

The Enigma of Charles St. John David

Marion Sargent (Member No. 1927)

When the City Engineer Charles St. John DAVID died, there was great shock and sadness amongst the citizens of Launceston, Tasmania. He succumbed to pneumonia on 17 July 1924, aged sixty-eight, while on annual leave in Sydney.¹ Mr David was respected widely as an excellent and faithful servant of the Launceston City Council.² He was appointed as City Engineer and Surveyor on 1 March 1892,³ so had devoted thirty-two years of his life to the city. This story reveals the mystery of his past.

Such was the esteem in which he was held, C. St. John David as he was known was given a civic funeral. His body had arrived in Launceston on the ship *Koranui* on the 27 July, and his funeral was held the following day.⁴ As the Post Office clock finished chiming three, the casket, borne by six members of the Council staff, emerged from the Town Hall and was conveyed to the waiting hearse. The popularity of Mr David amongst the Council staff and the wider community was evident by the number of people who gathered in the streets of Launceston to watch the funeral procession wend its way through the city to the Carr Villa Cemetery. Practically all of the municipal activities, except the trams, ceased for the afternoon to enable the employees to pay their last respects to their highly regarded colleague.⁵

As Mr David was responsible for the layout of Carr Villa and had designed the buildings there, the Mayor and aldermen selected a special site near the entrance as his last resting place.⁶ The headstone reads as follows:

**ERECTED BY
THE LAUNCESTON CITY COUNCIL
IN MEMORY OF
CHARLES ST JOHN DAVID
FOR 32 YEARS CITY ENGINEER
DIED 17TH JULY 1924**

Si monumentum quaeris, circumspice

(Translation – If you wish to see his monument, look about you)⁷

The Rev. W. R. GREENWOOD, of St Aiden's Church, and the Rev. W. J. HARRIS, the Mayor's Chaplain, conducted the graveside service. Rev. Greenwood concluded the ceremony by saying 'Perhaps I knew him more in his private life, and whilst he was by no means a demonstrative man, I could often see and hear of his many acts of kindness and thoughtfulness for others'.⁸

C. St. John David's major achievements with the Council were:

- Installation of the first hydro electric power scheme in Australia at Duck Reach, opened in 1895;

- Victoria Swimming and Turkish Baths, 1897;
- Original 1904 Alexandra Suspension Bridge at the First Basin, Cataract Gorge;
- Laying out the grounds and construction of the buildings at Carr Villa Memorial Park opened in 1905;
- Sewerage system for East Launceston 1906;
- Sewerage scheme for Greater Launceston;
- Ravenswood, Trevallyn and West Launceston water schemes;
- Design and construction of the tramway track, tram sheds and offices for the first tramways in Launceston opened in 1911;
- Remodelling of the Town Hall offices;
- Extension to the Queen Victoria Museum;
- Designing numerous buildings and dwellings for the Council.

Other achievements outside the Council were:

- As honorary engineer of the National Agricultural and Pastoral Society, assisted in the layout and construction of the Elphin Showgrounds;
- Assisted the Mowbray Turf Club in the improvement of the Mowbray Racecourse;
- Undertook survey work for the spawning beds for the Northern Tasmanian Fisheries Association;
- Advised the St Leonards Council on occasions.

He also was involved with several community organizations:

- Committee member and on the Board of Management of the Launceston Mechanics Institute and Public Library;
- Committee member from 1906-1922 and sometime vice-chairman of the Launceston Technical School;
- Honorary consulting engineer to the Northern Tasmanian Fisheries Association and a keen angler;
- Member of the Northern Tasmanian Camera Club;
- Foundation member of the Northern Club in 1894 and president from 1907-1909;
- A possible connection with the A.B.C. Bowling Club.⁹

C. St. John David came, highly recommended, to Launceston. He had spent eleven years in Queensland: three with the Department of Railways; and eight in a private practice in partnership with Fred. G. BROWN as engineers and architects. He designed and superintended the construction of electric tramways, wharves, drainage works, roads and various buildings in Brisbane and Booroodabin.

Sixty-seven applications were received for the position of City Engineer in Launceston. When this was reduced to five the Town Clerk, C. W. ROCHER, requested information from referees regarding personal characteristics such as temperament, sobriety, industry, method and demeanour. As he hoped the appointment was to be a permanent one, he stressed that '...a restless man would certainly not be suitable'. It seems that C. St. John David fulfilled the requirements admirably, as he was appointed with a salary of £400 a year and an expectation that he willingly would discharge his duties with energy and skill.¹⁰ And this he did.

When C. St John David moved to Launceston he lived in boarding houses: at 'Park View', 7 Brisbane Street and later at 'The Pines', 34 George Street. By 1910 he had purchased his own home at 1 Abbott Street, East Launceston. He also owned 5 Abbott Street, which was rented by metallurgist Loftus HILLS.¹¹

But what of his family and early life? The official documents and newspaper articles only hint at his private life. In his application for the City Engineer's position, Mr David stated that at thirty-six years of age he had had twenty years' experience and a thoroughly practical education on works of all kinds.¹² This means he would have been sixteen years of age when he had begun working or training in the engineering field.

Mr David did not have any family in Tasmania, but an intriguing snippet in *The Examiner* states that his 'only son and two grandchildren are now resident in England'.¹³ A son? Does this mean that he had a wife? David was born in Chepstow, Monmouthshire, Wales, about 1855, but generally that was all that was known.¹⁴

Clues to his background were discovered in the correspondence files of the Launceston City Council. In 1930 a letter was received from Mrs Edward DUTSON of Welsh Street, Chepstow, requesting a photograph of the memorial to her brother – 'R. T. SARGENT, known to you as St. John David'. She had heard of the memorial through her nephew Percy Sargent. The letter was signed S. E. Dutson. The photograph and negative were sent to her with a letter briefly describing the grave, which had been prepared by the workmen in the late City Engineer's department.¹⁵

Eight years later the Council received another letter, this time from Mr David's son Percival G. Sargent of Erdington, Birmingham. Percival had met the former Mayor H. C. L. BARBER at a cricket match in Birmingham. He too asked for a photograph of the grave and for a final settling of his father's estate.¹⁶

So, we have found that the illustrious City Engineer did have a son and a sister, and an assumed name!

We now must travel to Wales to find more about his origins. A letter from a gentleman in Cardiff, whose interest in Welsh émigré engineers in the nineteenth century, initiated the search in Chepstow. He could not find a birth for Charles St. John David anywhere and asked the State Library of Tasmania for help. On being told that he was really a Sargent, an enquiry at the Chepstow Museum soon revealed his real identity. The curator already had been researching the Sargent family and businesses.¹⁷

Richard Thomas Sargent was born 7 August 1855 to Thomas Sargent and his wife Sarah Ely, née FRYER. He had nine brothers and sisters: Alice Prudence (born 1847), Sarah Eliza (1849), George Waters (1851), Mary Ellen (1853), Bessie Fryer (1856), Alfred Gower (1858), Ellen Jane (1860), Fanny Matilda (1861) and Ada Phoebe (1863).¹⁸

Thomas Sargent ran the George Waters' Timber and Coal Yard and Brick and Tile Works, which was located in Bridge Street, in the shadow of the Chepstow Castle. It is quite probable that his son Richard worked here for four years learning the trade before setting up his own business in or near his father's yard.¹⁹ In January 1876, at the age of twenty, Richard advertised his own new business in the local newspaper as a builder, joiner, undertaker and general contractor.²⁰

A destructive fire razed the carpenter's shop just a few weeks later on 8 February 1876. Richard's friends and neighbours opened a subscription list to raise funds to replace the tools lost in the fire.²¹ Once re-established, the business expanded to include painting and wallpaper hanging, the installation of slate and marble chimneypieces, chimney cowls, Barnard's slow combustion grates, slate cisterns and baths and ornamental tile floors, the

construction of green and hot houses, and pianoforte and furniture removal. The diverse business also included personal attendance at funerals with the coffin and hearse provided.²² Richard advertised for one or two apprentices in carpentry and joinery in April 1877.²³

With his business flourishing and having the support of family and friends, Richard's life must have seemed complete when he married Amy Catherine (Katie) BRANT at the Baptist Chapel, Milton Road, Wokingham, Berkshire on 23 August 1877.²⁴ Katie, born 18 February 1853, was the daughter of draper John Brant and his wife Caroline.²⁵ Nine months later on 24 May 1878 the young couple had a son, Percival.²⁶

Then, for some inexplicable reason twenty-four year old Richard Sargent left his wife, child, business and home, and sailed for Australia. His baby son was just sixteen months old when Richard boarded the ship *Ramsay*, which left London on 20 September 1879.

Nearly four months later, on 13 January 1880, the single second-class cabin passenger Charles David disembarked in Moreton Bay, Queensland.²⁷ This journey heralded the beginning of a new life and new identity in a new land.

The stories told about this errant family member are, for his great nieces, vague and questioning. They have heard that he was known as the 'wild one', that his father possibly sent him away and he might have swapped his identity with someone on the voyage to Australia.²⁸ But why? This is the question that remains unanswered. There must be a deep dark secret that only Richard Sargent or his alias, C. St. John David, could answer.

Katie, with young Percival, left Chepstow and returned to her parents' home in 'Park Villa', Wokingham. They were there at the time of the 1881 census, as also were Katie's brother Cooper and a general domestic servant Rose E. BUDD.

When C. St. John David wrote his Will on 20 August 1909, he bequeathed all his property to his abandoned wife Mrs Amy Catherine Sargent who was then residing at 281 High Street, Erdington, Birmingham.²⁹ She died on 16 April 1918, so did not benefit from this extraordinary gesture.³⁰ Perhaps he felt a sense of guilt or duty after all those years?

His family did not forget him; they knew where he was and what he was doing. Someone transcribed newspaper articles of his funeral and sent them to the Sargent family in Chepstow.³¹ So this talented, hard working and kind-hearted man was buried in his adopted home of Launceston, Tasmania, in the tranquil memorial park that he designed.

His sister, Sarah Eliza Dutson, wrote to the Town Clerk of the Launceston City Council thanking him for the photograph of her brother's grave:

It has been a consolation to us all, to know he had many kind friends – and we feel very grateful to you all – who made it possible for him to be buried among those whom no doubt he had known – that he should have died among strangers was a grief to us – though it was quite unavoidable – and now he rests, where no doubt he would have chosen to be.³²

Whether he was known as Richard Thomas Sargent or Charles St. John David, the enigma of this man remains buried. The versatile engineer, surveyor and architect who began his working life as a builder, joiner and undertaker is remembered for the part he played in shaping the city of Launceston during one of its most progressive periods in history.

Author's note: I have not found any connection between my Sargent forebears who came from the Hastings area in England and the Sargent family from Chepstow in Wales.

Endnotes:

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- ¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1924, p. 5; *The Examiner*, 18 July 1924, p. 5; *The Weekly Courier*, 24 July 1924, p. 52.
- ² QVMAG LCC3:23/1.3.
- ³ LCC1:472 March 1892; *The Examiner*, 1 March 1892, p. 2.
- ⁴ *The Examiner*, 26 July 1924, p. 1; *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 1924, p. 4.
- ⁵ *The Examiner*, 29 July 1924, p. 4; *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 July 1924, p. 5; *The Weekly Courier*, 31 July 1924, p. 33.
- ⁶ *The Examiner*, 29 July 1924, p. 4; *The Weekly Courier*, 31 July 1924, p. 33.
- ⁷ LCC3:23/1.3.
- ⁸ *The Examiner*, 29 July 1924, p. 4.
- ⁹ *The Examiner*, 18 July 1924, p. 5; *The Weekly Courier*, 24 July 1924, p. 52.
- ¹⁰ LCC1:472.
- ¹¹ *State of Tasmania Electoral Roll, Division of Bass; Tasmania Post Office Directory; Tasmanian Government Gazette*, Launceston Assessment Roll 1910.
- ¹² LCC1:472.
- ¹³ *The Examiner*, 18 July 1924, p.5.
- ¹⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8, pp. 217-8.
- ¹⁵ LCC3:23/1.3.
- ¹⁶ LCC3:24/1.9. Percival lived at 'The Shrubbery', 57 Gravelly Hill North, Erdington.
- ¹⁷ Hugh Richards, Correspondence.
- ¹⁸ Mary Ellen Child, *List of Sargent births*.
- ¹⁹ Anne Rainsbury, Curator, Chepstow Museum, Correspondence, 10 Jan 2002.
- ²⁰ *Chepstow Weekly Advertiser*, 8 – 29 January 1876.
- ²¹ *Chepstow Weekly Advertiser*, 12 February 1876.
- ²² *Chepstow Weekly Advertiser*, 20 January – 10 February 1877, 21 April – 12 May 1877, 1 February – 10 May 1879, 12 April 1879; Alfred Hillman, *Hillman's directory of Chepstow and the parishes comprising the Chepstow Union*, 1879, pp. 1, 20.
- ²³ *Chepstow Weekly Advertiser*, 21 April 1877.
- ²⁴ *Chepstow Weekly Advertiser*, 25 August 1877.
- ²⁵ Helen Kegie and Margaret Barton, *Sargent family tree; 1881 British Census*.
- ²⁶ *Chepstow Weekly Advertiser*, 1 June 1878.
- ²⁷ Shipping list, Ramsay, Moreton Bay 1880; *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 January 1880.
- ²⁸ Rainsbury, Correspondence, 10 Jan 2002.
- ²⁹ AOT, AD960/48.
- ³⁰ Kegie and Barton, *Sargent family tree*.
- ³¹ Rainsbury, Correspondence, 10 Jan 2002.
- ³² LCC3:23/1.3.