Chapter 2
Family Background and Public Life

Abstract Details are given about Harmer's family background and public life, including his education; homes in Norwich and Cringleford; marriage to Mary Lyon and their five children, John, Sidney, Edith, Thomas and William, John and Thomas following their father into the family business, Sidney becoming a zoologist and William a consultant surgeon; Harmer's career in the family clothing business; interests in geology and palaeometeorology; membership of various geological societies and the Royal Meteorological Society; scientific awards; public duties in Norwich, Alderman (1880), Magistrate (1884) and Mayor (1887-1888); membership of two church congregations, first the Congregational Church, Norwich and later St Peter's, Parish Church, Cringleford. Born in Norwich in 1835 he died in Cringleford in 1923, aged 87; correspondence with Charles Darwin.

Keywords Family · Homes · Children · Clothing business · Public affairs · Church matters · Geological and palaeometeorological interests

2.1 Introduction

Esse quam videri, 'To be, rather than to seem (to be)', from the essay, *On Friendship* by the Roman statesman, Cicero, was the motto adopted by Harmer's family; this maxim provided a guiding principle that Harmer followed during his long and productive life.

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Harmer was a descendant of a long-established Norfolk family. Born in Norwich on 24 April 1835 he died in Cringleford, near Norwich on 11 April 1923, aged 87. Harmer was privately educated and in 1849 was awarded a "School Certificate" for 'Progress in General Knowledge'.

At the age of 15 he joined the family business in Norwich (one of the oldest clothing manufacturing firms in the country) and began work at the firm as a clerk to his father, Thomas. At this time Harmer lived with his parents at 1 Newmarket Terrace (since re-named Albert Terrace) off the Newmarket Road, Norwich. In due course, he was appointed director of the firm.

In 1856 Harmer became a member of the Congregational Church in Princes Street, Norwich. Four years later he married Mary (third daughter of Adam Lyon of Downham, Cambridge) and they moved into a rented house at Grove Place, Heigham in Norwich. They had five children, all born in Heigham, namely, John Alexander (born 27 October 1860), Sidney Frederic (born 9 March 1862), Edith Mary (born 5 October 1864), Thomas Bertrand (born 15 November 1867) and William Douglas (born 25 August 1873).

The eldest son, John, joined the firm in 1879 and by assisting with the running of the business gave his father more time to pursue his interests in geology and public affairs. John who lived at Boyton House, Ipswich Road, Norwich became a co-partner of the firm in 1897; he died on 17 November 1925, aged 65 and, like his father, was buried at St Peter's Church, Cringleford.

The second son, Sidney, became a distinguished zoologist, President of the Linnaean Society (1927–1931) and was awarded the Linnaean Medal in 1934. He was also Director of the Natural History Department, British Museum from 1919 until his retirement in 1927. Sidney lived at *The Old Manor House*, Melbourn, near Royston in Hertfordshire. He was invested as a Fellow, Royal Society (F.R.S.) and, in 1920, a Knight Commander, Order of the British Empire (K.B.E.). Sidney died on 22 October 1950, aged 88. Sidney's son, Russell Thomas Harmer, joined the firm in 1919, became a partner in 1925 and was the 5th generation to be involved in the business.

Harmer's only daughter, Edith, did not marry and in 1923, freed of her duties at *Oakland House* on the death of her father, moved to France where she lived for the rest of her life in Paris. The third son, Thomas joined the firm in 1888 and, like his brother John, became a co-partner in 1897. The youngest son, William, became a consulting surgeon at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, specialising in diseases of the throat and nose. He was a pioneer in the treatment of throat cancer by radium at the Radium Institute, London. During the Second World War his son, Squadron Leader Michael Harmer, was in charge of surgical wards at the R.A.F. Hospital, Hoylake. William died in 1962, aged 89 (Fig. 2.1).

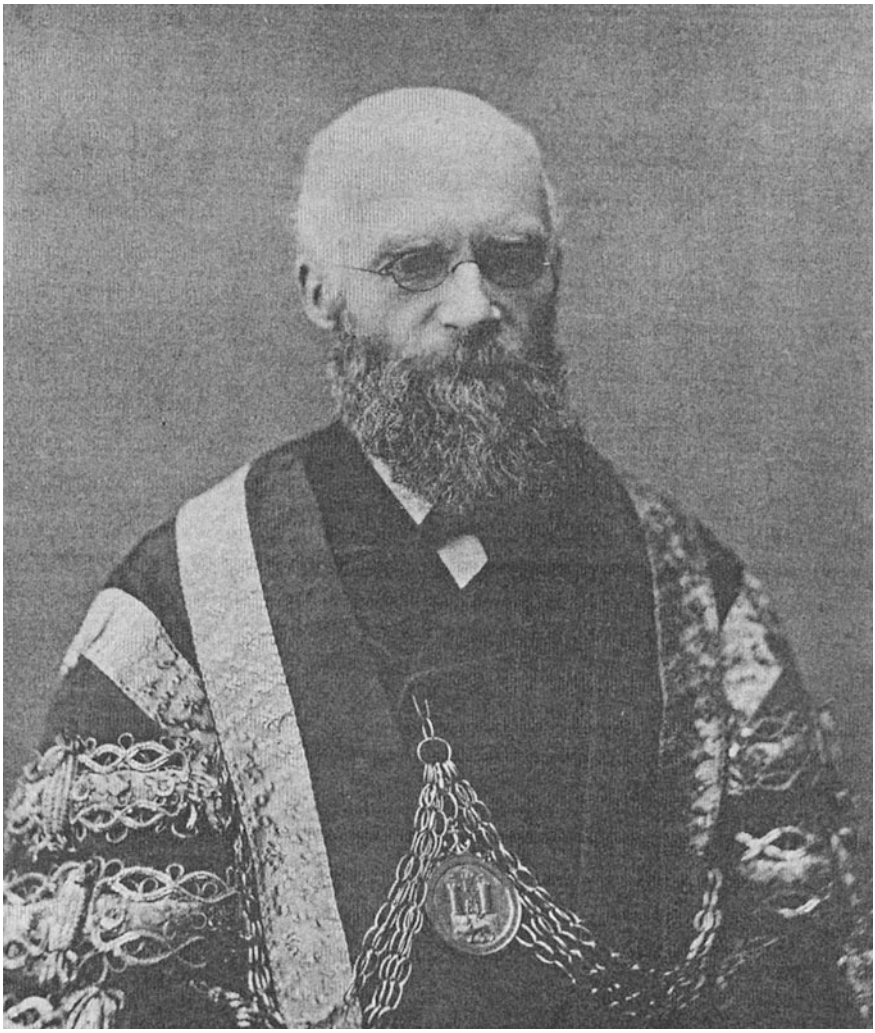


Fig. 2.1 Frederic W. Harmer, Mayor of Norwich, 1887–1888 (Norton 2013)

Besides being a successful businessman Harmer was scholarly and well-travelled, making repeated journeys to mainland Europe where he was able to visit many geological museums in Denmark, Belgium, France and Italy. His scientific lifestyle was maintained by the success of the family clothing business. However, Harmer was also an outstandingly public-spirited figure who played an active role in Norwich affairs, serving as an Alderman in 1880, a Magistrate in 1884 and Mayor in 1887–1888.

None of this meant that his interest in the firm had lessened in any way and not long after his Mayoralty, Harmer, realising the need for more spacious factory

premises, decided that as the original factory in Bethel Street was becoming too small for the expanding business bought a much larger site in St Andrew's Street.

As with the building of his home in Cringleford, *Oakham House* (see below), Harmer turned to the architectural skills of the Boardman family, this time with the son of Edward Boardman, Harmer's friend and fellow church member. Having recently qualified as an architect, the younger Boardman joined his father's business in Norwich and drew up plans for the new factory which was opened in St Andrew's Street in 1890. Known as St Andrew's Steam Clothing & Hosiery Works, it became the main base of the firm's future activities until it was severely damaged by bombing during an air raid in 1943.

During the late 19th century several large houses were built in Cringleford by wealthy Norwich businessmen who wished to move out of the city into a more rural setting. In about 1872–1873, Harmer purchased about sixteen acres of land adjoining Newfound Lane, now known as Colney Lane, Cringleford. He commissioned Edward Boardman, the City architect, to draw up plans for the erection of a large house on this site.

In 1876, Harmer and his family moved from their former home in Heigham to the newly-built *Oakland House* in Cringleford (home village, incidentally, of the present writer) (Fig. 2.2). Domestic and ground staff were engaged, the former usually numbered about five and the latter included eight gardeners. In the same year, a small, single storey lodge was built at the entrance to the drive on Colney Lane; this building still stands today in an extended form. A coachman's house built in the same year also stands in Colney Lane. Harmer kept a number of horse-drawn carriages and the sale catalogue for the auction of family possessions after his death listed a Morris Brougham, a Landau, a Victoria and a shooting cart. Harmer's will also indicated that he owned a motor car which he used extensively on his geological expeditions in the early 1900s.



Fig. 2.2 *Oakland House*, Cringleford, near Norwich (Cringleford Historical Society 2006)

Harmer was one of the founders of the Norwich Electricity Company. He was also a founder of the Norwich Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and was, for some years, its vice-president. He was a trustee of the Norwich Grammar School, now known as the King Edward VI, Norwich School. Harmer and Sir Peter Eade, M.D., F.R.C.P. (Mayor of Norwich 1883, 1893 and 1895) were jointly responsible for the layout of Chapel Field Gardens, the gardens surrounding Norwich Castle and the acquisition of Mousehold Heath.

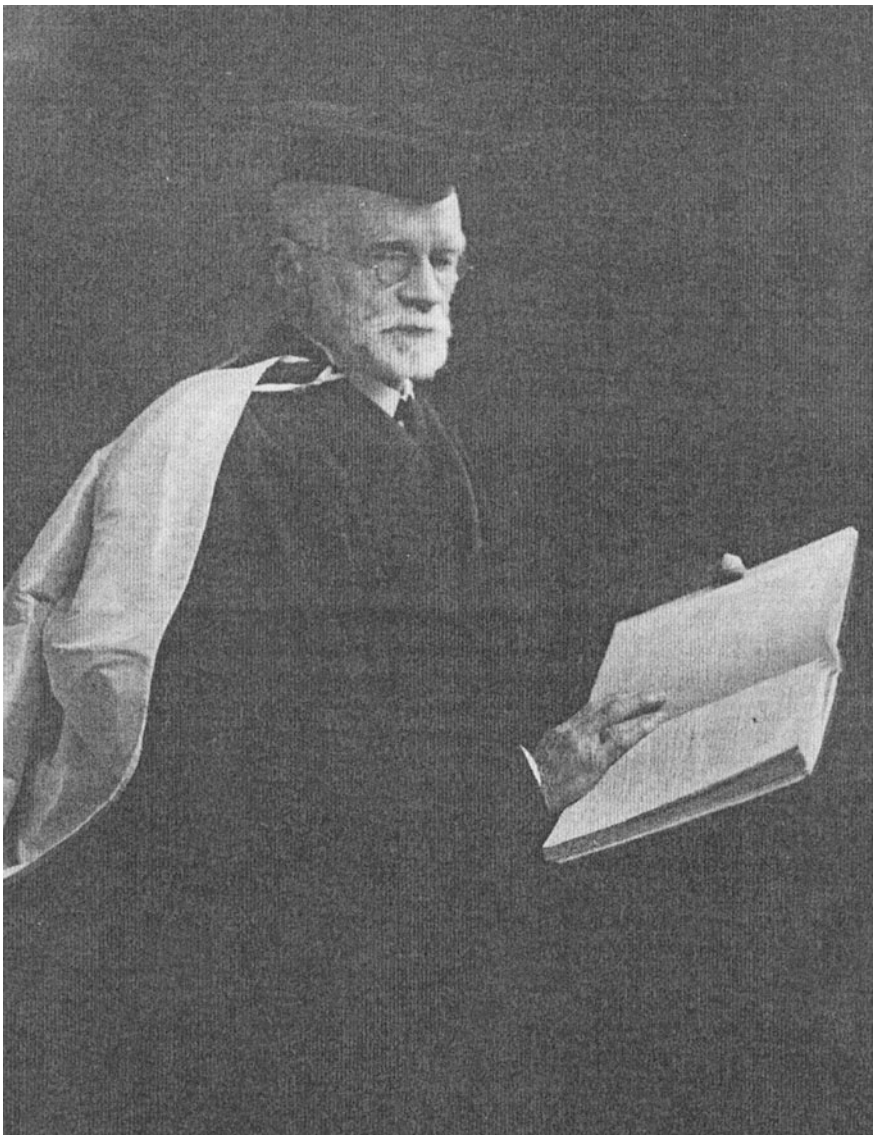


Fig. 2.3 Frederic W. Harmer awarded Honorary M.A., University of Cambridge, 1918 (Norton 2013)

From a young age Harmer was an active member of the Norwich Geological Society and in 1864 met the geologist Searles V. Wood Jun. (1830–1884). Harmer was a founder member of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society, was its president 1877–1879 and subsequently a vice-president. He was also a member of the Norfolk & Norwich Horticultural Society.

He was a member of the council and elected a Fellow of the Geological Society of London, 1896–1900; awarded the Murchison Medal, 1902; a member of the council of the Palaeontographical society, 1878–1882 and 1905–1906 and in 1918 was awarded an Honorary M.A. by the University of Cambridge (Fig. 2.3). He was also a member of several geological societies in mainland Europe.

Harmer became an authority on the geology of East Anglia. Through his geological studies he became a pioneer of palaeometeorology and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society.

Following their move from the city to Cringleford, Harmer and his wife joined the congregation of the Parish Church, St Peter's where, for a number of years, he acted as honorary organist—a man truly of many talents. Harmer also took an active role in the village life of Cringleford and was chairman of the Parish Council for 20 years. He was president of the Patteson Club in the village and was probably instrumental in the Cringleford Horticultural Society coming into existence as a section of the Patteson Club. In the 1920s, it was customary for the Annual Show of the Society to be held in a garden of one of the larger properties. Harmer gave permission for the third show to be held in the grounds of *Oakland House*. This event was planned to be more ambitious than on previous occasions with the Red Cross Band being engaged to play, and tents and tables hired for the Bank Holiday Monday but, unfortunately, it apparently poured with rain during the afternoon!.

Behind the house sloping down to the river Yare were several acres of open ground which Harmer developed into a large walled garden containing a conservatory, greenhouse and vinery. The central feature of the garden, known as 'the park', was an avenue of ancient oak trees after which the property was named. The 'wild' part of the garden was particularly beautiful in the spring when massed clusters of flowers such as snow flakes and daffodils were in bloom. There was also a water garden with an iron gate leading onto a bridge: a water feature in this part was an important and practical ornament since it provided ice for the icehouse. Alongside the river there were water meadows and a wild waterlogged alder carr which Frederic drained and planted with bulbs (Fig. 2.4).



Fig. 2.4 Inferred view of Harmer's garden at *Oakland House*, Cringleford, near Norwich (P680279, CP13/050. Reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey © NERC. All rights reserved)

Harmer's gardens would have provided a most beautiful setting for his home; however the area today is covered with a maze of houses and roads.

2.2 Charles Darwin

A fascinating connection between Harmer and the eminent naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) came to light when a signed original letter from Darwin to Harmer was recently discovered in the archives of the Ipswich Museum, Suffolk.

Down Beckenham
Kent
August 29th 1872

Dear Sir
I am very sorry that you have become involved in a troublesome controversy on my part. The sentence given by Mr Lyon in inverted commas is an invention, and it is a most unjustifiable proceeding on his part. He might of course have given any interpretation which he pleased of my words, but he had no right to put the words in inverted commas. I may add that I have given in the later and more especially in the 6th Ed. Of the Origin many cases showing how common generated forms (that is forms partaking of the characters of existing defined groups) are in all the same ancient formations. I have always been curious to hear who wrote Homo Vs. Darwin. Mr Lyon can hardly have the disposition of a gentleman, for in one place he states that I speak the truth solely because I should be found out if I lied. I hope that you will soon be able to bring your controversy to an end and I remain in haste.

Dear Sir
Yours faithfully
Ch. Darwin

It is believed that this letter is in reply to one written to Darwin by Harmer who apparently had entered into a newspaper controversy with W.P. Lyon, author of the publication 'Homo versus Darwin' published in 1872, in which Lyon (an Independent Minister from Tunbridge Wells) ascribed to Darwin the saying: 'natural selection is a kind of god that never slumbers or sleeps'.

Harmer did not believe that Darwin had made this statement and had written to Darwin to this effect.

In the letter housed in the Ipswich Museum Darwin is interested to learn that Lyon is the author of 'Homo versus Darwin' which was subtitled 'A judicial examination of statements recently published by Mr Darwin regarding the Descent of Man'. This was originally published anonymously in the style of a court case transcript but was apparently based on actual correspondence between Lyon and Harmer.

In a reply to Darwin's letter of 31 August, Harmer explains that he was sucked into the controversy when he wrote a letter to the *Daily Press* (possibly a Norwich paper) replying to a published letter by a Dr Bateman of Norwich, who claimed to have proved the 'fallacy of Darwinism'.

Bateman called in Lyon to support him and at first Harmer wanted nothing more to do with Lyon. This was seen by Lyon as a collapse of Harmer's case and Harmer could then not help being drawn into the controversy.

Again in his letter of 31 August, Harmer, himself a religious man, apologises for the attacks Darwin had received and continued to receive in the name of religion by its 'self constituted champions' (Friends of the Ipswich museums 2013).

This incident illustrates how well informed Harmer was about scientific matters of his day and his active response in dealing with any ill-judged comments.

2.3 Death of Harmer

Following the death of Harmer on 11 April 1923, the proceeds of his property were left, after the payment of certain bequests and expenses, to his five children in equal shares. Edith was given first choice of her father's furniture and personal effects, paying a price settled by a valuer. Subject to her first choice, the four sons were also able to purchase similar items on the same basis. Harmer bequeathed £2,000 each to Edith, Sidney and William, his three children who had not become his co-partners in the family business.

Harmer bequeathed his scientific collections to his son, Sidney. He also left a modest annuity to his friend, Andrew Bell, for his help with the publication of scientific work and the care and distribution of natural history collections and scientific books.

Sidney replied to a letter of sympathy from the eminent geologist, Arthur Woodward, F.R.S.

> 30, Courtfield Gardens,
> S.W. 5
> April 18, 1923
>
> My dear Woodward,
> Will you accept my cordial thanks for your sympathetic letter. In his later years my father had been cut off from his scientific friends, but it was always a satisfaction to him to know that his work was appreciated. He had often been indebted to you (as we all have) for assistance in bibliographical matters, and he often spoke to me of the help he obtained from you when he wanted it. His work was practically completed, because although there is still something to be published by the Palaeontographical Society he had passed for press the Part which is to appear in due course, and he had completed the MSS, with one Plate, of what he had intended to be actually the final instalment. His scientific work was a great resource to him, and he was engaged with it almost to the end.
>
> Yours very sincerely,
> Sidney F. Harmer

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