

Thomas Topple

Thomas (Tommy) Topple was born on 7th October 1886 to George and Catherine Topple (nee Boreham), and lived in Henry Street, Grays.



George and Catherine had eight children including Mary Anne, George, Clement, Thomas, Jane, Ellen, Kate and William.

Unfortunately George was a drunkard and ill treated the family. He kicked his wife down the stairs and she died giving birth to their son.

Sadly the children were separated. William, the youngest child was adopted. Mary Anne, the eldest daughter went into service.

Clement, Tommy's older brother, who had been born with a cleft lip and palate, was put into an institution in Chelmsford.

Tommy and the rest of his siblings were sent to live in a workhouse. George, the eldest son ran away from the workhouse to find his Grandad who lived in Hastings. He was only 11 years old at the time.

Tommy left the workhouse at the age of 13. He was given indenture papers which allowed him to learn a trade where he may have worked for free or for a very limited salary in return for being taught a viable trade. He was put into a motor/bicycle garage where he had to sleep on a sacks until one of the men took him to live at his house.

In later years he spent some time working in Stoke Poges and also joined the army.

Tommy married Elsie Rayment in 1908 and they lived in Arthur Street, Grays. They had two daughters, Elsie, named after her mother (1909) and Lilian (1914).

The photo was taken in 1916 and shows Tommy and Elsie with their two young daughters Elsie and Lilian.

It also shows Tommy in an army uniform, although it is unclear what regiment he belonged to in WWI.



During the war Tommy was sent to France and then onto East Africa. He took a banjo with him and entertained the troops in his spare time.

Tommy developed malaria fever whilst at war and became very ill.

After the war he returned to Grays and started a cycle hire business.

From a shed and yard in Stanley Road (on the corner of Bedford Road) he let bikes out at sixpence an hour, or smarter bikes for a shilling.

The six pence bikes were for learners and would often come back in a terrible state.

Children used to chant "Topple's old irons never rust. Topples tyres never bust"

As more people learned to ride and buy their own bikes, the business declined and Tommy branched out into car hire and maintenance.



This photo was taken in approx. 1924 of Tommy and Lilian.

Sadly Elsie senior died in 1923 of an unknown illness, she was only 36 years of age.

Not long after Elsie's death, Tommy married Elsie's sister Hilda Lobley (nee Rayment).

Hilda had been previously married, and had a daughter called Joan by her first husband.

In 1934, Tommy and Hilda had a child of their own and called her Margaret

Tommy ran his own taxi company called Topple's Taxi in Dock Road, Little Thurrock. Tommy was also a chauffeur and had his own set of clients.



The photo to the left shows Elsie (junior) and Lillian as bridesmaids at Hilda's first wedding. It has been taken outside Crown Road, Grays in circa 1920.

The photo to the right was taken pre WW1 in a De Dion car.



Often Tommy would be booked on Saturday afternoon for a wedding and a funeral. He would rush back home and the family would take off all the ribbons and trimmings so he could then go to the funeral.

Tommy became an Air Raid warden during World War Two as he was over the age for recruitment. He would patrol the streets carrying stirrup pumps to put the incendiaries out.

Sadly, Tommy died on Boxing day in 1955 from heart problems.

Hilda died just over 10 years later in 1966.

There has been much confusion over the years explaining the family connections, as Hilda was Tommy's daughters (Elsie and Lillian) step-mum and auntie at the same time.

Story provided by Tommy's grandson Mervyn Owen, (Lillian's son).