

KATE MIDDLETON: PRINCESS FROM THE PIT FAMILY



Kate Middleton's family rose from the most humble background

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By **Claudia Joseph**

AS Kate Middleton prepares to marry a prince, her family biographer explains why their remarkable rise from the most humble background is a triumph of social mobility.

Blacksmith Wilf Harrison stood on the platform at Durham railway station and watched the cloud of steam as the train approached from Edinburgh. Grasping his luggage he and his girlfriend Bessie, a nurse, who was heavily pregnant with their first child, clambered into the third-class carriage.

Minutes later the train pulled out across the high viaduct above Durham and began chugging southwards towards the capital, leaving the towers of the cathedral in the distance.

It was 1930 – a year after the stock market crash sparked the Depression. Wilf, 23, who came from the pit village of Hetton-le-Hole, had been employed as an apprentice blacksmith since he left school, gradually learning his trade as a toolmaker. But he had fallen in love with a girl from the neighbouring village Houghton-le-Spring and the couple decided to elope to a new world: London.

They got married at Kingston-upon- Thames register office on August 4, 1930, a month before the birth of their daughter Norma. There Wilf would establish himself as an engineer, studying at home before setting up his own company specialising in making tools for car manufacturers such as Ford with his three brothers Jack, Tommy and Albert.

But more importantly he had taken the first step that would catapult the Harrison family from the pits of County Durham into the middle-classes and – ultimately – to royalty.

Just three generations later Wilf's great-great niece is about to marry Prince William.

Without Wilf Harrison, Kate Middleton's family would never have escaped their northern roots and begun the social odyssey that has led to the gates of Buckingham Palace.

Norma recalls: "My father and mother were the first to come down to London because their parents didn't approve of their relationship. But if he had not eloped his other brothers would not have followed him and his great-great-niece would not be marrying Prince William."

While it is well known that Kate's family is descended from miners in the North-east the story of exactly how they made the move south is not so common.

Kate's great-great-grandfather John Harrison Jnr was born on July 25, 1874, the eighth of 10 children of miner John Harrison and his wife Jane Liddle, the illiterate daughter of a worker at the same pit. His parents both died of tuberculosis by the time he was 14 and his elder brother Anthony died in a mining accident when he was 21 – but he worked his way from the bottom of the ladder up to a deputy at Lyons Colliery.

At the age of 22 John married Jane Hill, a domestic servant nine months younger than him whose father was a joiner at the colliery, and they went on to have seven children before the outbreak of the First World War.

Their daughter Jenny was born in 1898, followed closely by Ernest, Jack, Kate's great-grandfather Tommy, Wilf, Norman and Gladys. Finally twins Albert and George were born in the early months of the war in 1914.

However John's career in the mines was cut tragically short when he was trampled by a runaway pony pulling a coal truck. After lying flat on his back for months, he was forced to give up work, spending the rest of his life in considerable pain, supported by walking sticks. Yet he and his wife still pulled together to support their large family, John breeding rabbits and chickens for the pot and selling produce from his allotment while Jane bought flour by the sack load and baked her own bread.

"He was quite religious – he didn't spend time in the pub like the other miners – and saved all his life," says Albert's daughter Jean, 72. "During the recession their savings dwindled away but they never went to the soup kitchens. I firmly believe everything we have stems from them. Without their ambition our family would not be where it is today."

It was a set of skills they passed on to their own children. But it was Wilf especially who inherited their ambition.

After moving down to London with Bessie they had four children – Norma, Molly, Jack and Bobby – before the war intervened.

He made parts for artillery tractors and armoured cars, a reserved occupation but sent his wife and children back up north to stay with her family until it was safe to return to London. It was in Durham, shortly before the end of the war in 1945 that their fifth child Christine was born. The family then settled in Hayes, Middlesex, and Wilf moved to an aircraft manufacturer before setting up the family firm.

Wilf's older brother Jack also pulled himself up from poverty. Unemployed from the age of 22 after losing his job at the mine in 1924, he was a talented snooker player who turned his hand to working as a hustler, winning competitions all over the North-east which enabled him to keep his family above the breadline.

Never one to shirk a challenge, when Wilf suggested he joined him in the capital he jumped at the chance, arriving with his wife Edith, known as Margaret, and children William, eight, and Joan, six, in 1934. It was there that his youngest daughter Joyce was born just before the war.

Within a few years brother Albert had also arrived in the South. The three worked alongside each other during the war before setting up their own company. Wilf mortgaged the family home to buy an old stable block and Jack invested compensation money he had received from a motorcycle accident, in which he fractured his skull.

Meanwhile Kate's great-grandfather Tommy worked as a house joiner, remaining in the North-east where he met his wife Lily – the daughter of gardener Thomas Temple – who had an illegitimate daughter Ruth.

The couple married on May 12, 1934, when Ruth was one year old. Kate's grandmother Dorothy was born the following year. Inspired by brother Jack, the couple moved down to London after Tommy had returned from serving in Malaya during the war.

Maybe it was the shame of having a child out of wedlock that encouraged Lily to become ambitious for her family.

While her parents-in-law had instilled in their offspring the merits of hard work it was she who would steer them on the first steps towards social respectability, encouraging her husband to become one of the first of their generation of Harrisons to buy their own home, a house overlooking a canal in Southall where they brought up Dorothy.

Her half-sister Ruth initially stayed with her grandparents. Albert's son Brian remembers carefree times after the war. "We used to have brilliant parties," he says. "Lily was very houseproud and had a lovely home – she was the only one of us to have a conservatory. She appreciated quality and nice things. I think Kate gets a bit of that from our side of the family."

Sadly the family business floundered post-war as the brothers fell out. Tommy got a job at the nearby Nestlé factory, breeding rabbits in his spare time like his father.

"My father was a very good engineer," added Norma. "He was determined to get somewhere. He developed prototypes for the first fibreglass boat and a motorised bicycle. But the other brothers didn't have the same attitude and their relationship became strained when their wives couldn't understand why they couldn't take money out of the business straight away."

On August 8, 1953 – just months after the Coronation – Dorothy, by now an 18-year-old shop assistant, married builder Ronald Goldsmith, 22, at Holy Trinity Church in Southall.

The following year their elder daughter Carole was born and 10 years later brother Gary arrived. Nicknamed "Lady Dorothy" by her husband's family because of her airs and graces, she encouraged Ronald to take advantage of the property boom and create a better future for their children.

When Carole married flight dispatcher Michael Middleton, the family's social status was cemented.

Together they steered their three children through private schools and university into London's social elite. Sadly Carole did not get to know her great-grandfather John, who instilled in his family the merits of hard work. He died in 1956 when she was barely a toddler.

But any children William and Kate have will bear the Harrison genes.

Dorothy's cousin John Harrison, a 63-year-old retired transport fitter, said: "I remember watching the Coronation on my grandfather's black and white television. It was a 14-inch Ferguson which we eventually inherited when he died. They only had a small living room but we crowded in, my grandma and grandad, dad and mum, my sister and me. There wasn't much conversation. All eyes were fixed on the TV. I never imagined 50 years down the line their great great-granddaughter would be marrying a prince."

Claudia Joseph is a consultant on Meet The Middletons, More4, 9pm, tomorrow.

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