

Ely's Germans – the Selbs and Fischers

At the turn of the century two German families were living and working in Ely as watch and clock makers at the shop known as "Fishers & Co" after its original German founders Ferdinand, Kaspar, Charles and Robert Fischer. Ferdinand and Kaspar were brothers and Charles and Robert were their cousins. The four Fischers had set up the business as early as 1881 (when they appear in the census in Ely). Charles and Robert, who were single, lived in the shop on the Buttermarket, while in 1901 Kaspar (1850) lived on Downham Lane with his German wife Anna and his children Albert, Mary and Margaret. The three children were all born in Ely. Ferdinand Fischer (1851), lived in St Mary's Street with his German wife Caroline.

The 1901 Census shows Robert Fischer (1859 Germany) with Robert's young cousin Hermann Fischer (1884 Germany) and Ernest Joseph Selb (1880 Germany) living in their house cum shop on the Buttermarket. There is also a live-in housekeeper, Hannah Preston from Shouldham.

In 1908 Ernest Selb married Frances Emily Brasier (1885) in Cambridge. Frances and her family were originally from Worcester, but had moved to Ely in 1887 and were living in the Gallery – her father was a gardener. In 1909 the couple's first son, Frank Hermann, was born.

In 1911 the family in the house on the Market Square / Buttermarket consisted of Ernest, Frances and Frank along with Ernest's brother Fritz Selb (1876 Germany) who was also a watchmaker. There was also a visitor, Marie Selb (1874 Germany) – Marie was the wife of Franz Selb (1870), also a watchmaker, and was normally living in Felixstowe. Still boarding with the Selbs was Robert Fischer. The Selbs later moved to live on New Barns Road.

On 26th February 1914 Franz Carl Selb, then apparently resident in Ely, became a naturalised British citizen. (Franz *may* actually be the same person as Fritz Selb.)

As the War broke out the people of Ely naturally became suddenly suspicious of the foreigners within their midst who appeared to be traitors and potential spies for the German enemy. Three days after War was declared Ernest Selb felt it necessary to make a statement to the Cambridgeshire Times affirming that he had not expressed support for the German army and was always loyal to his adopted country of England.

Orders for the internment of enemy aliens of military age were issued in October 1914. On 28th August 1915 the brothers Ernest and Fritz Selb were made civilian internees, spending the War at the civilian camp at Lofthouse Park, Wakefield, Yorkshire. They remained there until 20th April 1918.

The internment of their resident Germans did not lift the shadow from Messers Fishers and Co as the Ely Standard of 23rd March 1917 records that the Ely Tribunal wanted to close down the watchmaker's shop because of its German links. It was only the fact that the suspect staff (i.e. Ernest and Fritz) were already interned which saved the shop from being forced to close. *Despite this, the records of the Ely Urban Tribunal show that Cyril Caton, (watchmaker of Forehill) and George Williams, (watchmaker of Market Street) both tried to evade military service on the grounds that this would give an unfair advantage to the only other watchmakers in Ely which was a German business. This was clearly inaccurate!*

The Selbs were still regarded with suspicion when they were released from internment and returned to Ely; a newspaper report of January 1920 from a meeting of the Comrades of the Great War shows the ex-servicemen discussing the return of the Germans. Comments included: "some towns have not let the Germans return" and, while some ex-servicemen couldn't find accommodation, "this man has one of the best houses in Ely". The Comrades sent a letter of protest to the Isle of Ely's Member of Parliament, Captain Colin Coote, about the presence of Germans in the city.

In late 1920 Ernest and Frances had a second son whom they named Charles.

In the Ely Standard of 31st March 1922 it was advertised that Messers C & E Selb had relinquished the watchmaking business known as Fishers and Co which was being taken on by Messers A Fisher and C A Coleridge of Plymouth. "A Fisher" was in fact Albert Fischer, son of the original founder Kaspar, but himself a native of Ely.