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This is a local story that begins in southeast England in the 1880s. It's also a family story. Two of the most important communities in my family's history are Bexleyheath in south London, and Barriefield and surrounding area in Kingston.

I've known Barriefield all my life, but in 2007 I finally visited Bexleyheath. Time out from a business trip to London brought me to Christ Church in Bexleyheath on a sunny Saturday morning. A gentleman saw me photographing the church and asked if I was interested in its architecture. I explained that it was of interest to me because in the 1890s my maternal grandfather, Sydney Turner, left the village of Bexley Heath, Kent—as it then was—to begin his journey to Canada. He was an orphan, sent to a new life by the Barnardo Homes orphanage, known simply as Barnardo's.

The story of his early life is not a happy one. It reflects the harsh life of the working poor in late-Victorian England. The whole story of his life, however, is one of determination and strength of character, aided by Barnardo's charity.

Sydney was admitted to the orphanage on 14 April 1890. However, the events that sent him there began 4 years earlier in early 1886. They were set out in a letter to Barnardo's from Mrs. Beck, of 3, Alpha Villas, Bexley Heath, Kent who wrote on the 8th of March 1886:

Last Friday week a man called Frank Charles Turner left off work at the office of The Sporting Life with a sore throat; on Saturday he was admitted in the Middlesex Hospital, and on Sunday night he died. His brother tells me ... that he has been living a fast life for some time, and so was unable to cope with the disease. His wife (who is living at Bexley Heath) knew nothing of his illness until she received a telegram announcing his death when she was almost penniless. Last Wednesday she gave birth to twins, both of whom the Lord graciously took home yesterday. Of course, the mother is quite prostrate. She is now left with the six children who are totally unprovided for.



The Sporting Life was a newspaper established in 1859 and closed in 1998. It covered horse racing and greyhound racing—which might help explain Frank Turner's lifestyle. He had been earning £2 10s a week as a compositor, of which he gave £1 to his wife and the 6 children. The greater part of his wages he apparently devoted to financing his "fast life." Upon the death of her husband, Mary Turner sent her oldest child, Frank, to Barnardo's in 1886. Shortly thereafter he emigrated to Canada.

On January 1st, 1890, Mary died; the remainder of the family she had tried to raise was dispersed. Sydney and his sister Emma went to their uncle's home in Bexley Heath. His other siblings found homes with relatives and acquaintances in the area and elsewhere in England. However, Sydney's uncle, John Turner, had his own large family to support on a carpenter's wages and ultimately had to ask Barnardo's to take the boy. Sydney stayed in the orphanage for a little over a year. Then he embarked on the SS Numidian on 20 August 1891. Ten days later he arrived at Quebec City. He was 11 years old.

Barnardo's agent in Canada recorded Sydney's early life in his new country. Like many British orphans who came here, he was placed on a farm. Sydney worked for Mr. Thomas McFadden on his farm off what is now Highway 2, near Middle Road. He was expected to earn his keep in return for food, lodging, and 4 months of schooling, subsidized by Barnardo's. The attitude of Thomas McFadden towards my grandfather does not appear to have been paternal. In fact, Barnardo's agent reports that, after only 4 years with the McFaddens, on December 21st, 1895, *Mr. McFadden writes he wishes to send the boy back to the "House" as his eyesight is affected.*

However, he did not go back. At the end of January 1896 another local farmer, William Toner of Point Road, took Sydney on a trial. Not long afterward the agent reported that, *Turner's eyes have been somewhat better of late.* William and Charlotte Toner would become Sydney's surrogate parents.

Bernardo's agent slyly recorded Sydney's adoption of Canadian ways.



On March 24, 1896, the agent reports that, *Boy writes that he is in good health & getting on "fine" with his new employer.* The fact that "fine" is in quotation marks suggests he is noting Sydney's use of non-British terms. Similarly, an entry in May 1898 concerning a broken watch states that the boy reports, *his "boss" took it to town to get it "fixed,"* as opposed to—presumably—his master took it to town to have it mended.

As a young man Sydney lived for a time in the US—where his older brother Frank had settled. He then returned to Kingston for good. He spent a large part of his life as a furniture finisher in a piano factory in what is now the Smith and Robinson Building on Princess Street. He joined St. Mark's Church in Barriefield and met a Barriefield girl—Sylvia Tisdale—at a dance in the township hall, now the Schools Museum on Regent Street in the village. They married in 1906 and started a family. They had three daughters, Ada, Elsie, and Freda (my mother). In 1907 Sydney and Sylvia bought a house on St. Catherine Street in Kingston. William Toner provided the mortgage—\$241.00—that allowed them to purchase the property. For a man who started life as an impoverished orphan, having a trade and owning a home must have seemed like a miracle.

However, in the summer of 1924 tragedy struck the young family. All three girls became ill and were hospitalized. Only two came home. The middle daughter, Elsie, 16 years old, died. For any parent, the loss of a child is unimaginably difficult. But for a man whose life had taken such a dramatic turn as a result of untimely death, the loss of his young daughter must have been particularly hard.

The two surviving girls grew to be young women, living in the family home and working together in the same office. However, in 1940 my grandmother Sylvia died. My grandfather lived with his daughters until my mother married and moved away; he and his elder daughter remained in the house. In 1945, Sydney's first grandson was born, the second in 1950. Then, in 1952, Sydney died.

Sydney Turner was a simple man. He and his wife raised two daughters in a stable and supportive home. This was remarkable when we consider his early life in light of our modern-day understanding of the importance of emotional security to a child. His two grandsons went on

to earn degrees from Queen's University—something that he could scarcely have understood, let alone imagined, when he arrived in Canada.

My visit to Bexleyheath served to satisfy my curiosity about my grandfather. It also served as a way to pay my respects to someone I barely knew, but whose achievements have helped to shape my life.