

THOMAS HENRY KINGERLEE

Talk by Liz Woolley for the unveiling of a Blue Plaque at the River Hotel, 9 June 2021

The man we're celebrating today, Thomas Henry Kingerlee, was one of the key figures in late 19th and early 20th century Oxford. He was a leading Non-Conformist, a Liberal Councillor, and twice Mayor of the city. He was responsible for the building, renovation and repair of hundreds – perhaps thousands – of private and public buildings, and was one of Oxford's largest employers and landlords. There is physical evidence of his activities all around us, and in the continued success of his firm, Kingerlee Ltd, now under the chairmanship of his great great grandson David Kingerlee who, I'm pleased to say, is with us today, together with other family members, staff and former staff.

Thomas Henry was not born in Oxford, but in Banbury, where his father was a self-employed plumber and glazier. His parents were ambitious for their five children: they sent them all to good fee-paying schools, and passed on to them their strong religious convictions – the family were Congregationalists – and their Liberal politics. One of Henry's brothers went on to run his own business as a chemist. The other two went into the drapery trade and Kingerlee Bros haberdashers and fancy drapers prospered in Banbury for over 90 years, until the early 1960s. Thomas's sister made a good marriage to a wealthy Northamptonshire farmer.

Thomas himself showed early promise in science and in technical drawing, and on leaving school he started work for his father as a plumber and glazier. A decade later, in 1868, he took over the firm and expanded it enormously: by 1881 he was describing himself as a 'master builder' with 20 employees. Two years later he made a confident step forward by setting up a business in Oxford. The city was expanding rapidly – its population had increased by over 40% over the previous three decades – and so builders were in great demand. But it was a crowded field: when Thomas arrived here in 1883 there were at least 36 other builders; four years later there were almost 50. However, Thomas's strategy – which was to prove extremely successful – was to offer not only building services, but also to act as a merchant supplying other builders and tradesmen, and to sell household fixtures and fittings directly to the public, as he already did in Banbury.

On arrival in Oxford, Thomas took over the long-standing business of Alfred Wheeler at 16 Queen Street and he and his young family – wife Helen, sons Henry and Charles, and daughter Helen – moved into a villa on the Woodstock Road. Kingerlee's first major Oxford commission was a new isolation hospital for infectious diseases at Cold Harbour, a mile south of the city centre. Soon he rented a yard just north of here, at 1 Abbey Road, off the Botley Road, to which timber could easily be delivered by river, and established a timber yard and sawmill there. The yard had previously been occupied by the surveyor and developer John Galpin, who had begun to build houses on newly-laid out streets nearby in the late 1870s. But Galpin was declared bankrupt, and Kingerlee instead completed the estate, building almost 70 houses on Cripsey and Abbey Roads. This was to be the first of Kingerlee's major speculative house-building projects. Thereafter he started buying up plots of land, in east, south and west Oxford, and building substantial estates of terraced houses.

By the late 1880s – within only five years of arriving in the city – Thomas was employing several hundred men. Very few other Oxford employers, apart from the University Press, operated on such a scale. He quickly became Oxford's largest speculative developer, building hundreds of brick terraced houses in new estates all over the city, and especially in west Oxford. Eventually the firm was to build more than 350 houses either side of the Botley Road. Kingerlee's dominance of this part of the city resulted in a noticeable uniformity of housing here which makes it very different from north, south and east Oxford, where streets tended to be developed in a much more piecemeal fashion by numerous smaller builders.

Helen and Henry Roads, off the Botley Road, were named after two of Kingerlee's children, and one of his developments in south Oxford – Kineton Road – was called after his father's birthplace in Warwickshire. Thomas kept many of the houses that he built, rather than selling them, and hence became one of Oxford's largest private landlords: by 1905 he owned almost 20% of the tenanted properties in west Oxford alone.

Meanwhile Thomas and his family moved here, to 9 Frideswide Terrace or Bridge House as it was later called. It had been built in the 1870s and previously occupied by Thomas Sheldon, the master miller at nearby Osney Mill. Kingerlee also rented a builder's yard off Mill Street, just to the south of the house, and installed his mother-in-law, Sarah Hunt, in one of the new houses that he had built on nearby Cripsey Road.

Not only was Thomas's firm building houses, it was also erecting numerous public and commercial buildings in the city – hospitals, factories, hotels, shops, theatres, cinemas, and churches. The company also took on jobs in London and all over the south of England.

As Thomas's business prospered, he rose to play an influential role in Oxford's political and religious life. Nonconformity had begun to gain ground in the city in the early Victorian period and by the 1880s many prominent Oxford families, including Underhills the grocers, Buckells the auctioneers, and Salters the boat builders, were Congregationalists or Methodists. Thomas became a leading member and Deacon of the city's Congregational Church, whose main premises were on George Street. As a staunch teetotaler he no doubt hoped for abstinence amongst his employees, and as well as a staff cricket team and Provident Society there was a Kingerlee Temperance String Band.

Thomas was a Liberal in politics, and three years after arriving in Oxford he was elected as a city councillor representing the West Ward. He remained a member of the council for many years, sitting on numerous committees (at one time, 13 simultaneously). He became a Justice of the Peace, an Alderman, Sheriff of Oxford, and twice Mayor of the city. His one attempt at national politics failed, however, when he was beaten in the 1896 general election by the popular Irish peer Viscount Valentia, who went on to be Oxford's MP for over 20 years.

Thomas's sons Henry and Charles joined him in the business on leaving school, and by the late 1890s the firm was known as "TH Kingerlee & Sons"; they took over completely in 1911. Thomas and his second wife Jane moved to Foxcombe Hill in around 1905 but Charles and his family continued to live here at Bridge house for several more years. Thomas was awarded an honorary degree by Oxford University in 1912, and sat as a Liberal county councillor (representing Headington) throughout the First World War. In 1919 he and Jane retired to Bath and Thomas died there just before Christmas 1928, aged 85.

Henry's son Jack took over management of the business in 1945, followed by his son Tom in 1962. The firm consolidated its premises on one site at Lamarsh Road off the Botley Road, and moved from Oxford to Kidlington in 1999. In 2018 Kingerlee celebrated its 150th anniversary, and still flourishes, now under the fifth generation of family management.

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For more information see *Kingerlee Ltd: celebrating 150 years of craftsmanship in construction, 1868 – 2018* by Liz Woolley and Siân Smith, <http://lizwoolley.co.uk/wp-content/Kingerlee150bookMay2018.pdf>.