



ARCHIVE UPDATE No 51

SOUTH FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE

Elizabeth Scott (nee South) known to her family as Bess was the daughter of Joseph South and Mary Ann, his second wife. Bess was the last of the nineteen children from the two marriages of Joseph. He emigrated to New Zealand in 1874 and settled in Dunedin where Bess was born in 1889. On her death in 1987 amongst the belongings that came into the possession of Judith, her daughter, was a tin trunk containing literally hundreds of family letters and other documents. The archive has been of great assistance to the family research that has been undertaken both in New Zealand and the UK. Recently Judith has forwarded correspondence from Samuel South junior ('Sam') to his New Zealand relatives over many years. There are two letters written to Mary Ann South in 1907, a later 1929 letter to his uncle, Walter South, and several letters exchanged with Bess in 1955 and 1956.



Mary Ann
South



Elizabeth South
'Bess'



Samuel South



Samuel South
'Sam'

The first letter is dated 16 February 1907 to Mary Ann whom Sam addresses as 'My Dear Grandmother'. She had written to let the family in the UK know that Joseph had died on 20 December 1906. It is probable that this was the first contact between them because in his reply Sam goes on to write about his father, Samuel, that '*...my dad who also spoke so feeling[ly] of not being able to communicate with his father and has often expressed surprise at not getting a line. I have met several people that have been to New Zealand ...and one in particular that went to Christchurch on business [and] gave him your name as I had heard years ago that you were somewhere there and he could get no news for me.*' Both in this letter and a later one of September 1907 Sam explains that '*father has several times said he would have a trip to New Zealand*' but his wife was unwilling to travel such a distance and it was '*rather a big thing to leave to your family and go travelling for some months*'. It is apparent that Mary Ann had written about Joseph's business life because Sam replied '*I note your remarks that had Granddad been a younger man when he emigrated he would no doubt have done better. Well this what father has often said and he was pleased to hear that all the others are doing well*'.

When Joseph left the UK in 1874 he was accompanied by Samuel's younger brothers and sister Walter (16), Keziah (11), Arthur (9) and Moses (7). Sam enquired after his uncles and aunt and a 1955 letter to Bess emphasises the feeling of loss felt by his father who '*always spoke with great affection about Little Mo altho' they never corresponded*'. Four of the children by the first marriage remained in the UK. Sam told his step grandmother that '*Aunt Annie*' (Ann Passaway nee South) and '*Uncle Joe*' (Joseph South junior) had died and that '*... there is only Uncle Sol [Solomon South] and Father left alive*'.

He went on to describe the expansion of the small pottery business founded by Joseph South and sold to his son, Samuel, at the time of the emigration to New Zealand '*.....we have a very large business and keep 60 horses going and regularly employ at our White Hart Lane Works about 100 men and boys when boom in building trade was on we at times had over 200 but things at present are very quiet in around London... We are making bricks at Edmonton on the field Uncle Joe had (after his death it was sold by Auction and father bought it)...[it was] a field that dear grandfather dug potatoes in and I think Uncle Joe and father as boys picked them up for him, how strange things go...Some year or so ago we packed a lot of flower pots to Sydney for a London Firm and of course as potmakers we are known all over England as we put goods on rail for all parts*'. In a much later letters to his uncle, Walter South (1929) and Bess (1955) Sam says '*we made bricks for about 25 years up to 1914 when the field was worked out..... if my Dad in 1913 had bought some land I wished him to we should have still been brickmaking*'

To Bess Sam wrote '*I left school a small private one at the age of 12. School I never liked altho' I would learn when I felt like it...My Dad died in 1919 and we split up I took on the pottery and cartage Businesses and 2 brothers came with me and 3 brothers started building on their own and did a good deal until the present war broke out... I should have a trip to Australia before this but business has kept me hard at it especially since my Dad's Death.*' The cartage business was discontinued because '*my sons never interested themselves with the haulage business I closed it down*'

In the early letters Sam tells Mary Ann that *'My dad has nothing to complain of but up to about 6 years ago he worked extremely hard and he has earned the rest he is taking now and I am pleased to say he has no further cause to worry as regards himself or Mother for the rest of their days'*. An explanation for the withdrawal of Samuel(1) from an active involvement with his businesses appears in one of the later letters to Bess *'...Dad got jumped on by a horse when he was about 45 and was laid up for about 6 weeks and [when] he came back never took much interest in the business and left it to me'*. *'Dad has always lived a very quiet and Godly life'* his son remarked and *'...he was a Strict Baptist and had some very narrow views on some things'*.

There are wistful comments about Emma Bright, the first wife of Joseph South , because *'my father never seemed quite clear about his mother and the Bright Family as she died when my dad was quite young'*. However there were contacts and Sam relates *'the first time I went to Barley I was about 17 and my father told me to look up Phoebe Bright this was the mother of the Brights a little old lady. Her son Richard Bright lived opposite (she lived in a little old thatched cottage you had to bend down to get into) and was famous for her parsnip wine and seedy cake. I was warned by my cousin the name of Chuck about it and after drinking a flask full felt the effects of it first time in my life and was tipsy'*. On another visit he saw *'the old Brickfield where Grandfather worked'*.

Frequent comments are made in the correspondence about the pottery business in particular and the state of the country in general. In the 1929 letter to Walter South Sam remarks *'We have a labour government just know and some people are fearful of it...Of course Labour has a lot to learn against[sic] business men and my opinion as regards their policy is to make things dear and hard to get but the man knows his business and sticks to it can still get hold of some money in spite of 4/- [20p] in the £1 Income Tax [but] we keep gradually creeping up in our sales and production'*. The letter continues *'We are now practically built round when we first came here it was all open fields. I bought 20 acres last year to save it from the builders hand and to protect own business as we make a bit of smoke burning from 30/40 Tons coal per week, so that we have enough clay for over 100 years at double the rate of our present production, but of course I shall not live to see the benefit of this and of course that is the way in business one has to provide for future requirements of your family'*.

When writing to Bess in 1955 and 1956 he wrote about the experience during World War 2 and the aftermath *'I shut down my business for nearly 3 years ...but finding the wages etc was £25 a week with nothing coming in and to get going again had to finance the firm and it was charged as capital expenditure and taxed at 10/- in the £1 because I was closed down and [it was] treated as a new beginning...Labour problems are very difficult but I don't interfere with that, getting past it at my age... We could be busy but got no labour and this seems general, plenty come and say they want work but it [is] only the money they want and very little work... The fact is when I am at home and go round own works it worries one to see what little is done for what we pay out... we have raised our prices [but] there is a limit and being old fashioned meet troubles before they come...We get all the coal we want for our works but it is very poor and sends out all black smoke... they are supposed to send experts to tell us and letting us know how to how to avoid smoke but my boys have to attend to this'*.

On more general topics Sam offered the opinion that *'Ever since the end of the war everybody seems unsettled, strikes and troubles will not do us any good, complaints about the cost of living and food prices. You cannot make the young people see that shorter hours and go slow means less production and dearer prices, the more you produce the more you share in but you are told you are old fashioned... However I have not lost faith in our old country and feel that we shall get on our own feet again but we have some hard times to come but don't expect to be here when it arrives... the people are spending [money] right and left in spite of being asked to go a bit steady and be more careful and economic easy come easy go... we are looking forward to our Chancellor's Speech on Tuesday [1955] as to whether we are spending too much and not saving enough. All I can say I only bought one thing on the HP [Hire Purchase] in my life and that is our refrigerator 20 years ago ...never bought anything else but cash and did without things until I could pay down for it.'*

In the last year of his life there was exchange of several letters between Sam and Bess and he was more reflective about his life *'[I] have a good family and pleased with them no lazy ones, rather inclined to take after their father sharp tongued and sometimes a bit cynical but have no malice...However no regrets I have had a full life and a busy one. My good wife says I have got too many jobs. Well I say you cannot have too many. She has been a wonderful mother and wife. Unfortunately she has suffered a lot with three operations over 20 years and Rheumatic Arthritis but wont give in... I should have liked to have gone to your country in fact meant to but war stopped that and now too old to travel'*

In 1929 Sam had written that *'I keep a car and chauffeur so we motor a good deal and we have some lovely spots'*. It was during a motoring tour of East Anglia sometime in the 1920s that Sam and his wife discovered their favourite resort and 30 years later Bess was told *'We spend a good deal of time at a small seaside place Southwold near Lowestoft on the East Coast and we have a lot of friends there who always make us welcome'*

The last letter to Bess was written one month before the death of Sam. Her daughter Judith was in the UK and had visited her English relatives but then left for a tour of the Continent. Sam had plans on her return *'Judith rang me up ... to say she was going to France etc and she would be back in London 2nd week in July and I told her to let me know as soon as she gets back and would ... take her to Barley etc... just lately I have not quite felt myself just it is age... We are going to Bournemouth for a few days 25/5/56 this to our Association's annual Meeting'* The trip to Barley was not to be Sam was taken ill and died on 16 June 1956. The final sentence of the last letter reads:

'I enjoy myself and have some good friends and that counts in life'.

The contents of the letters provide valuable insights into the history of the South family. It is easy to forget that Samuel(1) was only 15 when his mother, Emma, died in 1868 and 23 at the time of the emigration of his father, siblings and step mother in 1874. The desire to have news of his family in their new life is apparent to the extent that a voyage to New Zealand involving several months at sea for the return journey was contemplated. Presumably the onus was on the emigrants to make contact first because their address in New Zealand would be unknown to the UK family. With the premature death of his mother and Joseph's departure it is to be expected that Samuel had limited knowledge of his earlier family.

Comments about the businesses activities of Samuel are evidence of his commercial acumen. Expansion was only possible from 1886 when the small Edmonton pottery was transferred to the site off White Hart Lane in Tottenham. Within a few years the activities embraced brickmaking and cartage in addition to potmaking and the reference to a workforce of 200 employees demonstrates remarkable growth. The price paid at auction for the brickfield of fourteen acres together with the stock and plant remains unknown but the probate of his brother's estate was admitted at the sum of £3,974 and is likely to be substantially represented by the value of the brickfield. It is of great interest to learn that flower pots were not only supplied locally to the nurserymen of the Lea Valley but also nationally by rail and, indeed, internationally.

Despite the success Samuel adopted a comparatively modest lifestyle and seems content to have invested for the future. At the time of his death in 1919 in addition to the pottery and cartage activities he was the owner of 81 houses, retained ownership of the brickfield land, was the owner of River House, Pipers Court and 35 acres of potentially prime building land. He also held the lease of Devonshire Hill Farm. Not all of his business decisions, however, turned out to be correct. There was a boom in both public and private housing during the 1920s and 1930s creating a demand for bricks. If Samuel had listened to the advice of his son and purchased the additional land in 1913 after the brickfield clay was exhausted there would have been a ready market for South bricks.

The injury to Samuel and the transfer of management of the businesses to his eldest son described in the correspondence is significant and probably explains the determination of Sam to have sole control of the pottery on the death of his father in 1919. Samuel had left his estate in trust for the benefit of his wife and ten children. Then aged 43 having started work in the family at the age of 12 and assumed management in his early twenties Sam was reluctant that the fruits of his efforts were to be dissipated rather than accruing for the benefit of his own family. For this reason he raised the money to buy out the other members of the trust and relinquished his interest in the remainder of the estate.

Another aspect of Sam's business life is the dramatic impact of World War 2 on the White Hart Lane pottery. The pottery was forced to close because it proved impossible to shield the glare from the kilns during air raid blackouts. Maintenance and other tasks were required and the weekly wage roll of £25 mentioned suggests that between 4 and 5 men were retained. There are many variable factors in calculating the equivalent value today. One source* provides comparable values in the region of £1,000 based on retail price indices and £3,000 using average earnings. Over the three year closure mentioned in the correspondence a potential outlay equivalent to £150,000 - £450,000 may have been incurred with minimal income from the flower pots that had been stockpiled before the outbreak of war. In addition there would have been other overheads and, of course, his personal living expenses. Together with the start-up costs after the war there can be little doubt that whatever financial reserves had been built up during the successful production enjoyed in the 1930s were severely drained.

The final letter to Bess is especially poignant. Sam was not feeling well but looking forward to the trip he had planned for her daughter to visit Barley reinforcing the common theme of family in the correspondence. From the first letter to the last there

is a continuing wish to strengthen the ties between the two branches of the family and fill the void created by the emigration of Joseph South in 1874.

* <http://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/>

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