

Larking John Seager (1840 – 1905) : Engineer and entrepreneur

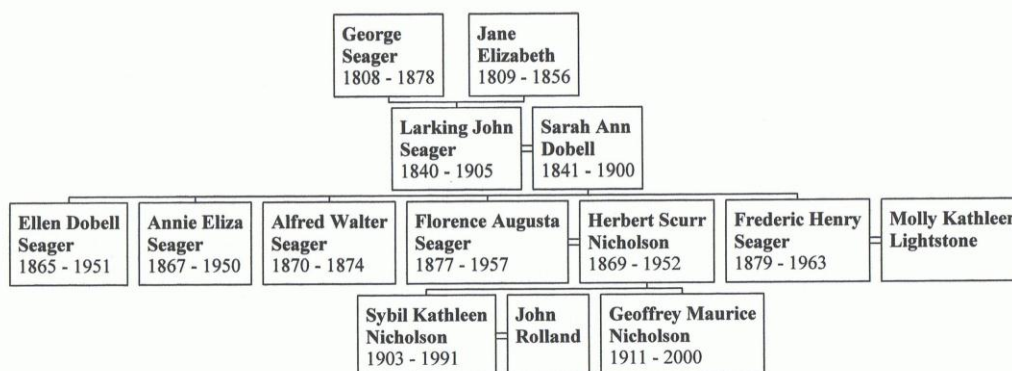
I came across the grave of the splendidly named Larking John Seager in East Hill Cemetery when recording monumental inscriptions. Intrigued by the name, I decided to find out more about his life. He was one of Dartford's Victorian entrepreneurs, who founded a company that brought employment to the town for over one hundred years.

Larking was born in 1840 in Maidstone, the fifth of ten children born to George and Jane Seager. The 1851 census shows the family living at St Faith's Street, Maidstone. It consisted of George (aged 41, a carpenter), Jane (41) with their children Emma (18, a dress maker), George (16, a carpenter), Ann (13), Larking (10), Thomas (8), Henry (6), Ellen (4) and Julia (6 months).

Sadly, Jane Seager died in 1856 when Larking was 16. In 1861 the widowed George Seager (aged 52, a builder) was living at 11 Church Street, Maidstone with his children Ann (22, housekeeper), Larking (20, an engine driver in sawmills), Henry (16, an assistant in sawmills), Julia (10) and Charles (7).

In 1864 Larking married Sarah Ann Dobell at St George's Church, Gravesend. Larking was aged 24, his wife (who was born in Bermondsey, the daughter of a grocer) was 23. His occupation is given as engineer on the marriage register. About this time Larking moved to Dartford to work for J & E Hall's engineering company. His first child Ellen Dobell Seager was born in 1865, to be followed by Annie Eliza in 1867, Alfred Walter in 1870 (he died in 1874 aged 4), Florence Augusta in 1877 and Frederic Henry in 1879.

Hourglass Tree of Larking John Seager



(a more detailed family tree may be found in the "seager42" database on RootsWeb's WorldConnect Project website)

The 1871 census shows Larking and his family living in Shepherds Lane, Dartford. There was Larking (30, an engine fitter at an iron foundry), Sarah (30), Ellen (5), Annie (4) and Alfred (6 months).

In 1876, Larking made the bold move of starting up an engineering business in Overy Street, Dartford. It was on land now occupied by Wickes and its car park. The business of J&E Halls was in decline at this time, with aging management and equipment, which may have been a factor in Larking's decision to leave. The following advert appeared in the Dartford Chronicle dated September 2nd, 1876.

L. J. Seager

Is desirous to inform Mill-Owners, Proprietors of Machinery, Farmers and others that he has opened a factory for the purpose of carrying on the business of an Engineer, Millwright and Founder. It has been urged, during his past experience of 12 years with the firm Messrs J&E Hall, that a business of this character, where work could be turned out at a moderate cost, combined with first-class workmanship, has been found wanting. He now appeals to those who have patronage to bestow their esteemed favours, and assures them that every possible satisfaction shall be given to work entrusted to him.

Sidney Keyes (Dartford Historical Notes, 1933) records that “*The trade carried on consisted of general engineering, the manufacture and repair of steam engines and machinery for paper, cement and flour mills, etc. A few years later a younger brother, Mr Charles Seager, joined him and took over the accountancy and commercial side of the business.*”

By 1881, Larking, aged 40, an engineer employing ten men and seven boys, was living at 19 Highfield Road, Dartford with his wife Sarah Ann (30) and children Ellen (15), Annie (14), Flossie (4) and Frederic (2).

The family moved to Overy House, 22 Overy Street near the engineering works. The house no longer exists, the site is where the YMCA roundhouse building now stands. A picture of the family was taken about 1890 in what seems to be the back garden of Overy House. It shows clockwise from left, Florence (seated), Ellen, Larking (both standing), Sarah, Annie (both seated) and Frederic (lying on ground). They are all well dressed.



From Dartford Borough Museum (photographer T K Biddle)

The 1891 census shows Larking (50, a mechanical engineer), his wife, children and a governess at 22 Overy Street. His daughter Ellen (25) is listed as a teacher of music.

I have a copy of a memo written on Seager's company stationery in 1895. It was headed "L.J. & C. Seager, Engineers, Millwrights & Founders, Dartford. Steam cylinders, cold water and air pumps, and taper holes in crank heads, rebored in their places".

In 1898 the Dartford Urban District Council Technical Education Committee was formed and Larking became a member of it. In 1901 his firm subscribed £20 to the Dartford Technical Institute Building Fund.

Larking's wife Sarah Ann died in 1900 aged 59. In 1901 Larking (59, a mechanical engineer) is listed as a widower. Also living at 22 Overy Street were his children Ellen (35), Annie (34), Florence (24) and Frederic (22, a mechanical engineer and draughtsman).

Florence Augusta Seager, Larking's youngest daughter, married Herbert Scurr Nicholson in 1902 in Dartford. His other two daughters did not marry.

Charles Seager (Larking's brother and business partner) and his wife Mary lived at 13 Summerhill Road, Dartford and had two daughters and three sons. The house is still there. Mary died in 1900, the same year as Larking's wife. Charles died in 1905, aged 51, and Larking 17 days later, aged 65. The following item appeared in the Dartford Chronicle

DEATH OF MR L. J. SEAGER

Within a few days both the partners in the firm of L.J. and C. Seager, iron founders of Dartford, have passed away. The death of Mr Charles Seager, after a short illness, was followed by that on Tuesday of his brother, Mr Larking John Seager. Both were highly esteemed in the town, and much sympathy is felt for the family in their bereavement. Mr Larking Seager had been an invalid from paralysis for some time. He had rallied to some extent, but there is little doubt that the sad news of the unexpected death of his brother contributed to his relapse.

Manifestations of sympathy were general in the town on Saturday, the day of the funeral, flags being hung at half mast. The employees joined the cortege to the Dartford Cemetery, where the funeral service was conducted, in the presence of a large number of sympathisers, by the Rev. F. Bryan Marshall. The chief mourners were : Mr F. H. Seager (son), Mr C. R. Seager (nephew), Mr H. S. Nicholson (son-in-law), Mr J. Jewell (brother-in-law), Mr F. C. Dobell (nephew), Messrs W. M. Newton, T. G. Baynes, W. Wood, T. Williamson, R. Bennett and J Turtle. Messrs J. J. Hewitt, C. C. Light, E. Snowden, and other members of the Emulation Lodge of Freemasons were present, the late L. J. Seager being a member of the lodge.

Larking was buried near the boundary wall in the north-west section of East Hill Cemetery. His gravestone is still in good condition and is inscribed :

Headstone

In loving / memory of / SARAH ANN CHAMPION / the beloved wife of / LARKING JOHN SEAGER / who departed this life Feb 17th 1900 / aged 59 years / "So he giveth his beloved sleep." / No one knows how much we miss her, / none but aching hearts can tell, / Earth has lost her, heaven has found her, / Jesus hath done all things well. / Also the above named /

LARKING JOHN SEAGER / who passed peacefully away Oct 3rd 1905 / aged 65 years / “He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” / Also of their daughter / ANNIE ELIZA SEAGER / who died Nov 28th 1950, / aged 83 years.

Footstone

In loving memory / of / ALFRED WALTER, / son of LARKING JOHN and SARAH ANN / CHAMPION SEAGER / who died Nov 22nd 1874 / in the 5th year of his age / “Jesus said suffer little children to / come unto to me”

The grave of his children Ellen (d 1951) and Florence (d 1957) is nearby. They are buried next to Larking's brother Charles and his wife Mary.

Probate on Larking's estate was granted to Frederic Henry Seager, engineer, and Ellen Dobell Seager, spinster. The value was £5,494 (equivalent to about £2.4M now, by comparison with average earnings).

A limited company, Seagers Ltd, was formed in 1907 with Frederic as one of the partners. He married Molly Kathleen Lightstone in 1932 and died in 1963. Larking's grandson Geoffrey Maurice Nicholson (1911-2000) became a director of the company in 1952 and chairman in 1965. The Dartford factory closed in 1980 and the firm went into liquidation in 1985.

If you have any further information on Larking Seager and his family, please contact me on PhilT42LQS@Yahoo.co.uk

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Sources

- Notes from Chris Baker (Dartford Borough Museum)
- The local studies collection at Dartford Library for The Dartford Chronicle newspaper and *Dartford Historical Notes* by S K Keyes.
- www.freebmd.org.uk for Births, Marriages and Deaths
- www.ancestry.co.uk for census returns
- Probate records from The Principal Probate Registry, 42-49 High Holborn, London