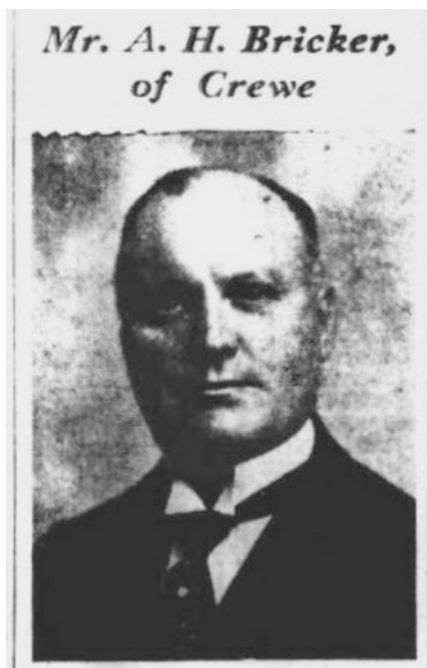


## Albert Henry “Harry” Bricker

Harry Bricker was Mayor of Crewe in 1938-39 and a well-respected local councillor in South Ward from 1928 to 1946. He was the landlord of the Earl of Crewe Hotel, on Nantwich Road, for over four decades. A renowned sports personality, Harry served as a Director of Crewe Alexandra Football Club and channelled much of his passion for football, bowls, billiards and horse-racing into charitable endeavours, especially the Crewe Memorial Hospital.

### Early years



Albert Henry (“Harry”) Bricker was born on March 17, 1884<sup>i</sup>, in Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire. His father, James, was at the time a coal porter who originated from Kingston in Somerset; his mother Emily (née Porch) came from Bath and was a woollen weaver. The 1881 census shows them living at Tory Rank in Bradford on Avon.

James and Emily married in Q2 1880<sup>ii</sup>, in Bradford on Avon. By the time of the 1891 census, Harry (as he is recorded then) is one of six children with two brothers (Samuel, b.1882; Herbert b.1891) and three sisters (Annie, b.1881; Florence, b.1886; Adelaide, b.1889). Two other brothers were born later (William, b.1895; Frank, b.1897).

Harry’s whereabouts at the time of the 1901 census are unclear. A later biographical note in the Liverpool Echo (in November 1938) suggests that he was employed by the age of fifteen, and spent some period in “gentlemen’s service”.<sup>iii</sup> We do know, however, that his first marriage took place in 1910 when he married Julia Lowe at the church of St. Martin, Ashton upon Mersey. The marriage register records Harry as Albert Henry Bricker, the proprietor of the Raven Hotel, Church Stretton. The marriage took place on April 28.<sup>iv</sup>

Bricker and his new wife moved to Middlewich where they ran the Kings Arms Hotel on Queen Street. They are recorded here in the 1911 census, with no children.<sup>v</sup>

It was whilst at Middlewich that Bricker’s passion for sport, especially football, became a matter of public record.<sup>vi</sup> His interest started at a young age, back in the town of his birth where he was an ardent fan of Bradford Town Football Club.<sup>vii</sup> Soon after arrival at Middlewich, he



**1 The Raven Hotel, Church Stretton - Harry Bricker's first venture as a licensed victualler. The building is now private apartments.**

founded the Kinderton<sup>viii</sup> Junior Football Club, whose inauspicious start in the Crewe and District League with just 3s 9d to its name belied its later success - three years later they were cup winners, with a balance of £120.



2 Bricker Cup, winners' commemorative medal 1922, awarded to Arthur Sant. Images © Debbie J Owen & reproduced by kind permission of Constance Sant.

It was here too that the **Middlewich Bricker Football Cup** was first introduced, in 1913 – a charity fund-raising competition and trophy still being played for as recently as 2006. The winners of the trophy would each be awarded a commemorative medallion as a keepsake.

Harry Bricker made at least one other significant contribution in his adopted town. As a result of the national coal strike of 1912, many Middlewich salt and chemical works were on short time or temporarily stopped, during which times men employed in those works

went unpaid: the effects were felt until well into 1913. Harry was joint Secretary of the Middlewich Childrens' Aid Society which provided food for the poor children of the town for six months. His contribution was later acknowledged by the town, with the awarding of a gold medallion.

## Crewe

After nearly four years in Middlewich, Harry and Julia moved again, this time to Crewe. Harry had applied to take over the Earl of Crewe Hotel, on Nantwich Road. This imposing building had been built, and subsequently run, by John Bebbington in 1896. Bebbington died in 1910 and the hotel had continued with his widow Catherine as Licensee. Harry Bricker's application to take the place on as Licensee in 1914 became mired in a remarkable argument between the brewery, Greenall Whitley (who had purchased the Hotel for £14,250 in March that year), and the Crewe Licensing Justices chaired by the formidable Dr Hodgson. The case ended up in the High Court and on July 1 the bench, comprising justices Lawrence, Lush and Atkin, found against Crewe's Licensing Justices<sup>ix</sup> and so by early July Harry Bricker finally took over the Earl. As an aside, whilst the High Court hearing was underway, Mr Rigby Swift (King's Counsel for the Brewery and Harry Bricker) described his client "to be a man of the highest character".

The whole affair had lead to the Earl being shut for some seven weeks: its weekly taking at the time was around £70, equivalent today to approximately £8,000. Undaunted by these early troubles, Harry and his wife threw themselves into the undertaking, and soon proposed alterations to the hotel including provision of new lavatories, rearrangement of the bar and drinking areas and provision of a new side entrance.<sup>x, xi</sup> The Hotel thrived under Bricker's custodianship and had further alterations in 1916 (new wash house)<sup>xii</sup>; 1920 (alterations including pavilion)<sup>xiii</sup>; 1930<sup>xiv</sup> and 1934<sup>xv</sup>.

In 1920 Harry became a Director of Crewe Alexandra Football Club, one of five of the eight directors at the time who by trade were licensed victuallers, and he served in this capacity for 18 years (including as Vice-Chairman for a while). In the same time span he went on to help form the Crewe [Memorial] Hospital Bowls Competition; was President of the South Cheshire Bowls League and Vice-

President of the Crewe and South Cheshire Motor Club; owned several racehorses (notably Love Letter, a winner at Manchester, Cheltenham and Uttoxeter) and a greyhound called Wave who won many races in 1927; and became a dedicated friend of the Crewe Railway Veterans' Institute.



3 Miss Barbara Bricker presents the Bricker Bowls Cup, August 31 1932

The Earl of Crewe Hotel had a splendid bowling green and Harry, perhaps unsurprisingly, won the pub's own competition in 1923: Harry had introduced another "Bricker Cup" for his Hotel's bowls competitions so it must have provided some amusement for those involved when he won his own trophy! Five years later, The Earl was the venue for the 1928 British Crown Green Bowling Championship, when Lancashire defeated Staffordshire 460 to 380.<sup>xvi</sup>

Bowls was a major feature of the hotel throughout Harry's time there, with many matches and competitions arranged for the purpose of charitable fund-raising. Whilst the Crewe Memorial Hospital was a regular beneficiary, Harry's generosity extended beyond the town as well. In January 1918 the Secretary of the Hotel's Bowling Club, Mr. W. Eaton, received a letter of thanks from the Secretary of the Audley Council Minnie Pit Disaster Relief Fund, in respect of the £35 10s raised by the hotel.<sup>xvii</sup> In the same spirit, Harry was often responsible for or a contributor to fund-raising activities for Crewe Alexandra, a club frequently in substantial debt throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xviii</sup>



4 The Earl of Crewe Hotel, Nantwich Road, begun in 1896 and completed in 1897 by John Bebbington. The fabulous lantern tower was removed in later years: behind it and not visible in this view is a roof terrace. The bowling green was to the left behind the trees. (Publisher unknown).



Harry's other sporting interest was billiards, and he was reputedly friends with many of the world's best players including Tom Reece, Willie Smith, Melbourne Inman and Joe Davis – all of whom were introduced to Crewe, and played there, by Harry.

Bricker never forgot the friends and associates he'd made whilst in Middlewich, many of them young men who joined-up in 1914. Shortly after the outbreak of war, a number of these men called on Harry and Julia at the Earl of Crewe to bid them a goodbye. Harry promised them that when they returned, he and Julia would entertain them – either in Crewe or Middlewich. Good to his word, on Saturday 22 June 1919, Harry did exactly that for nearly 100 men demobilised from the army and navy. The afternoon comprised a bowling handicap competition with prizes followed by tea. In the evening there was a smoking concert – that staple of late Victorian and Edwardian life – with live music by Jack Platt, W. Horabin and L. Townley, with Frank Winby at the piano.<sup>xix</sup>

## ***Politics and civic engagement***

Albert Henry Bricker ventured into civic affairs when he stood in 1928 as a candidate for the Progressives (another name for Conservatives) in Crewe's South Ward. He was elected with 1,834 votes, taking over from Frederick Thomasson.

Harry stood again in the local election of 1931. His electioneering advertisement of 1931 makes interesting reading, brief as it is.<sup>xx</sup> In it he promises to "enhance the importance of the town" whilst carefully considering expenditure. He appeals to the voters – "Never before in the history of Crewe has it been more essential than at the present time to put into practice sound Municipal Administration with regard to economy". He was duly re-elected with 2,358 votes.

### **HONOUR FOR BRADFORD MAN.**

#### **Mayor-Elect of Crewe.**

A former resident of the town, Mr. A. H. Bricker, is to be Mayor of Crewe, and the congratulations of his many friends in Bradford will be accorded him upon his great honour.

Mr. Harry Bricker is the son of the late Mr. James Bricker, who, when an employee of the Urban Council, was killed when a trench collapsed in Bridge Street. His mother resides in Middle Rank, and his brother, Mr. Frank Bricker, who is employed at Messrs. Spencer, Moulton & Co.'s, is a well-known amateur footballer, who was formerly a professional for Crewe Alexandra.

Mr. Bricker, the new Mayor, left Bradford some 35 years ago, and after experience in London and other centres became licensee of the King's Arms Hotel at Middlewich, where he identified himself with all kinds of sports and will be remembered there for his gift of the "Bricker" Cup, a trophy given for annual football competition. He went to Crewe 25 years ago, and as "Mine Host" of the Earl of Crewe Hotel he is a popular figure in the town. He was for 18 years a member of the Board of Directors of the Crewe Alexandra Football Club. He is also interested in many other kinds of sport. He will be assisted in his mayoralty by Mrs. Bricker, who has had a considerable knowledge of public work.

5 From the Wiltshire Times  
20 August 1938

His contribution to Borough affairs as a councillor appears to have been relatively unremarkable but he was clearly popular in his ward, being twice re-elected in 1934 and 1937. The outbreak of war in September 1939 led to the suspension of local council elections for the duration of hostilities. Harry Bricker therefore continued as a South Ward councillor until the first post-war local election in 1946. By this time the Progressives were a spent force: Harry stood as an Independent but lost, in part because he became ill mid-way through campaigning in October,<sup>xxi</sup> bringing to an end his eighteen years as a local councillor.

It was in 1938, however, that Harry received the highest civic accolade when he was elected Mayor, in August. In keeping with the spirit of the age, the appointment was widely reported in the press – this was still a time when Crewe and its affairs were matters of great interest nationally. Not surprisingly, the Wiltshire Times was pleased to report of the "Honour for Bradford Man" whilst the Staffordshire Evening Sentinel noted that

"His sporting interests have made him one of the best-known men in Crewe and he will enter

upon his year of office in November with the support of all the community.”

He assumed the role from November 9, with his wife Bessie serving as his Mayoress. Harry chose Alderman Thomas Kelsall, whom he succeeded, as his deputy. As was customary, he celebrated his election with a ball for some 600 of the town’s citizens that night.

Harry’s mayoral year coincided with the worsening political situation in Europe and ultimately the outbreak of war in September 1939. Local authorities were required, under the Air Raid Precautions Act of 1938, to create and maintain their own ARP services and in September that year Harry was appointed Chair of the Crewe Borough Council ARP Committee.



**6 First parade of the newly-formed 95th Squadron Crewe Air Defence Corps, 27 May 1938**

salute by the 95<sup>th</sup> Squadron of Crewe, Air Defence Cadets Corps in Market Square watched by a crowd of 2,000.<sup>xxii</sup>

Crewe was a critical centre of war-effort manufacturing, not just with its railway industry but more pertinently as the home of the new Rolls-Royce factory built for the production of Merlin aero engines. On July 14 1939, Sir Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for Air in Winston Churchill’s Cabinet visited the factory accompanied by Mayor Bricker. Immediately prior he had inspected the 95<sup>th</sup> Squadron, of whom he noted in particular their “smart appearance”.

As was customary for the position of Mayor, Harry’s year in office included several notable engagements and in July 1939 he was received in Paris by Monsieur Émile Faure, the newly-elected President of the Paris Municipal Council, where he signed the

In February 1939 Harry launched an appeal to the “townspeople of Crewe and to all others who have their country’s safety at heart” for help in forming a squadron of 100 air defence cadets.

A number of fund-raising activities were organised, including a dance at the Town Hall on April 25 where Harry and Bessie were amongst the 200 who took part.

This was remarkably effective: by May, Harry was able to take the



**7 Mayor Harry Bricker accompanying Secretary of State for Air Sir Kingsley Wood on a visit to Crewe's Rolls-Royce Factory, July 14 1938**

city's gold book on July 6.<sup>xxiii</sup> The visit included a tour of the Great War battlefields of France and Belgium and on July 7 Harry laid a wreath at the Arc de Triomphe on behalf of the citizens of Crewe. M Faure said of the visit, in which Harry was joined by Bessie and some 140 representatives from Crewe, many of who were ex Servicemen, *"In this critical period of international anxiety it is good to feel that we have good friends on this side of the Channel."*

His love of sport and athletic endeavour saw the introduction of a third Bricker Cup in 1939, given by Harry as Mayor when Crewe's auxiliary firemen competed in trailer pump wet, and hydrant dry, drills in Crewe. It's unclear whether this trophy was awarded subsequently.

### ***Family life... and the man himself***

Harry and his first wife Julia had three children: Florence Barbara (b.Q4 1913<sup>xxiv</sup>), Marjorie (b. Q4 1914<sup>xxv</sup>) and Gerald Wilson (b. Q1 1922<sup>xxvi</sup>). Julia Bricker died, aged just 40, in 1922. Harry remarried just over a year later, in the spring of 1923, to Bessie Hilton. Bessie was widely regarded as one of the most genial and effective Mayoress's the town had known, whilst Harry was known as a jovial and friendly man for whom the term "Mine Host" could not have been more fitting.

When he finally retired from the Earl of Crewe Hotel, Harry's son Gerald took over the business. (Anyone expecting a lesser character than Harry would have been disappointed – Gerald, who had fought in the Battle of Taranto, would remonstrate robustly with anyone who addressed him as Mr Bricker... "It's Lieutenant Bricker, Royal Navy, to you!" he would bellow. Behind the bar he had mounted a wooden propeller, perhaps from one of the Fairey Swordfish planes he flew in that battle, along with a dramatic painting of the battle itself.)

In conclusion, it's clear that Albert Henry Bricker – known universally as "Harry" – was a larger-than-life character whose personality and reputation was widely known locally, regionally and nationally. He was generous, especially in respect of poor and deprived children (he ran a children's holiday camp at Walgherton, amongst his many efforts), and a veritable tour-de-force in sporting circles. Jovial, popular and well-liked would seem to be a fitting summary.

Two anecdotes in respect of Harry Bricker are worth repeating here.

On March 30 1928 the Earl of Crewe Hotel Bowling Club held their annual dance, with over 150 members in attendance and the then Mayor and Mayoress as guests. Earlier in the day, one of the most remarkable Grand National races ever to take place had seen the 100-to-1 outsider, Tipperary Tim, win in a field of 41 horses from which only two finished. That night in Crewe's Town Hall, Barbara Bricker (Harry's only daughter) led the dancing wearing the actual colours worn in the race by Tipperary Tim's rider William Dutton. Harry certainly knew how to capitalise on his sporting connections, for sure!

Whether or not an obituary was ever published on Harry's death is unclear but Frank Hill, one-time player-manager of Crewe Alexandra between 1944 and 1948, said this of Harry Bricker in an interview with The People in October 1964:

*"Every club I've joined needed rebuilding, but no club was quite as run down as my first... Crewe. They used to tell at Crewe of a Director called Harry Bricker, a publican and generous supporter of the*



*club. Generous? He had to be. Often, Harry's most eager customers on match days were club officials whispering desperately over the bar: 'Harry, it's happened again'! And Harry, already suspecting disaster, would answer 'Not again'? 'Yes,' the officials would say, 'the gate won't cover the wages'. So Harry, with a weary look but no words, would pull out a £20 or so to keep Crewe going for another week."*

Albert Henry Bricker died on April 6 1963 and was buried in Coppenhall Cemetery on April 10. His grave is marked by an impressive headstone which makes mention of both his term as Mayor of Crewe and his association with the Earl of Crewe Hotel.

He rests with both his wives, Bessie who died December 17 1956 and his first wife Julia who died January 16 1922, with the simple affirmation "Reunited".<sup>xxvii</sup>

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*Text and images (except where shown) © Mike Christelow 2019*

*Banner picture: Harry Bricker and a gentlemen's party at the Ardlui Hotel, Loch Lomond. Harry is 5<sup>th</sup> from the right on the front row. © Anthony Churchill*

*My thanks to Peter Kent for clarifications regarding Harry Bricker's political career; also to Peter Ollerhead for details of the Bricker headstone; Kerry Kirwan (Middlewich Heritage Trust) for details about Middlewich and the impact of the 1912 national coal strike; Debbie Owen and Constance Sant for permission to use the Bricker Cup medallion images; and finally, Anthony Churchill for the Ardlui Hotel group picture.*



**8 Harry Bricker's headstone, Coppenhall Cemetery  
(Grave No. 2212-13)**

<sup>i</sup> As recorded in the 1939 Register (Ref: RG101/4007E/003/16 Letter Code: LEPJ)

<sup>ii</sup> England & Wales marriages 1837-2005, Wiltshire, Bradford on Avon District, Vol.5A, p.185

<sup>iii</sup> Liverpool Echo, 9 November 1938, p.4 col.2

<sup>iv</sup> Cheshire Diocese of Chester, Parish Marriages 1538-1910, sub-category Parish marriages item 2 p.99

<sup>v</sup> Census reference RG14PN21706 RG78PN1293 RD447 SD4 ED4 SN229

<sup>vi</sup> Harry wasn't alone in the Bricker family in his sporting interests: his brother Frank (b.1897) played football for both Crewe Alexandra FC (1921-23) and Macclesfield Town amongst others.

<sup>vii</sup> See Wiltshire Times, 11 November 1939, p.8 col.3

<sup>viii</sup> Kinderton was a historical name of a township in the parish of Middlewich

<sup>ix</sup> Runcorn Guardian, 3 July 1914, p.2 col.2 (*and many others*)

<sup>x</sup> Nantwich Guardian, 14 May 1915, p.3 col.4

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- <sup>xi</sup> Crewe Building Control Plans, 1915, LBCr 6492/45/12
- <sup>xii</sup> Crewe Building Control Plans, 1916, LBCr 6492/49/5
- <sup>xiii</sup> Crewe Building Control Plans, 1920, LBCr 6492/53/1 and LBCr 6492/53/10
- <sup>xiv</sup> Crewe Building Control Plans, 1932, LBCr 6492/65/14
- <sup>xv</sup> Crewe Building Control Plans, 1934, LBCr 6492/67/18
- <sup>xvi</sup> Staffordshire Sentinel, 17 September 1928, p.3 col.2
- <sup>xvii</sup> Nantwich Guardian, 12 April 1918, p.2 col.6
- <sup>xviii</sup> Staffordshire Evening Sentinel, 23 March 1929 p.8 col.5 (the Alex had an overdraft of £2,600 and were sustaining weekly losses)
- <sup>xix</sup> Runcorn Guardian, 24 June 1919, p.1 col.5
- <sup>xx</sup> Staffordshire Evening Sentinel, 31 October 1931, p.2 col.8
- <sup>xxi</sup> Staffordshire Evening Sentinel, 18 October 1946, p.6 col.7
- <sup>xxii</sup> Staffordshire Evening Sentinel, 27 May 1939, p.5 col.3
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Hull Daily Mail, 7 July 1939, p. col. and 8 July p.5 col.2 (and others)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Registration of Births, Northwich District Vol 8a p.492
- <sup>xxv</sup> Registration of Births, Nantwich District Vol 8a p.564
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Registration of Births, Nantwich District Vol 8a p.526
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Copenhall Cemetery Grave Register, p.277