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Rees Mogg ~ Real Biography.

“The MP’s grandfather worked as a dairyman and lorry driver, but this does not fit his carefully cultivated public image

Just to the south of London’s great stations for the north – Euston, St Pancras and King’s Cross – an old and rather careworn neighbourhood serves the traveller’s needs. Cheap beds, cheap food and drink, drugs probably, sex formerly. Finer amusements had been planned for the site: in 1830 a project known as the Royal Panharmonium Pleasure Gardens, which was to include a theatre, ballroom and music gallery, went bankrupt before it was finished. In its place came a square and a few streets of modest brown-brick houses, built just before flat-fronted Georgian went out of fashion.

Knowing no better, I stayed in a comfortless room there on a winter’s night in the 1960s. Shillings fed the meter for the gas fire, a light bulb hung from the ceiling, and in the early hours of the morning the door shook with a tremendous banging as a man’s slurred voice called out for a woman. The area is more respectable now, but in some ways nicely unchanged. True, there’s a Travelodge and a Comfort Inn, but also a Macdonald hotel and a Jesmond Dene hotel, which speak of a time when travellers coming or going from stations north of the Tyne liked to be reminded of home.

Thomas Morris and his wife Eileen (nee Shakespeare) moved to the district just before the second world war. Morris was a Londoner of Welsh ancestry, whose father had migrated from rural Cardiganshire and set up shop as a grocer and dairyman in the East End somewhere around 1900: a typical story of a time when Welsh migrants were estimated to own half the dairies in London. His wife died soon after Thomas was born in 1908. Father and son went on living together in Hackney until 1934, when Thomas married Eileen, daughter of a printworks compositor. He and his bride moved first to the set of parallel streets in north London known as the Haringay Ladder, and then to Birkenhead Street and its fine view north to the facade of King’s Cross station and the occasional drift of steam and smoke escaping through its arched roof.

Their daughter Gillian was born here in 1939, with her father’s occupation described as “motor lorry driver” in the register. But he got on. He became a car salesman for an Austin dealership, joined the Conservative party, won a seat on St Pancras council and eventually served a year as its mayor, by which time the family had moved a few hundred yards from Birkenhead Street to a flat in Queen Alexandra Mansions, a giant slab of Edwardian red brick behind St Pancras town hall. The car showroom was only 10 minutes’ walk away, the council chamber lay just across the street, and, when the time came, Gillian found a job around the corner in Gray’s Inn Road in the offices of the Sunday Times.

She was hired as a secretary to the city editor, William Rees-Mogg. Their subsequent courtship was prompted by his colleague, the writer Hunter Davies, who tipped him off that she was threatening to quit; he was so absorbed by the gold standard that she might as well not have existed. (In his written account, Davies said: “Hey, have you heard about Gillian? She is going to leave.” “Who?” “Your blooming secretary, that’s who! You have missed your chance there, William.”) And out of this happenstance

came a long and happy marriage and five children, the fourth of them christened Jacob William.

So far as I can tell, the leader of the House of Commons and lord president of the council rarely mentions this side of his ancestry. Not, I suspect, because he's ashamed of it – a lorry driver's rise to town mayor perfectly illustrates the Tory faith in individual enterprise – but because it doesn't fit the caricature he has made of himself. The top hat, the tailcoat, the waistcoat, the striped trousers, the white tie, the six elaborately named children (one of them Alfred Wulfric Leyson Pius), the drawl, the languor: matched with a grandad who drove a lorry, such a creation becomes a pitiable mountebank, Alfred Doolittle dressed for a wedding, rather than the courtly eccentric, the "honourable member for the 18th century", which is how Rees-Mogg likes to present himself.

His paternal forebears are a greater support, having lived in large stone houses that, though no longer in Rees-Mogg ownership, still stand and bear names. The manor at Farrington Gurney, Cholwell House at Temple Cloud, Ston Easton Park ("exceptionally sumptuous" – Nikolaus Pevsner) near Bath – a train of Somerset dwellings that began in the 17th century, to be joined by a second train of a similar kind when in 2007 Jacob married Helena de Chair, the daughter of Somerset de Chair and his fourth wife Lady Juliet Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, previously the Marchioness of Bristol. He is said to have proposed at Lady Juliet's country house under one of its six Van Dycks.

The weight of all this social connection and genealogy – the coats of arms, the Latin mottos, the drinks trolley – might weaken the mind of most of us, like a blow to the head with a Debrett's Guide. Rees-Mogg, despite his enthusiastic immersion in it, remains as sharp as a tack. His assets include a £5m house in Westminster and the freehold of a building in Pall Mall, reported to be worth £4m. In 2020 his dividend from Somerset Capital Management, the investment firm he co-founded, came to £800,000 (last year he's thought to have made £200,000 less). He has a London flat. When in Somerset he and his family live at Gournay Court, a 17th-century house that was restored and enlarged by King George V as a home for his epileptic youngest son, Prince John, who died before it was ready. A household presence is his old nanny, Veronica Crook, now nanny to his children; the same nanny that he took canvassing with him when he contested the former mining constituency of Central Fife in the 1997 election, perhaps in a misplaced attempt to be lovable or, more probable, to be noticed.

We met once, at a village hustings in North East Somerset during the 2010 election campaign. A predictable sentiment follows: he was charming. But onstage I notice he said something twice for emphasis: you don't make the poor rich by making the rich poor. Nobody in the audience looked particularly rich but there were sounds of agreement. With 41.3% of the vote, he took the seat from Labour and went on increasing his majority with a 49.8% share in 2015 and 53.6% in 2017, dropping only 3.2 percentage points in 2019. And during these years he praised Donald Trump ("our greatest ally after Brexit"), questioned the effects of climate change, suggested that his party should collaborate with Ukip, praised Nigel Farage, fought for the hardest of Brexits, and doubted the "common sense" of the victims of the Grenfell fire. The people of North East Somerset seem to like him.

This week, walking around the streets of King's Cross to see where his grandparents had lived, I began to hum the old music hall song: "I'm Burlington Bertie, I rise at ten thirty / And saunter along like a toff / I walk down the Strand with my gloves on my hand / Then I walk down again with them off ...". The male-impersonator Ella Shields made the song popular towards the end of the first world war. Like Rees-Mogg, she favoured a top hat and tails while performing – a swell's outfit and a disguise".