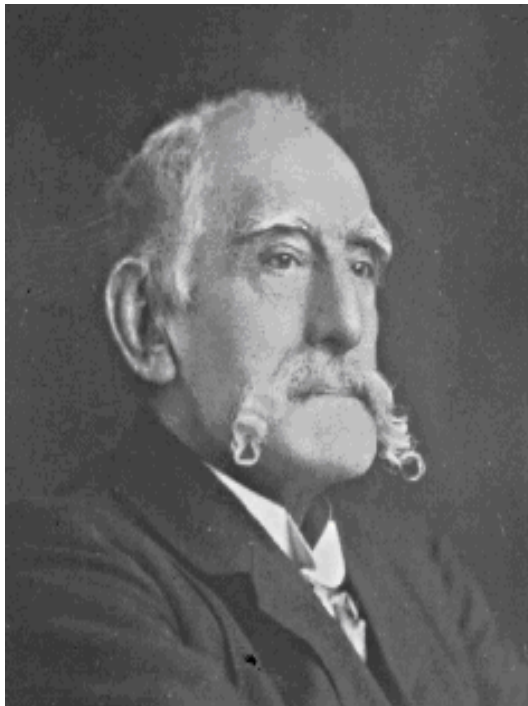


## SIR HENRY ALEXANDER WICKHAM 1846-1928

*Ref. 24*

Sir Henry was an explorer and adventurer who travelled to Nicaragua, Latin America and many another wild lands. He was born on Friday 29 May 1846 at Haverstock Hill, Hampstead, North London, and is buried in Wickham, having held a life-long conviction that his family were the direct descendents of William of Wykeham.



Born into a middle class family, Henry was the eldest son of a solicitor, also Henry, who died four years after his birth in the London Cholera epidemic of 1850, leaving Henry and his siblings to be raised by his mother, Harriet, who followed the millinery trade to support the family.

Henry was born into the age of the adventurer explorer, who considered himself “the instrument of his Maker”, and an atmosphere in which the goals of the British Empire were to civilise the World through the spread of Christianity and free trade. It was also the high point of the Industrial Revolution, where industry flourished by virtue of three basic commodities – steel to make machines, coal to raise the steam to power them, and rubber to provide seals and gaskets, hoses and belts and, in the fullness of time, tyres for the emerging motor car industry.

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Henry was an outdoor, roaming sort of lad but no great scholar, so the life of an adventurer suited his temperament admirably.

Inspired by contemporary accounts from adventurers and explorers, and in the hope of regaining some fortune for his family, in 1866, aged 20, he travelled to Nicaragua, arriving on 22nd October in the schooner “*Jonathan*”. Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast and the hinterland were to be Henry’s “baptism of fire” to tropical exploration.

He travelled up country and spent nine months catching exotic birds and sending their feathers to London for use in the ladies’ hat trade. Making friends with the local tribes-people, he befriended local royalty – the interestingly named William Henry Clarence, the young eleventh hereditary king of the Miskito people. He met one Hercules Temple, during his travels, who was leading a party to collect rubber from the wild, and doubtless learned much about the resource from him.



But it was a dangerous life and Henry narrowly avoided a local cholera epidemic by moving up river, only to contract malaria and jungle sores. On reaching the small gold-mining town of Consuelo, he stayed a month or so until he was well enough to return to England. By the time he got home, Henry was sick, scarred with sores and dispirited.

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In December 1868, his spirits rekindled, Henry sailed in the “*Tamur*” to St Lucia and then by smuggler’s boat via the Orinoco river to Ciudad Bolivar in Venezuela.

During this adventure, Henry witnessed the tapping of rubber and searched for economically valuable trees in the area of the upper reaches of the Orinoco, especially rubber trees. During a difficult journey, mostly by canoe, he contracted another strain of malaria, so he travelled down river to the town of Trinidad, sick and almost penniless.

At Trinidad, Henry took up with a Mr. Watkins and together they travelled up river again, to the rapids at Urubana. It was a difficult journey through lands inhabited by hostile tribes, caiman crocodiles in the river, and sickness-delivering insects. They met up with Andreas Level who had tales of vast tracts of rubber trees on the upper Orinoco shores. The group struggled on and find these trees, then set about collecting rubber. But Henry’s



mosquito bites become infected and he was bitten by a bot fly that laid its eggs under his skin – which hatched into wriggling larvae.

Sickness forced the party to move on and they took portorage to the Rio Negro and then on to Manaus on the Amazon River in Brazil. Manaus was a boom town due to rubber trading, largely by British traders. Here, Henry befriended Drummond-Hay, the British Consul, who cared for him until his health improved enough for him to return to London.

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Back in London, Henry wedded Violet Case Carter, daughter of the bookseller who published his Nicaraguan journal.

Towards the end of the summer of 1872, Henry, his wife, mother, sister and brother and their fiancés and several other members of his family set sail from Liverpool bound for the port of Belém in Brazil. The whole party travelled up the Amazon to Santarém and set up a homestead a few miles out of town in a rough cabin among the sugar workers.



The experience seems to have hardened Violet, but it killed many of the others of his family. Henry's farming attempts failed, and by 1873 he was all but ruined and only he, his wife, his brother and sister and their spouses were left alive. The remnants of Henry's family had had enough and left, leaving only Henry and Violet on the failing farm.

In 1873, Henry wrote to Joseph Hooker at Kew Botanical Gardens with an offer to supply rare botanical specimens. The British Foreign Office, via Kew, asked for seeds of the rubber tree, *hevea braziliensis*.

So, in the Winter of 1873, Henry and Violet left Santarém to journey up the Tapajós river, a tributary of the Amazon, through Avieros, "the headquarters of the fire ant", and onward.



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During the trip, Henry cut his foot accidentally with an axe and almost died. The country was plagued by huge anacondas, caiman crocodiles in the river and nasty bugs everywhere. The couple again tried their hand at farming, and again failed.

Back in Santarém, Henry negotiated a seed price by post for *hevea braziliensis* with Joseph Hooker at Kew - £10 per 1000 seeds. At the same time, others were collecting seeds and sending them to Kew, but all arrived rancid



or else failed to thrive. So, in January 1876, Henry and Violet again journeyed up the Tapajós river and in March started collecting seeds from the area around Boim, (territory of the deadly *fer-de-lance* snake). They had collected 70,000 seeds by May which they washed and carefully dried.

The Brazilian authorities had previously warned Henry not to try to export rubber tree seeds but Henry loaded the seeds onto the SS *Amazona*, out of sight of Santarém, at the confluence of the Tapajós and the Amazon rivers. With the help of the British Consul, Henry and Violet set sail with the seeds hidden out of sight, leaving the remnants of his family behind, passing through local Customs with “botanical specimens for Queen Victoria’s personal garden”.

The Brazilian Government were later to brand Henry as a “bio-pirate” for ruining their rubber producing industry and seriously damaging their economy.

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The arrival of the rubber tree seeds at Kew on 14 June 1876 caused a great stir. All the seeds were sown and the first few germinated within four days. By the 7 July, 2700 had germinated. Special cases were constructed for shipping the seedlings to the Colonies – Ceylon, Burma and Singapore. By the time of his death in 1928, 80 million rubber trees were growing in British territories where none had grown before. But Joseph Hooker had no great liking for Henry, giving him scant credit and refusing his application to accompany the seedlings to the new plantation sites.

Rejected by the botanists at Kew, Henry and Violet took ship for Australia in September 1876, with coffee and Brazilian tobacco plants, with a view to starting a plantation in North Queensland. By 1881, Henry and Violet had brought 1056 acres of land under cultivation.

But in relatively short order, the couple managed to accidentally burn their house down – twice – and a storm wrecked their third

abode. Added to their discomfort was the usually arid climate and the preponderance of



alligators, scorpions, tarantulas and a myriad of very nasty snakes on their land. So, once again their efforts at farming failed, added to which Henry managed to get himself into financial difficulties and the couple had to return to England.

Next, on 12 November 1881, Henry joined with a benefactor and travelled to British Honduras, (now Belize), Violet joining him in May 1887. *continued...*

Here they grew cacao, bananas, oranges, lemons and mangoes, among other things. Importantly, he befriended the British Governor, Sir Richard Goldsworthy, and spent some time on Government service, acting as a Justice of the Peace and Inspector of Mahogany, between negotiating with Mayan revolutionaries and unsuccessfully hunting for pirate gold.

Undeterred by previous farming failure, Henry and Violet tried again, planting bananas



and rubber along the Tamesh River, sixty miles from civilisation. But profits were too small to pay the rent on the land and, in spite of appealing directly to Queen Victoria, he lost a court case and was once again ruined.

The indomitable Henry Wickham next turned his attention to Papua New Guinea where he took out a 25-year lease on the Conflict Islands and tried to develop sponge growing and the cultivation of pearl oysters, as well as the growing of coconuts for copra.

Then, in north-eastern Papua, he again tried his hand at growing rubber trees. It was while in the Conflict Isles that his wife finally had enough of adventuring in wild places, so she left him. She eventually settled in Bermuda.

Henry moved from scheme to scheme with varying degrees of success. Hampered by a lack of investment capital and negligible business acumen, he eventually sold his interest in the Conflict Isles and returned home to England.

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At home, respect had been growing for Henry and his ideas about raising rubber trees, enhanced by his publication in 1908 of his book, "On the Plantation, Publication and Curing of Para Indian Rubber", which told the story of his race against time, from gathering the seeds to delivery at Kew before they rotted.



At the start of the Great War, Henry was poor while his rubber seeds had made millions and indirectly contributed in no small measure to victory. On 3 June 1920, Henry was knighted. The now Sir Henry at last began to reap some financial reward from being the instrument of the British Empire's near monopoly in rubber. The American industrialist, Edgar Byrum Davis, gave him a total of £6000 in 1926 and the governments of the Straits Settlements and Malay States a further £8000.

Sir Henry Wickham died 24 September 1928. Being convinced that he was descended from William of Wykham, Bishop and Chancellor of England in the Middle Ages, he asked to be buried in the village of Wickham, Hampshire, where his perceived ancestor was born. While he had a fine funeral in London, his body was interred in St Nicholas Churchyard in our village.



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