her former celebrity in France where she died in 1927 strangled by her scarf when it caught in the wheel of a sports car.

Paris sold Redcliffe and in 1914 handed over Oldway for use as the American Women's War Hospital run by American women living in England for the wounded in World War I. Paris' daughter Winnaretta, named after his sister, worked there for a while as a nurse. Paris went back to America and settled in Florida investing heavily in the development of Palm Beach as a resort, founding the Everglades Club, until suffering financially in the crash of 1929. He died in 1932 remembered by the people of Torbay as a kind man and generous philanthropist. Mortimer had died in 1829 and Washington later in 1934. Both had become pillars of English Society, Mortimer being knighted and appointed High Sheriff of Berkshire in 1921, and Washington, who became Sheriff of Wiltshire in 1924, was Master of the South Devon Fox Hounds. They too were philanthropists giving large donations to Paignton Hospital and Paignton Church. Washington donated £25,000 (about £1,500,000 today) to

the University College of the South West to build the chemistry and physics laboratories which were named after him.

From 1923 the Trustees permitted Oldway to become the Torbay Country Club. Bowling greens were added as well as a golf course and in 1932 the Torbay Golf and Country Club was created. Plans for further expansion were interrupted by World War II when Oldway was requisitioned as an RAF Initial Training Wing. After the war Oldway was sold to the Paignton Urban District Council for £46,000 with an option to buy the David painting. The council did not buy it and the Trustees sold it to the French Government who returned it to the Coronation Room at Versailles. Oldway became Oldway Mansion and was used for council offices as well as public events such as dances, sports tournaments and festivals. The Rotunda was rented for a while as a film studio and for 25 years by Standard Telephones and Cables as a training and research centre. The golf course lasted until 1955 when it was sold for housing development.

One small link continued between Oldway and the Singers until 1980. Paris' daughter Winnaretta lived in an apartment in Oldway with her husband Sir Reginald Leeds, 6th Baronet until 1949 after which they moved into Little Oldway. Reginald died in 1970 and Winnaretta in 1980 in the same bedroom as her grandfather.

The council abandoned Oldway Mansion in 2013 and it has been empty and deteriorating seriously ever since. Perhaps the future is brighter as on 10 January 2025 Torbay Council announced a £54,000,000 phased development plan.

There are undoubtedly many Singers still enjoying life in England and beyond and all descended from the remarkable Isaac.

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