

# Charles Chitty and Chitty's Mill

Derek Leach

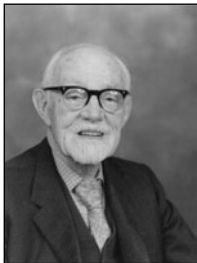
Looking through Joe Harman's local history archive I came across the recollections of Charles Chitty, written in 1972 when he was ninety-eight. Joe's wife, Rosa, was Charles' secretary for some years and he always sent them a Christmas card until his death in 1979 aged one hundred and four. His family owned Chitty's Mill by the river in Bridge Street.

Charles was very well known in Dover and Deal and when he died Joe kept the local newspaper articles published at the time. These and Charles' memoir provide a good picture of his life.

Charles was described as indomitable, a philanthropist, photographer, active Unitarian, lifelong Liberal, miller, Justice of the Peace and YMCA supporter for half a century.

Born when Gladstone was Prime Minister, his childhood was spent in Deal when the only way to get to Dover was on foot, on horseback or by a coach and four horses.

Charles attributed his long life to keeping active and abstaining from alcohol and tobacco. An active member of Dover Temperance Council, he always claimed that he gave up alcohol before he was three



*Charles Chitty*

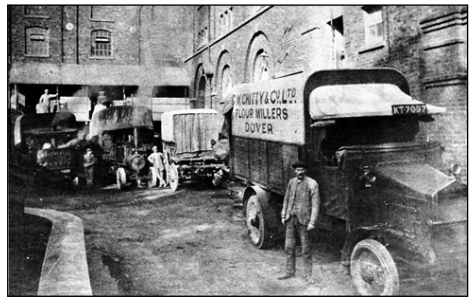
because his mother used to give him sips of ale when he was a baby. His father, however, was a staunch teetotaler and Charles followed suit.

He studied engineering in Leeds and after university

went to Switzerland to learn the milling business before joining the family's milling business in 1892. He, with his father and cousin, became partners in G. W. Chitty & Co., where he became expert in modern milling. 'It was hard, working from 7am to 7pm six days a week; on Sundays I was expected to go to church twice and to help at Sunday School in the afternoon. My father even expected me to go to his political and temperance meetings. I had no free time at all!' On his twenty-first birthday he was not allowed time off to cycle to Deal for a birthday tea at his grandmother's.

Facing strong competition, Charles made the mill more efficient and started to produce self-raising flour. This required a certain chemical to be added which the mill produced itself, converting old stables into laboratories. When the patent ran out after the First World War, Charles found that the flour quality was improved by heating.

The government took over all flour mills during the Second World War and Chitty's mill worked night and day seven days a week. In 1943 the mill caught fire during shelling; part of the mill was burnt out.



*Chitty's Mill Yard (John Bavington Jones)*

Although plans were made to rebuild, the decision was taken to sell the business to a national company, which then closed in the 1950s. Charles, already over seventy, retired, but the brand name of Chitty's Self-Raising Flour lived on for some years.

Charles loved to travel and visited most countries in Europe, especially Switzerland where he enjoyed mountaineering and made many friends over the years.

At seventeen the family moved to Castle Avenue in Dover, where he lived until moving to a care home in very old age. He enjoyed a long and happy marriage with his wife Marian, but they were never blessed with children. Marian, whom he called Birdie, died in 1945. Charles was still

driving at ninety-two and was President of the Dover Liberals from 1924 until 1972. When one hundred, his remaining ambition was to see a Liberal MP representing Dover and Deal.

Charles' father was a Unitarian. When a boy he asked his mother, a Baptist, what that was, she replied that they were people who did not believe in Jesus. Despite that Charles became a Unitarian and in 1924 became Chairman of the Dover Unitarian Church in Adrian Street, saying that he was tied to no creed, free to believe what seemed to him to be true. Charles wrote his own epitaph in his memoir: 'I hope that I have not been unfair to or misjudged anyone. I have no enemy. I have experienced great kindness from many quarters and from many friends.'



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