

# Thomas Beckwith Spencer

## (1883 – 1970)

Thomas Beckwith Spencer, whose father was employed by Farnhill Parish Council as the local sanitary inspector, was one of six children.

Thomas became an accountant's clerk and lived for a short time in Leicestershire. Here he would meet his future wife's twin brother.


Little is known about his war service but he married Dora Hirth in 1915 and gave his occupation, then, as an iron merchant. The couple would have two children, a daughter, who never married, and a son who became a stage director. Later, Thomas and his wife ran a business in Keighley making iron goods resistant to corrosion.

Eventually the Spencer family went to live in Riddlesden where Thomas would live for the rest of his life – surviving his wife by 14 years and dying when he was 87 years of age.

### Pre-war life

Thomas Beckwith Spencer was born in Farnhill on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1883, and was baptised at St. Andrew's church Kildwick a few months later. He was the fifth child born to Julius and Mary Spencer (nee Whitaker). Julius, Thomas's father had been born in Silsden in 1854; his mother, Mary, was from Farnhill.

The family lived at Oak Bank, a large house on Main Street, Farnhill. Julius was the local sanitary inspector, or "Inspector of Nuisances" as he was sometimes called, and was employed by Farnhill Parish Council.



No Photo  
Available



Oak Bank, Main Street, Farnhill

By the time of the 1901 census, taken when he was 17 years old, Thomas was working as a clerk for an accountant.

Ten years later, the 1911 census showed Julius and Mary living, with a servant, at Oak Bank. All of their children had left home. Thomas, still an accountant's clerk, was recorded living in a boarding house, in Leicester. Amongst the other boarders was Herman Hirth, a leather merchant (see later).

NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP to Head of Family.	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX.	PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE.	PROFESSION or OCCUPATION of Persons aged ten years and upwards.	BIRTHPLACE of every person.
1. Louisa Robinson	Head	69	Widow	Boarding House Keeper	Leicester, Leicestershire
2. Rose Tyler	Daughter	48	Single		Leicester, Leicestershire
3. William Cartwright Burgess	Boarder	32	Single	Stationer Manager	Leicester, Leicestershire
4. Thomas Beckwith Spencer	Boarder	22	Single	Accountant Clerk	Leicester, Leicestershire
5. Herman Hirth	Boarder	21	Single	Leather Merchant	Leicester, Leicestershire
6. Maurice Arthur Beauforth	Boarder	20	Single	Leather Merchant	Leicester, Leicestershire
7. Edith Mary Peasey	Boarder	40	Single	Sailor	Leicester, Leicestershire
8.					

Extract from the census return for 147 Evington Road, Leicester.  
Amongst the boarders are Thomas Beckwith Spencer and Herman Hirth  
Used under licence from the National Archive

Thomas must have returned to the village shortly after, as by 1913 he was a member of Kildwick Albion Cricket Club.

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**Kildwick Albion v. Cowling Second.—Played at Kildwick.**

**KILDWICK ALBION.**—G. Sunderland, b Dale, 7 ; J. Kitson, b Dale, 1 ; H. Foster, b Dale, 5 ; T. Hargreaves, c and b Barker, 5 ; A. Hargreaves, c Hardy, b Laycock, 2 ; L. Roberts, b Dale, 0 ; T. B. Spencer, c Laycock, b Kitson, 5 ; H. Pollard, b Dale, 11 ; F. Pollard, run out, 5 ; A. Kitson, not out, 8 ; B. Holmes, c Barker, b Laycock, 1 ; extras, 3 ; total, 53.

**COWLING SECOND.**—P. Smith, b J. Kitson, 0 ; R. Boocock, c Roberts, b J. Kitson, 11 ; L. Hardy, b w, b J. Kitson, 10 ; M. Laycock, st Hargreaves, b A. Kitson, 5 ; A. Barker, b A. Kitson, 1 ; F. Laycock, b A. Kitson, 0 ; A. Dale, c Foster, b J. Kitson, 1 ; A. Shackleton, c and b J. Kitson, 0 ; G. Barker, b J. Kitson, 5 ; E. Kitson, not out, 0 ; extras, 0 ; total, 32 (only batted ten men).

Score card for Kildwick Albion vs. Cowling Seconds –September 1913  
(By kind permission of Craven Herald)

The team won the local league Second Division cup that year.



The Kildwick Albion Cricket Club Second Division cup-winning team, 1913.  
No key to this photograph is known to exist and so it is not possible to say which of the players is Thomas Spencer.  
From the Farnhill & Kildwick Local History Group archive



## Thomas Spencer during WW1

There is no doubt that Thomas Beckwith Spencer volunteered to serve in WW1 – otherwise his name would not have been included in the Farnhill Parish Council Roll of Honour. However, it has not been possible to say when, where, or how he served.

No newspaper reports of the period mentioned him as a member of the armed forces, or included his name in any list of the men who were serving.

On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1915 Thomas Beckwith Spencer married Louise Johanna Fredericka Dorothy Hirth at St. Andrew's Church, Kildwick. She signed the register as Dora and Thomas gave his occupation as an iron merchant.

Dora Hirth was the twin sister of Herman Hirth, with whom Thomas had shared lodgings in 1911. Both her parents were German, which – if it had been common knowledge – might have been the cause of some conversation.

The couple set up home in Morton Banks, on the outskirts of Keighley, although this did not stop Thomas from playing an active role with Kildwick Conservative Club. In both 1918 and 1920 he was the club's auditor.

The couple's first child, a son called Beckwith, was born on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1916 and was baptised at St. Andrew's Church Kildwick a little over a month later.

## Post-war life

The couple's second child, a daughter they named Freda Mary, was born on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1919 and was, like her brother, baptised at St. Andrew's Church Kildwick a couple of months later.

The 1921 census records the family living in Keighley, with Thomas an employer involved in the production of "Barff – Iron Goods" at the Midland Works. This was probably a factory in Dalton Lane, Keighley, making iron goods "rustless" by means of the Bower-Barff process.

**Note:** The Bower-Barff process was invented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and involved coating iron with magnetic iron oxide powder in the presence of superheated steam, under pressure, followed by treatment with carbon monoxide. The resulting blue-grey coated metal was rendered resistant to corrosion.

According to an 1891 edition of the science journal "Scientific American" (Volume 64, number 16), Keighley was recognised as a centre for the Bower-Barff treatment, which it described as "an admirable process".

Thomas and Dora ran this business until at least 1940.

Thomas's father, Julius, died in 1931 and was buried in Kildwick graveyard in the plot occupied by the remains of his youngest daughter, Nellie, who had died, aged two, in 1891.



Lower section of Julius and Nellie Spencer's gravestone.  
Photograph courtesy of Keighley and District Digital Archive

Thomas's mother, Mary, died in 1938.

By the time of the 1939 register, created when ration cards were being distributed at the start of WW2, Beckwith, Thomas and Dora's son, had left home – he would have been aged 23. Freda, their daughter, was most probably still living at home and working on a poultry farm, assisted by her mother.

Either during or immediately after the end of WW2, the Spencer family moved to a house called "Four Winds" on Ilkley Road, Riddlesden. It would be Dora and Thomas's home until they both died.

In May 1947 Beckwith Spencer flew from London Airport to New York. A document completed at the time records that:

- He paid for his passage himself.
- His occupation was Stage Director.
- He was intending to stay with a friend, H.D. Swander at Grosse Point Farms, Michigan.
- His intended period of stay was five weeks (although this was crossed out).
- He was in the USA on holiday and planned to leave from New York in the July.

**Note:** Research carried out by the project suggests that H.D. Swander may have been a member of staff at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, 20 miles north-west of Grosse Pointe Farms. In 1948 Swander was a signatory to a letter from the university staff opposing the Mundt Anti-Subversive Activities Bill, which required the registration of all members of the Communist Party.

In the 1960s, the name H.D. Swander appears on a staff list for the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The same name appears as the author of a number of commentaries on the works of Shakespeare.

In 1949 Beckwith's name appeared on a passenger list for the liner Queen Mary, travelling between New York and Southampton.

Dora Spencer, Thomas's wife, died on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1956.

After his wife's death Thomas continued living at "Four Winds" with his daughter, Freda, until he died, at home, on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1970. He was aged 87.

## Postscript

Freda continued living at "Four Winds" until at least 1977. In 1974 the house was converted into two flats; she occupied one of them.

There is no record of the death of Beckwith Spencer anywhere in the UK; neither is there any record of the death of Freda Mary Spencer anywhere in Yorkshire.

Neither of the children of Thomas and Dora Spencer appear to have married and it is unlikely that there are any living descendants.

## Thomas Beckwith Spencer – a life in summary

**Born:** 12/4/1883, Farnhill

**Baptised:** 24/6/1883, Kildwick

**Died:** 15/12/1970

**Aged:** 87

**Home address:** Four Winds, Ilkley Road, Morton Banks

### Parents

**Father:** Julius; 6/5/1854, Silsden; d. 2/7/1931, Farnhill

**Mother:** Mary (nee Whitaker); b. 17/7/1852, Farnhill; bapt. 12/9/1852, Kildwick;  
d. 29/4/1938, Farnhill

**Married:** 3/8/1876, Kildwick

### Siblings

Millicent; b. 1/1/1877, Farnhill; m. George Sunderland, 16/9/1905, Kildwick; d. 5/8/1954

Charles; b. 18/11/1878, Farnhill; bapt. 4/1/1879, Kildwick; d. 11/1/1879, Farnhill (aged 7 weeks)

Charles Augustus; b. 13/7/1880; m. Annie Robinson, 11/7/1906, Lawkholme;  
d. 1971, Staincliffe (Registration district)

Norman Francis; b. 30/9/1881, Farnhill; d. 9/5/1932, California, USA (buried in Kildwick)

Eleanor Mary (Nellie); b. 5/2/ 1889, Farnhill; d. 14/4/1891, Farnhill

### WW1 service

Service details not known.

### Relationship to other volunteers

Although it is unlikely that they knew it, Thomas may have been distantly related to John Spencer Whitham. John's grandmother was called Elizabeth Spencer; and she had a brother called Beckwith.

### Marriage

**Wife:** Dora Hirth; b. 4/2/1890, Forest Hill, London; d. 7/8/1956, Riddlesden

**Date:** 26/6/1915, St. Andrew's Kildwick

### Children

Beckwith; b. 20/6/1916; bapt. 30/7/1916, Kildwick

Freda Mary; b. 4/6/1919; bapt. 3/8/1919, Kildwick

