

Oswald Joseph Reichel and his part in A la Ronde's history



Oswald Joseph Reichel was born in February 1840 in a Moravian Settlement in the parish of Ockbrook, Derbyshire to Samuel Rudolph Reichel and Matilda nee Hurlock. Samuel was himself a Moravian minister from Nazareth, Pennsylvania and Samuel's father was Carl Gotthold Reichel, who was born to a Lutheran clergyman in Saxony in 1751. The Moravian church is one of the oldest denominations of Protestantism; it emphasises piety and evangelism, embodied by the missionary work carried out by the congregation. Its modern form, which has just over a million followers worldwide, originated in Saxony in the early 1700s. The Reichels became instrumental figures within Moravian churches activities, particularly in setting up and maintaining settlements in North America and Britain. In the 1770s, Carl Reichel was sent to Nazareth to be the head of the Southern provinces (now Georgia) Moravian Church.

The Parminters (the other side of Oswald's family) were also involved with the Moravian church when it spread across South West England in the 1750s.

Oswald entered into the family tradition of ministers and scholars, studying classics at Queens College, Oxford. He was well-travelled, moving to Germany and France to study languages. He was ordained for the church of England in 1865 and became Vice-Principal of Cuddesdon College, Oxford. He eventually settled as the parish vicar in Sparsholt, Berkshire.

Despite his religious standing, Oswald was no saint. In 1885 he found himself at the centre of a scandal, when he stayed at a Bristol lodging house with his housemaid, Caroline King, posing as a married couple. When the lodging house's owner, a Mrs Niblett, reportedly tried to extort Oswald upon discovering the truth, he took her to court for libel and blackmail. His plan backfired when she was found not guilty and the full extent of Oswald's two-year affair with Miss King was revealed – including the fact he allegedly fathered two children with her.

In the wake of this scandal, Reverend Reichel resigned, upon the instruction of the Bishop of Oxford. But he didn't go quietly as he then attempted to sue the Bishop for misinformation, and even appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury for vindication. He maintained his innocence throughout, but his cases were eventually dismissed due to the weakness of his arguments.

Oswald was married on 25 May 1887 to Julia Maria Harriet Louisa Ashenden, a woman some 23 years his junior) at the church of St Bartholemew of the East, in the City of London.

Following Mary Parminter's death in 1849, the provisions of her will were executed, including her insistence that A la Ronde should be owned only by single female family members. At

this time, the women in her family were Jane Hurlock, Ann Sophia Hurlock, Stella Reichel, Mary Melhuish, and Ann and Louisa Black. Given the difficulties faced by women deemed 'spinsters' in the 19th century, Mary's wishes seem to be an act of feminist solidarity.

A la Ronde was occupied by various members of the extended family over the following decades. First, it was passed to Jane Hurlock. When Jane died in 1870, her sister Ann Sophia was next in line. Upon her death nine years later, it fell to Stella Reichel – but Stella was due to marry John Tudor, meaning she would no longer fit Mary Parminter's 'spinster' criteria. Louisa Black - the family's last eligible unmarried woman - stated that she didn't want the house. Consequently, Stella sold A la Ronde to her brother, Reverend Oswald Reichel. Oswald had no doubt had his eye on the property since his aunt's death; he diverted the wishes of its original owners that it be inhabited by an unmarried woman. Though he bought A la Ronde in 1881, it seems he remained in his parish of Sparsholt for a few years after this.

In the 1890's through to 1910, Oswald Reichel implemented some major modernising of A la Ronde. He replaced the thatched roof with tiles, inserted dormer windows and made the attic space into a set of upstairs rooms. He also brought in central heating (with a furnace in the basement) and gas lighting. Finally, he installed a dumb waiter linking the dining room with the kitchen along with speaking tubes to enable communication with servants. Oswald and Julia Reichel lived together in A la Ronde for many years. In the 1921 census Oswald listed his occupation as a Clerk in Holy Orders, but stated that he was *'out of work, but receiving neither Old Age nor Unemployment pension'*.

During his time at A la Ronde, Oswald wrote regularly, perhaps his greatest passion. In his work we see much of his character. Known as opinionated and stubborn, he would frequently write in to newspapers to weigh in on contemporary issues. For example, the Boer war, treatment of veterans and contemporary political happenings such as women's suffrage and the empire. With a particular interest in canon law, he became known as an expert in mediaeval church doctrine and much of his work can still be found and accessed today. With such strong opinions and a history of scandal, we can imagine that Oswald was a divisive character in the community.

Oswald died in 1923 and was buried at the Church of St John in the Wilderness. After his death, Julia took over the management of the estate. She outlived her husband by many years, living in another house on the estate until she died in 1951.