

OVERBURY AND THE GRASSHOPPER



Family crests and emblems are not usually very interesting. There are crowns and lions and that usually represent some sort of association with a King or Queen at one time or another. The emblem of the family who bought Overbury – Mrs. Bossom's relatives the Martins - is wholly different. It is a grasshopper and its association with the family is through banking.

The origins of the Grasshopper's association with banking goes back to the 1540s when Sir Thomas Gresham (1519-1579), regarded as the father of British banking, became involved in financing trade as well as arranging funding for the Monarchs of the day which in his period included Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I. The grasshopper emblem came from his family crest and was used to identify his banking premises in Lombard Street, to which he moved in the 1550s.

Lombard Street in London has famously been associated with banking since the early 14th Century as it was in 1318 that the Italian Florentine Society of the Bardi set up their goldsmith and banking business in Pope's Head Alley. Following Sir Thomas Gresham's death the banking operations were taken on by a series of goldsmith financiers and the major financial operations of the Grasshopper continued to involve the financing of the Exchequer. Sadly, all the banking records were destroyed by the Great Fire in 1666, so only brief details are currently known prior to that date. But by the late Elizabethan times this area was the wealthiest in the City of London and Lombard Street was lined with the mansions of rich merchants.

The Martin family became associated with the banking operations of The Grasshopper at the end of the 17th Century.

In 1699, Thomas Martin, the eldest of four Martin sons, came to London to work as a clerk at the Grasshopper in Lombard Street. Thomas Martin's father came from a line of yeoman farmers who were based to the north of Evesham but who had risen to become mayors of that town. It is not known how young Thomas was introduced to the City, but the likelihood is that Thomas's aunt, Anna Martin, who had married a London merchant, created the introduction. She took very great care of her nephews and their future following the early death of both their parents.

With her help, the four orphaned young men grasped their opportunities with both hands: over the years, the first, third and fourth sons became partners (almost in sequence) in the bank, thereby making their fortunes. The second one became a barrister. All four also went on to become MP's, for Wilton, Gowran (in Co. Kilkenny, Ireland), Tewkesbury and Cambridge respectively.

It was, however, the third son, John, who decided not to lose his links with Worcestershire and therefore took on a lease of an Elizabethan manor house at Overbury in 1723. Tragedy struck, sadly, and the house burnt down in a fire in 1738, so John had to build the Georgian house that the family still occupy today.

Over the next six generations, the Martin family firmly established their name in the banking world and played a full part in the City and also in Parliament. Within the family there were 13 MP's in all, most representing Tewkesbury for a total of 100 years between 1741 and 1885.

At the end of the First World War in 1918, the Martins Bank business was still relatively small and it merged with the Bank of Liverpool. Although the latter bank had a large regional branch network and more momentum than Martins, the Bank of Liverpool needed membership of the London Bankers Clearing House that Martins brought with the merger. Thereafter, the enlarged banking business in London was hugely changed, particularly with the head office in Liverpool dominated by shipping families. As a result, the Martin family's influence was diluted, although the important Lombard Street Grasshopper office remained well represented by the family until the early deaths of Christopher Holland-Martin in 1960 and Edward Norman-Butler in 1963 and Martins Bank was bought by Barclays in 1968.

Barclays respected the Grasshopper and Liverpool histories and to begin with the Grasshopper emblem remained swinging outside ex-Martin branches and was printed on cheques. But inevitably common branding was imposed in due course and the Grasshopper sign was phased out. The final break with history came in April 1981 when the 68 Lombard Street branch was closed and some 425 years of continuous banking activity on the same site came to a halt, leaving just the large gilded Grasshopper still hanging outside No. 68. Happily the Grasshopper lives on at Overbury; it can be seen on Overbury Cricket Club's kit and by the Estate signs marking the permissive paths on Bredon Hill as well as on the Nursery School's name.