

## INTRODUCTION

The gravestone of the family Stocks in Holmeside Park with its inscription, “Martha, Baroness Speck von Sternburg”, was pointed out to me many years ago by a good Holmfirth friend, the late Vernon Sykes. He guessed, quite rightly, that as I was then teaching German in a local school I would be intrigued to know more about Martha, and how a lass from Holmfirth had managed to become a Baroness in far off Leipzig. I decided that when I had time I would try to find out more about this transformation in Martha’s life. It was not until 2011, encouraged by membership of the Holmfirth Local History Group, that I got down to work whilst I still had a few marbles left to play with.

In researching Martha’s early life in Holmfirth, and then Leeds, I followed the route familiar to most family historians, - parish registers, census returns, the register of births, marriages and deaths, local trade directories, and also snippets about Martha in the *Holmfirth Express*. All very straight forward. I anticipated that continuing my researches in Germany would prove more problematical, given the catastrophic history of the country in the 20th century. I would very rapidly reach a dead end, or so I thought. I could not have been more wrong. German Google quickly revealed that the Sternburgs were still alive and well and flourishing in the Germany of today, especially in the figure of Wolf-Dietrich, the present Baron Speck von Sternburg. He was, he informed me, the great-grandson of our Martha. Moreover he was also the family historian and had recently completed a long and comprehensive history of the Sternburg family, including the crucial role of Martha in that family. He kindly sent me a copy. All the answers to all my questions handed to me on a plate! Vielen Dank! But in this family history the details of Martha’s early life in Holmfirth were very sketchy and the Baron was eager to fill in some of the gaps. This I was glad to do and in return the Baron suggested I visit him in Martha’s old home, Schloss Lützschena near Leipzig, where I could peruse the family archives at my leisure. This I did in September 2014. The rest, as they say, is history, mainly Martha’s.

David Cockman. New Mill, Spring 2015.

# THE LIFE OF

## MARTHA STOCKS,

### BARONESS SPECK VON STERNBURG

Martha Stocks was born at Shaley House, Holmfirth on the 2nd of December 1823 and was baptised by the Reverend Bellamy in Holmfirth Parish Church on the 11th of January 1824. Shaley House, now known as Linden Grove, is the building next to and adjoining Holmfirth public library.

There is one vital piece of surviving evidence locally which points to Martha's entry into the ranks of the German aristocracy. This is the gravestone of the Stocks family which can be found in what is now Holmeside park, but which was, until about 1855, the burial ground of the parish church. When this graveyard was deconsecrated, possibly around the 1960s, and turned into the present day park, all the gravestones were preserved and used to either make the paths through the park or left on display around the perimeter. Thus here we can commune with the ghosts of Holmfirth citizens who lived in the town from the mid 18th until the mid 19th century, contemporaries of Beethoven and Wordsworth, Lord Nelson and Jane Austen.

The Stocks' gravestone contains a great deal of information about members of the family, most of whom were not buried in this cemetery. The pater familias was Dr. James Stocks, described on the gravestone as "surgeon." He died in 1832 at the age of 51. His wife was called Ann and she died in 1843. I have been unable to unearth much information about James, not even where he qualified as a surgeon, (if in fact he did!), but his wife was a member of the wealthy Shaw family of Hinchliffe Mill, who lived on Shaw Lane in the large house called *Stubbin*. James and Ann were married in Almondbury Church on the 9th of December, 1812. The only other family burials here are those of their daughters, Mary, who died in infancy, and Sarah Ann. But the deaths of their other surviving children are recorded here also:

Sarah Ann, died Shadwell Grange near Leeds, 1857 aged 42.  
Robert, died Rawil Pindee, East Indies, 1857 aged 39.  
George Henry, died Parliament House, Leeds, 1858 aged 38.  
James, (also a doctor) died Lützschena, Germany, 1864 aged 51.

And then, right at the bottom of the gravestone we find the following:

**Martha, wife of Alexander Speck, Baron von Sternburg of Lützschena near Leipzig, Saxony, died May 1878.**

A few other clues documenting Martha's rise up the social ladder are contained in little snippets of news about her life reported from time to time in the *Holmfirth Express*. There seems to have been some considerable pride, and perhaps also a touch of snobbery, in recording this life of "a local girl made good".

After the death of Dr. James Stocks in 1832 the family moved away from Holmfirth and we find them next in the 1841 census still living as a family in Kirkgate, Leeds. Martha would be 17 in that year. (Shaley House would then become known in Holmfirth as Mr. Burton's academy, a small private school with perhaps three or four scholars living in the house as boarders. According to an item in the *Holmfirth Express* Mr. Burton reported that Martha Stocks had scratched her name on a window pane in Shaley House using the diamond engagement ring she had received from her German fiancé. Can this possibly be true? I presume so. Mr. Burton would hardly have made the story up and a later resident at Shaley House also confirms this little piece of graffiti. Martha would by then be about 24 years old and had not lived in Holmfirth for at least ten years. Had she come back especially to do this in her childhood home? Or was there perhaps some closer family connection between the Stocks and Mr. Burton which rendered such an action more likely? We shall never know. Later owners of Shaley House are reported to have carefully preserved this window pane, although unfortunately it does not appear to be there today.)

The man who was to transform Martha's life, - her Mr. Darcy you might think, - arrived in Leeds in 1844. This was Alexander Speck, the youngest son of Maximilian, First Baron Speck von Sternburg. Alexander had been born in Leipzig in 1821. Before coming to Leeds he had already led quite an adventurous life. On the 19th of January 1841, aged just 20, he set sail from Liverpool on the barque *Lady Raffles*, destination Australia, arriving there on the 29th of May in Port Phillip. (Alexander was highly critical of this voyage accusing the captain and crew of neglect and incompetence. At one point crossing the Indian Ocean the vessel ran out of drinking water and was lucky to meet up with an American vessel which topped up their water supply. In 1844 the *Lady Raffles* was lost in a shipwreck in Caernarfon Bay. Everyone on board was drowned.)

Alexander had come to Australia to set himself up as a sheep farmer with the wish to export wool to the cloth industry in Europe and in particular in Great Britain. His father, Maximilian, (of whom more later), had already made his fortune as a producer of high quality wool in Saxony, much of which he exported to Britain, especially to mills in Yorkshire. Presumably in going to Australia Alexander had wanted to demonstrate to his father that he was capable of standing on his own two feet and making a fortune through his own endeavours. For two years Alexander struggled to establish himself in Australia, but eventually gave up and returned to Europe disillusioned. He wrote a long account of his experiences there, explaining that a major problem was not being able to trust the word of anyone there he had tried to do business with. Perhaps the fact that Australia was a penal colony, peopled mainly by British criminals, was a contributory factor!

On arrival in Leeds Alexander set himself up in offices in Trinity Street. His plan was to import high quality wool from Saxony for the textile industry in West Yorkshire. In the first half of the 19th century Saxony, along perhaps with Spain, was the main source of quality raw wool for the Yorkshire textile industry. The *Leeds Mercury* newspaper in the first half of the 19th century carried regular reports from Leipzig with information on the state of the woollen market there, so clearly there were strong business links between the two cities centred upon the textile industry. (*I am grateful to Alan Brooke for providing me this information from his own research.*) It was only after 1850 that imports from Australia started to replace those from Saxony. It was not unusual to find German business men

and entrepreneurs working in the West Riding textile industry. A part of Bradford is still known today as Little Germany as a result. The Bradford born composer, Frederick Delius, was indeed the son of one of these German wool merchants, Julius Delius, working in the city. In Huddersfield what has since become the University started life as the Huddersfield Scientific and Mechanic Institute in 1841, founded with the encouragement of Frederic Schwann, a German merchant who conducted an export business in the town.

So at some date after 1844 Alexander met and fell in love with Martha Stocks, spinster, formerly of Holmfirth. According to the *Holmfirth Express* Alexander met Martha by chance in London where she was working as a shop assistant. Although I can't disprove this account, I am not totally convinced by it. I don't quite see Martha behind a shop counter. It seems more likely that she met Alexander in Leeds, perhaps through one of her brothers who was also working in the woollen industry there. Whatever, their meeting resulted in what was clearly a genuine and life-long love match. Alexander wrote to his father in Leipzig, telling him of his engagement to Martha and of their plans to marry soon in Leeds. He received a rather cool response, Maximilian advising him not to be too hasty and questioning whether he was not too young to marry and whether he would be financially able to support a wife and subsequent family. (Perhaps Maximilian had had his own marriage plans for his son and future heir.)

Alexander ignored his father's advice and he and Martha were married in Leeds parish church on November 10th 1849. Alexander was 28 and Martha gave her age as 24. (In fact documents in the archive in Leipzig show that Martha regarded herself as one year younger than she actually was. She was born just before official registration was introduced and therefore would not have had a birth certificate.) The two witnesses to the marriage were her brother, James now also a doctor working in Halifax and her sister, Sarah Ann who was living with Shaw relatives in Shadwell Grange near Leeds. (The Shaws had also recently moved there from Hinchliffe Mill.)

The couple's first marital home in Leeds was at 1 Mount Preston, probably in 1849 a newly-built house to provide for the growing number of middle class business men in the city like Alexander. The house no longer exists. Buildings of the University are now on this site. In this house Martha's first two sons were born, - Maximilian Alexander on the 19th of May 1851 and Hermann on the 21st of August 1852. There then followed a house move, to Headingley where a third son, Gustavus Arthur was born on the 2nd of May 1854. After another change of house, this time to Kingston Terrace off Woodhouse Lane, a fourth son, James Alexander, was born on 23rd of May 1856. This house still survives and is now the private Kingston Hotel.

Each move seems to represent a climb up the housing ladder to a larger and more substantial property, reflecting both the need for more space to accommodate a growing family and perhaps also Alexander's increasing financial success in his business. A maid called Martha Bedford had also become part of the Speck household. Reflecting his commitment to his rapidly growing English family Alexander legally adopted British citizenship in 1852.

1856 was the year which would transform their lives. For news came from Leipzig that Alexander's father, Baron Maximilian Speck had died on the 22nd of December. As the now oldest surviving son Alexander would inherit his father's title and become the new Baron. As his wife Martha would also automatically become a Baroness. But with this title came heavy responsibilities. Alexander was now in control of the extensive family business

interests in the Leipzig area. He therefore had no choice but to close down his Leeds business and move lock, stock and barrel with his family to Leipzig. The family arrived there, not without a certain amount of forelock tugging from the locals, in May 1857. It must have been a considerable culture shock for Martha, - from the small villa in Holmfirth of her childhood to mistress of "the big house" with a retinue of servants and domestics to supervise, all of whom spoke a language which Martha did not understand. Alexander, too, found himself facing the huge burden of the legacy of business, domestic and social responsibilities bequeathed to him by his father.

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### **Maximilian: the First Baron Speck von Sternburg**

Maximilian, the first Baron Speck and Martha's father-in-law, was a man of very humble origins. His parents were innkeepers on the River Elbe and Maximilian was expected to follow in their footsteps. He seems to have had little formal education as a child, but at about the age of 12 he was seized with a desire for self-improvement and learning. He went to the village pastor for help and under his guidance undertook a period of rigorous study, working in the the inn by day and studying by candle light at night. At the age of about 15 he began an apprenticeship in the woollen trade in Leipzig. By the age of 20 he regarded himself as now being capable of running his own business and went into partnership with another businessman and friend. Through hard work, intelligence and enterprise he gradually amassed a personal fortune. His particular interest was in breeding and cross-breeding sheep to produce the finest quality wool and he gradually established himself throughout Europe as the leading expert on this subject. In spite of the disruption caused by the Napoleonic wars he travelled widely from Spain to Russia. He made several visits to England and visited Mr. Whitacre's Woodhouse mill at Deighton, Huddersfield, in 1803. (The relentless passage of time grants us now a little frisson of irony, for we know that the whole future of the Sternburg dynasty would rest on the shoulders, not to say reproductive capacity, of a girl to be born just a few miles away twenty years after Maximilian's visit to Yorkshire.)

In 1815 he bought a property in the centre of Leipzig as the headquarters for all his extensive European business interests. In 1822 he acquired Schloss Lützschena, just a few miles from Leipzig, as his family home, and which from 1857 onwards became also Martha's home. In 1829 King Ludwig I of Bavaria bestowed a baronetcy on Maximilian in recognition of his pioneering work in the field of European agriculture. Maximilian's life can be seen as a classical product of the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. For the first time what counted was not whether you were of aristocratic blood leading a privileged life by chance of birth, but what you could achieve through your own intellectual gifts, determination and sheer hard work, in spite of your background. In England the railway pioneer, George Stephenson, was cut from this same timber.

But Maximilian was not just a very successful business tycoon. He was a man also of deep and wide cultural interests. In particular he used his wealth to gradually acquire what would become, and still is, the largest private collection of paintings in Germany, numbering over 200 works dating from the Middle Ages to those created by artists contemporaneous with Maximilian, such as the German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich. (These paintings are now on display in the new art gallery in Leipzig, placed there on permanent loan by the present baron, Wolf-Dietrich.) During Maximilian's lifetime, and then during Martha and Alexander's years, the painting were on display in Schloss Lützschena available for all to come and enjoy. The Schloss was not just a family

home, but also one of the most important art galleries in Europe. Maximilian also corresponded with some of the leading literary figures of the day, including the great Goethe in Weimar, at that time the *eminence grise* of European literature.

Perhaps because of his own humble beginnings and struggle to educate himself Maximilian took his responsibilities to those many people he employed in Lützschena and Leipzig very seriously. He built ten decent houses with gardens for his workers on the estate and founded a school in which their children would receive a practical education and training. He also opened a kindergarten where the younger children of his employees would be safely cared for during the working day. I doubt whether Maximilian would have regarded himself as a radical, let alone a socialist, but his ideas and practices were extremely "modern" in comparison with what obtained elsewhere in the still semi feudal Germany at that time.

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So, safely installed in Schloss Lützschena in 1857, Martha continued doing what she did best, - producing children! Four children had already been born in Leeds. Now in Lützschena another eight would follow. From 1850 until 1867 Martha was almost continually pregnant. She produced not just "an heir and a spare", (as was famously said of Princess Diana), but an heir and nine spares! Twelve children in total, ten boys and two girls. And remarkably for that time all survived into adulthood. That the Sternburg dynasty still continues to flourish not only in Germany but elsewhere in the world is due in no small measure to Martha's fecundity. The present Baron is descended from Martha's ninth child, Joseph, who died in 1942. Her last surviving child, Wolf-Rudolph, died in 1947. Hundreds owe their existence today to the reproductive powers of this little girl from Holmfirth.

It seems almost certain that all Martha's children, both those born in Leeds and those born in Lützschena grew up speaking English as their first language, and that, at least whilst Martha lived, English was the language used within the family circle. A succession of English governesses was employed which reinforced this effect. All the children would of course become bilingual. To what extent Martha herself came to grips with the German language is not clear.

A passport in the archives in Lützschena, issued by the Kingdom of Saxony, shows that Martha made a return visit to England, and presumably Yorkshire, just a year after her arrival in Lützschena. She travelled with all her children, two nursemaids and an English governess. I suspect that it is the gravestone in Holmfirth which provides the reason for this visit. This tells us that three of her siblings, Sarah Ann, George and Robert, all died within a few months of each other in 1857/58. Doubtless there was a lot of family business to sort out. Moreover her last surviving brother, James, working as a doctor in Halifax, had suffered a disabling stroke and needed care. Martha's solution was to take him back with her to Lützschena where he spent his remaining years. His death there in 1864 is also recorded on the gravestone in Holmeside park.

Following Alexander's take-over of the family business, the emphasis in the second half of the 19th century shifted from wool to beer. When Maximilian bought Schloss Lützschena with its extensive farmlands, it also included a brewery in the village. This was expanded to become one of the major beer producers in this part of Germany bearing the trade name Sternburg Beer. Martha and Alexander had become the Mr. and Mrs Joshua Tetley of Saxony. Their son James, born in Leeds, would travel to Milwaukee in the USA to study

the brewing trade and eventually take over the running of this business. The brewery continued in production until the end of the communist era in East Germany. It closed in 1991 and the buildings stand empty and rather neglected today.

In 1864 there was further upheaval in Martha's life quite apart from that caused by family bereavements. Alexander, now officially an Anglo-German citizen, retained his Anglophilia on his move to Leipzig and to this end decided to create in Lützschena a large country house with parkland and walled garden in the English style. Thus the typically German 17th Schloss in to which they had moved on arrival from Leeds was demolished and a much larger Schloss in the English gothic style was erected on the site. Alexander could also justify this action to himself by saying that his fast growing family needed much more room and that in addition he needed much more space in order to better display the large collection of paintings inherited from his father. Like Maximilian Alexander was keen that these should be available for all who wished to view them. So Martha, apart from being a full-time mother and lady of the manor was also expected from time to time to act as curator and guide to this fine collection of old masters. (The present Baron, Wolf-Dietrich, rather regrets this action by his great-grandfather. I sympathise with him. Alexander's house, whilst large and imposing, has a rather utilitarian atmosphere, more office block than Schloss. You can compare the old Schloss with the new in the appendix.)

During her years in Germany Martha seems to have maintained close contact with her English relatives, or at least with her mother's family, the Shaws of Hinchliffe Mill. (Her father's side, the Stocks, remains something of a mystery and there are no references to them in the archive.) In August 1859 Martha's sixth child and first daughter was born. Also called Martha there were three members of the Shaw family acting as godparents at her christening in the village church in Lützschena on September 14th 1859.. And in the local paper in Lützschena there is a report that "visitors from England had made a generous donation towards the repair of the village church." This was almost certainly a large dollop of Shaw money created in Holmfirth at the end of the 18th century. Martha's last born and 12th child was also a girl, Charlotte, born in October 1867. She was killed in the catastrophic bombing raid on Dresden in 1945.

I think it fair to say that most of Martha's twelve children made a success of their lives in whatever their chosen role, their privileged and wealthy background providing a firm foundation on which to build. Her fourth son, James, born in Leeds, would eventually become the third Baron Speck von Sternburg in 1911 when Alexander died at the age of 90. Other sons became soldiers, civil servants or foresters. Her two daughters made "good" marriages.

But one of her sons in particular has left a lasting mark upon the public record. This was her second son, Hermann, born at Mount Preston, Leeds in August 1852, (and therefore a British citizen.) Since he could not anticipate inheriting the family title he chose a career in the German diplomatic service. He served in British colonial India, then in China as Germany's representative. In 1903 he was appointed the German ambassador to the United States, a post he held until his all too early death in 1908. He became a close and trusted friend of the President, Theodore Roosevelt. In 1900 he married a wealthy American heiress, Lillian Langham, from Louisville, Kentucky. Interestingly, the marriage did not take place in Lützschena, as might have been expected, but in the fashionable St. George's Church in Hanover Square, London. As his obituary in the New York Times pointed out, although there was never any question about Hermann's loyalty to Germany, he nevertheless always seems to have regarded himself as more British than German. It is a moot point that, had he lived longer, whether he might have been able to use his dual

nationality and his undoubted diplomatic skills to prevent Germany and Britain sliding into the First World War.

The evidence from the archive suggest that Martha adapted well to her life as chatelaine and Lützschena's leading lady and that she was a popular figure in the local community, most of the members of which depended upon Alexander and the employment he provided, whether in the brewery or on the family farms. It is recorded, for example, that when her daughter, Martha, celebrated her birthday, all of the children of the same age in the village would be invited to the birthday party at the Schloss, upwards of 50 children in total.

Martha died on 21st May 1878 from the "galloping consumption." She was 53. Her death was a devastating blow to Alexander, as is clear from a letter he sent to his son James, who was at that time, (as I mentioned previously), studying the brewery business in the USA. A few extracts from it show the scale of his grief:

*..... I chose your Mamma out of love, a love which has endured for almost 30 years. This wound can never heal. For me there can be no more true happiness in life, never any real joy ever again. I shall live now only to fulfil my duty as a father to my children.....She is one of the noblest women who ever lived, for she possessed a genuine femininity with a pure and god-fearing heart..... Always carry the image of your mother in your soul... She lived not for herself, but only for others.....*

Martha was buried with due solemnity in the Sternburg family tomb in the grounds of the Schloss. For eight days after the funeral the bells of the village church, close to the Schloss, rang a mourning peal. Her obituary in the local paper gave fulsome praise to all her qualities as wife, mother and baroness.

In spite of what he said in his letter to James, (above), the widower Alexander married for a second time just over a year after Martha's death. This second wife does not appear to have been very popular as a stepmother or with other members of the family. She died in 1896, leaving Alexander a widower for a second time.

Alexander himself died in April 1911 aged 90. He was totally blind. He had long since left the family business in the hands of his sons and devoted his final years to the arts and his private interests. His fourth son, James, born in Kingston Terrace, Leeds, was by now the oldest surviving son and therefore inherited the baronetcy, becoming the third Baron Speck von Sternburg.

And the conclusions that may be drawn from this narrative of Martha's life? There is the obvious one which can apply to us all, - namely the role that chance plays in shaping our destinies. For Martha a chance meeting with Alexander would transform her life beyond anything she might have imagined as a child in Holmfirth. And the many descendants alive today because of that happy and fruitful union almost a century and a half ago, - do they offer up a silent prayer of gratitude for the little bit of Yorkshire blood that undoubtedly flows through their veins?