

Percy Bernhard Fischer

From Timekeeper in a White Lead Smelter to Rambles in the Peak.

Three graves of members of the Fischer family can be found in the church yard of St Barnabas, Bradwell. One commemorates three members of the family: father Percy Bernhard Fischer, his wife Edith (née Burt) and their daughter Hilda Edith. Another grave is inscribed with the name of son Bernhard Percy Fischer and his wife Gladys (née Ibbotson born in the now flooded village of Derwent). A second son Edgar Allan has his own memorial. We may ask why a family with such a Germanic sounding name came to rest at St Barnabas.



Although having a Germanic name Percy Bernhard was born on 22nd February 1873 in Deptford beside the Thames: his father Bernhard Wilhelm was born in Germany. Although little has been discovered of his early life we do know that Private 4027 P.B. Fischer enlisted in the 5th Royal Irish Lancers in 1892 and fought in the 2nd Boer War. He was entitled to a 'clasp' for his part in several actions most notably in the Defence of Ladysmith in 1899. In 1905, the year after leaving

the Army he married Edith Burt. The same year he was employed as 'a Time Keeper' at the Brimsdown White Lead Works at Ponders End in the Borough of Enfield, then in Middlesex. He and Edith continued to live in Enfield where Bernhard Percy, Hilda Edith and Edgar Allan were born. Another son George died the year he was born in 1908.

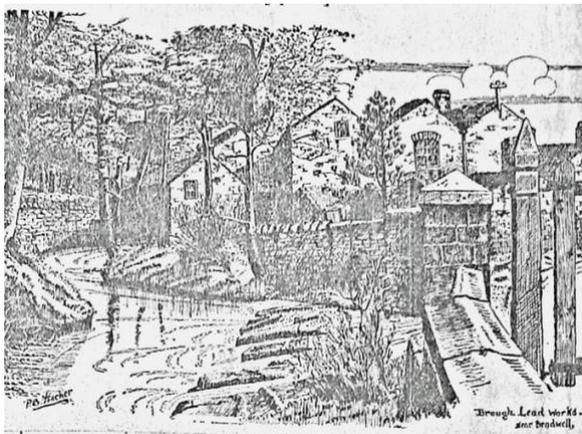


The Fischer family Clacton 1912

It seems that the Ponders End Lead Smelter had closed down by 1918 and Percy and his family moved to Bradwell. Over the years Percy lived first in Fern Bank (Treacle Cottage?) and then



in The Croft on Hugh Lane. On arrival Percy became a foreman at the Brough Lead Works. By that time the Brough Lead Works themselves had only a few years left and when they closed in 1926 Percy became unemployed again.



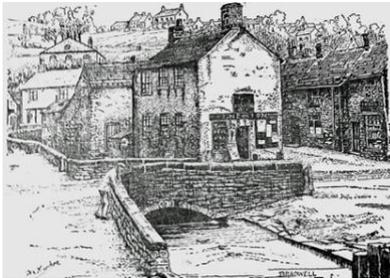
A Percy Fischer sketch of Brough Lead Works.

In the early 1930s an article about Percy Fischer was published in the *Sheffield Telegraph* and this in part reads:

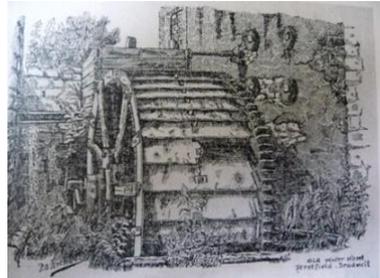
When the lead works closed down he did not scruple about turning his hand to the hardest form of manual work in order to keep in employment. When Mitchell's Manchester contractors were building the light railway to the cement works in the Hope Valley, Mr Fischer was taken on as a navvy ganger. When the contract was completed there was no immediate prospect of further work, so now he became among the great army of unemployed.

By this time Percy would have been about 60 years old. The *Sheffield Telegraph* article quoted above had been written to celebrate Percy's association with the paper. This focussed on Percy providing the newspaper with sketches and descriptive

texts. It is not clear when Percy's interest in artistic things started (it may have gone back to his time in South Africa) but it seems possible that his third redundancy decided him that he might earn some money from the sketches he had been making to that date for pleasure (although profit was never his main motivation).



View from Soft Water Lane



Water wheel at Stretfield

He never had a drawing lesson but he produced hundreds of drawings and a number of paintings. For his early artistic work he told the *Telegraph* journalist

(I) wasn't egotistical, was pleased to receive feedback and did not seek payment for (my) work. I know my weak points, because I know what I have the greatest difficulty with. Distance and light I can get alright, but foliage sometimes harasses me.

His artistic talent together with his love of walking encouraged the *Derbyshire Times* to invite him to produce a series 16 paid for pieces called '*Rambles in the Peak*'. Initially he signed these as Viator a word implying wayfarer or traveller. Each of these articles included at least one sketch and a detailed description of a walk together with landmarks and historical background. Hilda Fischer told Barry Fletcher that her father

received 3/4d per line and many of the pieces exceeded 50 lines. The *Sheffield Telegraph* interview marked Percy's contribution of some 66 pieces for the paper's Current Topics series. These like his contributions to the *Derbyshire Times*, consisted of brief historical details accompanied by his sketches. The places covered by Percy were numerous and included Ashopton, Bamford, Bradwell, Brough (the lead works), Burbage, Calver, Castleton, Chapel-en-le Frith, Edale, Eyam, Foolow, Hathersage, Holmesfield, Leash Fen, Little Hucklow, Ladybower, Longshaw, Millers Dale, Moscar, Padley, Peak Forest, Ringinglow, Shatton, Stanage, Stoney Middleton, Surprise View, Tideswell and Whirlow. Coincidentally an almost identical list of names covers some of the places painted by the Sheffield artist Harry Epworth Allen at about the same time that Percy Bernhard Fischer was most active. It is to be wondered if their paths ever crossed?

Hilda Fischer described some of her father's activities in an early Carnival Magazine. In a piece called Happy Times she wrote:

As our Gala Week comes round each year, my thoughts often wander back to the August Bank Holiday Pageants of years gone by. These took place on the old football field on Netherside, to raise funds for the Memorial Hall, the foundation stone of which was laid on 10th Nov 1923.

My father, an old soldier, worked very hard for this cause, and in the year 1920 his entry for the pageant was a huge prehistoric animal which he made from a framework of wooden laths and wire, covered with tarpaulin. My two brothers performed as the legs, while I dressed in skins and wearing a heavy stone necklace, led the creature. Several mornings previous to the day of the pageant, we arose very early before people were about, and went up on Granby to practice the correct sequence of leg movement. If any early

risers had witnessed our performance, I'm sure they must have felt somewhat apprehensive of the strange animal on the road.

Another year, my father entered as a tall scarecrow, and once again in the early hours he practiced walking about on stilts.

His appearance the following year as a well-disguised shabby old pavement artist together with a tatty cap beside him to receive any voluntary contributions, really had the local people baffled. When one Bradwell resident asked my Mother if she could recognise him, she carefully evaded the question. His pastel drawings on slates, plus the collection in the cap, realised quite a considerable sum of money towards the Memorial Hall Building Fund.



Percy and Edith Fischer