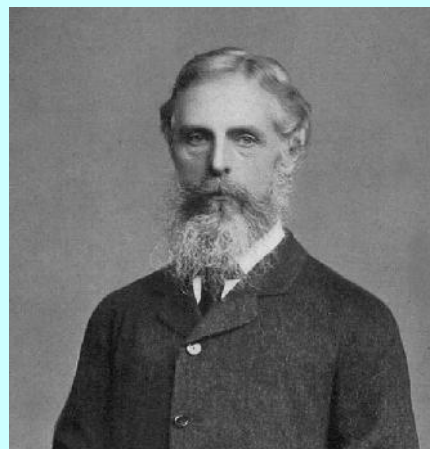


WAS HE REALLY ALICE'S WHITE KNIGHT?

Augustus George Vernon Harcourt 1834 – 1919

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If Augustus George Vernon Harcourt is remembered these days it is usually only by a few historians of science interested in his pioneer work in physical chemistry, being the inventor of a 'safe' chloroform inhaler, a standard light source bearing his name or perhaps even for his work on the purification and testing of coal gas. It is seldom for his connection with the '*Through the Looking Glass*' story by Lewis Carroll.



The son of Admiral Frederick Vernon Harcourt, he was born in London 24th December 1834. His formal education started at Cheam Prep School before Harrow and Balliol College, Oxford where he read natural sciences. Following which he was appointed the Lee's Reader in Chemistry based at Christchurch. It was at Christ Church that he first met Charles Dodgson, the mathematician, better known as Lewis Carroll the author. Charles Dobson's interests in the rapidly developing sciences lead him to spend many an hour in the laboratory at Christchurch with his friend.



George Vernon Harcourt was elected as a Fellow of the Chemical Society of London in 1859 and to a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1868. He appointed to the Council of the Royal Society in 1878 and delivered the Bakerian Lecture in 1895.

1880 he became the Vice-President of the Chemical Society and was its President for two years from 1895, remaining a Vice-President until his death at St Clare, Ryde 23rd August 1919.

He was also a very active member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (now known as the British Science Association) and was president in 1875. The prime mover for the Association and often considered its founder in 1832 was his uncle the Reverend William Vernon Harcourt.

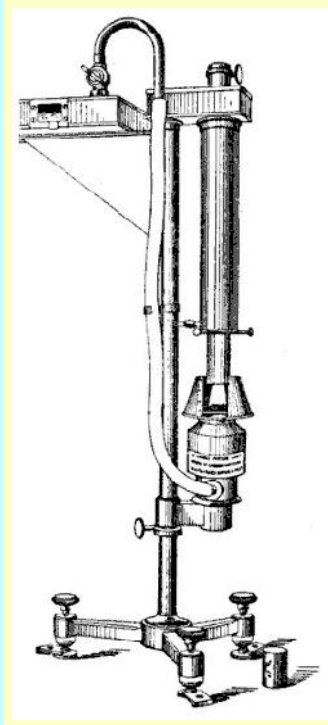
His principle work was with his friend and mathematician William Essen for confirming the chemical '*law of mass action*' independently of German chemist.

At the turn of the century many undergoing operations were to be very grateful to Vernon Harcourt for the invention of his chloroform inhaler. Confident of its safety during its evolution he offered its use to his daughter during childbirth – she declined – and delivered healthy twins.

One of the interests of Augustus Vernon Harcourt was the purity of coal gas and he developed a sulphur test for the industry known by his name. In 1872 he was appointed a metropolitan Gas Referee the same year that he married Rachel Mary Bruce. She was the daughter of the Home Secretary in the Gladstone government. The marriage resulted in two sons and eight daughters. The family first lived at Cowley Grange, Oxford, the site became a teacher training college next to St Hilda's. Augustus was the son of Admiral Frederick Vernon Harcourt

The whale sperm oil candles used to measure light output from gas lights was not as consistent as his own standard lamp invention in 1877 of the Vernon Harcourt Pentane Lamp of 10 candles. The air saturated with pentane (C_5H_{12}) distilled from petroleum – coiz oil.

The lamp was in use until replaced by the more stable and easier to use electric bulbs. The author remembers it from the physics syllabus he studied in 1955 for A-level.



In 1827 the original St Clare set in some thirty acres of grounds which had been completed during 1823 was acquired and modified by the third Baron Lord Henry Vernon. It was inherited by the forth Baron George Charles in 1835 and then by Col. Francis Vernon Harcourt in 1835.

The Colonel entertained Queen Victoria with Prince Albert in 1843 and again during 850 when the grounds were opened to the public. In 1862 Princess Alice used the house for her honeymoon. The Queen again visited the site unexpectedly for a picnic in July that year but failed to check if the Colonel would be at home.



Augustus George Vernon Harcourt became the owner in 1880 of what was known then as St Clare Castle. Many house of the period on the Island such as Ryde Castle and Steephill Castle were constructed with mock battlements.



In his younger days, when going on the river with the Liddell children, Charles Dobson would have known that Augustus would be inheriting a 'castle' but not the title which had run through the family for many generations. With his sense of humor it does not demand much imagination to think Charles Dobson may well have used 'Wight Knight' to address his friend. From there the idea of a story in which Augustus is set in a chess game in not all that improbable. It needs to

be remembered that the story was not published until many years later when the description of Augustus would have been more appropriate.

St Clare Castle was burnt down between the war years. The photographs with thanks to the Historic Ryde Society archive shown the house as it was in it heyday.

It is not difficult to imagine that Charles Dobson's humour might well have lead to him jokingly addressing Augustus as *"the Wight Knight"*, for even in their early years at Christchurch when they were both escorting the Liddell children on the famous river trips. Two things would have been known – the first that Augustus would inherit a 'castle' and the second that he definitely would not inherit the family title that could be traced back for centuries. Is it beyond imagination that the Wight Knight turned into a white knight and the idea of setting one of the stories in a chess game?

They both knew Henry George Liddell, the Dean of Christchurch, and his family well. It appears that Augustus was often with Charles Dodgson on the legendary boating trips and picnics with Alice Liddell. Downstream they would row to pink chalet type boathouse at Nuneham Courtney which belonged to the Harcourts. It may well have been here, sheltering from the heavy rain, that the *'Mad Hatters Tea Party'* was first told. The Dodgson diaries for the summer of 1862:

"Harcourt and I went to see if the Dean's children could come on the river today or tomorrow"

"After dinner Harcourt and I went to the Deanery and stayed to plat a game with the children"

"In the afternoon Harcourt and I took the three Liddells to tea and I had to go on with my interminable fairy-tales of Alice's adventures"

Alice Liddell was born 4th May 1852 and would have been ten at the time of the boat trips. Lorina and Edith her two sisters were both older than her. The photograph of Alice among many others is said to have been taken by Charles Dobson.



By the time the story of *'Alice through the looking Glass'* was published in 1871, Augustus was then 37. He had acquired many of the characteristics noted in his later life'

The long report of his death and funeral in *The Isle of Wight County Press* on Saturday 30th August 1919 mentions that:

"Although not an athlete he was active in games and the white-haired tutor gave students often more than expected in tutorials."

It goes on to say:

"His long rigorous life was also a full and happy one, he followed the path he had chosen with never a thought for profit or self advancement. If he had an ambition it was a desire to serve others and to feel that he was loved by his friends."

It is known that he could be at time rather absent minded and perhaps a little eccentric. His kind, friendly but fiery eyes caught the attention of those he met.

Two verses from the chapter “*It’s My Own Invention*” in “*Through the Looking Glass*” tie in well with the many obituaries written.

*I heard him then, for I had just
Completed my design
To keep the Menai Bridge from rust
By boiling it in wine
I thanked him much for telling me
The way he got his wealth,
But chiefly for his noble wish that he
Might drink my noble health.*

*Of that old man I used to know -
Whose look was mild, whose speech was slow
Whose hair was whiter than the snow,
Whose face was very like a crow,
With eyes, like cinders, all aglow,
Who seemed distracted with his woe,
Who rocked his body to and fro,
And muttered mumblingly and low,
As if his mouth were full of dough,
Who snorted like a buffalo -
That summer evening long ago,
A-sitting on a gate."*

Augustus Vernon Harcourt had advised on how to prevent the bridge from rusting!

One further coincidence:

“... down the hill and over the little brook and then you’ll be a queen”

Until quite recently along the boundary between the St Clare and Appley Estates at Ryde ran, certainly in winter, a little stream. Charles Dobson, Lewis Carroll when staying on the Island as a friend of Augustus the Vernon Harcourts no doubt would invite him over to St Clare Castle.

There is just too much circumstantial evidence to dismiss the claim of the *Wight Knight*, even if some would insist that all the Lewis Carroll characters are composite.

But what would you like to *believe*?

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