

Mary (May) Hughes 1860-1941

A Brief history of her life and Longcot days

By Shirley Dalton-Morris

This is the story of an extraordinary Victorian woman whose influence and work with the poor in London became legendary. As a young woman May Hughes, daughter of Thomas Hughes of Uffington, lived in Longcot as housekeeper to her uncle John Hughes who was Vicar of Longcot. When he died in 1895 he left the major part of his estate to his niece, including several cottages in the village. May moved to London to carry on her social work with the poor in Whitechapel, but kept her property and connections with the village, for years bringing sick and destitute children to recuperate and be educated in Longcot.

MAY HUGHES



Longcot

Her Life and Longcot

By

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Mary (May) Hughes 1860-1941



May speaking at the Thomas Hughes Festival 1912
Courtesy Tom Brown's School Museum, Uffington

The Sisters and Longcot

May and her sister Lilian Hughes were the daughters of Thomas Hughes of Uffington and frequent visitors to Longcot. Their Uncle John Hughes was vicar of Longcot from 1852 and he and his wife Elizabeth enjoyed the company of the girls having no children of their own. They were both of striking appearance, and their arrival must have brightened up life at the vicarage and in the village. May with her auburn hair and spirited personality was to become an authoritative and respected figure in the village, and later a well-known social worker. Lilian was described as 'very fair, and full of life and humour'.

As daughters of Thomas Hughes it is not surprising that the sisters held strong religious beliefs and a well-developed social conscience. Their father, although best known as the author of Tom Brown's Schooldays, was an influential social reformer who dedicated his life to Christian Socialism. He became a founder member, and eventually Principal, of the Working Men's College which was established to provide education to the illiterate workers. His daughters inherited his reforming zeal and both spent their lives trying to improve conditions of the poor, particularly through education.

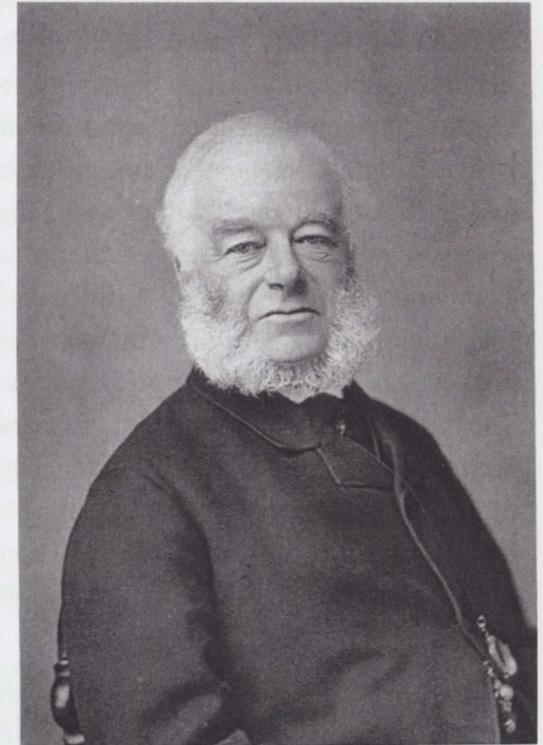
When her Aunt Elizabeth died in 1882, May became housekeeper to her uncle in Longcot and helped with parish work. By then she was a member of the Rechabite Society that practised total abstinence, and she later became a Quaker. She was convinced that alcohol was the cause of the misery of the poor, at one time writing '*I increasingly know that alcohol is by far the chief enemy that keeps the poor poor, the ignorant ignorant and the (equally cursed for taking it) rich, rich*'

May became influential in Longcot, involved with church and school and actively promoting her temperance message. She started a Band of Hope, and opened the Hope Coffee Shop in one of the cottages on the Green where she offered tea and darts to the villagers as an alternative to the many public houses and beer retailers in the village.

As a Manager she was a frequent visitor at school and often took Bible Classes, which the children greatly enjoyed, as she was an excellent storyteller. She also ensured that each June the school closed, so children might attend National Rechabite Society Day events.

When John Hughes died in 1895, he left the major part of his estate to May. She inherited

several cottages in Longcot, together with farmland and stock, the entire contents of the Vicarage including horses and carriages, and a further two cottages at Fernham. May immediately sold the contents of the Vicarage at auction that year to raise money for her work with the poor. Following her Uncle's death, she was now a relatively wealthy woman and the time and opportunity was approaching to extend her work.



The Angels of Whitechapel

May's sister Lilian had married Ernest Carter the Curate of Chieveley, but in 1898 they gave up their comfortable lifestyle and moved to the East End of London where Ernest became Vicar of Whitechapel, and May went to live with them.

The living and working conditions in the East End were dreadful. Children brought up in damp, squalid houses, suffered from malnutrition and disease, crime and vice prospered, and the poor took refuge in alcohol. Lilian and May energetically set about trying to improve the lives of the poor families of the parish. They both learned Yiddish so they could speak with the many Jewish families, and Lilian went on to learn other languages, and both sisters were in demand as public speakers and lecturers. They became well known in the area and were soon being referred to as 'The Angels of Whitechapel' by local people. The money they needed came from friends including Walter Morrison, a wealthy friend of the Hughes family, who on one occasion gave each sister £2000 to help their cause.

Rest Cottage, Longcot

For many of the Whitechapel children the only hope of recovery from consumption, and the other chronic illnesses, was to get them out of the East End, and what better place to take them than to the clean air and peace of Longcot. And so May started to bring the sickly children for recuperation and education to her cottage in the Dash.

She called the cottage Rest Cottage, (now Holly Cottage), and built a wooden hut alongside named The Ark, in which she housed the children. She said Rest Cottage was dedicated to boys work, but she also boarded out children, and possibly whole families, in houses in the village. From 1900 – 1920 many cottages in the village were involved in May Hughes' work, which was not only with children. She also brought prostitutes from London for weekend 'rest and recuperation' to Downs Cottage, which she owned.



Rest Cottage in The Dash

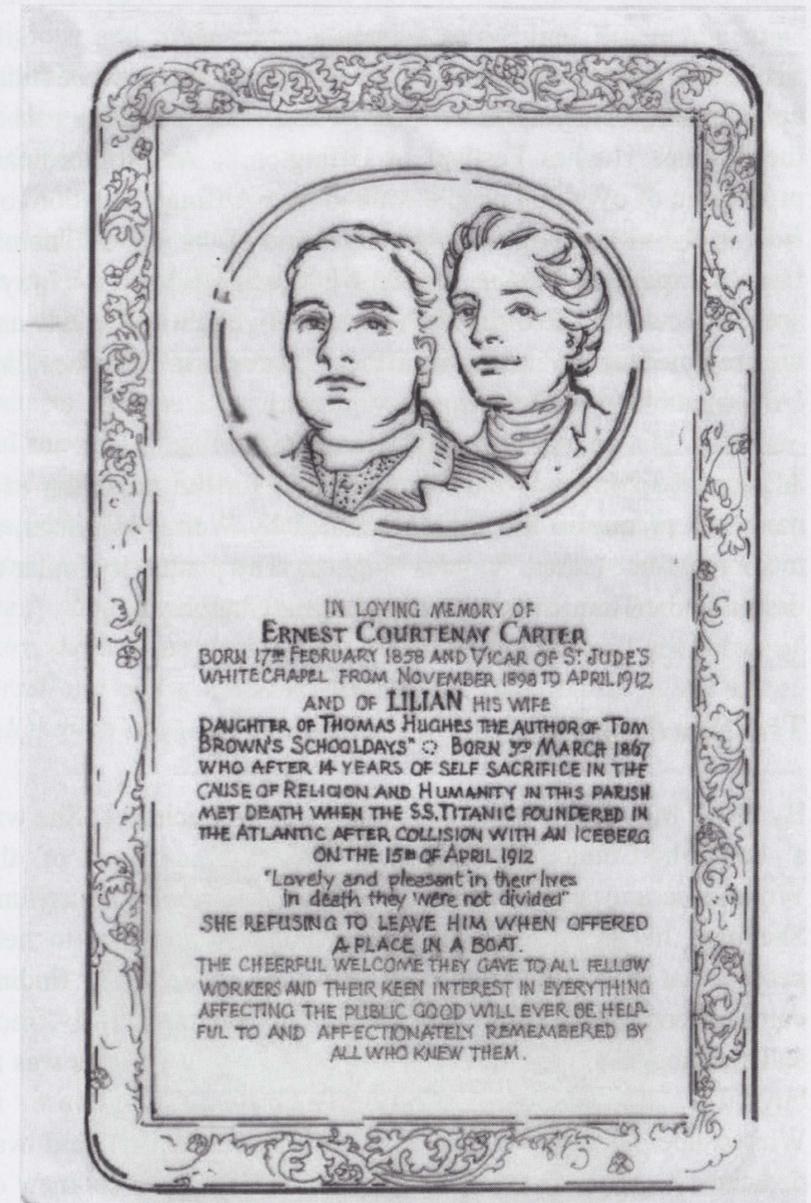
SS Titanic goes down

By 1912, Lilian and Ernest were in need of a holiday after many years work in Whitechapel. They decided to visit family in America, and they booked to travel on the SS Titanic. Neither of them survived when the ship hit an iceberg and sank.

Survivors spoke of a jolly parson and his charming wife leading the hymn singing in the saloon on the last evening. Two hours later, as water poured through the holed ship and the lifeboats were lowered, Lilian was offered a place in a boat, but chose to stay with Ernest. Maybe they led the singing of the final hymn, Abide with Me, which is associated with the last minutes of that ship.

The tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic horrified the whole nation, and the people of Whitechapel deeply mourned the loss of Lilian and Ernest. The congregation of St Jude's Whitechapel subscribed to a brass memorial that was erected in the church in commemoration of their lives and brave death.

When St Jude's church was demolished, the plaque came to Longcot church and is sited on the North wall of the choir. The inscription shows the great affection for Ernest and Lilian felt by all that knew them.



Brass Plaque in the chancel at St Mary's church Longcot

Six weeks after the sinking of the Titanic and the death of Lilian and Ernest, May, despite her grief, was taking a leading role in the Thomas Hughes Festival in Uffington. An extraordinary procession of over 300 people walked from Uffington station to a field in the village to join in a celebration of the life of Thomas Hughes organised by the Workers Education Society. May's speech about the life of her father was a highlight of the day and was reported in several national newspapers under the headline 'A Feast among the Buttercups'.

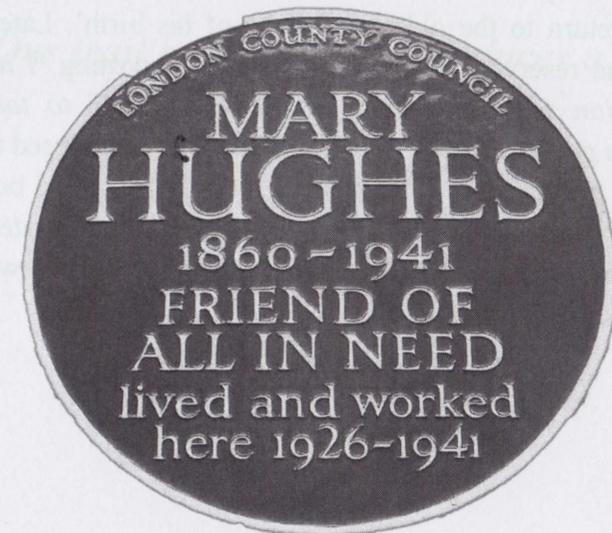
A year later May was back in Uffington for the unveiling of a memorial plaque in the church donated by Walter Morrison, in memory of her father, Thomas Hughes. The plaque is similar in design to the Titanic memorial in Longcot Church.

The Dewdrop Inn

By 1930s May was a well-known figure in Whitechapel. She was a borough Councillor, on the Board of Guardians of the Workhouse and a Visitor at the St Peter's hospital and asylum. She used her connections to many public institutions to help people, but she was quite unorthodox in her outlook, finding employment and accommodation and handing out money, food and clothing to anyone in need. One of May's enterprises was to buy The Earl Grey, a notoriously bad public house in Whitechapel, which she renamed The Dewdrop Inn and was dedicated to 'education and joy'. Everybody in the area knew of The Dew Drop Inn and its proprietor May, who they called 'Comrade'. The door of the Inn was always open, and she took in the destitute and fed, clothed and housed them, and on Tuesdays

and Thursdays anyone might have a free bath. She also held religious and trade union meetings at the Inn. When Mahatma Gandhi visited London in 1931 he asked to meet May and it is said they clasped hands and laughed, each recognizing the quality of the other's life.

Several newspaper articles were written about her and from one we have a vivid description of May at seventy-five years of age. By then she had become a formidable lady, speaking out fearlessly in defence of the poor. She had influential contacts such as Lord Lansbury, the journalist and Labour MP, and she was adept in using contacts to raise money and make her passionate and forthright views known. The newspaper article describes May as *'a little wizen wisp of a woman in the most extraordinary clothes – a man's black coat and a sack-cloth skirt. She is about four feet eight tall with silver hair and a complexion more screwed up than a crab-apple skin. She will not speak of herself but of the worthless lives of the rich, and is full of moral indignation about the conditions of the people living around her.'*



The Cottage on the Green

An interesting collection of letters from May Hughes has survived dated 1916-1922. They relate to the sale of a cottage called Bareppa on the Green at Longcot, now renamed Plomers, and the home of Robert and Jill Baker. The letters are to Frank Indge, Robert Baker's grandfather.

Vicar John Hughes had a coachman and faithful servant Henry Indge. After he was widowed in 1882, John Hughes relied heavily on Henry and May Hughes to run the large Vicarage. The families became close friends, and kept in touch long after the death of John Hughes. When Henry's son Frank Indge wanted to move back into the village, he asked May if he could purchase a cottage in Longcot from her. A protracted correspondence followed between May, now living in London, and Sergeant, later Inspector, Frank Indge in Faringdon.

The letters in May's strong handwriting cover a period of six years. First May said she would like Frank to buy the cottage so he could 'return to the old clay village of his birth'. Later that year she had reservations about his suitability writing '*I have a little question whether a policeman is the BEST to take an interest in a poor village*'. Eventually in 1922 she agreed to sell the cottage to Frank for £200. By then her letters had become rambling and difficult to read. Her handwriting deteriorated and with frequent insertions, and heavy underlining in red, show a sad change in her state of mind.

A Lasting Legacy

May's work with the East End poor continued all her life, and the Dewdrop Inn was set up as a Trust to continue after her death. The building has a Blue Plaque commemorating her life. Fittingly she died in Whitechapel at St Peters Hospital, cared for by the people she had devoted her life to.

Rest Cottage in Longcot was still in her possession when she died in 1941, by then lived in by a tenant Miss Mitchell-Taylor. She brought education, health and hope to many children who came to recuperate in the village, and that legacy continued when later other children from London were to find safety in the village, as evacuees from the bombs during the Second World War.

*"Our frail humanity only produces a Mary
Hughes once in a century"*

- George Lansbury

At the cottage on the green I spent a long time. The cottage was built in the early days of the century and had a very comfortable interior. The garden was very well kept and the view from the cottage was very good. I had a very good time there and would like to go back again.

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Extracts from:
Longcot – A village in the Vale by Guy Richards & Shirley-Dalton-Morris
Mary Hughes – Her Life for the Dispossessed by Rosa Hobhouse