

Sir John Ellerman and the Reeves Family: the Rise of the Richest Man in Britain

Jonas Hermann Ellerman was born in Hanover about 1819 but appears to have moved to Hull by 1847. He started work as a clerk but soon built up a range of business interests. Soon he had become a well respected corn merchant in the town and was also acting as a shipbroker and insurance agent. He was a Lutheran by religion and a prominent member of Hull's German Church. This church had been founded in 1848 but for the first few years used a range of rented premises. Jonas seems to have played an important role in raising the funds necessary to secure the Lutherans their own building and indeed was secretary of the church council when they moved into their permanent home in Nile Street in 1859.

In October 1855 Jonas married Anne Elizabeth Reeves at St Pancras Church in London. Anne's father, Timothy Reeves, was a prominent Hull solicitor who also had property in London. Her brother, Stafford Reeves, later described as an adventurer and a journalist, had at one time ran a plantation in the Southern states of America. He married an American Society beauty, Elizabeth Atherton Seidel (1838-1888), in Virginia and during the United States Civil War made an epic ride through the Confederate and Unionist armies, meeting many of the generals on both sides before finally being imprisoned for a spell by the Unionists on suspicion of being a spy. He later returned with his wife to East Yorkshire and lived for some years in the village of Welton and in later life he drew attention to the deplorable conditions facing passengers crossing the Atlantic. Stafford and Elizabeth are buried in the Reeves family grave, along with his father Timothy, in the Spring Bank Cemetery, Hull.

The newly married Anne Ellerman was soon supporting her husband, Jonas, in fund raising for the Lutheran Church and they went on to have at least two daughters, Ida and Emily, and also a son, John Reeves Ellerman, who was probably born at his parent's house on Anlaby Road, Hull on the 15th May 1862. By the 1860s, Jonas seems to have become a figure of some importance in Hull Society. He was nominated as Conservative councillor for the Lowgate Ward in 1863 and although he polled the lowest votes, his supporters urged him to stand again as a candidate a couple of years afterwards. He declined but continued to play a prominent role in local Conservative politics. He was also a mover behind the foundation of a very successful company, the Hull Brewery Company, and became its first chairman.

In the early 1870s, however, Jonas's health went into rapid decline. He was afflicted by what was described a 'softening of the brain' which could mean he had suffered a stroke or perhaps some form of cerebral inflammation. Whatever the cause, it is clear that he was incapacitated for when he was called as a witness to a court case in June 1871 it was reported that his answers were very disconnected and he was evidently not aware of what was taking place. His wife, Anne, moved him to a house

in Hornsea where it was hoped his health would improve but he continued to decline and finally passed away back in Hull on the 17th November 1871 at the age of 52. His funeral service was held at the German Lutheran Church in Hull and he was buried in the Spring Bank Cemetery.

Though he had been a successful businessman when in good health, his affairs may have suffered somewhat during his illness and whilst he left sufficient money - £600 - to provide his wife with a modest annuity he did not leave a really substantial fortune. After Jonas's death Anne took her children to France for some time and then later young John briefly attended King Edward VI School in Birmingham. John did not get on well with his mother and left home at the age of fourteen to become articled to a Birmingham Chartered Accountant.

Back in Hull, John's grandfather, Timothy Reeves, died in August 1879 and left around £14,000 to his seventeen year old grandson. John immediately put the money to work, lending part to his employer in return for longer holidays which he spent climbing in France. On passing his articles in the early 1880s, he turned down a partnership in one of the leading firms of the day and founded his own company, J. Ellerman & Co., in the City of London in 1886.

John seems to have followed his father in terms of the range of his business interests, which came to include, brewing and shipowning but his ventures were of a national and international magnitude. He also seems to have been influenced by his uncle, Stafford Reeves, who at one time seems to have owned a steam press for printing newspapers in Hull. John specialised in buying up businesses which had an established product but had lost their managerial driving force after the death of the founders. He created substantial business groups including the Brewery and Commercial Investment Trust which appreciated in value by 1,300% in nine years.

John Ellerman moved into shipping in a big way in the 1890s, purchasing the Leyland Line in 1892, after its owner, Frederick Leyland's sudden death. He sold the business on to J.P.Morgan in 1901 for £1.2 million. He continued his interests in shipping, buying up companies and combining them into the Ellerman Lines in 1902. He became a baronet in 1905 in recognition of the contribution made by his shipping companies during the Boer War and, as Sir John Ellerman, his maritime and other business interests became global as he bought out firms involved in Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South African shipping routes. In 1916 he bought up the great Hull shipping Company of Thomas Wilson Sons and Company, once the largest privately owned shipping company in the world, for the then staggering sum of £4.1 million: The company's founder Thomas Wilson and Ellerman's father, Jonas, had at one time operated their businesses from the same district of Hull. By 1917, this Hull born man's personal fleet was the size of the entire French mercantile marine.

By the end of the Great War it would be an understatement to merely describe Sir John Ellerman as a very rich man. Apart from his shipping interests, he owned

shares in over seventy breweries and was a substantial investor in a range of newspapers including The Times, the Financial Times, the Daily Mirror and the Illustrated London News. During the 1920s he invested heavily in collieries and also built up a substantial property portfolio in London. In many respects his business interests continued to reflect those of his father and uncle, albeit on a far more colossal scale.

Although he was made a baronet, Sir John Ellerman does not seem to have sought much public recognition and, given his immense wealth, he led an unostentatious domestic life with houses in London and Eastbourne. His private life, however, was somewhat unconventional for the time as from the early 1890s he lived with Hannah Glover and they had a daughter in 1894. They finally married, but then only by means of an unusual and quiet Scottish ceremony in 1908, the year before the birth of his son John.

In the 1920s Sir John Ellerman was the only British millionaire whose wealth rivalled that of the top American business magnates. In 1929 the Inland Revenue drew up a secret list of Britain's leading millionaires. It showed that Sir John was worth more than twice as much as the next richest person in the country. When he died in 1933 his estate was assessed for probate at nearly £37 million, a staggering sum at the time and it accounted for almost forty per cent of national death duties for that year. He is now regarded as one of Britain's most successful businessmen and he was the first to possess accountancy qualifications.

He was succeeded by his son, also John, and he owned Ellerman Lines throughout his life. Apart from overseeing a successful business, Sir John Ellerman junior had a keen interest in natural history and was an active philanthropist. He also played an important role in helping Jewish refugees escape from the continent. Since his death the Ellerman Foundation has carried on his substantial philanthropic activities.

Select Bibliography

Philip Beresford and William D. Rubinstein, *The Richest of the Rich* (UK: Hariman House, 2007)

Youssef Cassis, *The European Experience in the Twentieth Century* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1999)

John Clarkson and Roy Fenton, *Ellerman Lines* (UK: J & M Clarkson, 1993)

Brian Dyson, 'The End of the Line: Oswald Sanderson, Sir John Ellerman and the Wilsons of Hull' in David J. Starkey and Alan G. Jamieson (eds) *Exploiting the Sea* (UK, Exeter University Press, 1998)

Hull Advertiser

Hull Packet

W.D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain Since the Industrial Revolution* (USA: Rutgers University Press 1981)

On-line References

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article603425.ece?token=null&offset=24&page

The Lost Tycoon – Times Online

<http://www.richestoftherich.com/richlist.php?richindex=58>

The Richest of the Rich: The Wealthiest 250 People in Britain Since 1066. Sir John Reeves Ellerman.