

Pen Portraits
Kenneth Hillier

On the 18th December, 2014 the Society was successful in a bid to purchase a collection of **'Original Victorian Photographs of Meade Falkner Family, Inc John Meade Falkner'**. Sold through eBay, there were nineteen in all. All were identifiable bar four. Also included was an 1882 copy of Charles Gaskell Falkner's Birth Certificate (he had been born in 1864).

The Dorset Record Office in Dorchester holds the typewritten family reminiscences of John Meade Falkner, as well as shorter accounts by his sister Anne Louisa (1862-1933) and his brother Charles Gaskell (1864-1932). John recalled that his mother's anxieties increased with her increasing family. Both Anne and Charles were apparently labelled 'delicate'. John went on to say, *'It is quite possible that they were delicate, but it is equally possible that over-anxious care tended to make a naturally fine constitution more susceptible than it would otherwise have been'*. (One must remember that the eldest child, Robert, had died young). John continued: *'Some years later (I think in 1868) they were photographed by Mr. Pouncy, an old Dorchester tradesman and the possessor of a fine old Dorset name. He was a very pioneer of photography and his pictures were not only remarkable for their date but are remarkable today. He had very pretty portraits of my sister and brother, but they give an impression rather of refinement than 'delicacy' '*. Also included in the photographic session were pictures of Mary Grace Falkner (1856-1901) and William Richardson Falkner (1867-1902). These portraits are among those now in our Society's possession.

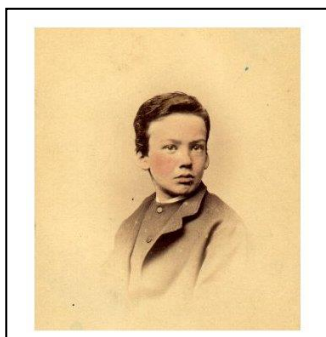
Mary Grace Falkner
1868
Aged 12



**Anne Louisa
Falkner
1868
Aged 6**



**Charles Gaskell
Falkner
1870
Aged 6**



**John Meade Falkner
1868
Aged 10**

**Another
photograph
of JMF**



**William Richardson Falkner
(with Jane)
1868
Aged 1**

John Meade Falkner's poem, *Christmas Day: The Family Sitting*, which was published in *The Spectator* on 22nd December, 1906, contained these heartfelt lines:

There are passed one after the other
 Christmases fifty- three,
Since I sat here with my mother
 And heard the great decree:
How they went up to Jerusalem
 Out of Galilee.

They have passed one after the other;
 Father and mother died,
Brother and sister and brother
 Taken and sanctified.
I am left alone in the sitting,
 With none to sit beside.

His mother, Elizabeth Grace, died on 12th March 1871, only three years



Elizabeth Falkner

after most of the photographs above were taken and when John was only twelve. Most Society members will know, from articles in previous *Journals* that she died, aged forty-nine, of typhoid fever, brought about by drinking water at the Rectory which had been contaminated by a dead rat. In his reminiscences, John recalled that his father 'seemed merely to increase that remoteness from surrounding life...' after his wife's untimely death.

John's father, Thomas Alexander, died in May 1887, aged sixty-eight. That same year both Charles Gaskell and William Richardson went up to Cambridge. Charles read Natural Sciences at Trinity College and William was awarded a Foundation Scholarship in Classics at Queen's College. In 1889 Anne moved to the Slade School of Art in London. John's income by now enabled him to help all three siblings through their education.

The years 1901 and 1902 saw the deaths of John's elder sister Mary and his younger brother William respectively. He wrote on 9th September 1902 to his old tutor Edward Stone: *'Thank you for your kind words about the deaths of my dear sister and brother. Both were entirely unexpected – and, to me, inexpressibly tragic. They are losses that one can never get over. My sister had been for years my closest intellectual companion. She was a woman of quite extraordinary refinement and literary taste, and I relied on her judgement in all literary matters than on that of anyone else. I suppose that the loss of sisters and brothers in middle life is often less poignant than before the family is broken up. But in our case affection had only increased with years – and principally owing to Bohemian habits, I think, and to none of us marrying (until I did so myself at 41) we had never any of us in the*

least lost touch of one another. My brother, who was with us at Manchester, I mean with our firm, died of a sudden & fierce attack of pneumonia, in the heyday of his strength at 34. He was fond of old things, as I am: and was with me through all our Berkshire expeditionizing’.

Thus, John’s poem, written some four years’ later, can be put into context. Charles – the only sibling to marry – outlived John by less than two months, dying on 15th September, 1932. Anne died in the following year.

In the same letter to Edward Stone, John made mention of ‘*my aunt, also Miss Mead – who has been a mother to me...*’ This referred to one of his mother’s sisters, who for years lived at Brunswick Buildings in Weymouth. Two of the photographs purchased on EBay are of the aunts. Years later, John reminisced.



Ellen Mary Mead (born c.1826)
Lucy Caroline Mead (born c.1832)
Charlotte Mead (born c.1830)

‘When I knew Brunswick there were three aunts, Ellen, Lucy, and Charlotte called Aunt Lot for short. They all were dear to me, but perhaps Lucy was the aunt that most appealed to me and to my brothers and sisters. She had no distinct proclivities, I think, whether literary or artistic; she never wished

to be 'anyone' or to lead anyone but took her share in the common good works of the place and was anxious to help young women of all stations. All three aunts were very religious in an old-fashioned sober protestant fashion but Lucy never 'aired' her religion, she just led the irreproachable life of a sweet gentlewoman whose heart overflowed with loving sympathy, and who tried to do all the good she might in her life's journey. She loved children and was much loved by them. Looking back I remember with great gratitude forbearing kindness and many thoughtful and most valued 'presents' which she provided out of straightened means.



Aunt Lot was of a very different type. She had never achieved any great education, and never made any pretence of culture. She was by no means 'soft', much less weak-minded, but she had all the simplicity of a child and imposed on people by a very excess of guilelessness. She had been very good looking in her young days and had received several attractive offers of marriage, which she could not bring herself to accept.

She possessed an immense faculty for hero-worship. If she had been a nun she might have rivalled the adoration of Saint

Charlotte Mead in 1907 Teresa, but having nothing of the nun about her she was content to maintain a sort of hereditary admiration for the Rector (for the time being) of St. Mary's parish church. It would be far too long to give a genealogy of these admirations...but they were easily transferred and gave her infinite contentment through the whole of her long life. She was not strong enough to resist the (sometimes no doubt boisterous) onslaughts of childhood, and we who were too young to appraise the finer and most delightful points of her character, were inclined to make fun of little mannerisms. Her infinite sweetness of temper was very rarely ruffled, but sometimes she did turn on us in a most disconcerting way, which used I fear to add to the piquancy of the situation. If one reproaches oneself for these things now, let us be glad that before very long we gained an appreciation of her real lovable ness, and were able to surround her with every comfort to the end of her long and honoured life.

Aunt Ellen was the dominant factor of the household.



Ellen Mead in 1869



Brunswick Terrace

Aunt Ellen was a person of great character. From the religious standpoint she was an immovable protestant, and carried on the strict traditions which she had inherited from her mother – and from her father. But she was very much more than a narrow religionist. She set herself very high ideals and tried to live up to them. No considerations of earthly advantage would induce her to move a hairsbreadth from the line which she believed to be right. She made no show of religion but religion always governed her actions, it was always by her. Out of her narrow means she gave ‘handsome subscriptions’ to various associations for doing good, and to such church societies as came within her tenets. She did little religious work in the town and confined herself to a Dorcas Society, an institution for helping young women whether in health or sickness, and above all to the ‘Eye Infirmary’. She thought (and most rightly thought) that the sphere of action to which she was more particularly called was the management of her own house.

If to some her religious outlook might appear narrow, she had a very wide and catholic outlook on life. She was a woman of great education and up to the end took pains to be always adding to it. On her had fallen the literary mantle of her [elder] sister Louisa. She enjoyed nothing more than the society of intellectual people, and perhaps liked them all the better if they had done anything. She had a great talent for entering into the interests of others and this made her an excellent conversationalist. She had learnt a great deal of poetry and could quote it aptly and at length. Uncle John who

was a kind but not munificent brother sometimes brought her, sometimes sent her, a new thing that was interesting London. The Ingoldsby Legends had greatly interested him, and one Christmas he introduced them to his sister Ellen...The Legends were one of my aunt's books of which I never tired...My aunts used to get me to recite them in the evenings, and as I had at that time a confidence, not to say a conceit, which very soon after entirely deserted me I was nothing loth and considered the Gay Mousquetaire and Smuggler Bill as my best efforts.

*My aunt was a delightful travelling companion; she threw herself into any excursion, with all the expected and realised pleasure which as a rule is only felt by young people. She always took care to inform herself about the things that were to be seen and her enthusiasm was so great that it kindled irresistibly the enthusiasm of her companions. She was *boute-en-train* of the proceedings and made a success of any 'expedition' to which she was admitted. Wherever she went, or in whatever company, she was always thoroughly at her ease, and had all the self-possession which comes of good breeding and the comfortable certainty that Miss Mead was at least as good as anyone else in the room. At one time there was a well-established Weymouth Society, of which some were permanent residents and others came for a sea-side season. But by sad degrees society died out from Weymouth. As family houses were vacated, no new 'families' came, their places were taken by what were contemptuously called 'lodging-house keepers', a term which was supposed to convey misprision. The last stronghold of Weymouth aristocracy was certainly the Belvedere. The first appearance of a lodging-house in that exalted region, was a bird of ill omen, all said it was the beginning of the end. But in fact it was not the beginning at all, for land-ladies had absorbed nearly all the 'Front'. Brunswick Buildings in which my aunt lived had fallen long before the Belvedere. The houses were the nearest to the sea, they were wonderfully sunny, they were easily managed, if the rent was high higher prices could be charged for rooms in so delightful a neighbourhood, and before Aunt Charlotte died her house was the only 'private residence' as local newspapers delight to style them left in the famous buildings. Then...ambitious land-ladies changed the title into Brunswick Terrace and the old Georgian dignity took wings and flew away.*